

## Introduction

Good morning, everyone. I'd like to start with a few personal notes before I get to the main presentation.

First of all, thank you to the program committee for inviting me to speak. I was truly floored to be asked. Thank you to Laura for her patience with me as I wrapped my head around being asked to do this. I know I made things complicated, and I'm appreciative of your efforts.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that my privileges are substantial and I feel compelled to name them. I am white, upper middle class, have career status and academic freedom. I move through this world in an able body. I have a supportive partner in my husband and a healthy son. We go to bed in our home each night fed, warm and secure. I try to be mindful of these privileges, and recognize what they allow me to do, including standing behind this podium here with you today.

I recognize and am grateful for all of the invisible labour that has gone into this event - both on the part of the program committee and the folks who are here working hard to keep us fed, caffeinated, connected to the internet and organized.

Before I start, I think it's important that my intent is made clear. For those folks in the audience who are precariously employed, or still in school or still looking for work, I want you to know that I believe your struggle is real. I see it in my own library and online almost every day. I see you when you volunteer to take the minutes at that meeting, or that late reference shift, or when you are one of the last ones left at a staff gathering, tidying up the food table. You have entered an incredibly difficult job market, and not one that I ever had to face. I had good timing and dumb luck on my side when I graduated. I wish you fortitude as you carry on with that next job interview for the job that you hope will be "the one", or that second or third side hustle you are deciding to take on to bolster your CV. And I hope it pans out. I can promise you that I will always advocate for less contract labour and more retirement replacements in my place of work. I will do so loudly and always encourage my colleagues to do the same. A lot of what I will say over the next hour will not apply to you. But when you finally do get that sweet tenured gig, I hope that maybe you'll remember what I talked about, and seek out these proceedings and refresh your memory. And with that, my fellow

academic librarians, let's talk about bullshit. I've limited most of my cursing to this word, but brace yourself, I'm going to say it a lot.

*"Reality is less important than how one is represented"* - Harry Frankfurt, 2016

Harry Frankfurt, a noted American philosopher, wrote a tiny book in 2005 called *On Bullshit*. I first came across this delightful nugget of words in San Francisco, at my first library conference - an Innovative Users Group meeting - a meeting that cost my institution thousands of dollars for my attendance, and a meeting intended to be a forum for users of an integrated library system (ILS) software to gather and swap notes, hacks, workarounds and workflows on the use of said software. This is, in and of itself, classic library bullshit. We outsource our core functions to a private company that in turn, provide us with a product of such marginal functionality that it begets an entire user group community whose sole purpose is to figure out the best way to use it and to make recommendations for enhancements to their black box; effectively we are paying handsomely to do the work of the private corporation, but there's a nice lunch in a fancy hotel, and there's always a reception to check out or a "free" dinner to be had, so ... who's counting?

In retrospect, to reflect on my discovery of Frankfurt's book in the famed City Lights bookstore during that trip that took place so early in my academic career is apropos. At the time, as a naive newcomer to this world of academia, I thought it was somewhat scandalous and outrageous. A book! About bullshit! Those wacky academics - what won't they write a book about? And yet... here we are. In many ways, bullshit has never been so common, so widespread, and so very dangerous as it is right now.

While the political denial of climate change in the face of scientific evidence will inevitably be the downfall of society as we know it, today I seek to discuss a less grave effect of bullshit - that is, what is the effect of this blasé attitude toward truth, this proliferation of empty speech devoid of substantial meaning, on the psyche of the worker in the academic library? What is the ultimate effect of feeling like you don't understand what you are supposed to be doing because nothing around you makes sense anymore? When you've totally lost sight of what your work actually means to the wider world, it's hard to get up and at 'em with a smile on your face and a "can-do" attitude as you wade through endless email and fill out yet another Doodle poll.

Let's begin with Frankfurt's take on what bullshit means, and then we'll do a quick tour of some of the more prominent academic treatments of bullshit. Then, I will attempt to illustrate six themes in academic libraries that I feel are heavily influenced by bullshit, and then I will conclude with a discussion of some of the ways we can shovel our way out.

In his 67 page mini book, Frankfurt doesn't offer a concrete definition of the term. It is his contention that the very nature of bullshit and the ways it is so widely employed eludes definition. He identifies "humbug" as the closest established term and spends a fair amount of time considering its definition:

*Humbug*: deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes. (Frankfurt 2005, p. 6)

The rest of the book considers this at length, and it goes into a deep contemplation of the ways that bullshit manifests itself. It is a short read, and to avoid rehashing the entire thing here, I will move on, but will highlight this quote from a short video also featuring Frankfurt:

"A bullshitter is indifferent to the truth in a way that the liar is not. It is less identifiable. A lie makes a specific move - it can be uncovered. Bullshit is vague, you can't put your finger on it. When a politician outright lies, there is a commotion, but there is no corresponding response to bullshit. There's no finding it out. There's no uncovering it." - Harry Frankfurt (Think Nice 2016)

In short and for the purposes of the remainder of this talk, I present my own simplified definition:

**Bullshit is something that doesn't really mean anything, but sounds totally legit; so we don't ask too many questions, go along with it, and carry on.**

Here's where I could just start plowing right into a rant about all of the ways that we propagate bullshit in libraries with my finger in the air, but in the interest of time and with respect for my audience, I did some actual research! It turns out that there is a robust body of knowledge devoted to the study of bullshit in society - and I revelled in what I found.

## Academic explorations of the phenomenon

So, now that we've determined what bullshit is and that an unstructured rant from me won't be very constructive, let's take a tour of bullshit scholarship.

### Business bullshit

Andre Spicer is a professor of organizational behaviour at the Cass Business School at the City University of London. He has published on a wide range of topics, but for the purposes of this talk, I focussed primarily on his work in critical management studies, and specifically, business bullshit. He literally wrote the book on it.

He writes a bullshit spotter's guide (Spicer 2018 p. 21) - six things to look out for if you suspect you are being led down the garden path of corporate bullshit:

1. A lack of facts and details
2. A lack of logic
3. A lack of comprehension by the audience
4. Maligned intention
5. Use of a vocabulary that is purposefully vague
6. Attempts to mislead the audience

Spicer takes great pains to point out that those who employ corporate bullshit are not necessarily doing so with nefarious intent. Rather, the proliferation of bullshit is borne of a society obsessed with productivity, doing more with less and of course, that catch all phrase that embodies the ultimate 21st century goal: innovation.

Innovation is a slippery word and it's \*everywhere\*, particularly in higher education. It's difficult to define, and really hard to quantify, but we must be seen to be innovating at every turn, lest we get left behind. Spicer suggests that when the latest fads are being embraced by management, it's not necessarily because they genuinely believe in them, rather it creates the illusion of forward thinking. It's very difficult to get funding to keep the lights on and maintain core tasks, but it's increasingly easy to secure significant infusions of cash if you are leading the pack in the latest fad. The savvy manager will look to see where they can repackage their core activities as innovations to get what they need, and then in reality,

change very little of what they are doing. “Being seen as effective or efficient is simply a way of building legitimacy.” (Spicer 2018, p. 122)

If this sounds outlandish, I can totally vouch for it as a legit strategy I have seen used successfully. Ryerson is a particular abuser of the term “innovation” - I have a little game I like to play where I will CTRL-F any official planning document to count the number of times “innovate” or “innovation” is used. I am never disappointed.

Our former President, who had a reputation for being a bit chatty, once disclosed his political strategy to a meeting of admin types. He told everyone that the reason we were pursuing this rather nebulous concept of “zone learning” was because it meshed well with the current government’s fetish for the commercialization of research and jobs focused education. He assured us that we weren’t really planning on doing much different, but that we just had to phrase it so that the province would think we were advancing their agenda and they would favour us in the new funding formula. At the time, I was simultaneously struck by this candour and this cynicism. I mean, of course it makes sense, but to see it laid out on the table so plainly was shocking to me.

This is how insidious business bullshit is - we learn to employ it in order to use it to our advantage. It legitimizes vapidty and lends itself to repetition. Otherwise intelligent people find themselves spinning it without even realizing it, and thus it becomes normalized.

## Bullshit jobs

When I first entered the white collar working world, I was flummoxed by the jobs I was hired for that seemed to not actually require a full time person. I was meant to spend eight hours a day on tasks that could easily be done within an hour or two. What was happening? Was I the only one who sort of thought this was a bit of a racket? And how on earth was I going to spend the remaining hours of the day?

In 2013, David Graeber, an American anthropologist who teaches at the London School of Economics and was a leading figure in the Occupy movement, wrote a short but profound article for *Strike Mag* called “On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs”. He makes the observation that it seems to him that there are a great deal of people going to work every day who struggle to describe what exactly it is they are doing, why it’s important, and secretly believe

that their job does not actually need to exist. These are people who feel demoralized and defeated by the work that they do. Graeber refers to this as a “profound psychological violence”. He asks “How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one secretly feels one’s job should not exist?” (Graeber 2013).

It seems counter-intuitive for a profit-driven economy to function in this way. Surely, if a job isn’t essential it would be cut, wouldn’t it? Curiously, market forces aren’t the culprit here, rather it’s the deeply held belief that work is in and of itself a virtue. Borne of the industrial age, this is a modern extension of the notion that value comes from labour and that work is a moral value itself.

Further in his analysis, he notes a sort of vocational awe as we have come to know it, thanks to the work of Fobazi Ettarh. The resentment that is felt by the populist right against those who have essential jobs like teachers or transit workers. The ability of public service workers to bring the world as we know it to a halt when they dare exercise their right to strike is a sore point; how dare they demand benefits? They get to teach children and drive buses! They should be grateful to have a job!

The article went viral. It crashed the Strike Mag website. Graeber was onto something and thus the subject for his new book was found. After soliciting the general public to email him at [ihaveabullshitjob@gmail.com](mailto:ihaveabullshitjob@gmail.com), he was able to categorize what he received, and create a sort of typology of bullshit jobs.

Typology:

1. Flunkies - jobs with the main purpose of making someone else look important
2. Goons - jobs that only exist because other people also employ people in these roles. Namely, armies - if no one else had an army, you wouldn’t need an army, but also PR specialists, lobbyists and corporate lawyers are a good example.
3. Duct tapers - people who are there to fix problems that don’t need to exist in the first place; this is a big one for libraries and universities - just imagine if there were no such thing as subscriptions or tuition. Many of our jobs would not exist.
4. Box tickers - people who are there to allow an organization to say they are doing something that they are not doing. For example, collecting data about how something is being done rather than just actually doing the work.

5. Task masters - Most of these are middle management jobs whose primary task is supervising people who don't need to be supervised. They also make up new bullshit jobs.

When I first read this piece, it had a profound effect on me. I was on the cusp of a mid-life crisis in my career, and I am pretty sure that it pushed me over the edge. Did I have a bullshit job? Was this really all there is? If so, why do I feel so disillusioned all the time? I still haven't fully answered that question, and I'm sure that many of you are asking yourself that same question right now. I hope that the rest of this talk will assist us in finding some closure.

## How has bullshit manifested itself in the academic library

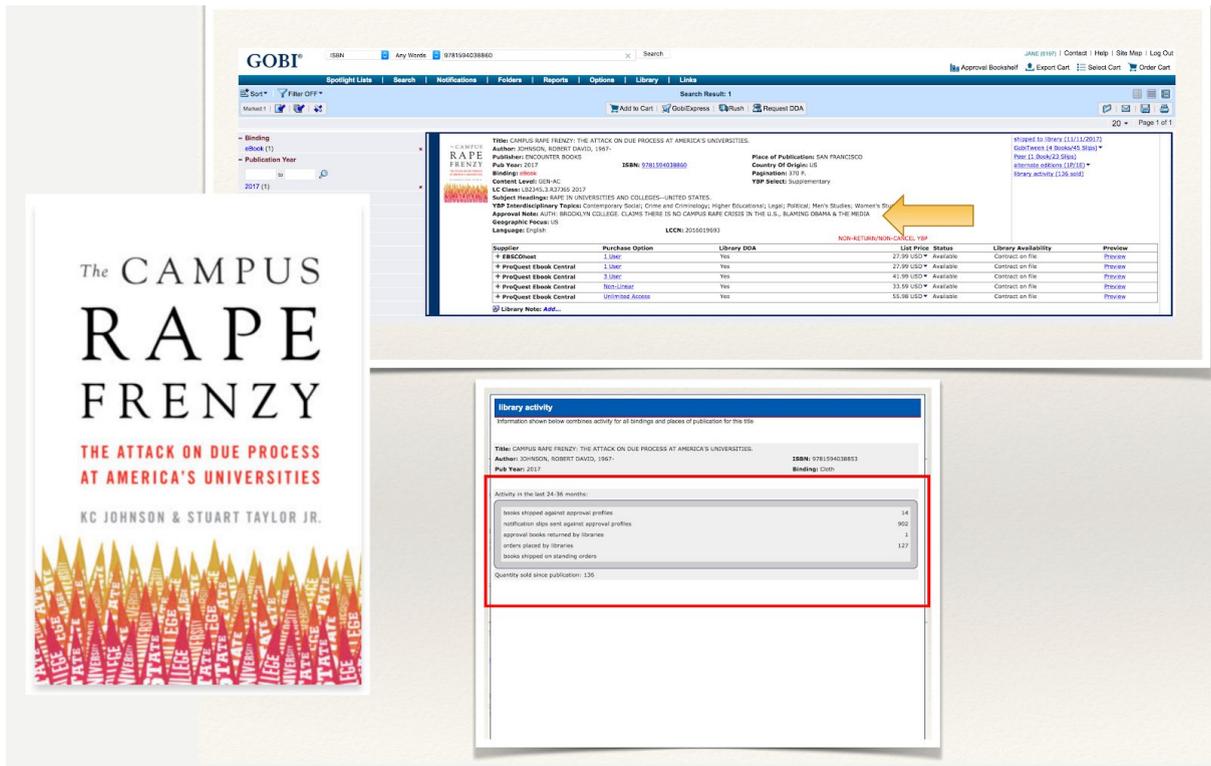
### 1. The myth of library neutrality

The myth of library neutrality is bullshit in its purest form - it doesn't exactly represent reality. True neutrality simply doesn't exist. But yet there are librarians out there who will insist that it is a cornerstone of librarianship and a pillar of libraries. In many defences of library neutrality, I am dismayed to see the extolling of librarian as a robot who either cannot think for themselves, or a stone cold automaton who can think for themselves, but suppresses their own thoughts, ideals and values in the name of service to a professional ethos. This to me is a profoundly depressing vision for our profession, while I find myself invigorated by the ideas presented by those who make the case against neutrality. For example, in their excellent piece on the future of librarianship, Cristina Bell and Marisa Mendez-Brady state “[p]erpetuating the myth of neutrality further ingrains perceptions of librarians solely as service providers.”(Bell and Mendez-Brady 2017, p. 113); they go on to challenge us to assert ourselves in the academy through publishing outside of LIS and to adopt praxis rooted in critical theory to further legitimize our scholarly contributions and role in the university as partners to our faculty.

So, what does this look like, then? There are many ways that issues of neutrality present themselves in the life of an academic librarian. Picking up on praxis, I would like to turn to the CAPAL Statement of Principles on Academic Librarianship. The fifth principle states that academic librarians are committed to: “Uncensored and unbiased access to information”. (CAPAL 2012). Well, that's not exactly true, is it? At least from where I am standing, there

are a few biases that I am pretty darned comfortable with in my practice, and those “biases” are endorsed by my faculty partners. Around the time of the Lindsey Shepard vs. Wilfrid Laurier University affair, in which a TA was disciplined for showing a video of a debate on the use of gender neutral pronouns, featuring the opinions of Jordan Peterson, I had recently led a session on critical media literacy for first year students. In the discussion about determining authority, I used that precise example of Jordan Peterson - a psychology professor - and his beliefs on non-gendered pronouns as an example of a PhD not being an automatic signal of authority. As part of the discussion, I declared, without compunction, that his view was wrong. I did this because I know that this academic program is based on an anti-oppression framework and any student who graduates from it will know that it is every person’s right to declare their own gender identity and have that respected by society without debate. I admit the Shepard case shook me for this very reason, but then, I remembered that I have academic freedom and that this was a case where if I was going to be taken to task for sharing that view, I was going to be on the right side of history.

Collection development provides a seemingly never ending stream of decisions for the librarian to make. Every decision you make about a book is an act of non-neutrality. Most are banal, but others are far more intricate. As above, you must situate these choices in relation to the context in which you are working. While my library is technically a research library, we aren’t even pretending to collect in an exhaustive manner. I need to make choices. Sometimes you’re just weeding an out of date textbook, and sometimes you’re making a really dated guidebook go away because the language in it has rendered it irrelevant at best or harmful at worst. Selection is another can of worms. You just never know what you are going to find when you are going through your slips. One day, I came across this eye-opening title:



Screenshot of slide from presentation, includes images of slip view from gobi.com

This was definitely a WTF moment. Because I was one of the original architects of our approval plan, I've got a sharp eye in determining why something may or may not have been profiled. It turned out that this item certainly met the parameters of our approval plan, but we just don't seem to have a filter for vetting defenders of the so-called "other side" in debates that don't need to be debated (namely, any issue covered already by the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*). This led to a closer look at other titles from *Encounter Books* and ultimately, we opted to block this publisher on approval. Would we turn back a request for one of their books from the community? Probably not. But given our knowledge of our curriculum and faculty research interests, we felt that the titles coming from this publisher were in appropriate candidates to be coming into our collection without vetting. This is clearly not the case for all of YBP's customers given the purchase history, but it is a choice that we made with intention. Not neutral, but absolutely appropriate given our local workflow and context.

Moving from instruction to collections and finally, to spaces, when we talk about academic freedom and neutrality, I really feel like we need to ensure we are including diverse voices in the discussion. I am weary of panels of white librarians and tenured academics who insist that all sides of all debates must be given air time. The debate over free speech has been

co-opted by the alt-right. They have asserted that the university has become a hot bed of radical leftism intolerant of dissent. The fact that this story that they tell is the one that has taken hold in the public imagination is absurd to anyone who spends any amount of time at a modern university. The existence of a civility policy or Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) office is hardly evidence of a radical socialist agenda. On the contrary, On the contrary, during the recent White Privilege Conference at Ryerson, women and gender studies professor Rinaldo Walcott recently observed that institutional EDI initiatives are the bare minimum of what needs to be done, and in effect, actually teach marginalized groups to not to demand more. They are alibis for the university; bodies that create task forces to uncover obvious truths. Classic box ticking, they are the gatekeepers between the administration and the communities they are meant to help.

I don't have the answers to these incredibly thorny questions, but I'm pretty sure that my lived experience of privilege is not going to provide the information to get at the answer. Of course silencing dissenting opinions is not desirable, but I think it's a dangerous precedent to set when existing power structures (i.e. tenured faculty) are the ones making that declaration. If you have never actually relied on safe space, it is not up to you to judge whether or not it is necessary, or what it looks like. Reconciling these issues is one of the greatest challenges of our time, and we need to elevate the discourse away from talk of punching Nazis and keeping *Mein Kampf* in our collections. The reality is that we encounter white supremacy and inequity every day in much more subtle manifestations - in our work, in our community, in ourselves and our own implicit biases, and it is our moral obligation to recognize that, name it, and work to erode it.

## 2. The fetishization of leader

We live and work in an era of unprecedented shameless self promotion and absurd reward systems. The proud display of the mundane to the remarkable are often indistinguishable. We reward our students with badges for coming to the library and we offer our explicit approval to colleagues by endorsing them for completely obvious skills on LinkedIn. It is hardly surprising then that we seek ever more accomplishments to enumerate and share. The often derided but always noticed annual *Library Journal* Movers and Shakers list is probably the most clear example of rockstar librarian bullshit, with apologies to those have moved and shook here in the room, of course. If I had a fiver for every time I saw an announcement of yet another event featuring a panel of Thought Leaders, I could buy Congress a round of beers.

Libraries run on the talents, skills, patience and hard work of maintainers. Maintainers are those who make the links work, are there to help the panicked student with the stapler (yes, I said it), and look out for the shy new student who really needs to use the bathroom. They make LibGuides for that one class who all need to use that really hard to find market research report so that the reference desk isn't flooded with confused business students. They create the workflow that allows the grad student to upload their dissertation to the repository. They are the ones who batch load the thousands of ebook records and clean up the terrible metadata that they came with so that said books are actually discoverable. They are the ones who will buy the books that will be relevant to that one assignment that comes around every fall - you know the one - the one about the history of the chickpea.

Perhaps less discussed are the maintainers who work in our administration. I am no apologist for bad behaviour of those in power, nor am I one to participate in the us vs. them dichotomy that so often exists in hierarchical environments, particularly those with volatile labour relations. I will not deny that while there are bad actors out there, what I think is more to the point is that there are terrible power structures in all organizations, and inevitably, those who are in positions of power will come to represent that structure - whether they believe in it or not. The quiet maintainer in administration is very rarely celebrated, because most of what they do is invisible; much of the time, whether due to confidentiality or humility, you wouldn't even know if someone in middle management went to bat for you, because they won't or can't tell you. They almost certainly are aware of their role in managerialism, and the limits of their ability to influence any meaningful change to an organizational structure so steeped in history - imagined or real - and so firmly committed to reproducing itself.

And yet, when you look at a typical trajectory of the career path of the academic librarian, inevitably, leadership comes up. Why are so many of our most coveted professional development opportunities couched in the language of leadership? In my career, I started out on the upward path on the ladder, and eventually came to realize that wasn't where I wanted to be. So I stopped, and stepped back. I realized that the path that had been set for me wasn't where I wanted to go, and that if I carried on with it, I was going to become resentful, which would inevitably become toxicity.

I want to live in a world where mediocrity - and I use that word in a positive sense - is okay. Where it's just enough to show up, do your work competently and wrap up in time to go home and carry on with the rest of your life. Must we always give our whole selves over and seek to be innovative leaders? What does that even mean? Where's the award for being a decent human being and creating a workplace where people feel mutually supported by their colleagues and administration? Do I get a ribbon for being a really great reference librarian who relishes slowing down and spending time with students who come to see me? (Just kidding, I really don't want a ribbon)

### 3. Tone policing

Tone policing, as defined in Wikipedia, "attempts to detract from the validity of a statement by attacking the tone in which it was presented rather than the message itself." I'd like to briefly turn to the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) to consider tone policing as it manifests in our discourse. Scholars engaged in CMS seek to "connect the practical shortcomings in management and individual managers to the demands of a socially divisive and ecologically destructive system within which managers work." and are "driven by the desire... to transform existing power relations in organizations with a view to encouraging less oppressive practices that do not harm social and environmental welfare." (Fleming and Banerjee 2016). Now, **how** this is achieved is a matter for some debate, and well beyond the scope of this talk, but I share it with you today because I was thrilled to find out that these debates were, indeed, taking place somewhere in the academy. It **is** possible to critique management without laying the blame at the feet of managers, and do so in a way that is thoughtful and constructive.

Outside of critical librarianship circles, there is so little room for constructive criticism of the status quo. As a profession and an institution, we are earnestly optimistic. In *Business Bullshit*, Spicer observes the managerial classes' obsession with looking toward "best practice"<sup>1</sup>; not because they have a genuine desire to actually improve, but because it "enables managers to suppress the organizational dark matter lurking below the few examples of sweetness and light." (Spicer 2018, p. 121). Uncomfortable with dissent, we shine lights on bright stars and shush the rest when the simmering reality of banality at best and austerity at worst rears its head in the form of the disgruntled library worker. All this

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<sup>1</sup> This is further validated by one of my favourite LIS papers ever. In 2013, three librarians from Queen's (Druery, McCormack and Murphy 2013) sought to probe the definition of what exactly we mean when we say we are employing "best practice". Their review of the term in LIS research confirmed that it was generally not defined in any rigorous manner, rather they were based mainly on anecdotal evidence and opinion. In other words, these practices just *felt* best.

venting of negativity on Twitter! We must build resilience! You must be the change you want to see and step up to the plate! The blame is shifted to the individual; no matter that years of austerity, flooded job markets, and the serials crisis have all meant that doing more with less has practically become a competitive sport. At the Ontario Library Association Super Conference earlier this year, at a session on the topic of resilience and burnout, one of the questions that was posed to the audience asked what individuals found was helpful when they felt they were reaching a breaking point. One of the most common responses was the need to feel heard and acknowledged.

What if instead of pushing narratives about resilience and gaslighting the “complainers”, we slowed down and listened to concerns using some of the frameworks suggested in CMS instead? If we really get to the root of what is often derided as snarkiness, we see some really deep rooted issues that aren’t going to go away by denying their existence; sometimes, people just want validation and not a callous disregard for their truth veiled by concern trolling.

#### 4. Our neverending identity crisis

In the race to remain relevant, librarians have reinvented themselves as everything, leading to a sometimes debilitating role ambiguity. Sam Popowich discusses this in his post that begs the question - is there such a thing as a library? “Rather than deal with the problem, however, we tend to repress it by appeals to ever vaguer mission statements, values, and strategic directions, and we rely on people’s sense of responsibility to “keep the lights on”.”(Popowich 2018). This is referred to as “strategic ambiguity” in the literature on bullshit - the use of empty yet impressive language in over-packed discourse employed specifically to give the illusion of competence (Spicer, 2013). In short, we bullshit because it makes us look good.

The Canadian Association of Research Libraries has defined seven core competencies for the 21st century librarian (CARL 2010). The document runs the gamut from electronic resource management to digital preservation to instruction. In the preamble, it is recommended that the document be used for recruitment. Hence, the unicorn job ad, as it is colloquially known. Of course, we don’t really expect one individual to perform all those herculean tasks deftly, but we list them anyway. In reality, we end up hiring for “fit” instead of skill or expertise, and encourage new hires to fake it until they make it. Turning back to Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit, he says:

Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligation or opportunity to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. - p. 63

We all know very well that a liaison librarian can't know everything that is implied within the competency document. Rather than embracing expertise, the 21st century library is content with a cabal of "competent" librarians who can muddle their way through the complexity of the needs of the community. Perhaps most unsettling in this scenario is that we are recognized and treated as experts within our institutions, when in reality, we are making a lot of educated guesses or furiously Googling behind the scenes to find answers to questions being asked of us.

## 5. Playing the game

Librarians portray themselves as advocates for open access and barrier free access to information. It is at the very core of what we do, or so we say. Reality paints a very different picture from this lofty vision. Out of 115 journals that were identified for inclusion on a list of peer-reviewed journals in LIS, only 35 were open access (Hoffman, 2018). That's 30%. In 2014, a study sought to measure how many journal articles about OA were actually available OA - it was 60% (Grandbois and Beheshti, 2014). The *Journal of Academic Librarianship* is an Elsevier journal. In the parlance of bullshit as we have come to understand it today - this image of the fearless OA advocate definitely qualifies in that it is a blatant disregard for the truth.

In 2017, Baharak Yousefi characterized this as the disparity between what we say and what we do in libraries. She sharply observes the deep disconnect between our professional values of democracy and social responsibility and our decisions and actions. In considering what can be done in the name of resistance, Yousefi notes that a rational response is not guaranteed to be effective - "It is difficult to fight with indignation what is not there." (Lew and Yousefi 2017, p. 97). After all, if the mission statement of any given institution is nothing but a polite fiction, how can one launch a coherent response to pushing back against it? Mats Alvesson and Andre Spicer ponder a similar situation in their 2016 paper that considers professional compliance with managerialism. Indeed, why do articulate and intelligent

professionals play at being radical while being almost entirely complicit with systems they profess to loathe?

Yousefi offers up tactics for survival including gossip, doubling, hacking and exaggerated compliance. Alvesson and Spicer conclude that academics must submit to “playing the game” as a pragmatic response; it is not a game that is chosen, rather it is imposed and in order to cope one must play along in order to preserve their sense of selves (Alvesson and Spicer 2016). I find the latter solution to be a cynical one. It diminishes the power that we have, collectively, to actually change the game, and serves to reproduce it. Yousefi’s tactics focus on infrastructure and subversive ways to disrupt and fundamentally alter the system; whereas simply submitting to playing a game protects the individual and disregards the power of solidarity.

## 6. We are terrible at business but spend a lot of money

Almost everything we use or rely on for teaching and research is owned by approximately three companies, maybe four or five if you include a couple of ILS systems. Let’s call them ProCLC and Ebquest. In their mission to become everything to everyone and keep up with each other as they seek to buy ever more subsidiaries<sup>2</sup>, they’ve almost totally lost the plot in what their core business actually is. Ambiguity in corporate missions is a hallmark of business bullshit. This becomes painfully evident when you start asking detailed questions about why their products don’t seem to work the way you think they should. It takes an enormous amount of tenacity, energy and knowledge to play this game with any modicum of success. You may be familiar with this game, it goes a little like this:

Liaison librarian notices an issue with a database, reports it to the electronic resources department. Goes on with their day. ER department opens a call with the vendor’s help desk. Help desk asks lots of very detailed questions to clarify the problem. They then immediately go to “clear your cache” as a solution and when that doesn’t work, they escalate it further up their food chain. A week or two passes with no communication. ER department may or may not follow up on the call depending on their workflow and/or staffing levels, if they do, they are often given a “known issue, we are working on it” answer or are told, well we weren’t able to replicate it, so ... meh. A month later, liaison librarian encounters the same issue with another

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<sup>2</sup> Between 2001 and 2016, Proquest has purchased 13 companies - some libtech, some content, some service-based

students and wonders “I wonder what ever happened to that call?”; they mean to follow up, but get distracted and forget about it. Renewal time comes around. A very modest 2% increase is levied. We pay it. And, repeat.

In 2016/2017, the University of Alberta spent \$7,289,007.31 on services and products from ProCLC and Ebquest. Sure, UofA is a heavy hitter when it comes to collections expenditure, but I am willing to bet that every single university library in Canada does business with these companies and pays a minimum of triple figures and upwards of millions in most cases. We tend to focus a lot of our outrage on the money spent with the big five publishers - which, don't get me wrong - are a major problem, but in terms of the amount of contact our staff, students and researchers have with the tools, content and services provided by these aggregators, we really need to pay very close attention to how these products are actually working. We've been told by more than one of our vendor reps during these circuitous exchanges that they are surprised they don't get more detailed questions from libraries.

My challenge to all of you here today is to go back to your libraries and start shining a light into the deep recesses of the databases you use. Are they really working the way you expect them to? Try some advanced Boolean searches and see if you can replicate them across tabs. Look at the way these products are described on your website. Is it really clear what the difference between Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts and the Sociology Collection are? Is there a straight path from problem flagging to problem resolution in place? How much communication do your reference librarians have with the folks doing negotiations? Do you know how much your library spends on the products you use every day? Are you able to speak confidently on how those prices have fluctuated over time and why they have? If something doesn't work the way that we think it should or as it is advertised, why is an increase in price - no matter how modest - a given? These are all questions that we need to start asking more consistently. Also, thank you, Simon Fraser University and University of Alberta, for taking the lead on sharing your expenditure data.

## How do we shovel our way out of the shit?

At the beginning of this talk, I suggested that we would try to answer the question - do I have a bullshit job? I've just spent quite a bit of time illuminating many of the things about our work that seem to pass the sniff test, to be crude about it. It would seem that if our jobs in and of themselves are not bullshit jobs, we sure seem to be surrounded by a lot of hooey. I'm a

pragmatist at heart, and never can resist a good old fashioned practical solution, so for the rest of this talk, I want to focus on ways that we can shovel our way out.

It's worth mentioning here that I am a diehard cynic, but I like to think that my cynicism is more focused on structures and systems. I do believe in people and think that individual action is important. It may not change the world overnight, but we've got to live with ourselves, so may as well try and do the best job we can, yeah? And again, I want to acknowledge the issue of agency. I would love to further discuss ways that non-tenured library workers may be able to participate in non-compliance; and I would encourage tenured librarians to really think about the job security they enjoy as we consider these calls to action.

### Push back against the cult of busy

Lisa Sloniowski argues that by fostering spaces for dissent and by even rejecting the culture of "efficiency" we offer disruptions in the flow of the corporate university (2016, p. 664). When we cut the bullshit tasks and focus on work that matters to us, we create space to move forward. Instead of just agreeing to be the chair of a committee that you secretly think doesn't actually have a purpose, suggest that perhaps the committee itself be reviewed within the context of the rest of the library's committee structure. Does it still need to exist? Maybe it's time has passed and it did what it needed to do. We always talk about how librarians never know when to quit; we have an unending desire to just tweak this one initiative or maybe change the position of the desk or the button on the website and then maybe it will work! We need to know when to just stop doing something.

Workplace culture encourages and rewards productivity and efficiency. Inbox zero! Getting things done! Self help books that promise you a four-hour work week, if you can just manage to find the time to read the book. Rather than stepping back and considering whether or not a task should be done at all, we seek out the perfect workflow to do as much of it and as quickly as possible. It's a distraction that allows us to ignore the unpleasant reality of the futility of our paperwork.

David Graeber shared an anecdote about what happened when he proposed to his colleagues that they stage a self assessment boycott. It went over like a lead balloon.

People simply weren't willing to relinquish the bureaucracy they have become complacent about. Graeber pondered what he called a vision of hell:

"Eternal damnation is a group of people performing unnecessary, unpleasant tasks that they are bad at and can't stand doing — but spend all their time on anyway because they are so indignant about the prospect that anyone else might be doing less." (Graeber 2018).

So we must ask ourselves, what can we do to disrupt, subvert or simply stop playing the game? Not all battles are worth fighting, but if there is something that you do on a regular basis that you secretly think is mainly pointless, consider how you could approach it differently. Do I really need to write that grant application? What exactly do I need funding for here? Can I proceed without it? Am I really spending my time wisely by poring over these collections stats that, deep down, I know no one truly takes literally? Is the department I am writing a 20 page report for even going to read past the Executive Summary? Maybe a one pager will do. You may surprise yourself when you answer those questions honestly, and just maybe there'll be more time in your day to work on things that truly resonate with you, and even better, maybe you'll still have energy left at the end of the day to devote to the people and activities that you love.

Getting the word out (of our echo chamber)

*"You're not going back on your word if you never said anything."* - (Denault 2018)

We need to get beyond the virtue signalling of performative wokeness. Conference ribbons aren't cutting it. I felt uneasy when I saw Black Lives Matter ribbons alongside ones that say "I'd Rather Be Knitting" at OLA one year; but I told myself to chill out - it's just a bit of fun, and at least it shows we are thinking about issues - but, then I got upset later on when I saw the BLM ribbons sat in a barely touched pile, but #nastywoman were the first to go. That's some white feminism for you.

It's all well and good for us to come together here and talk within our echo chamber, but preaching to the converted doesn't actually move us forward. As I wrote this, I read so many intelligent and progressive pieces and I repeatedly asked myself "aren't you just telling everyone stuff they already know? Is everything really that bad out there? Most librarians are pretty woke, aren't they? What do you have to say about it anyway?" And then I remember

there are places on the web like LIS Grievances, Annoyed Librarian and ALA Think Tank, and I reassured myself that there is, indeed, much work to be done. People who deny that white privilege exists are among us. If we don't find ways to take these conversations back to our workplaces, our unions, our administrations, our communities, friends and family, then it is all for not. For a great number of us, it's highly unlikely that we will ever seriously be at risk of losing our jobs for creating a bit of controversy. If not us, then who?

Others before me have laid out paths to how we can effect change, I don't presume to present an exhaustive list of ways forward and genuinely feel uncomfortable standing on a pulpit to give sage advice on how you can contribute to your community, but I will offer up a few that have resonated in my own experience:

**Research:**

The hamster wheel of academic research often means that research becomes focused on research process itself. The notion of asking interesting questions for the sake of curiosity is subsumed by our own insular insecurities; whether driven by a fear of your promotion committee, or a sense of obligation to prioritize actionable, practical research, we sometimes forget if the question we are asking is the right question to ask. Emily Drabinski and Scott Walter ask us if we can "imagine interventions that librarians might make that would help to undo the commodification of learning" (Drabinski and Walter 2016), for example.

At its heart, the Little Free Libraries project was a really elaborate way to call out bullshit. The project resonated with people from all walks of life. Never in my wildest dreams did I think it would lead to being interviewed by (a sympathetic) Carol Off on national radio. Whether people agreed with Jordan and I or not, it certainly got people talking and thinking about public libraries and what they do. That was an amazing thing to be a part of. If you are protected by academic freedom, then I would advise you to interpret that in the most generous sense possible. Choose to research issues and explore ideas that genuinely spark interest in you, have the potential to effect change, get people thinking, or perhaps - just perhaps - be part of progress.

**Community:** On campus, actively reach out to your student unions and activist groups and ask what they need. Volunteer in your own neighbourhood in spaces where you know your skills can be put to use. Whether that is through activism, tutoring, web maintenance or even political office, librarians are smart and have so much to offer our broader communities.

**Occupy the bureaucracy:** Bring issues to your meetings. Liven up your library council by creating a standing item where an issue of the day is explored, discussed and debated. Take up space to bring contentious matters forward in union meetings. Call out bullshit when you see it. Ask questions. Make things uncomfortable. You may not solve everything with these tactics, but shining a light is the first step.

**Study. Learn. Read.** About anything other than libraries, though. Read widely and as frequently as you can about the world around us to understand how it works. Read news from other countries. Seek out disciplines that you find intriguing and explore their literature. This doesn't require publishing or getting a degree - unless you want it to - but it will make you smarter and it will most certainly help us be better librarians.

Pass the mic

*"Look behind you, offer your hand"*. - Carol Off (address to the graduating class of 2017 at University of Western Ontario)

It is up to all generations to actively work to eradicate what I will call the "intergenerational endurance of hardship"; - just because you endured a road to tenure paved in tears and ramen lined with men doling out pats on the ass and crass jokes doesn't mean your successors also have to do so. We can make things better for future generations. One study that I read (Lo and Herman 2017) suggested that work stress for senior academic librarians was reduced because we were more comfortable in our work. This may be true, but we forget what it was like to be young and struggling at our collective peril. Complacency can creep into our work when we aren't paying attention. The ideas of new librarians need to be heard, and time spent incorporating them in our collective practice, lest we become too inured to change and growth. In short, if we aren't constantly challenging the status quo, we aren't paying attention.

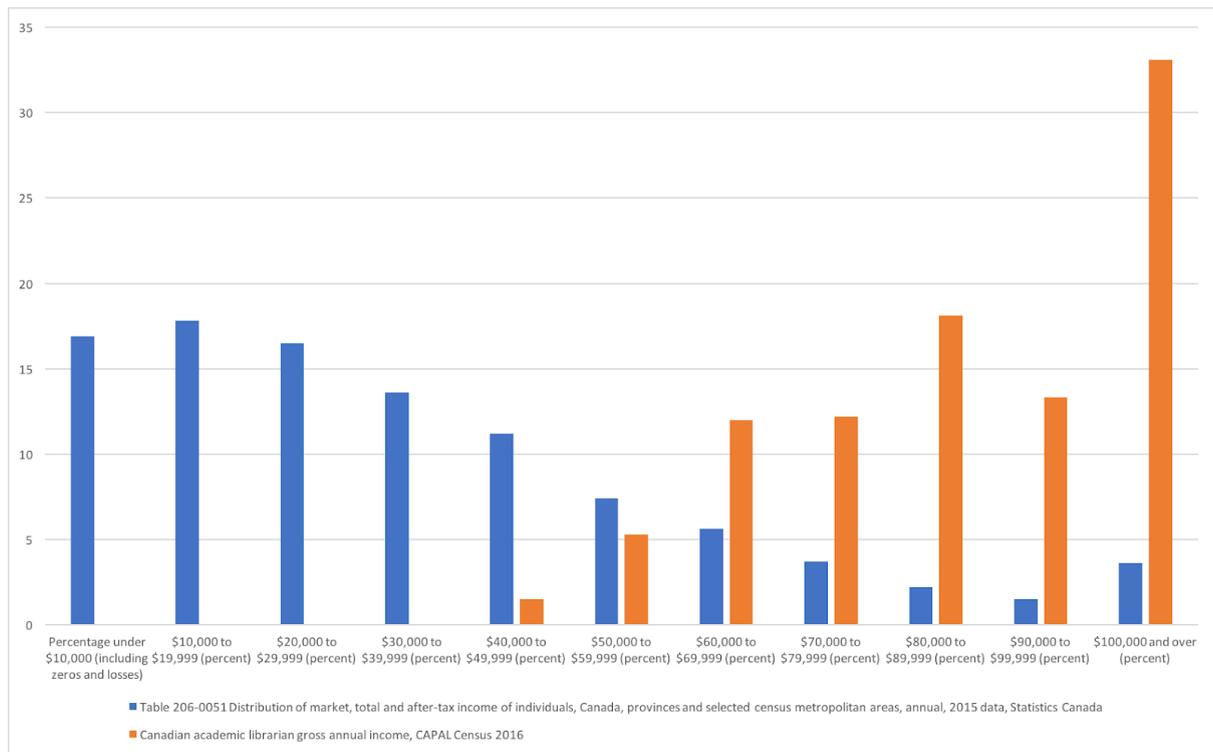
Passing the mic will mean you will have to pass on opportunities that may be offered to you. This means you will have to give something up. But this is what allyship looks like and it involves personal sacrifice where you don't get the credit. If you've had any sort of platform for a long time, perhaps it's time you looked to give someone else a voice. If you are seeking research partners for a new project, consider looking outside of your tried and true circles and ask a newer colleague; they need the experience and are thirsty for it. They are also

ambitious, smart and have fresh ideas. And we can and need to do more to ensure their success.

Maintain perspective - explore our privilege and how we can leverage it for progress

Erin Bartram, a former scholar and PhD in history wrote an influential blog post earlier this year called “The sublimated grief of the left behind.” It was a reflection on her decision to give up on her dream of landing a full time job in her field. In the post she asks what would happen if instead of hanging our heads and feeling sad about those who were unable to achieve the holy grail of the tenure track position, we actually grieved those losses? What if we talked about them more openly? Her post really struck a nerve and garnered a significant response. Those who identified with it because of a similarity to their own life felt seen and heard, and, unfortunately, there was a cabal of tenured folk who felt attacked (Bartram, 2018b). Instead of choosing empathy and hearing what was being said, the reaction was to go on the defense.

This event reminded me of something a colleague of mine once said to me during a discussion about our faculty association. Solidarity is an illusion. I’m inclined to agree with them in a lot of instances. Take, for example, bargaining tactics. Salary is hardly ever the main issue - often dwarfed by workload and benefits, it’s normally a foregone conclusion that the association will seek some sort of percent increase. We’ll go in high, the other side will go in low and we’ll meet somewhere in the middle and save the big fights for other issues. But what if we changed the game? What if we changed tactics and cut a deal where we would forego a percentage of our increase in exchange for an increase in tenure track positions? What if all of us did that? I’m sure there are people hearing that and automatically thinking of reasons why that can’t happen - which I am sure are reasonable - but the point is, and what Bartram was asking those with privilege to do - is to imagine that **something else** is possible. And if we are not going to be the ones to imagine it, then nothing will change. And that will be on us.



Source: CAPAL Census Project Team 2016, Statistics Canada

This is a chart that illustrates something that we don't talk about. It compares our salaries to the rest of Canada; with respect for any stats enthusiasts, I concede that it's not a perfect one-to-one comparison. But it undeniably illustrates the point that we are basically the one percent (CAPAL 2016); and if not the 1% most definitely the 10%. At some point, we need to really ask ourselves - when do we have enough and what can we do to spread that wealth? This is a jarring image. I am not sharing this to shame anyone. All of us worked for what we have, but the point is ... so have others who have not yet had the good fortune to land That Job. Emily Drabinksi reminds us that our professional status, by default, creates inequity when others do not enjoy that same status (Drabinski 2016). We enjoy enormous wealth. Go to the website [www.globalrichlist.com](http://www.globalrichlist.com) and see for yourself. The imperative to do the best that we can with what we have is difficult to ignore - as long as we don't look away.

## Conclusion

Let's circle back to my identity crisis in which I wondered - do I have a bullshit job? Is my life's work meaningless? I like to think that no, my job is not bullshit, but there does seem to be an undeniable amount of bullshit surrounding our work, and the impact that has on the psyche of the worker cannot be dismissed. When we are disconnected from our values in

the work we perform, we distance ourselves from our purpose in service of maintaining an infrastructure of bullshit. Furthermore, the more emphasis we place on our profession as our identity, the more risk we run of equating our job as our personal value.

Toni Samek, in her book *Librarianship and Human Rights* tells us that critical librarianship is a choice (Samek 2006, p. 35). It is my contention that for academic librarians who enjoy the relative privilege of tenure and academic freedom, this is not a choice. At the women's march in 2016, Janet Mock told us that "our movements require us to do more than just show up and say the right words. It requires us to break out of our comfort zones and be confrontational. It requires us to defend one another when it is difficult and dangerous. It requires us to truly see ourselves and one another." At ACRL 2017, Roxane Gay told us that she didn't want our shame, she wanted our fight. If this group of privileged, intelligent, well-resourced and articulate professionals can't give themselves over to this challenge, then who else? It is said that the strength of any movement is how loud their members sing. I'm not sure if we're that great at singing, but we do have a lot to say. Let's make sure it's loud enough to break through the walls of our echo chambers.

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