

# The Digital is Critical

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*Creating and Maintaining  
Radical Library Systems*

*Kate Dohe, University of  
Maryland Libraries*

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*If libraries are not neutral, then our  
systems are not neutral.*

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My presentation is based on the underlying premise that libraries are not neutral, and there is an extensive body of literature illustrating the very real cultural, political, racial, and economic ways the *library* and its employees are inherently not neutral. If you are unfamiliar with this premise, there is a lot of good literature on this topic, including by nina de jesus, Chris Bourg, Emily Drabinski, and many, many other scholars.

Consequently, the technological systems that are created and reproduced in and for libraries are also inherently not neutral.

## The Digital Library Ecosystem

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**Open Source** projects that are primarily supported by libraries or cultural heritage organizations, like DSpace, Fedora, Samvera, and grant-funded open projects.

**Commercial projects** pitched to the library market, such as Digital Commons, and services marketed directly to researchers and users like academia.edu.

The first - OS projects - are what I consider to be library-maintained and produced systems. These are what I will focus the bulk of my discussion on, because these are the things \*we make\* and systems we have the most care for. I'll come back.

The second set of projects represent both alternatives and risks to the former. If the technological barriers to entry for open source projects continue to climb, many institutions who want to participate at all in digital scholarship must choose the latter, putting them back in bed with the same organizations that have a long, and famous, track record of exploiting libraries, researchers, and users. Elsevier, of course, is at the flashpoint of a nearly existential conflict over library budgets, the price of scholarship, open access, and strongarm negotiation tactics, and they are clearly pivoting their business strategy to claim an increasingly large piece of the research enterprise pie through acquisitions of repository platforms. Academia.edu, ResearchGate, etc. are social networks with commercial interests, and as the old adage goes, if you're not the customer, then you're the product.

## Library Systems are Influenced...

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**Locally**, by the micro-cultures of technical staff who create and maintain digital projects.

**Organizationally**, by institutional legacies of whiteness, androcentrism, and neoliberalism.

**Structurally**, by the governing organizations for digital projects that valorize and elevate technical labor.

\* Library IT is a unique subculture of libraries, largely male, largely white, physically isolated, work carries more norms of IT culture than libraries

\* Organizationally, many cultural heritage institutions have engaged in white supremacy and patriarchal practices in pursuit of neoliberal ends, and many still do today. This inevitably means that the organizational wealth used to pay for the talent that undergirds digital initiatives is a byproduct of our own oppressive and exclusive Legacies.

\* Structurally, governing organizations in open source digital library projects tend to have governing groups that influence and drive strategic direction. The makeup of these groups is often dictated by institutional investment in a project—wealth, in other words, either through direct financial contributions or labor (often, explicitly or overwhelmingly technical labor).

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As a result, some of our  
worst biases manifest in  
the systems we make.

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library systems carry all the weight of our organizations AND the baggage of the uniquely masculine culture that produces and maintains them

Hit -

- Accessibility
- Technical cost and economic stratification
- Gendered distribution of emotional labor
- Cottage industry of librarians and specialist staff to compensate for poor technical support
- Valorization of technical labor and technological solutionism

# Seeking the radical library system

This is a very small slice of a broad piece of critical computing studies, feminist media studies, and sociotechnical critique. We are seeing the reaction to rightful demands of greater representation and inclusion playing out in mass media pretty much every day, and in smaller spheres there is considerable interest in initiatives to encourage more people from historically marginalized communities to take up coding,

## Why should library systems be radical, anyways?

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- \* Digital project missions historically advocate for social justice goals
- \* Open access is an inherently radical idea
- \* Open systems stand in opposition to neoliberal influences

Mission statements for ICDL, TDL, ChronAm etc. are wildly aspirational.

Budapest initiative - "uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge." I mean, what a mission.

These are the tools we have to resist.

## The Ethics of Care

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Tronto (2001) outlines four *phases of care* relevant to systems work:

\* Caring about

\* Caregiving

\* Caring for

\* Care receiving

There are tons of scholars writing about and advocating the ethics of care, which is a moral framework for understanding ethics as an interpersonal and relational construct. The term and theory originates with Carol Gilligan, and has been explored at length by scholars like Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, and Joan Tronto, whose work I am referencing here.

- Care requires an awareness of need
- Care necessitates assuming responsibility for that need
- Care must be intentional and competent
- Care must also be responsive to feedback about caregiving
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...the work of information maintenance is future-oriented, with the goal of making the systems in and on which it is performed open themselves up to community-driven brands of creativity, adaptation, and transformation that are respectful and deeply rooted in care.

- From *Information Maintenance as a Practice of Care*

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Ultimately, the radical system must embrace care: care of all users, care of staff, care of the environment, care of its role in the continuity of human knowledge. That has to start with intentional practice.

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# Reflect and Share

*How can we, professionally  
and personally, imbue our  
systems with care?*

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So this is where I would like to transition to a more interactive component, and ask participants to share, via [mechanism], the reflections you have on this line of thinking, and what it looks like to create and maintain a system, radically?

## The Radical's Reading List

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- \* Sadler, Bess and Chris Bourg. 2015. "Feminism and the Future of Library Discovery." *Code4Lib Journal* 28. <https://journal.code4lib.org/articles/10425>.
- \* Mirza, Rafia, and Maura Seale. 2017. "Who Killed the World? White Masculinity and the Technocratic Library of the Future." In *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, edited by Gina Schlesselman-Tarango. <http://mauraseale.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Mirza-Seale-Technocratic-Library.pdf>.
- \* The Information Maintainers, Olson, D., Meyerson, J., Parsons, M. A., Castro, J., Lassere, M., ... Acker, A. (2019, June 17). *Information Maintenance as a Practice of Care*. Zenodo. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3251131>
- \* Askey, Dale, and Jennifer Askey. 2017. "One Library, Two Cultures." In *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, edited by Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi. <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/22281>.
- \* de Jesus, Nina. 2014. "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression." In *The Library with the Lead Pipe*. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/>
- \* Tronto, Joan. 2001. "An Ethic of Care." In *Ethics in Community-Based Elder Care*, edited by Martha Holstein.
- \* Drabinski, Emily. 2018. "Are Libraries Neutral?" Remarks from ALA Midwinter 2018. <http://www.emilydrabinski.com/are-libraries-neutral/>

This is some of the research both explicitly referenced in my talk, and which has informed my thinking over the years. It's a starting point for further exploration of critical practice in libraries and its impact on technology. Many of these authors have written a considerably body of literature on these topics, and I'd encourage you to seek out more.

**Thank You!**