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# Librarians as Target

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I have noticed lately that I am experiencing both internal and external challenges to my profession. There are days that I feel wedged between doubters on the inside and antagonists on the outside. This makes me pause and reflect. So, reflect I will.

I am a library science (LIS) educator, and, as such, I encounter students new to the program who are working paraprofessionals in their local libraries. Some, in fact, have held these jobs for a number of years before deciding to seek a professional degree. Early in the program, they question the need for the professional library science degree. As far as they are concerned, their libraries run efficiently, jobs are clearly defined, and everyone knows the weekly routines. What more is there to know? I am certain many library science educators encounter these questions and are ready with their rationale and refrains. The prescription sounds something like this: take the management course, the copyright course, the intellectual freedom course, the digital libraries course, the metadata course, seven other courses, and come see me in three semesters. We'll talk some more about the necessity of the degree. (Rest assured, I jest a bit.)

Students' greater familiarity with the library environment is often what prompts the question and what makes teaching library science challenging. Some students are doing professional level work due to inadequate staffing. We have seen this practice for decades. Educators are required to up their game in order to take students to the next level. At the same time, classes contain students new to the profession who have never worked in libraries. Instructors must balance the course with enough advanced content for those who need it while not losing the novices along the way.

So, just as we are getting students settled about the profession, along comes one of those articles. You know, the ones that come at us from outside the profession from sources like *USA Today*. These articles have titles like, "8 Jobs That Won't Exist in 2030" and "America's 25 Dying Industries."<sup>1</sup> These stories are sourced from other content services like *The Job Network* and *24/7 Wall St*. Unfortunately, the *24/7 Wall St*. researchers did not realize their data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) was incomplete. The BLS chose not to publicly disclose certain state, local, and private data due to a standards issue.<sup>2</sup> A correction few people will ever see was issued at the bottom of a revision of the *24/7 Wall St*. article on Jan 4, 2018. Michael Hoon's article, "8 Jobs That Won't Exist in 2030" from *The Job Network* and republished in *USA Today*, lists *librarian* as the number one job fated for oblivion. Since this article will not appear until several months after Hoon's October piece, I will refresh readers with some of his text:

More and more people are clearing out those paperbacks and downloading e-books on their Tablets and Kindles instead. The same goes for borrowing—as books fall out of favor, libraries are not as popular as they once were. That means you'll have a tough time finding a job if you decide to become a librarian. Many schools and universities are already moving their libraries off the shelves and onto the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

The last thing LIS educators need—and the last thing the profession needs—is misleading and ill-informed articles like this. Hoon writes about the workplace, ways to identify and avoid bad bosses, résumé tips, and other appealing articles—the kind of articles one cannot resist reading. The fact that Hoon lumps our profession into a list of fading jobs that includes paperboy, cashier, and receptionist leaves librarians just short of irate (with all due respect to paper boys, cashiers, and receptionists).

I had to think long and hard about the common thread among these jobs. The closest I can come is that both paper boys and librarians distribute reading material, both cashiers and library workers check out “products” to customers, and both receptionists and librarians smile and help direct people, but I remain baffled by this list.

At least in the *24/7 Wall St.* article, Stebbens and Co-men credit their research to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. To the librarian in all of us, the lack of sources for Hoon's claim about the trajectory of our profession, and the lack of any explanation as to why these occupations were chosen, is just irresponsible. Understandable, certainly. These attention-grabber stories are created as hooks to draw the reader's attention to advertisements. Blurbs like Hoon's are far from journalism. The irony is not lost on me that Hoon's “article” is distributed by libraries to their audiences through library databases, although it is hard to find now. The blurb also was available on the web for free if one can manage to read it through the darting videos, pop-up ads, and general screen clutter.

The double irony is that I promote the press. I support news organizations. I believe in the work our best journalists do. So, it is disappointing when newspapers run poorly researched, attention-seeking blurbs disguised as news stories. I would not classify this as fake news; rather it is just hastily compiled misinformation. Thoughtless misinformation like this is harmful to the entire profession, to prospective students attempting to make career choices, and to the public, which then formulates false notions about libraries. It is disheartening when a news organization with enormous reach uses the platform to spread misinformation.

Here we have a good lesson in critical thinking and looking at the evidence, which I hope everyone in the field will do. Syracuse University iSchool students Samantha Mairson and Allison Keough quickly responded with an excellent rebuttal to Hoon's “article.”<sup>4</sup> I applaud their quick response. The students examined the Library Research Service and the Pew Center reports which provide good evidence for a

positive projection for the profession. Let us look at more evidence. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook's* essay on librarianship says

employment of librarians is projected to grow 9 percent from 2016 to 2026, about as fast as the average for all occupations. Communities are increasingly turning to libraries for a variety of services and activities. Therefore, there will be a continuous need for librarians to manage libraries and help patrons find information.<sup>5</sup>

Dietmar Wolfram, president of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), also came out with a quick rebuttal published in *USA Today* on November 6, 2017. The letter, written on behalf of the ALISE board, appealed to the public, saying Hoon's “article demonstrates a lack of understanding of librarians' work.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, *USA Today* chose to publish only a small portion of the letter, but it lives on the ALISE website in its entirety.<sup>7</sup>

All this begs the question about the journalists' profession. How is it that *journalist* failed to make the list of Hoon's doomed professions? *Indeed's* blog on journalists reports, “For now, however, it is undeniable that the economics of the profession make it difficult for highly skilled, highly trained professionals to sustain a career.”<sup>8</sup> The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* also had this to say about journalism:

Overall employment of reporters, correspondents, and broadcast news analysts is projected to decline 10 percent from 2016 to 2026. Declining advertising revenue in radio, newspapers, and television will have a negative impact on employment growth for these occupations.<sup>9</sup>

Hoon's list appears to be cherry picking.

But back to our valiant students, Samantha and Allison. The students ask, “Why are librarians a target?” and “Why do librarians *still* have a bad reputation?”<sup>10</sup> They reflect a Rodney Dangerfield mindset. These are interesting questions from the new generation of students.

The students may be on target with their question. Librarians are a bit of a target, and an easy one at that. Or might we think of ourselves as a subject of interest? We should welcome those outside the profession who put us in their sight rather than ignore us. Being a subject of interest demands that libraries shine in that spotlight. Our services must be transparent, highly visible, and comprehensible. Our efforts and initiatives with digital collections, maker spaces, literacy programs, services for seniors, financial literacy, computer training, analytics, and all of our other services must be actively marketed. We have suffered too long under a cloud of misunderstanding about what we do.

Decades ago when I told a relative I was earning a degree in library science, she smiled and said, “oh that's so nice, you're going to check out books.” Six years ago, I spent an

hour verbally sparring with a 90 year-old family friend who said I could not be a “real” librarian because everything I did was on the computer. (We actually enjoyed the debate). “Real” librarians deal with tangible books, apparently. Hoon made the same mistake. Even today, my neighbor does not understand why I spend time at the university business school working with students. What could a librarian have to offer to business students? This is one of the dilemmas of knowledge work. No one outside the circle understands the nature of the work. No wonder we are easy targets for misconstrued perceptions.

In November I had a phone call from a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. This was music to my ears. He was writing an article about reference librarians. While my mind jumped for joy, my sixth sense sent up flares. The reporter, James Hagerty, was intent on knowing the number of reference librarians in the United States. I suddenly realized that I did not have an answer, but took heart in the fact that the question was more complicated than it seemed at first glance. We spent twenty minutes talking about the impact of the web on librarianship. I spoke at length about the way reference has been transformed, explaining the many flavors of “reference” work today. There was little response from the other end of the line, no sense of surprise, no follow-up questions, no sense of intrigue. I thought that maybe I had foiled his story line. The plot was predictable: who needs reference librarians now that we can find everything on the web?

But James Hagerty surprised me and wrote quite a different piece: “Google Shmoogole: Reference Librarians Are Busier Than Ever.”<sup>11</sup> The focus of the article was on traditional reference, but it was not the negative piece I feared. I also take heart in a *Forbes* web article from 2014, “The End of the Story? Why Libraries Still Matter.”<sup>12</sup> This article highlights the advances libraries have made:

Public libraries remain a cultural touchstone and vital part of American society. One reason for this is that many librarians have found creative ways to anticipate and meet shifting user preferences—and that includes embracing the very technology that some believe is threatening their future.<sup>13</sup>

In all fairness to *USA Today*, the newspaper had run a better article by Greg Toppo in June 2014 on libraries’ adopting new services.<sup>14</sup>

I return to the questions posed by Samantha and Allison, “Why do librarians still have a bad reputation?”<sup>15</sup> Hans Prins and Wilco de Geir studied this question in 1992 and stated, “No other group of professionals seems to pay as much attention to its status and image as librarians.”<sup>16</sup> If we do not want to admit to a bad reputation, we certainly can admit to a stereotype. But is not society full of stereotypical images of workers? Consider accountants, philosophy professors, scientists, cheerleaders, construction workers, Hollywood tycoons, and so on. I have always subscribed to the notion that a reputation

is earned, if the layperson continues not to understand the work we do, we will continue to struggle with our reputation. We also live in a society that respects service workers, but does not reward them well. Prestige follows reward.

The way forward calls us to keep doing what we do well. We are in a knowledge and service profession that needs librarians with all kinds of specialized knowledge and skills. The field needs people talented at communications, marketing, research, archival practice, medicine, business, reading, literacy, education, assessment, systems, programming, GIS, digitization, budgeting, law, data management, statistics, cultural studies, and public administration—to name just a few areas. I am impressed with students applying to library science programs. They come to our programs with law degrees, PhDs, degrees in education and social work, computer programming skills, and marketing experience. In an age in which societal ecosystems are increasingly complex and work has become highly specialized, LIS students need to come equipped with a variety of talents to take libraries to the next level and to help the profession earn the reputation it deserves.

Librarians should take heart that we are a subject of interest. It is an opportunity to showcase our service, collections, and knowledge. Moreover, since we seem to be a subject of interest, we need to read this as an invitation to be more proactive in promoting the knowledgeable and beneficial work we all do for our communities. And we need to correct the record when we are misunderstood.

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