

LIBRARIES AND THE GLOBAL  
RETREAT OF DEMOCRACY

# ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP VOLUME 50

**LIBRARIES AND THE  
GLOBAL RETREAT  
OF DEMOCRACY:  
CONFRONTING  
POLARIZATION,  
MISINFORMATION,  
AND SUPPRESSION**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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**Colleen Hall** began her career in libraries as a Clerk, shelving books and serving the public. From inside this lens, she has been fortunate to work as a Children’s Librarian, a School Librarian and as the Manager of Outreach, all positions involving service to the community, especially to youth and underserved populations. She currently serves as the Assistant Director of the Boyle County Public Library in Central Kentucky.

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# INTRODUCTION

## ANTICIPATING 2020 AND BEYOND: WHAT'S NEXT FOR LIBRARIES AND DEMOCRACY?

Natalie Greene Taylor, Ursula Gorham, Karen Kettlich  
and Paul T. Jaeger

As we sat down to write this introduction, we thought back to the political environment of the United States (and the world) when we first had the idea for an edited volume on libraries and the global retreat of democracy. It was the end of 2019 and we were looking with some concern to the 2020 US presidential election cycle. Misinformation online seemed to be worsening and events on the international stage seemed to be setting the stage for impending crises of truth. Because of the historical role that libraries have played in promoting democracy (in the political sense) and democratizing information on more individual scales, in general, we thought it was a prime time to look at how libraries are situated within the context of democratic institutions and cultures. We had no idea just how important this collection of works would be.

In the year since the contract was signed on the book, the world has experienced a global pandemic, which has been characterized by political malfeasance, rampant misinformation, and the deaths of roughly 2.94 million people (a figure that continues to grow daily). In the United States, the seat of our federal legislature was attacked by far-right-wing domestic terrorists. The United Kingdom officially left the European Union, a departure fueled by political lies and disinformation (Brexit). The Chinese government, partially due to the pandemic but also encouraged by the loss of democratic norms worldwide, increased its draconian legal actions against Hong Kong and essentially any government detractors. The jailing of well-known political opposition leader Aleksei A.

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**Libraries and the Global Retreat of Democracy:**  
**Confronting Polarization, Misinformation, and Suppression**  
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Navalny became another example of the persistence of autocratic behavior in Russia. Human rights' abuses against minorities abounded, both globally and in the United States, with the police brutality against Black Americans a prime (and distressing) example. In general, it wasn't a great 12 months on planet Earth.

With that said, there is perhaps no better time for reflection and scholarship on how institutions (in this case, libraries) are situated within democracy. The influence of political decisions, cultural norms, and human empowerment on access to (true) information cannot be overstated and this collection of 10 chapters throws this into sharp relief. The works included in this volume have been divided into three sections: "What is Democracy?," "How the Information Environment Contributes to and Detracts from Democracy," and "Libraries as Virtual and Physical Spaces for Democracy." While each author or set of authors explores libraries within these themes, we want to invite our readers to consider what democracy itself is or can be before thinking about how the information society and individual library actions impede or promote democratic norms.

In the first section, three authors consider democracy writ large – what it is, how it relates to libraries and personal information management, and how it changes institutions. In Chapter 1 – "Actually-Existing Democracy and Libraries: A Mapping Exercise" – John Buschman discusses why democracy in the United States has faltered. This view of recent history notes that economic and political forces prizing the free market have ignored the negative impacts of the neoliberal economy on democracy. Helpfully, the chapter discusses what is meant by neoliberalism and its relationship to both society and libraries. Buschman describes the critical importance of the public sphere in fulfilling some means of actually-existing democracy, and that the

heart of libraries in actually-existing democracy is equality. The equalitarian imaginative and practical effects that libraries foster repeatedly come out in tales of opportunity and discovery from library users reflecting on their experiences. (p. 17, this volume)

This chapter articulates that, even while so many describe libraries as dying institutions, the defense and use of libraries demonstrates that "there is a desirable everyday quality of community and campus life of which a library is a core part" (p. 24, this volume). Because of the way that democracy is now experienced by most people, libraries are an essential piece to maintaining the voice and agency that remains.

Nicole A. Cooke asks in Chapter 2, "A Right to be Misinformed? Considering Fake News as a Form of Information Poverty", how information professionals should grapple with the question of people choosing misinformation. It is the nature of a democracy that people are able to decide who to listen to and what to believe;

[p]eople are inclined to believe what they want to believe (i.e., what makes them comfortable and what confirms what they already believe) despite training, awareness of critical thinking, and acknowledgement of widely held "objective facts." (p. 46, this volume)

Cooke asks: "Are they less intelligent or informed because they choose to exist in their own information worlds and privilege their own confirmation biases?" (p. 46, this volume). This chapter, through its examination of personal democracy,

addresses the way that human behavior shapes the culture(s) that survive and thrive within democratic society, as well as ways that information professionals can view their own practices in light of these small-d democratic freedoms.

Chapter 3, “Facts (Almost) Never Change Minds: Libraries and the Management of Democracy-Supportive Public Perceptions,” written by Bill Crowley, discusses the media’s role in the misinformation society. Like Cooke, Crowley examines the various ways that human information behavior serves to allow (and even encourage) misinformation to flourish. His work complements Buschman’s exploration of how democratic the United States is (and has been). Crowley introduces the theory of pragmatism to the discussion of how democracy can thrive in our current information environment and how libraries can address many of our current democratic errors. In Crowley’s own words:

[t]his chapter’s process of national examination includes considerations of how direct and indirect democratic practices and social networking can impede securing social justice...[and] explores how library and information staff may take inspiration from the nation’s record of successful political movements, as well as the role of contemporary mass protests, in laying the groundwork for advancing inclusive US democracy. (p. 79, this volume)

We begin our second section of the book – “How the Information Environment Contributes to and Detracts from Democracy” – by examining how digitization creates problems of misinformation. In Chapter 4, “Container Collapse and Misinformation: Why Digitization Creates Challenges for Democracy,” Christopher Cyr describes findings from a research project investigating how students evaluate scientific information on the Internet. One major change that occurs when consuming information online rather than in print is the lack of context in which information can be found – it need not be housed in its original “container.” Cyr asserts that

[t]he trend toward digitization of resources, and the loss of context from the flattening of containers, combined with the increase of the number of people who get their political information online, creates a situation where misinformation is an increasing threat to democracy. (pp. 103–104, this volume)

Libraries, in their ongoing efforts to promote information literacy can use the study’s findings to identify where in the information search process we might best be able to combat this democracy-eroding misinformation.

In Chapter 5, “Fighting Fake News: The Cognitive Factors Impeding Political Information Literacy,” Rajesh Singh and Kyle N. Brinster continue a discussion of the fake news environment with their expansion of the nascent concept of political information literacy, which encompasses critical information literacy, digital literacy, and media literacy skills. Their discussion argues that civic engagement is a key to combatting misinformation and that libraries can drive this engagement through programming and activities that target cognitive barriers to processing information: “Fake news is everywhere and to fight it we must be too” (p. 122, this volume).

Finally, Amy Dickinson considers the “Information Obstacle Course: Seeking the Right to Asylum at the US–Mexico Border” in Chapter 6. She asks whether

[a]t the US–Mexico border...the right “to seek, receive and impart information” [must] be fulfilled in order to fulfill the right to asylum? If so, is that right being fulfilled? ...What is the role of the information professional in the fulfillment of the right to asylum? (pp. 133–134, this volume)

Many of the information barriers impacting asylum seekers – policy decisions that fail to take into account procedural guidance and adequate information technology for implementation, as well as a lack of equitable access to information – are common for many underserved communities, and in this way, Dickinson highlights both a specific information environment in need of attention and a set of environmental issues that commonly impede information democracy.

The thread of the role of librarians in democracy is continued in Section 3 of this volume – “Libraries as Virtual and Physical Spaces for Democracy.” In Chapter 7, “Beyond Fake News: Learning from Information Literacy Programs in Ukraine,” Maria Haigh, Thomas Haigh, Maryna Dorosh and Tetiana Matychak

explore several successful information literacy programs in Ukraine, a country whose fake news problems made global headlines in 2014, when the Russian annexation of Crimea and stealth invasion of Eastern Ukraine was accompanied by a flood of crude but effective disinformation. (p. 163, this volume)

The programs highlighted have been introduced in diverse contexts, including libraries and schools, and illustrate how effective coordination of information literacy education across contexts can succeed “on a scale far beyond what could be accomplished by individual libraries acting alone” (p. 164, this volume).

Chapter 8, “‘Politic Talks’ in Academic Libraries of the South to Address a Global Democracy Recession in the United States: An Exploratory Website Analysis,” features a discussion on how academic libraries in the US southern region are working to address what authors Bharat Mehra and Joseph Winberry describe as a democratic recession in this country. In order “to understand how academic libraries are providing accurate and authentic political information and opportunities for student political engagement in responding to the recent repressive cultural and political climate,” the authors have applied website content analysis and describe positive findings in terms of the offerings of political rhetoric (p. 184, this volume). They also describe how their findings highlight the need “to adopt a more consolidated and cohesive framework to present political information on [library] websites” (p. 184, this volume).

In Chapter 9, “Raking the Forests: Information Literacy, Political Polarization, Fake News, and the Educational Roles of Librarians,” two of the editors of this volume (Paul T. Jaeger and Natalie Greene Taylor) assume the roles of chapter authors by considering gaps in the ways librarians are trained to address misinformation. By exploring personal experiences with acts of misinformation on the part of individual librarians, we argue that

we cannot neglect that the members of our profession are open to being influenced by misinformation as much as anyone else. We need to not only focus on teaching patrons to cut through the thickets of misinformation, but also spend some time raking our own forests as well. (p. 220, this volume)

Finally, Chapter 10, “Libraries Of, By, and For the People: Reimagining Strategies to Enhance Democratic Culture within LIS Spaces and Programming,” concludes with Daniela K. DiGiacomo, Shannon M. Oltmann, and Colleen Hall’s discussion of the potential of libraries’ contributions to structured civic learning

opportunities and experiences by serving “as places and spaces that provide and promote such opportunities” (p. 226, this volume). The authors turn their attention to the types of users libraries see (and to those who are currently non-users) and suggest that “[r]ather than amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and individuals, we suggest a radical change: *become* the voices of marginalized communities. Let them speak through and shape the library” (p. 240, this volume). In this way, libraries may be able to truly encompass the role that so many of the chapters in this volume suggest that they can – an institution to save democracy.

The tripartite structure of this volume – questions of personal and state democracy, how the information infrastructure shapes these democracies, and the ways that libraries can and do contribute to democracy – is designed to situate libraries within the political conversation and highlight their importance. A focus on how libraries are coordinating their work in political and information literacy (and how these efforts can be improved) is a common refrain throughout this entire edited volume. We conclude with an afterword, “Reverse the Retreat: Countering Disinformation and Authoritarianism as the Work of Libraries,” that continues this theme with a discussion of where we go from here. Here, we return to many of the troublesome current events discussed in this introduction, suggesting that while “libraries cannot turn the mighty ship of state around on their own...they can sure do a lot to help right its course” (p. 253, this volume). The recommendations and examples highlighted in this book will hopefully serve as inspiration and motivation to its readers.

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# SECTION 1

## WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

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