

## Unpresided: Librarianship in the New “Not Normal.”

Guest Editorial by Michael Dudley

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Following an American presidential campaign unlike any other in history—one replete with blatant lies, open racism, a spate of hate crimes, disturbingly angry rallies, and a shocking normalization of sexual assault—alleged billionaire, Donald J. Trump, was elected President of the United States.

On November 15th, the Washington D.C. office of the American Library Association put out a press release entitled, “ALA offers expertise, resources to incoming administration and Congress.” Readers shouldn’t bother trying to find it on the ALA website anymore—[it’s been rescinded](#). However, the statement was quickly archived by the [Wayback Machine](#), where one can learn that ALA President Julie Todaro was quoted as saying,

We are ready to work with President-elect Trump, his transition team, incoming administration and members of Congress to bring more economic opportunity to all Americans and advance other goals we have in common... Libraries...make up a robust national infrastructure immediately available to advance several policy priorities identified by the President-elect.

The reaction was swift, with many library professionals using the Twitter hashtag, #NotMyALA to disassociate themselves from what they saw as the Association’s normalization of Trump. Emily Drabinski blogged, “[ALA does not speak for me](#)”, declaring, “this is not a moment to collaborate. This is a moment to resist.” Sarah Houghton writing at [Librarian in Black](#) added,

I have no intention of supporting this incoming administration in any way whatsoever. With the transition team and other appointments being floated in the press, President-elect Trump has made it clear that racism, sexism, bigotry, assault, discrimination of all kinds, and the destruction of basic civil liberties are foundational to his administration’s philosophy. I refuse to be complicit in the work of the Trump administration and cannot in good faith remain part of a professional organization that chooses to be complicit.

As a result of this furor, the ALA press release was retracted almost immediately and replaced with a new one about [diversity and inclusion](#), in which President Todaro affirmed that “the struggle against racism, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination is central to our mission.” While the statement mentioned the recent divisive election, it did not specifically refer to the reality of a racist President-elect. Finally on November 19th, the ALA President issued a [full apology](#), noting that the first press release had been a

draft posted by mistake. In his thoughtful reflections on the controversy, [Rory Litwin at Library Juice Press concluded](#),

I don't think we need to say that "ALA refuses to cooperate with the Trump administration and repudiates its fascist ideology," but we can say what we stand for, and we can register what we are concerned about specifically, before mentioning possible areas of collaboration.

The anger over the ALA's response to the election highlights the fundamental ethical dilemma that will be faced by all professionals and institutions concerned with civil society over the next four years: to what extent can or should they continue to go about their professional and institutional activities as they always have, or is outright resistance required? For librarians in particular, our long-standing professional values (related to diversity, social justice, gender and sexual equity, democracy and public education, etc.), and those of the incoming Trump administration (and the neo-Nazi so-called "alt-right" movement that supports him) are in stark opposition. For many then, the initial official pronouncements from ALA raised doubts about how the Association might represent those values under what promises to be an authoritarian regime.

The spectre of authoritarianism is indeed weighing heavily: Observers are frequently evoking Germany of the 1930s, and discussing in foreboding terms how America is entering an era in which its institutions will fail them in large part because they are trying to normalize what is happening, and will as a result become integrated into the authoritarian state. [As Sarah Kendzior writes](#),

Authoritarianism is not merely a matter of state control, it is something that eats away at who you are. It makes you afraid, and fear can make you cruel. It compels you to conform and to comply and accept things that you would never accept, to do things you never thought you would do... You do it because everyone else is doing it, because the institutions you trust are doing it and telling you to do it, because you are afraid of what will happen if you do not do it, and because the voice in your head crying out that something is wrong grows fainter and fainter until it dies.

To forestall such a disaster, Yale history professor [Timothy Snyder set out 20 ways to save America from tyranny](#) in the *Dallas Morning News*, the first three of which are of special interest to us in light of the ALA controversy, and are discussed in turn:

Do not obey in advance. Much of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then start to do it without being asked. You've already done this, haven't you? Stop. Anticipatory obedience teaches authorities what is possible and accelerates unfreedom.

This, unfortunately, was the pitfall into which the ALA was about to fall, being pulled back from the brink by its activist members—whom exhibited Snyder's second point:

Defend an institution...Do not speak of “our institutions” unless you are making them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions don’t protect themselves. They go down like dominoes unless each is defended from the beginning.

Defending libraries will take on a pressing urgency under President Trump, as they have already come under attack in the form of [a shocking number of hate crimes directed at or taking place in libraries](#) on both sides of the border, including [anti-Semitic graffiti spray painted on a public library in Toronto](#). As well, anticipating the same pressures from the government that were directed at libraries under the USA PATRIOT ACT (and against which [ALA issued a strong policy statement](#) in 2005) some public libraries are updating their privacy policies to ensure that [user data is not used for surveillance purposes](#), which speaks powerfully to Snyder’s third point:

Recall professional ethics. When the leaders of state set a negative example, professional commitments to just practice become much more important. It is hard to break a rule-of-law state without lawyers, and it is hard to have show trials without judges.

The writings of Drabinski, Houghton, and Litwin—as well as the Twitter campaign—attest to this. Another commendable example: While most of the tech industry—including [Facebook, Microsoft, Google, Apple and IBM](#)—declined to respond when asked by the website The Intercept if they would be willing to contribute to Trump’s proposed national Muslim database, [hundreds of engineers signed an open letter](#) vowing they would have no part in it.

We need to pay close attention to these warnings and practices of resistance. Canadian library professionals might seek comfort in our present Liberal regime under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (having endured years of information-averse rule under former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, during which numerous libraries were denuded of their collections and the mandatory Census was repealed), but we must remind ourselves that the current slate of candidates for the leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada includes at least one, Kellie Leitch, [who openly admires Trump and wants to import his “exciting message” to Canada](#).

Under normal circumstances, of course a professional association like the ALA would in the spirit of civic-mindedness issue a press release offering the services and support of the profession to the incoming administration. However, these are not normal times: this was not a normal election, and this will not be a normal presidency. The inexperience, lack of education and avowed extremism in the upcoming administration is unprecedented—or as Trump infamously tweeted, “[unpresidented](#).” Professions and institutions with a vested interest in a healthy democracy—which is to say, almost every one of them outside of, perhaps, arms dealers—need to recognize that, as [Robert Kuttner declares](#), “the era we are entering is not normal, not to be normalized...This is a time to defend core democratic institutions.”

Which is why the response to the initial ALA press statement, as well as the forms of resistance already being practiced in libraries, give cause for hope: Our profession is passionately committed to our institutions and stands ready to defend them.

Michael Dudley

### ***Postscript***

On January 30th, in response to President Trump's executive order banning immigrants and travellers from seven majority Muslim nations, ALA President Julie Todaro issued a press release entitled "ALA opposes new administration policies that contradict core values," in which she declared "We are shocked and dismayed by recent executive orders and other actions by the new administration, which stand in stark contrast to the core values of the American Library Association (ALA)."

To which I say, #YesMyALA.

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