Libraries, Silence and Social Justice; why finding our voice and being mouthy is needed

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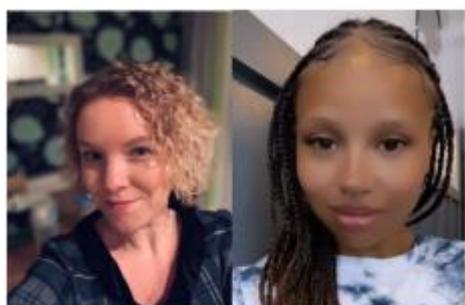
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If there's one word associated with libraries and librarians by the general public, it is probably 'silence'. Libraries are traditionally thought of as silent reflective places; librarians are supposed to monitor noise levels and 'sssshhhh' appropriately.

If there is a second word it is probably 'trustworthy' or 'good'. In the 2022 Ipsos Veracity Index, librarians were considered the second most trusted profession, behind only nurses, with 93% of respondents indicating they would trust librarians to tell the truth. Memes circulate online that emphasise librarians' somehow inherent honesty, reliability and trustworthiness. For example: **Neil Gaiman**'s: "Google will bring you back a hundred thousand answers. A librarian will bring you back the right one", **Chris Riddell**'s much-shared illustrations about libraries and reading, with the central message: "A library is a place of safety, a haven from the world. It's a place with librarians in it", or the explosion of 'don't mess with the librarians' comments after the recent moves against Donald Trump over possession of classified material.

But have we, as a profession and as a sector, internalised these messages too much? Do we silence ourselves when we should be speaking out against the injustices we witness in our workplaces, amongst colleagues and in the LIS sector? Have we somehow convinced ourselves that we have no need to speak out because our 'good librarian intentions' speak for us, because we think of our libraries as places of neutrality and sanctuary? Surely they must be?

Several years ago **Fobazi Ettarh** articulated the concept of 'vocational awe', referring to external and internal perceptions of the library profession as inherently good or otherwise

neutral, dedicated to education and knowledge and social justice, and the insidious role this ostensibly positive perception can play in upholding the status quo and maintaining systems of oppression and marginalisation. We therefore need to look beyond our good intentions and interrogate our well-meaning actions more thoroughly.

> *Are our libraries genuinely neutral? Are they places of sanctuary and safety for all? Are they accessible to everyone? Do our collections serve our users and reflect their lived experiences and outlooks? Do we reflect and acknowledge our own positionality and privilege when designing library services, support, facilities?*

If we are honest with ourselves (or have enough critical awareness), we need to admit that the answer to these questions is mostly 'no'. Our libraries (and the universities to which they belong) are enmeshed in a number of discriminatory and exclusionary systems, from technology to academic publishing, hiring practices to professional networks, sector bodies to legislative and regulatory frameworks, that inhibit equal participation from anyone who falls outside of the white, cis, able-bodied mainstream. As librarians navigating this structural space we therefore need to ask ourselves questions regarding the extent of our neutrality and whether there is more we can and should be speaking out about.

Many people no doubt hold back from speaking out on social justice issues for fear of not knowing what to say or do, or not wanting to offend, or doing the wrong thing. There may be a fear of making things worse and consequently being accused of prejudice or bias. From our combined personal experience, it frequently seems that some people are more worried about being accused of prejudice than they are of the impact of that prejudice on others. As a result, many only be willing to step up and act when someone provides guidance or direction who (rightly or wrongly) is perceived and/or assumed to be more knowledgeable, especially when that person is from an oppressed community themselves.

There are many reasons why we should stop waiting for the 'experts' to speak for us. Ask ourselves who usually are the people that get to be appointed as leaders? Who are the people who get to be in the rooms, buildings or gated compounds of importance? Do those at the top of the social hierarchy have a genuine desire to *radically* dismantle the status quo? Even though positive changes have been made where more people from marginalised backgrounds are thankfully now entering positions of power, we must not be blinded by the fact that tokenistic, numeric gestures only change symptoms of oppression when they manifest as exclusion. Let's remember that every Global North society has huge diverse populations and yet oppression still exists, which is why 'inclusion' alone cannot effect the change we are looking for. The idea that the presence of the 'token' leader from a marginalised background is enough to enforce critical status quo change is also open to debate. Being siloed within hegemonic spaces and the psychological pressure to assimilate are themes which psychologist **Guilaine Kinouani** discusses in her work.

Ultimately, we should not let anyone speak for us. We need to do our own talking and find the power in the voice of our individual selves rather than in others.

People may feel that their voice may be quiet but manifests through acts of 'silent solidarity. Liking a 'woke tweet' is not activism. Failing to *actively* speak out is silence, pure and simple, and silence only lends strength to oppression. Our colleagues and users suffering under that

oppression can hardly be blamed for perceiving our silence as *complicity*, not sympathy. This is especially the case if they possess less social privilege and so receive less protection when being vocal (think of the angry black woman trope and other negative stereotypes) and/or have to deal with psychological, individual and collective trauma but are still *expected* to be the loudest voices in the fight.

Clearly, we need to listen to our oppressed colleagues and users, listen and learn, but not expect them to lay out a roadmap and direction, to smooth the path and make it comfortable enough and 'safe' enough for us to act. It should not be on marginalised communities to shoulder the intellectual and emotional labour of trying to effect change. Those of us with privilege and positions of authority or responsibility need to levy that privilege to our advantage. We are the ones who should be doing the heavy lifting in pursuit of equality in higher education.

Of course, we are not naive to the barriers that are present to all who dare to speak out. Power at the very top of higher leadership continues to be held by a privileged few and these people hold the power to silence those who attack their authority and the structures which maintain that authority. Opening ourselves up to emotional and professional pressures by talking to colleagues about difficult social issues can also be emotionally taxing, as Naomi found during her research interviewing senior library figures about their critical awareness of digital inequalities and assessing their views from a Critical Race Theory lens. In her soon-to-be-published work she mentions how there were no guidebooks or academic writing to be found that could both practically help or mentally prepare her to have potentially difficult conversations with colleagues, which had the potential to be personally triggering by being full of microaggressions or could cause her professional repercussions if she 'called out' leaders who were more 'superior' than her in their job status.

As we have discussed already in this article, critiquing people can activate feelings of fragility and defensiveness and it is understandable why some people may continue to feel scared to speak about critical issues for fear of also not wanting to offend, or also being judged as saying the 'wrong' thing. However, if we really are committed to creating equitable change then all of us must go through discomfort as best we can. This is because we should "perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which [we] can transform". Creating a just world, a just institution, a just profession, requires dialogue, communication and recognising the individual and collective power that is found when we speak passionately about things that need to be spoken about.

This is in no way an indictment of the incredible, challenging and impactful work taking place in many libraries and institutions across our sector. Many libraries are beginning to take steps to address inequality in their collections, in their hiring practice, pedagogy and relationships with commercial partners, and this is work that should be applauded and encouraged. Decolonisation, for example, has become a familiar term in higher education, with many libraries involved in work to 'decolonise' curricula, reading lists and library collections. But any use of the term without deeper critical analysis will be doomed to fail. we cannot 'decolonise' as long as we are entangled in these systems of systemic oppression and bias that actively prevent true equality and equity. Those systems need addressing first, and that is where librarians need to speak out more.

As librarians we occupy a position of privilege as a profession, even though it may not seem so from how vulnerable the library sector is in recent years. Our users trust us to tell them the truth, and that trust is both an honour and a responsibility. Perhaps we just need to transcend our fear-based egos, speak up and both make and more importantly *own* the mistakes? There is nothing wrong with speaking up and admitting to a lack of knowledge, admitting to a lack of experience, nothing wrong with speaking up and saying 'I am concerned, I am troubled, I want to do more, I want to help'. However, rather than expecting others to teach and advise, it is up to all of us to be responsible for our critical education. There are so many anti-oppression and critical theory based resources available, specifically written by oppressed communities. As librarians we clearly have the knowledge to locate and use them.

Silence perpetuates harm by maintaining and reproducing oppression, whilst being corrected may only bruise your ego. This is why finding our voice and being mouthy is needed, especially in a profession widely stereotyped as quiet and accommodating. If we all made the decision to become a bit more mouthy this year, perhaps that would embolden others to do so too!

Shared Issues that Naomi and Caroline bonded over were *#ebookSOS*, our sector's entanglement with publishers, anti-racist pedagogy and library activity, and other areas of social and digital justice. We invite you to follow us on twitter and get mouthy with us! @heroicendeavour @NaomiLASmith

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.

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