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<u>7</u> Cultivating Critical Dialogue on Twitter

April M. Hathcock

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN LIBRARIANSHIP

"Librarianship is not a neutral profession, and libraries are not neutral spaces."1 For many librarians,² like the librarian founders of Storytime Underground, this statement could not be more true or more central to their daily working practice: managing information, educating the public about information literacy, developing systems, curating collections. For librarians who subscribe to critical consciousness-that is, those librarians concerned with issues of power, privilege, oppression, and social justice-all of this work is rooted in and affected by the events and circumstances happening in the world around them. Information institutions, like libraries and archives, are not neutral spaces because the world in which they exist are not neutral spaces. Moreover, it is the information professional's responsibility, as a curator of knowledge, to question and trouble these spaces from the inside out, as Chris Bourg, director of libraries at MIT, describes in her framework for bringing social justice into library work.³ For the critically conscious information worker, there is no question about the non-neutrality of our work or the importance of bringing critical theory and practice, critical praxis, into our day-to-day duties. In fact, social responsibility and a commitment to diversity are built into our professional values.⁴ As LIS educators, Sarah T. Roberts and Safiya Umoja Noble note, "Within the context of *professionalism* and *the field*, a socially responsible perspective mandates that students and scholars think about the ways in which deep entrenchments to narratives of neutrality, objectivity, and in many cases silence on social issues by LIS researchers and professionals have consequences."5

Thus, to be a critically conscious librarian is to understand the inherent importance of critical dialogue on weighty social issues such as race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, indigeneity, disability, religious freedom, and more.

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Interestingly enough, however, some of the most productive and enriching of these conversations for critical librarians have been and are taking place on a social media platform that limits commentary to 140 characters or less. For many librarians seeking to engage with and learn from each other and their communities on these vital societal issues, Twitter has become a go-to digital space for initiating critical conversations, learning, listening, and growing.

Twitter is a public, web-based social media platform that allows participants to post 140-character microblogs or *tweets* onto their accounts to be shared openly on the web, or privately among their followers in the case of closed accounts. Twitter users can follow each other's accounts (denoted by the usernames known as *handles*) to keep updated on tweets of people or institutions they know or care about. Likewise, Twitter also provides online spaces for public conversations on a variety of topics through the use of *hashtags*, a tagging system that allows Twitter users to participate in and the general public to follow along with topical tweets, such as #Indigeneous-PeoplesDay as an alternative to Columbus Day⁶ or #Election2016 dealing with that year's devastating presidential election.⁷

Libraries and librarians have been early adopters of social media platforms such as Twitter for conducting outreach to library patrons and marketing library events. Just as important to this use of social media, however, has been the ways in which librarians use Twitter and other social media outlets for engaging in low-cost professional development.⁸ Librarians use Twitter to explore subject area expertise related to their informational duties or as a networking tool to meet and interact with other professionals.⁹ Finally, by combining the outreach and professional development capacity of social media, many librarians have even taken to using Twitter and like tools as a means of building community, both within the profession as well as among our larger communities. This community-building function of Twitter has been of particular value to critically conscious librarians looking for ways to derive "real-world social value from shared trust and shared vision"¹⁰ by engaging in critical *micro-dialogues* with like-minded individuals. Twitter allows critical librarians to engage more deeply with social justice values and activism through connection with each other and with our broader communities.

CONNECTING WITH EACH OTHER: #CRITLIB AND #LIBLEADGENDER

In so many ways, Twitter is invaluable for critical librarians to connect with each other across institutions, job titles, and geographic distances. For many librarians, engaging in critical work can feel like a solitary experience, so the benefit of joining with other like-minded librarians, even if it is only through 140-character micro-chats, can make a huge difference in motivation, learning, and professional growth. There are many ways in which critical librarians connect with each other via Twitter, from formal chats to informal information sharing on hashtags to more organic person-to-person connections.

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Cultivating Critical Dialogue on Twitter

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One of the more organized connection points that has existed since 2014 is the #critlib hashtag and its accompanying chats.¹¹ #Critlib provides a space on Twitter for critical librarians to discuss a variety of issues central to their praxis: "Critlib is short for 'critical librarianship,' a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries. We aim to engage in discussion about critical perspectives on library practice. Recognizing that we all work under regimes of white supremacy, capitalism, and a range of structural inequalities, how can our work as librarians intervene in and disrupt those systems?"¹² In light of this mission, formally organized chats take place on a regular basis about twice a month



Wow, we're at question 6 already!

Q6. What can we as individuals do to support coworkers with disabilities? #critlib



A6. Learn more!! If patron or coworker confides in you, take opportunity to SELF-educate on their challenges. #critlib



6:48 PM - 6 Dec 2016

@violetbfox

Figure 9.1. Screenshots of tweets by Jessica Schomberg and Violet Fox from #critlib chat on supporting library workers with disabilities, Jessica Schomberg, Twitter post, December 6, 2016, twitter.com/schomj/status/806328902641709056; Violet Fox, Twitter post, December 6, 2016, twitter.com/violetbfox/status/806329606383038464; Critlib .org, "Library Workers with Disabilities," accessed January 9, 2017, critlib.org/library -workers-with-disabilities/.

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on a topic chosen and moderated by librarians from around the world, though primarily from North America. Topics include a wide assortment of social justice issues relating to librarianship from building more inclusive public service points, to providing services to the homeless, to dealing with microaggressions in the profession.

The #critlib community has grown so much that it also sponsors physical, inperson gatherings for critical librarians. The first #critlib unconference took place in 2015 right before the Association of College and Research Libraries meeting in Portland, Oregon.¹³ There have been other #critlib unconferences and meet-ups since then for those librarians able to travel to the meeting locations. Nonetheless, by far, the use of the Twitter hashtag has been crucial for librarians looking to connect with their colleagues elsewhere without the burden of travel costs. #Critlib provides a place for librarians interested in social justice praxis to learn from the experiences of others and feel even more connected to the profession: "The #critlib community and artifacts they create (conferences, website, etc.) have been really helpful. . . . It's



Figure 9.2. Screenshots of tweets by Amanda Meeks and Krista Mccracken from #libleadgender chat on intersectional identities and privilege, Amanda Meeks, Twitter post, December 14, 2016, twitter.com/A_meeksie/status/809204450053062656; Krista Mccracken, Twitter post, December 14, 2016, twitter.com/kristamccracken/ status/809205692968161280

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also really nice to know there are people out there thinking and excited about the same things as me." $^{\!\!\!^{14}}$

Another great organized space for critical dialogue among librarians on Twitter is the hashtag #libleadgender.¹⁵ Started by library leaders Jessica Olin and Michelle Millet as an outgrowth of their article on gendered expectations of library leaders, the #libleadgender community is a space for periodic discussions and information sharing among librarians regarding issues related to gender and leadership.¹⁶ Previous discussion topics have included strategies for maintaining self-care and methods for building more inclusive work spaces.¹⁷ In a highly feminized profession,¹⁸ having space to discuss the ways in which gender performativity and gender normativity affect our work as librarians can be vital to success in our day-to-day work.

Online communities for critical dialogue, such as #critlib and #libleadgender, are immensely useful to librarians who participate, but these communities also provide ample space for self-reflection and critique that includes the voices of those who do not participate. Two key elements of critical praxis are self-reflection and iterative critique; these elements are just as present in the micro-dialogue space of Twitter. For example, there has been at least one #critlib chat focused entirely on "critiquing #critlib," during which librarians who self-identity with the community and those who do not reflected on the ways the community fails to live up to its mission of inclusive dialogue on social justice.¹⁹ Another #critlib chat titled "#feelings" encouraged participants to share reflections under the joint hashtag #whyicritlib.²⁰ While many included very positive stories about how the #critlib community has enriched their practice, there were also several others who included critical views of the ways the community has fallen short. The point is that, regardless of whether a librarian selfidentifies with the Twitter community, the open dialogue space allows for everyone to share their reflections, good or bad, on what the community is and what it should be.

Aside from these more formal ways in which critical librarians connect via Twitter, using the #critlib, #libleadgender, and other hashtags, Twitter allows for other more organic means of connection between and among librarians interested in social justice issues. Because it is open to all types of users and accessible in countries all over the world, Twitter provides an opportunity for critically conscious librarians to connect across institutions and borders in ways that may never be possible in a physical space. Having this space to connect with others who share an interest in social justice can be invaluable for those of us who may feel isolated within our neoliberal institutions. It can be extremely isolating to feel like the only librarian struggling for justice and equity in an institution continuously focused on staying within constantly restrained budgets, meeting newer and higher assessment goals, or counting and valuing every task and encounter. However, with the online connections Twitter affords, socially conscious librarians can step out of the neoliberal, market- and business-driven spiral of their institutions and slow down to think, share, and engage in self-care with like-minded others all over the globe.²¹

Opportunities for organic connection are also vital to librarians for whom critical social justice is more than an interest but a way of life. For librarians from marginalized communities and identities, being able to connect with other librarians living

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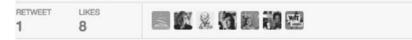
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their reality can make the difference between succeeding in the profession and leaving it altogether.²² Critical conversations and connections that take place on Twitter provide a safer haven for navigating the profession from the margins. Particularly for new librarians of color, Twitter can be a natural fit for these connections: for example, research shows that 40 percent of Black Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 use Twitter.²³ In a profession that is 88 percent White,²⁴ librarians of color, as well as librarians from other intersections of marginalized identity, need "access to a supportive group of similarly diverse-minded colleagues to whom they can relate and confide."²⁵

As a librarian of color, I have myself benefited from and witnessed others benefiting from the organic connections for critical dialogue that Twitter affords. I have a number of colleagues from marginalized identities with whom I check in and connect on a regular basis and whom I may never have met if it were not for Twitter. We share stories of frustration and triumph; we teach and learn from one another; we encourage each other, all with the goal of staying true to our commitment to bring social justice praxis to our day-to-day library work. These connections have been absolutely essential to our continued success in the field. As librarians Tarida Anantachai, Latrice Booker, Althea Lazzaro, and Martha Parker note, "Professionals are generally better equipped to grow and succeed when they have such collegial group environments and networks at their disposal."²⁶

Regardless of identity, though, Twitter provides a great place for librarians to connect with each other to engage in critical dialogue and broaden our social justice work. Critical dialogue on Twitter provides a space for listening, learning, and growth. It is a place for simultaneously learning from others and sharing our own experiences (figure 9.3). Engaging in these critical micro-conversations with likeminded professionals allows us to deepen our engagement with critical issues both within our libraries and beyond within our broader communities.

I appreciate my Twitter community for teaching me how to talk about diversity and inclusion in a thoughtful and fearless way.



7:46 AM - 9 Sep 2016

Erin Leach

Figure 9.3. Screenshot of tweet by Erin Leach (@erinaleach), Erin Leach, Twitter post, September 9, 2016, twitter.com/erinaleach/status/774257721596051457

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CONNECTING WITH OUR COMMUNITIES

In addition to allowing critical librarians to connect with each other, Twitter also provides space for us to connect with the social justice issues of importance to our broader communities. Critical librarians recognize that our work does not occur in a vacuum, and we look to engage with the broader social justice issues of our time both within and without our library settings. For many of us, connecting with community advocacy and activism through Twitter provides an opportunity to connect personal and professional concerns and identities.

The use of Twitter to promote social justice advocacy is nothing new.²⁷ From the tweets arising out of the Arab spring protests of 2010; to the development of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and movement in 2012 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, three queer and queer-allied Black women enraged by the acquittal of the White man who killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager²⁸; to the #noDAPL hashtag tracking protests against the forcible taking and contamination of Native lands for the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline²⁹—Twitter has long been a valuable tool in galvanizing support for social justice movements around the world. For many advocacy groups, Twitter provides the key to "civic engagement and collective action," allowing people from vastly disparate backgrounds and physical locations to collect on a particular issue.³⁰

It is no wonder that Twitter has proven to be such an integral element of widespread social justice movements. Since 2010, its user numbers have risen exponentially, from about thirty million monthly tweeters to more than three hundred million in late 2016.³¹ Twitter connects even more people than it ever has before, making it a natural tool for spreading awareness and galvanizing action around social justice issues. What this means for critical librarians is that it makes for a natural social media platform for connecting beyond our own critical conversations to the discussions happening in our communities and the communities of others. The broad reach of Twitter allows critical librarians to integrate our "offline versus online" experiences,³² such that our critical lives *on* social media can support and reflect our critical lives *off* social media.

This integration of online and offline social justice involvement has resulted in critical librarians connecting via Twitter with movements like #noDAPL, #Black-LivesMatter, #TransLivesMatter,³³ and many others. While there are any number of librarians connecting with these movements on an individual basis, perhaps what is most noteworthy are the ways in which librarians are engaging in these movements collectively. For example, the Twitter account for #Libraries4BlackLives³⁴ (@ Libs4BlackLives) represents one such collective form of engagement.

Founded in the summer of 2016 by four public librarians from across the United States, #Libraries4BlackLives is a "call to action" for libraries and librarians to openly and proactively commit to the #BlackLivesMatter movement: "#BlackLivesMatter is an invitation to listen to the lived experiences of Black communities, to join in dismantling racism, and to affirm that 'embracing and defending Black life in particular

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has the potential to lift us all' (Alicia Garza, #BLM co-founder, July 2013)."³⁵ To that end, librarians Amita Lonial, Amy Sonnie, Jessica Anne Bratt, and Sarah Lawton developed a site to connect critical librarians directly to the Movement 4 Black Lives platform and actively encourage fellow professionals to join the more than forty thousand (as of late 2016) people who have signed the #M4BLpledge and affirmed their commitment to advocating for social justice in the lives of Black people. The #Libraries4BlackLives site also includes a number of resources for critical librarians to engage better with the movement not only in and through their libraries but with the broader Black and allied community (figure 9.4).³⁶

While the #Libraries4BlackLives movement maintains a static web presence, its most effective and active means of connecting librarians and libraries with the activist community is via its Twitter account. Using the @Libs4BlackLives handle, Lonial, Sonnie, Bratt, and Lawton update library and non-library followers alike on news, actions, and events related to #BlackLivesMatter happening around the country. They also organize opportunities for critical librarians and the broader activist community to connect through tweet chats, call-ins, and conference meetups. The #Libraries4BlackLives team takes advantage of the broad reach of Twitter to engage librarians and the broader public in essential conversations about race, racism, and anti-racism. As Sonnie explained in a *Library Journal* interview,

I believe deeply in learning from history, the civil rights movement and even further back . . . engaging new ideas, lifting up hidden and marginalized voices, and amplifying calls for a more free, democratic, and participatory future. . . . That is why I became a librarian. That is what I think this movement is calling on us to do now, to encourage people to explore these ideas and our interconnections, to provide information and provide space for people who are most impacted by racial injustice.³⁷



Figure 9.4. Screenshot of tweet by #Libraries4BlackLives (@Libs4BlackLives), Libraries 4 Black Lives, Twitter post, August 8, 2016, twitter.com/Libs4BlackLives/status/7627400279 39880960

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Cultivating Critical Dialogue on Twitter

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Another example of critical librarians collectively engaging with the community in critical dialogue is through the hashtag #librariesrespond.³⁸ The American Libraries Association's (ALA) Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services started the hashtag during the summer of 2016 following the rash of hate-fueled killings in Orlando, Florida; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Dallas, Texas; and many other locations across the United States.³⁹ Librarians and libraries were encouraged to share the ways they were supporting and advocating for their communities in the wake of these tragedies by posting pictures and messages under the #librariesrespond tag. Critical librarians from across the country took up the challenge by sharing ways they were engaging their communities in critical dialogue on issues of racial profiling, police brutality, homophobia and transphobia, and other instances of hate and violence against marginalized groups. Postings included information about a library-run counseling hotline for community members affected by violence, #BlackLivesMatter book displays, and the provision of additional library hours and spaces for community members to gather and feel safe.⁴⁰ The librarians and libraries that participated in #librariesrespond used Twitter to draw attention to the work they were doing as part of their commitment to promoting social justice within their communities.

In a similar vein, the creation and use of the #LIUlockout hashtag⁴¹ in the fall of 2016 helped to galvanize critical librarians worldwide around a labor cause affecting a number of university educators, including a number of academic librarians. At the start of the 2016–2017 academic year, administrators at Long Island University, Brooklyn (LIU), rather than continue to engage in contract negotiations, locked out unionized faculty for nearly two weeks.⁴² Faculty had less than two days' notice before losing their benefits and pay, and students were left to begin the school year with unqualified administrators and other "scabs" filling in to teach their courses.⁴³ Using the hashtag #LIUlockout, LIU librarians, led in large part by Emily Drabinski, instruction coordinator for the library and union secretary, took to Twitter to spread awareness about what was happening in their campus community and to garner support. Thanks to the broad reach of Twitter, that support came in droves as fellow librarians, educators, and labor organizers rushed to send in letters of support, donate funds to help provide for the locked-out faculty and their families, and otherwise spread the word about the lockout. The Twitter outreach also inspired a #critlib chat on the #LIUlockout, during which critical librarians discussed ways to get involved in supporting the LIU community and labor movements in general.⁴⁴

Finally, librarians also engage in critical community conversations on Twitter through involvement with the #WeNeedDiverseBooks⁴⁵ campaign, which began in 2014 through the efforts of authors Ellen Oh, Malinda Lo, Aisha Saeed, and others.⁴⁶ #WeNeedDiverseBooks is "a grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people."⁴⁷ With the involvement of librarians, publishers, teachers, caretakers, and other community stakeholders, the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement promotes the importance of

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published stories that include and even center characters beyond the traditional white, cisgender, heterosexual male. #WeNeedDiverseBooks is about advocating for the publication of more diverse books that reflect the realities of children of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, disabilities, religions, gender identities, and more. Using the hashtag, people from a broad range of backgrounds share their stories of how and why diverse books help those from otherwise marginalized identities find a sense of place and self by seeing themselves reflected in the characters they read. Likewise, with the #ownvoices hashtag,⁴⁸ developed by author Corinne Duyvis in 2015, critical librarians and other community members advocate for the publication of books about characters from marginalized identities that are written by authors from marginalized identities in their *own voices.*⁴⁹ Together, the #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #ownvoices hashtags provide an online space for critical librarians to engage in critical discussions surrounding publishing practices and the need for more diversity in children's, and other, literature.

FROM CONVERSATION TO ACTION

Thus, through hashtags like #Libraries4BlackLives, #librariesrespond, and #We-NeedDiverseBooks, critical librarians engage with their communities in vital conversations about social justice issues that extend far beyond the immediate library context. However, these conversations merely represent the greater social justice work critical librarians are doing. The critical dialogues provide a much-needed place for planning, learning, and strategizing for the actual labor of advocacy and activism that highlight the day-to-day work and lives of librarians concerned with social justice issues. We engage in dialogue among ourselves and with our communities in order to inform our active work, which in turn provides additional topics for discussion in an iterative process of linking theory and practice into praxis.⁵⁰ It is through cultivating critical dialogue in online spaces like Twitter that we are better able to engage in critical action to improve the lives of our library users and our broader communities.

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