

4-15-2016

The Growing Necessity of Radicalism in Library Advocacy and Political Outreach

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Recommended Citation

Sweeney, Patrick (2016) "The Growing Necessity of Radicalism in Library Advocacy and Political Outreach," *The Political Librarian*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/pollib/vol2/iss1/6>

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Patrick Sweeney

Advocacy for causes and the current state of politics in America has been hijacked by a sadly necessary radicalism. For libraries to continue to exist as we know them we need to get on board with the rhetoric and identify and radicalize our supporters. If we don't learn to start talking about libraries in a severely emotionally meaningful way that engages and activates our most impassioned supporters, libraries will continue to be devastated by budget cuts. We can't allow this to happen because libraries are one of the few truly great institutions to come out of the American government.

This all began with [my own blog](#), and why I essentially stopped blogging. The truth is that I was frustrated about what kinds of posts got the most hits. A few years ago I realized that the posts that "did the best" were ones that were inherently mean spirited or controversial. For example, I wrote a post about Second Life that was intentionally mean spirited and, to this day, it is my most read piece. The thing to realize about this post is that I never really said anything important. There was nothing in there that would move anything forward. Libraries were already dropping Second Life and by the time I wrote the piece the virtual landscape was already a ghost town. And yet, this post remains the most popular while a number of other posts that I think were more important were hardly read at all.

Of course, we could make the argument that the other posts aren't as well written or as timely, but really, the biggest difference is the level of emotional sensationalism. I really don't hate Second Life; I really don't care at all about Second Life, but I had the chance to write something radical and see the results. I was so disappointed in the broad and deep response that my number of blog posts written per week almost dropped off completely after that experiment. I went from writing one blog a week to one every month or two. That was 4 years ago. Once I realized that these were the kinds of articles and blog posts that got the highest ratings, I noticed that this mirrored the wider media sphere. Every day it seemed like there was more bad news, or emergencies, or a constant state of urgency in the world around us. There were constant streams of vicious and witty criticisms but very few appraisals of positive viewpoints or constructive ideas. I realized that this was because moderate

or positive ideas simply don't attract reaction or generate the ratings, clicks, or views that are necessary to raise revenue or resources through encouraging actions or ads or donations. For example, the recent article in the *Telegraph* entitled "[No Self-Respecting Adult Should Buy Comics or Watch Superhero Movies](#)," criticized adults for reading comics. There was really no point in writing the article because it doesn't move any discussion forward; it's poorly written, and whether or not adults read comics or watch superhero movies has no real impact on the world. However, because it was a radical viewpoint and wild criticism of a popular and generally well-liked pastime, this article appeared multiple times on my social media feeds with varying levels of indignation.

Recently, I left full time library work to work for EveryLibrary, the first and only National Political Action Committee for Libraries. In the last three years we have helped libraries win local measures for library funding to the tune of more than 100 million dollars. Because EveryLibrary is about libraries, it's non-partisan, which is one of the things that I, as a moderate, really enjoy about it. But, because we are non-partisan, I've attended webinars, trainings, conferences, read books and professional literature, followed campaigns, etc for just about every political party and/or political perspective in the United States.

I say all this because my work with EveryLibrary combined with these trainings has reinforced my belief in the necessity of more radicalism in our advocacy efforts. At EveryLibrary, we noticed that some of our posts or emails get a much higher level of engagement than others. While we at EveryLibrary understood/understand? that library issues are highly complex and require complex solutions, we noticed that when we explained those issues in an educational and informational way that lays out the true scope of the issue, the professional and general public left them generally unread. The ones that have the highest level of emotion, the least amount of complexity, and least amount of real information or solutions are the ones that get the highest levels of donations, the most shares, the most likes, and are the most widely read.

We have many examples of this stark contrast between educational posts and emotionally radical posts. When

we posted articles about how important libraries are for businesses and startups and how those kinds of organizations can take advantage of the services of libraries, we got very few click-throughs, almost no shares, and even fewer donations. *But*, when we posted that libraries were being attacked by the Koch Brothers we raised thousands of dollars and had hundreds of people sign up to support libraries in a matter of hours. There was a guttural emotional reaction to the idea that wealthy billionaires were (and still are) working to strip services away from the American people. Yet there was no sense of urgency to learn about how businesses and startups can benefit from library services; services that can help build up the economy and be used to demonstrate library value to those in power.

We decided to test our messages to determine which engaged the highest amounts of people and returned the highest number of actions taken for libraries. We wrote emails that explained what positive things that libraries were doing and how they helped communities and got very little return. But, when we wrote something controversial or something that was more highly emotional and less deeply informational, we saw far more donations, sign-ups, shares, etc. This also held true when we attempted to activate people to sign a petition to fight or support legislation. Our calls to action that were informational went largely unheard, but our calls to action that were highly emotional generated thousands of signatures

Many people who work in the library industry have brought up the fact that they don't enjoy our radicalist posts, however, those posts are generally not for them. Librarians tend to be less motivated by reactionary posts because they better understand the complexity of the issue at hand. They tend to have a broader understanding of the complexities and context of the issues that surround library work. For example, librarians are the people who know the difference between things like para-professional staff and MLIS credentialed librarians while a broader audience and the general population think that anyone who works in a library, from a page to a director, is a librarian. Because of this, and despite the fact that I absolutely understand the less emotionally motivated readers' concerns (I have them too), I want them to recognize that we aren't writing for the people who are already engaged- we are writing to engage those who are not.

Radicalism Beyond Library Land

Examples of the effectiveness of radical messaging go well beyond librarianship. We see it in the political discourse around minimum wage, abortion, or the Second Amendment. You may have even participated in the discussions yourself, or at least have witnessed how the discourse for controversial issues often slides into a highly emotional argument of sound bites and meaningless rhetoric, often declining into a barrage of name-calling. Just like the issues in librarianship, the highly emotional and rhetoric-filled views of these issues like those surrounding the Second Amendment are not fully representative of the reality of the issue at hand. Many issues are highly complex and require a deep level of understanding if we are seriously looking for a cure. If we think deeply about discussions surrounding the Second Amendment (to continue the example) we quickly see that soundbites like "guns don't kill people, people kill people," are wildly dismissive of the deep-rooted social ills and that simply banning guns won't cure the underlying social ills either. To achieve meaningful solutions we require a fully immersive strategy that explores many possible solutions at each level, with the public being informed about all possible solutions. Soundbites and simplified emotional rhetoric are clearly not the solution.

So why is using such simplified and meaningless rhetoric to discuss highly complex issues so prolific? As described earlier, radical propaganda has the most radical return on investment (ROI). Using another example from outside of librarianship of a large ROI on a radical action comes from US Representative Joe Wilson who yelled "You Lie!" during the recent State of the Union Address from President Obama. His campaign for re-election raised millions of dollars from his supporters in the next week. Joe Wilson was then able to use those resources to go on to defeat his general election opponent, Rob Miller. Of course, this isn't just limited to candidate campaigns, we see a similar set of actions and outcomes play out repeatedly. This demonstrates that radical actions can be the necessary first step in allowing causes to have the money and identify the supporters and help them build the resources they need to take action for the actual solution.

Joe Wilson's donations didn't come from moderates. His donations didn't come from people who could see both sides of the issue. His donations came from people with

deep-seated, extreme anger and resentment towards President Obama. People who kind of like Obama weren't the ones who donated to Representative Wilson. It was the ones who hate and oppose Obama the most. What this proves is that radicals are the ones who take action. Not moderates. It's very important to understand that radicals with radical views who are using radical rhetoric are the ones who give money, volunteer, and otherwise provide resources to causes. You won't find someone who has only moderate views on an issue or is careless about an issue spending their hard earned money to fight for or against it.

What is also interesting is the very low percentage of individuals that give to campaigns. Bernie Sanders, for example, who has raised more money from individual donations for his campaign than any other candidate in history has received donations from 1.3 million Americans. While 1.3 million people sounds like a large number, when compared to the size of the general population, it is almost a meaningless statistic. There are over 330 million people in the United States and that means that Sanders has only raised money from less than one third of one percent of the population. The most successful individual donor candidate in the world has only been able to actively engage 0.33% of the public and convince to take action. This is also interesting considering that he polls at an approval rating of about 40% of Democrats. About 30% of Americans identify as Democrats, or about one hundred million people. Since you do not have to be a registered voter to donate to a campaign, there are around 50 million people who potentially support Bernie Sanders (far less are willing or able to vote) and could be tapped into giving donations to the Sanders Campaign. Why, then, do only 1/3 of one percent of Americans give? Because those are the individuals with the most radical faith and belief in a country governed by President Sanders. The truth is that it takes a very small percentage of radicalized Americans to drastically influence politics.

All of this is to say that if a cause wants to exist, it needs resources to fight, and therefore it is in the best interest of causes and political parties to generate more radicalized supporters in order to get more access to more of the resources that they need to maintain a sustainable fight.

Libraries are no different than political parties in their need to obtain and maintain resources. They continually fight for their existence and therefore need to find ways

to identify and radicalize supporters of libraries so that they will take action and give those resources to library causes. Whereas Bernie Sanders is supported by 50 million people, libraries have far more supporters than all of the presidential candidates combined. Libraries have an approval rating of over 80% across the country and across a wide range of political beliefs, but we have failed to engage the most radical believers in libraries. Librarians need to understand where and how these radical beliefs are generated and how they can be used. Libraries also must examine the messages that are being used against them, take the time to understand the root of those messages, and then develop effective and emotionally charged counter messages.

One of the biggest weaknesses that libraries and librarians have when conducting advocacy is that we know very little about the kinds of people who support libraries or why they support them. We know even less about the people who are against libraries and why. The well-resourced causes mentioned (gun control, etc...) earlier as well as political party platforms spend literally millions of dollars every year to research voter perceptions, motivations for voting or taking action on behalf of a cause, and identifying messaging that works effectively and the kinds of people that it works on. Every single year, they make use of the most current and up-to-date data to help them fight. For libraries, the only real study that has been done to look at the propensity of registered voters to support libraries at the ballot box was done in 2008 with 2007 data. This means that the data comes from a time that was pre-recession, pre-Tea Party, pre-"Any tax is a bad tax" organized groups. We know that people's support or opposition to libraries is not dependent on their use of the library, and we know that people are just as likely to vote for or against the library regardless of their political ideology, unless they are radical in their views on either side of the political spectrum. It should scare librarians and library supporters that we do not have enough data to create a model of voters for libraries, and that we don't have data to create a model of voters in opposition to libraries.

Because there is currently no funding for this type of research, we are starting to track trends using comments on our Facebook page with full awareness of the limits of this source for data. One of the biggest things we've noticed thus far is that the people that comment posi-

tively for libraries are not radical believers, but the people who comment in opposition to libraries are radical non-believers. They are generally deeply neo-liberal or deeply neo-conservative. When we clicked on the negative comments about libraries on our Facebook posts and looked at the walls of these commenters we saw that the majority of their Facebook posts centered around radical political rhetoric even though they are typically individuals who do not work in a political sphere¹.

What this small set of data shows is just how strongly the kinds of individuals who oppose libraries are influenced by the political radicalism of neo-liberalism or neo-conservatism. This is especially alarming considering the wealth of other activities they could engage in online. Essentially they are focused on posting about a small sliver of the world in which they live and a very small sliver of the world in which they have almost zero influence. This behavior is a testament to the power and influence of political think tanks, the vast resources and far reaching power of political issues, and the kind of radicalism that is being tapped into in order to fund the fight for these various oppositional beliefs.

If They Can Radicalize, Shouldn't We?

Wouldn't it be nice if libraries could tap into this kind of radicalism? I would argue that it has become a necessity for librarians to be able to speak in ways that tap into these kinds of extreme belief systems. Why couldn't similar ideologies be built around a belief system that is supportive of libraries?

One of the reasons this hasn't happened (yet) in libraries is that we haven't had the need for it before. Previous to the Great Recession, libraries had the benefit of being so well supported by the general public that they have not had to campaign to win elections. Libraries could simply place ballot measures before the people and many of them would pass without the need for well-funded or

well-trained and structured campaigns. That level of pass-

1. I want to point out that there is nothing wrong with the beliefs of the individuals who comment on our Facebook Page. With their experiences and their understanding of the world around them, they have a right to believe what they believe. However, it our responsibility to understand them and their ideologies and be able to respond to them in a way that's meaningful to them.

ing referendum is almost unheard of in almost any other cause and we can't expect to ever surpass these levels again without highly structured and well-funded modern campaigns. But, because libraries have never had the need to learn to be politically well-positioned in communities, libraries have not had a strong culture of politics or political action in our day-to-day work. This can no longer be the case.

Currently, fewer library campaigns are winning, and those that do are winning by smaller margins and are being even further eroded by legislation that require super majorities to win tax increases. In addition, there have been increased attacks on libraries, such as the [recent attack by the Koch Brothers funded Super PAC](#) that come out against libraries. Libraries don't have the benefit of years of data and research that can be used to fight back against these kinds of attacks. Organizations like EveryLibrary are only just beginning to build the data and research needed to ensure that libraries win on election day. We are only just beginning to build radicalism into our own rhetoric. Like it or not.

Libraries need to spend time and resources on data building, on focus groups, supporter identification, and message development in order to help build a database of radical supporters. If we can identify what messages work and encourage them to take action on behalf of libraries we can help ensure that libraries continue to be funded and continue supporting the communities they serve. To this end, [EveryLibrary created a Knight News Foundation Grant Submission](#) and are looking for other sources of funding so that we can continue our research in this area.

It's time for libraries to duplicate the efforts of national causes, political parties, and candidates and truly understand what makes Americans radically support a cause with money, time, and other resources. We need this level of radicalism on the side of libraries in order to ensure that libraries continue to exist at all and continue to serve the good of the American people.

About the Author

Patrick Sweeney is the Political Director for EveryLibrary. He is a tireless and innovative advocate for libraries. A 2007 graduate of the San Jose School of Library

and Information Sciences, Mr. Sweeney is the a former Administrative Librarian of the Sunnyvale (CA) Public Library and was Executive Director of [EveryLibrary California](#), a statewide initiative to support library Propositions. He is active in the American Library Association where he is an at-large member of their governing Council and the California Library Association. His library [blog](#) is well respected, and he is a sought-after speaker and presenter. He tweets at [@pcsweeney](#).