

Editorial response: A librarian by another name

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Abstract: The problems facing libraries are often defined in such a way that the solutions can be packaged and sold like any other consumer good. Such claims should be regarded critically as librarians maintain the core functions of selection, acquisition, organization, and provision of access to materials.

Keywords: future of libraries; professional issues; library services; labor



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[Editor's note: This essay is written as a response to "A librarian by another name" by Deborah Schwarz, appearing on pp.55-57 of this journal.]

It is quite common to find ourselves declaring that we are in an exceptional present, a time without precedent where everything is different from any and every other time. Perhaps it is even a condition of the present, to look around and see something entirely new, heralding a heretofore unimaginable future. It is a way to frame time as something that matters, our actions as a part of impending history. As much as a sense of urgency lends meaning to the mundane, it is also a signal to pause and ask who might benefit from telling a story about the present as a time of the exceptional. The stories we tell are not simply descriptions of reality. They are also the means by which we shape political and economic futures. When we frame problems of the present, we define the potential solutions to the future. When we hear declarations about the present, I think it's important to step back and consider who might gain in the future if such a declaration is believed. What would it mean if the stories we tell were true?

In the case of the story of the future of libraries, Deborah Schwarz tells a version that is familiar to most of us. She sounds again that persistent drumbeat about libraries and librarians as no longer relevant, collapsing under the digital weight of information overload while simultaneously fading into oblivion as books are removed and replaced by coffee shops and makerspaces. For Schwarz, librarians live and work in exceptional times, we have "finally arrived" at a moment in the history of libraries where everything will be irrevocably different from any other way that libraries have ever been. In these stories, the librarian is always standing alone amid collections somehow both swamping and rapidly

receding from library space, casting about uncertainly for something to do with herself and her time. (Most librarians I know in real life are not often at such a loss during the workday.) For Schwarz and others, the librarian of the exceptional present needs a brand new sense of purpose, one defined by a futurist who has diagnosed the problem in such a way that he or she is able to sell a solution.

In the case of Schwarz, that solution is specialized staff who can step in to solve the problem of the library or information center that is no longer anything like the library of the past, and therefore impenetrable to librarians without sufficient specialization. The CEO of LAC Group, Schwarz offers clients a way to provide library services without the library through Library as a Service, offering “the benefits of having access to professional information talent and resources without the ongoing burden of running an information center” (LAC Group). Schwarz’s company offers cheaper access to librarian labor. In her story of the present, that librarian labor requires an all-new, never-before-seen set of skills unlike anything librarians have done before.

From LAC’s perspective, the professional librarian is a commodity to sell on the open market. A company can sell more of that commodity if the market is segmented in such a way that there are many different versions of it to sell. When a generalist librarian is not enough, the company can sell you more than one. If Schwarz is right that “the role of the librarian must diverge into areas of specialization,” her company can become the supplier

of those specialized workers, sure to be sold at a premium, as niche consumer goods so often are.

This is not to say that there isn't some truth in the present and future of the library as Schwarz describes it. Information is increasingly born digital. Libraries are sending print materials into storage to make room for other functional uses of library space. Users do search the library catalog without the help of the librarian. The question is whether such changes are exceptional, and whether those changes mean the librarian must change or die. Surely libraries have always moved things around to accommodate changes in formats and functions in collections and services. Does such change require librarians to be something entirely new? Or do the core—or generalist, to use Schwarz's term—functions of selection, acquisition, organization, and provision of access to materials still happen every day in our libraries?

For working librarians like me, the answer to that question is an unprofitable yes.

References

LAC Group. (2016). *Library as a Service*. Retrieved from <https://libsource.com/library-as-a-service/>