Opinion Piece:
Steady on Our Course: Thoughts on the Canadian Library Association’s 64th Annual National Conference and Tradeshow

Erica Sum, Master of Information Studies, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto.

Erica Sum is a Master of Information Studies candidate in the library stream with the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information. During her first year, she served as a Faculty Council Representative for the Master of Information Student Council, and was active with the Child & Youth Advocacy Group. She is currently a student liaison for CASLIS Toronto, and loves the city’s many special libraries. For more information, please visit Erica’s profile on TakingITGlobal: http://profiles.tigweb.org/esum

As a library stream student, I am bombarded by messages regarding change, innovation, and leadership. This championing for change implies that the library profession is doomed to obsoletism unless technological advances are embraced. Such was the theme, or perhaps threat, of the keynote speech delivered by Professor Joe Janes, at the CLA’s 64th National Conference and Tradeshow. The survival instinct was evident in full force at the conference, in formal and casual conversation. It was clear that whether librarians are embracing technological adaptations or are reluctant to incorporate them, they know they must learn to accept them.

However, I feel there is a different potential source of obsoletism that may befall our profession that isn’t given the same amount of consideration: the potential to shift away from the core values of the librarian profession. Librarianship today is built upon serving the information needs of library users. Our values of public service, enabling information seeking behaviour, and, above all, supporting the freedom of and access to information are what define our profession. Librarianship is not founded on the clichéd characteristics attributed to the field: card catalogues, the Dewey system, dusty books and shushing ladies. It is not any particular type of physical or digital space, it is not any specific method, technology or system. It is in the moment in which we disregard our commitment to service and community that our
profession truly erodes. It is in the moment when we stop making our users our first priority and replace their needs with the interests of other stakeholders that our vision blurs. It is in the moment we cease to advocate for user rights in copyright, or alternative models of power in sharing information that we begin to stagnate.

Librarians are trained to advocate for their users, not simply on a usability level, but on many different levels: the economic level, the policy level, and the local/community level. In a context of increasing commercialization and commodification of information, the fundamental values of librarianship are now more critical to the survival of our profession, in differentiating ourselves from other information professionals, and in influencing the direction of growth the greater information field takes.

Perhaps librarians do not need to worry about merchandizing their collections or jumping on the social media bandwagon so much as they need to examine what their values are. Commitment to the core values results in technological change becoming an issue of choosing the right tool to complement those values. With this perspective, adopting certain technologies no longer becomes a matter of survival. It was heartening to see that the values I've described were the first priority for many presenters at the CLA conference. No one spoke of supporting change to be cutting edge, to attract funding, or to adopt a leadership role. Instead, innovation was always undertaken for the sake of the library user.

Perhaps it is problematic for me, an MISc candidate, to extol the virtues of “core values” of a profession to which I am new. Trained to be wary of essentialist thinking, I am not suggesting that librarians should be thought of as a homogenous herd. Perhaps what needs to be addressed now is not so much how librarians need to adapt, and how quickly the information environment is changing, but what we are going to stand for, advocate for, and fight for? Are we professionals in agreement, or have changes to the information field created valid rifts in our professional values? What does librarianship mean to you?