



We Can't All Be Rock Stars

Reaching a Mass Audience with the Message of Library Privacy

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The dust had scarcely settled on the ruins of the World Trade Center and at the Pentagon when US legislators, in what can be charitably called an overabundance of caution, passed the USA PATRIOT Act, a sweeping and often controversial series of powers designed overtly to aid security officials in detecting and thwarting any additional attacks by terrorists on American targets. Nestled in among the tangle of legal language was Section 215, immediately dubbed “the library records provision.” Under Section 215, federal officials—specifically, the FBI—could request almost any document or record from a library with no need to provide probable cause and a strict prohibition against any librarian discussing such requests. Librarians, predictably, found Section 215 onerous. President George W. Bush’s attorney general at the time, John Ashcroft, called the concerns of librarians “baseless hysteria” in 2003. The library community found its villain that day.

Two years later, it found heroes, too. In 2005, George Christian, a Connecticut library executive, was served with papers from the FBI “demanding that he surrender ‘all subscriber information, billing information and access logs of any person’ who had used one computer at one of the libraries he managed” (Z. Carpenter 2015, 14). Christian balked at the request and went to court alongside three other library officials. Collectively, the group became known as “The Connecticut Four,” and their case opened the door to bombshell reporting by the *Washington Post*, which documented government use National Security Letters (NSLs) for overreach. After the FBI abandoned both its request for information and the associated gag order, the quartet of

folk heroes earned the admiration of the library community (15). But the events took place before the first iPhone was ever produced, before Facebook had expanded beyond college campuses, and when encountering something viral still meant a trip to the doctor. Outside of the library bubble, the tale of the Connecticut Four’s dedication to patron privacy is still relatively unknown.

This is all a very winding road to an extremely important question: since the greatest heroes of the modern library privacy movement exist almost entirely in obscurity, do libraries need a high-profile advocate?

Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act quietly died on the table in May of 2015 when reauthorization of the



statute failed (Kelly 2015). Before librarians could properly sit back and enjoy being out from under the shadow of the legislation, the 2016 elections flipped politics on its head and reacquainted the everyday American vernacular with terms like “hacking” and “authoritarianism” as well as introducing new doozies like “fake news” and “alternative facts.” To be fair, at the time of this writing (March 2017), the policies of the Trump administration are still nebulous, but the new president put forward Mike Pompeo as his pick to lead the CIA, and Pompeo was confirmed 66–32 late in January. Pompeo’s ascension to the CIA seat has rubbed civil liberties groups the wrong way in part because of Pompeo’s continued “support for the National Security Agency’s now-defunct bulk communications metadata collection and other surveillance programs” (Landay 2016). Librarians had likely already latched on to particular campaign rhetoric from the president focused on promises of domestic security and “law and order.” Even before Republicans consolidated power by winning both houses of Congress and the White House, the Connecticut Four penned an op-ed for the *Hartford Courant* warning against moves in Congress to again empower federal officials with the authority to request information and mute any discussion of those requests. “The senators could try again at any time,” the quartet warned (Chase et al. 2016).

With all due respect to the *Courant* and great admiration for the Connecticut Four, the most well-known voices in the public sphere are not librarians. Celebrities of all stripes—actors, authors, internet personalities, whatever the Kardashians are—bring a virtual army with them to nearly anything they call attention to, from the plight of refugees to marijuana legalization. Unfortunately, a basic Google search of “celebrity library advocates” turns up nothing especially noteworthy or viral-ready. Emma Watson, who plays noted bibliophile Belle in the upcoming Disney live-action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, has already taken up a full dossier of causes. Author Neil Gaiman is famous, but mostly to people who already have a strong relationship with books and libraries.

Pining for a celebrity advocate to speak up at the next awards show on behalf of libraries may be a bit reductive;

a naive belief in the power of the celebrity megaphone to push an important issue to the forefront of public discussion. But if privacy issues swell to the forefront as they did beginning in 2001, some expansive and memorable plea to American citizens is in order. Initiatives like NISO (National Informational Standards Organization) are already helping guide the Library Freedom Project (T. Carpenter 2016, 29), but there is not a public face or coordinated, singular campaign to remind the American public about the value and sanctity of libraries. In fact, both NISO and the Library Freedom Project are hardly known outside library circles despite their work to codify and enact best practices for all libraries to protect patron privacy.

It is hardly the place of this author to pretend to the expertise necessary to design and implement a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the library privacy issue in the vein of the American Library Association’s successful “Read” poster campaign. But I do have some idea what such an effort would look like. It would make the diminishing number of private spaces an issue average Americans would relate to without being alarmist. It would stress the long history of libraries as spaces where intellectual freedom was defended. To be a successful public relations campaign, it would juxtapose unpopular ideas with popular breakthroughs—perhaps a student studying volatile combustible materials to develop a new form of jet fuel. And, in my opinion, the campaign very well might have one famous face and voice to serve as the campaign’s “guide.”

Perhaps such a campaign isn’t needed at all. With some luck, the next iteration of the Connecticut Four will thrive in the exploding Information Age. But it is worth courting the idea that the commitment to the privacy of our patrons should be brought to the attention of the widest audience possible. It is worth considering how a voice with a virtual bullhorn might draw a spotlight to the cause of patron privacy. It shouldn’t take a new law like Section 215 or an unartful comment by Pompeo or Trump to give libraries and their supporters a rallying point.

If there’s a way to call in the “big guns,” sooner might be a better time than later.

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