Delay, Distract, Defer: Addressing Sabotage in the Academic Library

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Abstract: In 1944, the US Office of Strategic Services released the Simple Sabotage Field Manual. Originally intended to aid the World War II-era citizen saboteur in committing small, undetectable acts of sabotage within an enemy organization, the Field Manual developed a second life on social media after its declassification, as its advice to "make faulty decisions, to adopt an uncooperative attitude, and to induce others to follow suit" echoed the pitfalls of modern office work. In the context of academic libraries, seemingly neutral actions that actively work to delay production may include our insistence on following proper channels, creating committees, haggling over precise language, and holding unnecessary meetings. In this paper, we argue that academic libraries find themselves uniquely susceptible to unintentional and willful saboteurs alike. As higher education's hierarchical culture meets professional norms that stress collaborative decision-making and emotional labor, we create an environment ripe for exploitation by those unhappy with the direction an organization is taking. As workers charged with the stewardship of information infrastructure, and as individuals who implement best practices in digital cultural heritage systems, library saboteurs have the potential to impede the care work essential to information maintenance. This paper explores how academic libraries can fall victim to sabotage, and ways that individual librarians and staff can identify and resist the saboteur in the next cubicle.

Introduction

At the height of World War II in 1944, the US government published the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*.[1] This classified guide was designed to help citizens resisting fascist regimes in Europe to not only slow their productivity, but also undermine the hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations they worked within. Some of this advice is now dated—such as ways that wood shavings and erasers might stymie factory production. But other advice is timeless, outlining how regular people can effectively block leaders and colleagues through their quiet choices to delay, distract, and defer collective action. Nowhere is this more relevant than in today's networked organization.

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[1] U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), *Simple Sabotage Field Manual,* Strategic Services Field Manual No. 3 (OSS: Washington, D.C., 1944). https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2012-featured-story-archive/CleanedUOSSSimpleSabotage_sm.pdf

This guide for the wartime saboteur gained a new life online after its declassification, with the CIA noting "how easily productivity and order can be undermined."[2] The most effective saboteur, it suggests, quietly adds to the usual confusions and inefficiencies of the workplace. By haggling, involving committees, delaying decisions, grandstanding, worrying, and general irritability, a workplace saboteur can slow down institutional processes they don't agree with.

Here, for instance, are suggestions directly applicable to the maintenance organization:

- *"Attempt to make the committees as large as possible — never less than five." (11a3)*
- *"Make 'speeches.' Talk as frequently as possible and at great length." (11a2)*
- *"Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions." (11a5)*
- *"Advocate 'caution' ... urge [colleagues] to be 'reasonable' and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on." (11a7)*
- *"Be worried about the propriety of any decision — raise the question of whether such action... lies within the jurisdiction of the group." (11a8)*
- *"Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question." (11a6)*
- *"Insist on doing everything through 'channels.' Never permit short-cuts to be taken." (11a1)*
- *"Give lengthy and incomprehensible explanations when questioned." (12a)*
- *"Be as irritable and quarrelsome as possible without getting yourself into trouble." (12d)*

This list is unlikely to call to mind a stealth operator in the French Resistance. It might instead remind you of a well-intentioned colleague—who has nevertheless found ways to obstruct in order to achieve their goals. At its heart, we suggest that sabotage is about power inequalities between individuals and organizations. Yet acts of sabotage must be contextualized by the particular mission and culture of the individuals, organization, or movement they seek to derail. This paper explores how and why academic libraries can be sabotaged, and how to continue our maintenance mission regardless.

Conditions for Sabotage

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[2] Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Timeless Tips for 'Simple Sabotage,'" July 12, 2012,
https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2012-featured-story-archive/simple-sabotage.html

A strong commitment to *maintenance*—of materials, infrastructure, access, and skills—is central to the mission of academic libraries. Our business is permanence, carried out by an increasingly specialized staff who collaborate across distances and with limited resources to maintain access to human knowledge as a public good. Yet librarians are conscripted into serving not just *information* maintenance, but the *organizational* maintenance common to the academy. Committees, working groups, task forces, and other ad hoc collaborations are deployed in response to problems, projects, and the governance of the library itself.

While any organization can be sabotaged, the organizational culture of academic libraries makes them uniquely vulnerable. First, they are deeply hierarchical organizations often masquerading as (quasi-)egalitarian ones.[3] The academic library is structured around a tiered system of influence which divides academic faculty from library staff, where polite derailment can seem a sensible way to defer to those with higher rank. Compounding this, the exponential growth of administration in higher education has resulted in a veritable blossoming of policies, procedures, and assessment mechanisms. Given its unique position within the university, as neither fully academic nor fully administrative, the academic library must adhere to two contradictory sets of standards, neither of which is intrinsically concerned with the maintenance at the core of our mission.

Librarianship is also a profession founded on rules,[4] where group agreement on classification, standardization, and normalization are primary tasks. Contemporary librarianship relies upon these standards to advance collaborative initiatives at the local, consortial, national, and international levels. This is illustrated in the rise of digital library systems and large-scale shared print projects. In addition, our professional norms elevate collaboration and service,

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[3] Shin Freedman and Dawn Vreven, "Workplace Incivility and Bullying in the Library: Perception or Reality?" *College & Research Libraries* 77, no. 6 (2016): 727. https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/16553
[4] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York: Melville House, 2015).

manifesting in numerous committees, councils, and task forces, many of which can only carry out their work through consensus. Thus opens the door for the saboteur. Much like juries can be deadlocked by one holdout juror, a single dissenter can shut down a committee, convene a working group to explore a pet issue, or activate other mechanisms to slow progress and divert the focus of the maintenance organization.

Motives for Sabotage

But why would a library worker commit sabotage? Librarianship, after all, is idealized as a noble and caring profession.[5] Librarians are expected to provide emotional labor across position responsibilities, from reference interactions[6] to descriptive cataloging, and in instruction, documentation, student and staff management,[7] digitization consultations, and the omnipresent "collaboration with stakeholders." Combined with chronic underfunding, these expectations leave librarians vulnerable to burnout.[8] Burnt-out employees are discontented employees, and discontented employees are motivated to reshape the organization to suit their own interests.

In addition, librarians face ongoing renegotiations of professional identity and expectations. As the profession shifts from bibliographic reference to instructional design, from original cataloging to discovery services, and from systems to digital scholarship, individuals may experience an erasure of their professional identities, with alienation leading to resistance, in turn spurring acts of sabotage as a form of self-preservation. Compounding this stress is the

[5] Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe,* January 10, 2018, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/

[6] Celia Emmelhainz, Erin Pappas, and Maura Seale, "Behavioral Expectations for the Mommy Librarian: The Successful Reference Transaction as Emotional Labor," in *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques and Conversations*, ed. Maria T. Accardi (Library Juice Press: Sacramento, 2017), 27-45.

[7] Lisa Sloniowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian," *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 651.

[8] Maria Accardi, "What is Burnout?" *Librarian Burnout,* March 23, 2015. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20160316171305/http://librarianburnout.com/2015/03/.

increasing lack of individual power in many modern libraries, as organizational power is

consolidated further up the administrative ladder.

Finally, sabotage may be an act of resistance to what Alma Ortega calls out as toxic

library leadership.[9] An institutional emphasis on promoting new initiatives may preclude

maintaining vital services,[10] so that a new makerspace with a donor's name on it replaces a

heavily used computer lab, leaving low-income students with less infrastructure to complete

basic coursework. Or a desire to avoid negative publicity may prompt a library director to

demand that a digital collection of archival materials be withdrawn. In such situations, pushback

from staff is understandable and even appropriate.

Impacts of Sabotage

Scholars have studied the systemic abuse enacted upon academic librarians through

workplace bullying,[11] yet systemic sabotage can also inflict indirect harm upon those caught up

in its machinations. Enacting sabotage results in slower progress, fractured teams, lowered

morale,[12] and toxic environments—all of which *encourages* further stonewalling,

counter-sabotage, and even open aggression towards others.

Yet unhappy saboteurs do more harm than merely grinding individual axes or creating a

hostile work environment. Because academic libraries create substantial digital library

infrastructure, we rely on open collaboration to advance our digital cultural heritage. This means

that some of the most visionary initiatives are vulnerable to the same organizational sabotage

we find in local libraries. As Centivany explores in "The Dark History of HathiTrust," multiple

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[9] Alma Ortega, *Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership* (Cambridge, MA: Chandos Publishing, 2017).
[10] Jane Schmidt. "Innovate This! Bullshit in Academic Libraries and What We Can Do About It," (Keynote Address, Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians, May 29, 2018): 4. https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA%3A7113.
[11] Freedman and Vreven, "Workplace Incivility," 727.
[12] Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 57, no. 8 (2017): 846-878.

turning points in the planning and launch of HathiTrust hinged on competing values and

organizational politics. As one interviewee perceived it,

> "The library community is very catty. Because they've been deprived of power for so long
> they engage in horizontal violence at the local level. So, the number one complaint
> would be that Michigan is doing this thing that really benefits us so that they can control
> us. [. . .] We had a vision, which was that we really needed to back-up our digital scans,
> but the rest had to be settled by the library community."[13]

If such concerns around power and control had not been recognized and navigated responsibly,

then HathiTrust would not have gotten off the ground, and an important cultural heritage

resource would not exist.

Responding to Sabotage

Within an ethics of care framework,[14] we have a number of ways to allow for varying

opinions, address sabotage, and to move our maintenance organizations forward.

If you find that *you* are the one sabotaging the direction of your team or organization,

you have the opportunity to:

- Recognize when you obstruct, and take responsibility for your choices.
- Respond to feedback from others about how your actions are affecting the organization.
- Take action when you're out of alignment with others. Consider adapting and finding
  elements of a new initiative that you can agree with.
- Speak up more directly if you see something truly wrong.
- If all else fails, consider transferring or leaving, in order to find a space where you can
  more effectively contribute.

If you experience sabotage among your colleagues, you have the opportunity to:

- Assume responsibility as a co-contributor to your organizational culture.
- Note and document when sabotage is happening, and consider addressing the dynamic
  directly with your colleagues.

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[13] Alissa Centivany. "The Dark History of HathiTrust," in *Proceedings of the 50th Annual Hawaii International Conference on Systems Science* (HICSS 2017), 2365, https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fimspub/120/

[14] Joan Tronto. "An Ethic of Care," in *Ethics in Community-Based Elder Care*, ed. Martha B. Holdstein (New York: Springer, 2001), 60-68.

- Speak up. Even if you're not a manager, as a courageous follower,[15] you can support your organization's mission by helping others to align with shared goals, provide feedback to leaders, and even challenge leaders' initiatives when necessary. (This differs from sabotage by maintaining clear lines of communication; sabotage happens when trust and communication breaks down.)

And if you are a manager who sees staff responding to change or dysfunction with sabotage, you have the opportunity to:

- Address rather than ignore sabotage. When abrasive or evasive workers are not challenged, their colleagues begin to avoid collaboration or shared meetings.[16] Failing to address obstruction hampers the work of your whole unit or organization.[17]
- Shift processes and expectations so that input is encouraged, but work proceeds by agenda and the opportunity for stonewalling is reduced. The *Simple Sabotage Field Manual* can serve as a reverse guide or list of behaviors to address. You might also look to the management and learning organization literature for ways to keep meetings small, speeches limited, written documents agile, and projects moving ahead.

Conclusion

We see this as the beginning of a discussion of the procedures and social norms which serve to structure decision-making and delineate power in the academic library. As power moves upward, librarians are left debating how to most effectively advance maintenance organizations from within their position in a hierarchy. Skillful saboteurs understand this power, and how a seemingly innocuous email about the risks of a new initiative can serve as the contemporary shoe in the gears. For now, the first step is recognition. By recognizing the saboteur in our office—or within ourselves—and understanding their motivations, we can extend care to these affected by sabotage and to the alienated saboteur themselves. Is is through our care work that our technical work proceeds, building and extending the maintenance organization, and permitting it to thrive.

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[15] Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and for Our Leaders* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

[16] Pete Marksteiner, "Don't Sabotage Your Organization," *Public Manager* 41, no. 4 (2012): 72.

[17] Stewart Liff, *Managing Government Employees: How to Motivate Your People, Deal with Difficult Issues, and Achieve Tangible Results* (New York: AMACOM, 2007), 18.