

# Delay, Distract, Defer:

## The Saboteur in the Academic Library

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Hello, we're bringing the fun.

My name is Kate Dohe, and I'm at University of Maryland Libraries. My collaborators Erin Pappas (here, from UVA), and Celia Emmelhainz (at UC Berkeley, and who unfortunately could not join us today) are here to talk to you about a very important topic. Listen all y'all--



That's right, get it out of your system now.



When my colleagues and I considered the role and significance of maintenance organizations, we landed on its antonym as an exploratory concept. After all, by throwing maintenance into relief with its opposition, we can begin to assess how the common traps and norms of information maintenance organizations can lead to destruction.

## **WHAT IS SABOTAGE?**

### **If You See Someone**

Deliberately BREAKING TOOLS or RUINING MACHINES—  
Failing to do a FULL DAY'S WORK—  
Knowingly PRODUCING or PASSING INFERIOR MATERIAL—  
Intentionally WASTING TIME or MATERIALS—  
Thoughtlessly BLABBING JOB SECRETS to outsiders—  
Encouraging DISHONESTY, DISLOYALTY or DISHONOR—  
Or doing anything fishy  
TO DELAY OUR WAR PRODUCTION

Smash these scurvy tricks to make America helpless!

**—BECAUSE—**

## **SABOTAGE IS TREASON!**

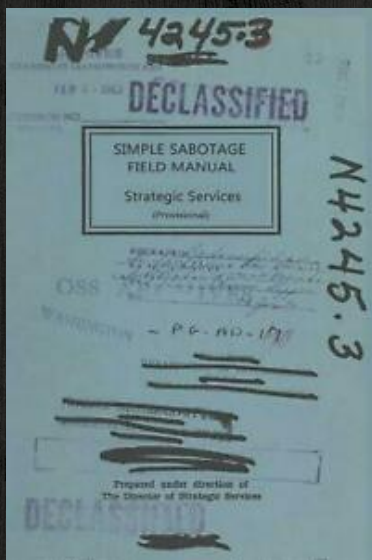
WINCHESTER

We start from some underlying premises: first, at its heart, sabotage is about power inequalities between individuals and organizations. Second, that sabotage as an act must be contextualized and evaluated by the mission and culture of the individuals, organization, or movement it seeks to disempower or overthrow.



In 1944, the US Office of Strategic Services, which is the precursor of the CIA, released the Simple Sabotage Field Manual. Its original intent was for distribution and reuse by citizen saboteurs behind enemy lines in Nazi-occupied Europe.





conductor, and a short-circuit will result.

(11) *General Interference with Organizations and Production*

(a) *Organizations and Conferences*

(1) Insist on doing everything through "channels." Never permit short-cuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions.

(2) Make "speeches." Talk as frequently as possible and at great length. Illustrate your "points" by long anecdotes and accounts of personal experiences. Never hesitate to make a few appropriate "patriotic" comments.

(3) When possible, refer all matters to committees, for "further study and consideration." Attempt to make the committees as large as possible — never less than five.

(4) Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.

(5) Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions.

(6) Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question of the advisability of that decision.

(7) Advocate "caution." Be "reasonable" and urge your fellow-conferes to be "reasonable" and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on.

(8) Be worried about the propriety of any decision — raise the question of whether such action as is contemplated lies within the jurisdiction of the group or whether it might conflict with the policy of some higher echelon.

Since its declassification and digitization, the Field Manual has enjoyed a second life online, because in addition to its timeless advice about starting fires surreptitiously, it also includes thorough instructions for slowing and derailing the organization. Some highlights:

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Insist on doing everything through "channels." Never permit short-cuts to be taken (11a1)

Attempt to make committees as large as possible — never less than five (11a3)

Everything has a "swim lane," and in the interest of fairness and propriety, everything must be done according to established workflows.

Really, a committee would be best to organize and prioritize that work, don't you think? And in order to fully represent all relevant perspectives, that committee should be pretty large, to allow for the fullness of discourse and deliberation.

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Make "speeches." Talk as frequently as possible and at great length (11a2)

Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions (11a5)

Really, this sort of process reminds me of something at my last institution. So when we formed a 17-member governing board for our own digital repository, we had to carefully assess how other institutions were handling the same questions. Before I made those phone calls, I tied an onion to my belt, which was the style at the time.

Of course, the best part of my day is a dispute about the minutes of the last meeting, and whether a policy should include "may" instead of "could."



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Advocate "caution" ... urge [colleagues] to be "reasonable" and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on (11a7)

We all know that academic libraries occupy vulnerable positions on their campuses. A high-profile mistake could cost us respect and political capital. Truly, we should proceed with any initiatives slowly and deliberately, otherwise we could end up failing in a very public way. Then, think what could happen to our collections budgets! It's much more reasonable to move slowly and ensure we don't make an unforced error.

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And really, what authority do we have to make decisions, anyways? Have we spoken to every prospective stakeholder? Have we conducted the right sorts of studies? This issue should probably be elevated to higher levels of the organization, or even opened to all parties, for further evaluation and assessment.

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*Academic library cultural norms  
can be manipulated against the  
organization.*

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Oh, I hope you're laughing.

This probably sounds familiar to most people in the audience, regardless of employer or role. Bureaucracy is our universal experience. For those in the audience who have worked in academic libraries, though, some of this might sound alarmingly familiar, because in many of them, this *\*is the way we work.\** We posit that academic libraries are uniquely vulnerable to sabotage for a few environmental reasons.

First, we are a profession fundamentally charged with upholding standards and rules for information. This desire for order in description often transfers to order in *\*process,\** and then to order in execution. Our commitment to these rules and their consistency means that we can be easily manipulated into their self-perpetuation.

Second, the culture of librarianship celebrates and prioritizes collaborative and collective decision making. This pursuit of egalitarianism echoes faculty governance cultures, and regardless of whether academic librarians have faculty status at an institution, these cultural norms often conflate into seeking input from everyone. Moreover, librarianship is often conflict-averse, and this collectivist approach can serve as protection from critique and argument, particularly for vulnerable members of the organization. Consensus-based action is a laudable goal, but it is not one well-suited to all situations.

Finally, because academic libraries occupy uniquely administrative and academic positions on campus, this duality means we suffer weaknesses of the higher

education environment - the rise of administrative overhead, consolidation of authority into higher levels of the organization, and contracting budgets that restrict our own ability to work effectively. Our agency is shrinking along with our collections budgets, and powerless people often seek to reclaim their autonomy wherever they can.



# Who Sabotages, and Why?

Anyone can be a saboteur, sometimes, for many motives. Leadership, managers, colleagues, even...you?

If we understand sabotage as an act rooted in power dynamics, then we begin to identify our saboteurs.



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### *The Impact of Sabotage*

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A person quoted in the article “The Dark History of Hathitrust” eloquently said that since so many librarians feel powerless, we “engage in horizontal violence against each other.” Indeed, examinations of workplace bullying in academic libraries do often identify otherwise “normative” activities and organizational structures, including the faculty process and organizational hierarchy, as common mechanisms for interpersonal bullying. The lines between “collaborative” and “mobbing” can be easily blurred by a saboteur to undermine an individual, an initiative, or an organization.



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### *The Impact of Sabotage*

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Resource scarcity and organizational change also motivate the saboteur. Maybe we have a colleague who started their career in a specialty that is increasingly marginalized in the organization, as we do less original cataloging, less bibliographic reference, and way more digital, pedagogical, and scalable work. As we see ourselves diminished within an organization's mission, especially if the changes are radically different from our perception of librarianship (and often, it follows, of SELF), then the best way to reclaim relevance and stymie change is through sabotage.



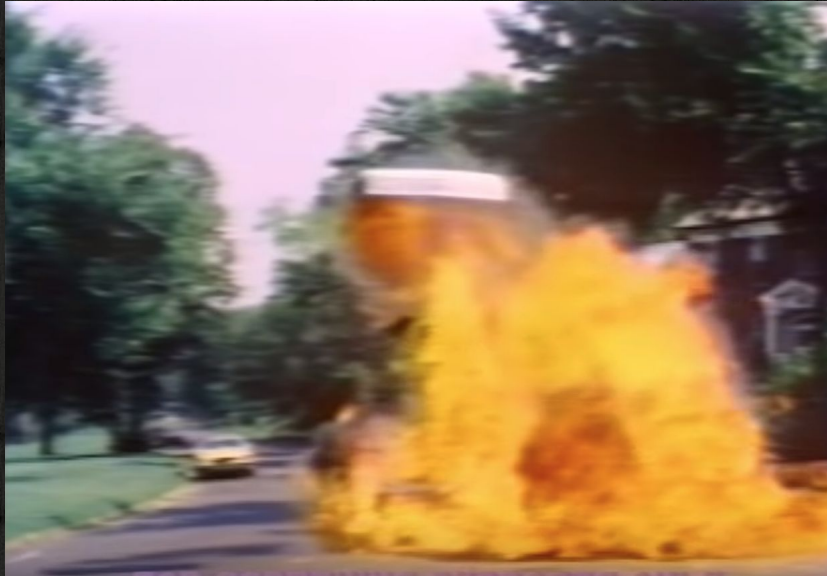
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### *The Impact of Sabotage*

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We should also consider the ways that sabotage is also an act of self-preservation and resistance to toxic library leadership, something that has been surfaced as a pressing issue by Alma Ortega's scholarship on the topic. Maybe that spiffy new makerspace displaces lower-income students who rely on the computer lab. Maybe your director wants to remove yearbooks from your digital repository, to "protect the university's reputation." Maybe your campus wants your specialized branch library with unique, in-demand resources converted to classroom space. Would sabotage be merited in these cases?





### *The Impact of Sabotage*

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Organizational Sabotage is a tool of choice for the powerless because it WORKS. But the cost is often in morale and well being throughout the organization at large, as individuals are caught up in power struggles they do not fully understand. In effect, this type of sabotage, even in service of noble goals, often creates a need for care by colleagues and bystanders--those who are frustrated and hindered by a dysfunctional workplace.



# #RESIST

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With that in mind, let's examine mechanisms for resisting the saboteur and their most harmful impacts.

# Ethics of Care and the Saboteur

Tronto's frame: Recognition, Assume responsibility, deliver care competently, respond to feedback.

People who can extend care include individuals and leaders; starting from an understanding of who has power, who can change the underlying conditions of power, and supporting the ways those who are harmed directly or indirectly by sabotage must care first for themselves.

If the Saboteur is YOU, you have the opportunity to reflect upon and own your choices, and either assume responsibility for bystander harm, or, interrogate your own motives and determine if they're driven by egocentric thinking.

If you're in a position of power at your library, you can influence norms to a degree. One of the most powerful choices is through transparency--saboteurs thrive when information is commodified and weaponized, undermining organizational trust.



# SABOTAGE

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We hope this has been an enlightening exploration of the ways a skillful saboteur can manipulate the maintenance organization. Go forth, and surreptitiously start fires.





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This is definitely us.