Problem-Solvers & Problem-Makers: The Librarians of the New South

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Abstract: Despite the recent focus on dispelling stereotypes (including a 2014 book on the topic), the bespeckled, bunned-shushing-spinster persists in the minds of many Southerners (and Americans, for that matter), especially if they had such a librarian in their school or hometown. As a 2007 New York Times article heralded, there is a "hipper crowd of shushers"—the next generation of librarians that has been filling in the roles previously held by Baby Boomers, many of whom are making their way towards retirement. And with them a new stereotype has arrived: they are steampunk, tattooed, black-rimmed glasses wearing hipsters here to make libraries cool again. This new image, however, isn't much of an improvement. Since it, too, denies librarians of the spectrum of identities that they inhabit. Here you'll find an introduction to the unique voices of the next wave of librarians and the wide and incredible range of work they are doing on behalf of all of us. From saving the audiovisual record of Appalachia to making the Internet of Things accessible for everyone, the librarians you will meet are invariably smart, creative, entrepreneurial, and dedicated to making our South a better place.
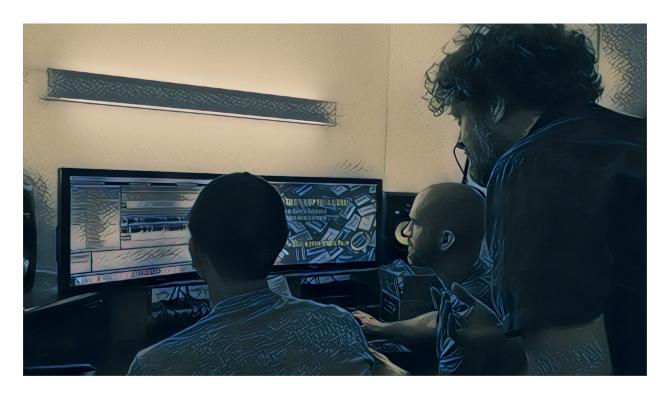
Image caption: Librarian Jason Evans Groth helps students learn to synthesize sounds using an Arduino. Image location: https://www.dropbox.com/s/81990czg70e3j7s/2017-01-11%2014.41.22.jpg?dl=0

When I meet people for the first time and tell them I'm a librarian, I usually get some version of this annoying response that bedevils librarians everywhere: "Aww. I love books, too. It must be great to read all day long!" or "I bet it's so quiet!"

Despite the recent focus on dispelling stereotypes (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014), the bespeckled, bunned-shushing-spinster persists in the minds of many Southerners (and Americans, for that matter), especially if they had such a librarian in their school or hometown. My most vivid school librarian was Alice Quaintance, a thin, wiry middle-aged woman with a dark sense of humor who frequently threatened to chop off our fingers with a paper cutter. The images of librarians in many of our minds are often not kind, inviting, or very flattering. Ornery. Crusty. Strict. If they are positive, they might veer

towards the idyllic—the kind lady who opened up a world for you with books. But these notions, too, are narrow and outdated.

As Jesela (2007) heralded, there is a "hipper crowd of shushers"—the next generation of librarians that has been filling in the roles previously held by Baby Boomers, many of whom are making their way towards retirement. And with them a new stereotype has arrived: they are steampunk, tattooed, black-rimmed glasses-wearing hipsters here to make libraries cool again. This new image, however, isn't much of an improvement. Since it, too, denies librarians of the spectrum of identities that they inhabit. And, to those in the know, there never really has been a time when libraries—protectors of freedom of information, keepers of cultural treasurers, democratizers of education—were never *not* cool. And, despite a recent economics professor's [suggestion in a (now-deleted) Forbes article that Amazon replace all libraries](#) (Bussel, 2018), libraries are, in fact, alive and well and thriving through the innovation and leadership of the people that power them.

There's a whole wide range of librarians out there between fedora-wearing techie and the strict granny…much in the same way that while some Southerners might live in trailer parks or go to Bible-thumping churches the vast majority live a more nuanced existence. I've got a banjo-playing uncle and a sister who lives in a double-wide, but I'm not the barefooted hillbilly that Hollywood might paint for the rest of America.

Stereotypes diminish. Stereotypes simplify. In our uncertain, post-2016 election world, it's more important than ever to carve out spaces where we acknowledge more than black or white, truth or fiction, left or right. If you're ready to explore the library world's many shades of grey, I hope you'll take a read, a look, and listen to the stories of these librarians of the New South I've curated.

Here you'll find an introduction to the unique voices of the next wave of librarians and the wide

and incredible range of work they are doing on behalf of us all. From saving the audiovisual record of

Appalachia to making the Internet of Things accessible for everyone, the librarians you will meet are

invariably smart, creative, entrepreneurial, and dedicated to making our South a better place for all of

us. (Do keep in mind, however, that this is a tiny selection, a curated handful from the many

fascinating places and people I've encountered in Southern libraries and archives.[1])

Knoxville, Tennessee is a small city nestled in the Smoky Mountains best known for its college

football team, the Tennessee Volunteers. So, you might be surprised first to learn that in the 1920s,

Knoxville was home to one of only a few recording studios around the country—recording country

music, jazz, blues, gospel, and more—and second, that this humble town now houses a rich

audiovisual archive that keeps the producers of HBO, CNN, and PBS calling for access to materials.

Over a decade ago, film and audio enthusiasts Bradley Reeves and Louisa Trott started filling

up their apartment closet with reels and records collecting the audiovisual record of East Tennessee.

When the project outgrew their home, they started a 501(c)(3) and the Tennessee Archive of Moving

Image and Sound was born.

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[1] This sampling is by no means an exhaustive survey or even a fully representative sample of the range of work or librarians in the New South; it's merely a snapshot. While I've attempted to choose a diverse and interesting subset, the diversity herein may not be visible to all as my definition of diversity encompasses more than checking boxes on a census survey.

The LIS profession has a well-documented and multifaceted diversity problem (e.g. diversity as defined as ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and more). There's certainly room to diversify our profession in many ways around the country, not just in this region.

For one of the many important articles on this topic, see: Vinopal, J. (2016, January 13). The Quest for Diversity in Library Staffing: From Awareness to Action. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe.* Retrieved from: http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/.

Eric Dawson is the current caretaker of the TAMIS archive, now housed within the Knox County

Public Library system. Hear about the materials within this massive archive, see highlights from the

collection, and hear music excerpts in this short video. Explore the Tennessee Archive of Moving Image

and Sound, featuring Eric Dawson, Archivist [video, 4:31]

A few hours away, in the more metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia, you'll find something else

unexpected if you happen into the recording studios of WREK. There, you'll like find Ameet Doshi,

Charlie Bennett, and a whole team of librarians working away on their weekly Library Rock-n-Roll

Radio Show, *Lost in the Stacks*. You've probably never heard anything like it: the hour-long show

contains serious rock, library talk, and even some Library of Congress call numbers for each set. Meet

the hosts and take a listen to this one-of-a-kind radio.[2] Meet Ameet Doshi and Charlie Bennett, hosts of

Lost in the Stacks - the Original Library Rock-n-Roll Radio Show [video, 5:28]

Further east, you'll find another perhaps unexpected treasure — what has been dubbed the

"library of the future" at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Outfitted with a

slew of visualization spaces, including a 270-degree immersive 3D visualization lab and a gaming and

game development lab, the Hunt Library is a technology marvel to behold. Heck, it even has its own

book robot (NCSU Hunt Library, 2018) (see the video from a book's perspective here (NCSU Hunt

Library, 2018), which allows the library to house all its entire science and engineering collection in one-

ninth of the space required by traditional stacks.

But, as any librarian will school you, it's not the stuff or tech (or even necessarily the books)

(Wikipedia, 2018) that makes a library such—it's the people that work there. Here are a few of the many

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[2] Audio from the video was selected from: Bennett, C., & Doshi, A. (2016, November 18th). Predictive Engineering, Episode 326. Retrieved from https://www.wrek.org/2016/11/playlist-for-lost-in-the-stacks-from-november-18th-2016-predictive-engineering-episode-326/.

exceptional librarians at NCSU, who describe themselves and their jobs in terms that should shatter any remaining dusty stereotypes you have of library-dwellers. Meet the Librarians of NCSU (Digital slideshow in Microsoft Sway, screen reader compatible content]

The people at NCSU Libraries keep the place abuzz night and day with innovative programming. Behold the array of events that took place during a single day when I toured NCSU:

https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html

My 94-year-old grandfather once asked me about my then job as librarian at the University of Tennessee, saying, "So do you just check out copies of *Gone With the Wind All Day Long*?" Nothing could have been further from the truth for me or for my many colleagues who staff the hundreds of libraries and archives across the American South. I gently explained that, no, I didn't check out books at all—instead, I was helping people create content that he might see on his much-beloved iPad.

And while I do rock a large set of spectacles and use the handy contraction "ya'll," I'm neither a racist nor a book-toting shusher. Individually and collectively, there is much work to be done to dispel the myths and stereotypes of libraries, librarians, and that beautiful region of the US that I'm proud to call home. Like Dolly Parton who leads a [double-life as literacy-advocate extraordinaire](#) (*About Dolly Parton's Library*, 2018) most librarians are more than meets the eye. We are scholars and technologists, app developers and information democratizers. We are teachers, advocates, and connectors. We are problem-solvers and problem-makers in the best possible way, through boundary breaking, stereotype-defying, and future-forward work. So, let's make room in our hearts and minds for all of these roles and start describing and imagining our librarians differently.

Image Caption: Libraries being awesome at NCSU during mini-Moogfest.
Image location: https://www.dropbox.com/s/iq22fd6eh8qmpx4/2017-01-11%2012.29.42%20copy.jpg?dl=0

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