

EDITORIAL

The Librarian as Witness to History

Por **Tracie Hall**
tdhall@uw.edu

In recent years there has been a prolonged debate about the appropriate political positionality of the library, with one side arguing for a quiet institutional detachment from contemporary debate, “a neutral sphere above the fray” (Kurtz 2022); and the other for deep community engagement that ultimately “work[s] toward a more equitable society” (Cooke, et al., 2022). While this discussion is important in that it forces ongoing professional self-examination and recalibration via the question of whether the work of providing access to knowledge and ideas can exist in a vacuum or requires the active acknowledgment of both social diversity and social inequality, that it can be too easily perceived as a purely conceptual argument is worrisome, if not dangerous. When libraries intentionally or inadvertently uphold the status quo, reinforcing the existing power structure and the inequities it creates in terms of who is favored and who is penalized, the consequences are quite tangible.



Tracie Hall is a librarian and a Professor of Practice as well as a Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at the University of Washington / Photo: Doug Parry

EDITORIAL

However, given the complexity of the current information environment: the normalization of disinformation; the escalation of politically motivated censorship; the widening of digital disparity and segregation; the persistence of digital deserts and disinvestment; the intentional creation of information islands made possible by exhaustive (if not invasive) algorithmic curation; and the persecution and prosecution of libraries and the materials they collect and make available -- the question must extend beyond whether maintenance of the status quo is the right professional disposition, to whether it is an ethical one. As a reader adroitly commented on an online article addressing the clash over libraries upholding intellectual freedom, “the common good is a menace to the status quo (Box 2022).”

This question of ethics is invoked for two reasons. First, because librarianship, like most professions operates under a code of ethics created to guide how people behave in occupational settings. These codes are usually based on broad consensus around values such as honesty, integrity, accountability, and accessibility. For example, the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics opens with an avowal of proactive efforts to lower barriers to

information, “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.” It closes with a clear social responsibility directive, “We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces (ALA, 2021).” Contained within the ALA Code of Ethics is the recognition of the social reparation necessary to achieve the level of service the stewardship of the profession envisions. The second invocation comes because of the moral attribution the public has assigned to libraries and librarians. Several studies attest to libraries’ persistence in being considered one of the most trustworthy community institutions (Geiger, 2017). In a 2022 Ipsos study, librarians (following nurses), were named the second most trusted profession with 93% of survey participants revealing that “they would trust librarians to tell the truth” (Clemence, 2022). The high

EDITORIAL

ethical expectation the library and information sciences (LIS) sector places on itself is matched, if not exceeded, by that of the people it serves. In an era when the veracity of information is increasingly dubious, libraries are expected by the public to uphold the social obligation of trustworthiness, and librarians to fill the role of truth-teller.

In being entrusted with the role of public truth-teller, the librarian approximates the function of witness, someone expected to not only preserve and provide access to the human record but as the Oxford English Dictionary states, “to give evidence in relation to matters of fact under inquiry” (2025). In a legal context, the four key expectations of a witness are “knowledge and experience, impartiality and objectivity, effective communication, and adherence to ethical standards” (Lavine, 2023). The work of truth-telling, the act of witness, are not apolitical positions. Author Erna Paris discerns, “witnesses incur responsibilities,” continuing “to be a witness or bystander is not a value-free choice but, inadvertently, a moral position (2000).”

To be a witness to history is to engage in the act of sharing information as a means to bring public attention to an act or event occurring in the past or present toward the goal

of generating collective memory, ensuring visibility and accountability, and increasing public understanding. In her book, *The Witness as Object*, examining the use of video testimonies in Holocaust museums Professor of Public History Steffi De Jong unpacks the German term “zeitzeuge” or “witness to history” (2018). Amalgamating “the idea of having witnessed something in situ with that of giving testimony ex post facto, the De Jong describes the zeitzeuge as “somebody who knows something, but also somebody who is aware of the moral consequences of her or his knowledge.”

That the act of witnessing history, seeing and describing what has happened and what is happening rather than remaining silent, is understood as ultimately a moral or ethical obligation rather than a political or partisan act is important to note for librarians whose public credibility lies in fulfilling this responsibility. Mute neutrality it turns out, might be the far more political and inherently biased turn in that implicit in not responding to what is happening in society, is a taking of sides. As Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner, Elie Wiesel observed, “neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.”

EDITORIAL

In a time of blatant disinformation peddling, censorship, and epistemicide, the role of witness requires courage, commitment, and as libraries and librarians come under alarming and unbridled attack, survival strategies. To say the LIS profession has been here before is not offered as consolation, but rather as an attestation that even with their own internal heterogeneity and range of opinions, librarians have served as witnesses to history, protecting and collecting information in times of war, tyranny, political unrest, natural and manmade disaster, civil rights struggles, economic depression, pandemic and public health crises, and efforts to shut down free thought and free expression.

That the profession continues to reject attempts to coerce our silence and self-censorship is paramount to adhering to our ethical code and honoring the trust and obligation the public has placed in and on us as truth-tellers and witnesses to history.

References

American Library Association. (2025, March 11). *ALA code of ethics*. American Library Association. Retrieved from <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics> .

Box. (2022, December 15). “The common good stands as a menace to the status quo.” *MetaFilter*. Retrieved from <https://www.metafilter.com/197575/The-common-good-stands-as-a-menace-to-the-status-quo%20The%20Horrrifying%20War%20on%20Libraries> .

Clemence, M. (2022). Ipsos Veracity Index: Trust in the police drops for the second year in a row. *Ipsos*. Retrieved from <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row> .

Cooke, N. A., et al. (2022, June 10). Once more for those in the back: Libraries are not neutral. *Publisher’s Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/89576-once-more-for-those-in-the-back-libraries-are-not-neutral.html> .

de Jong, S. (2018). The witness as object: Video testimonies in Holocaust museums. *Berghahn Books*. Retrieved from <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/dejongwitness> .

Geiger, A. W. (2017, August 30). Most Americans – especially Millennials –

EDITORIAL

say libraries can help them find reliable, trustworthy information. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/30/most-americans-especially-millennials-say-libraries-can-help-them-find-reliable-trustworthy-information/>.

Kurtz, S. (2022, February 24). The battle for the soul of the library. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/opinion/battle-library-neutrality.html>.

Lavine, J. (2023). Unveiling the four pillars of an expert witness. *Joel Lavine*. Retrieved from <https://joellavine.com/unveiling-the-four-pillars-of-an-expert-witness/>.

Oxford English Dictionary. (2025). Witness, N. Meanings, etymology and more. Retrieved from https://www.oed.com/dictionary/witness_n?tl=true#14198402.

Paris, E. (2000). *Long shadows: Truth, lies, and history*. Knopf Canada.

Wiesel, E. (1986). Elie Wiesel acceptance speech. *The Nobel Prize Organization*. Retrieved from <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/acceptance-speech/>.

Sobre a autora:

Tracie Hall

Distinguished Professor of Practice at the University of Washington Information School. She was executive director of the American Library Association from 2020 to 2023, the first African American woman to lead it since 1876.

She holds a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Washington, a Master of Arts in International Studies from Yale University, and dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in Law and Society and Black Studies from the University of California.

Hall has extensive experience in library leadership, cultural advocacy, and academia. She served as vice president of Queens Public Library, director of the Joyce Foundation Culture Program, deputy commissioner of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs, and director of the Office for Diversity at the American Library Association. She was also assistant dean at Dominican University Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

Written: Tracie Hall

Photo: Doug Parry / University of Washington Magazine