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## A History of Unquestioning Faith: Vocational Awe and the Hope for a Future of “Bad” Librarianship (Panel)

### **Abstract:**

Vocational awe is an emerging concept within LIS used to highlight how narratives and metaphors involving professional self-reverence and sacredness serve to absolve librarianship of accountability for the complex and problematic legacies of institutional oppression and exploitation. This panel explores the vocational awe narrative and its implications for LIS research in two ways. First, by sharing panelists’ experiences and struggles with vocational awe and second, by engaging the LIS research community in appropriate responses to vocational awe, such as advocating for library workers and responsible allyship with marginalized groups.

### **Background**

*“Library workers can’t self-care themselves out of systemic problems”*  
*Kelly Jensen, Public Libraries Aren’t Essential Services, 2022*

Vocational awe (VA) describes a phenomenon within the librarianship profession of unquestioning faith in the library and its mission. Specifically, VA is “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique” (Ettarh 2018). This is problematic because it masks the profession’s very real flaws of institutional oppression and exploitation.

For instance, the concept of neutrality, which has been codified in the ALA Code of Ethics and the Library Bill of Rights, is often upheld as a virtue every librarian should strive for. However, neutrality perpetuates oppression by obscuring “the fact that the perspective of the white majority is embedded within the view” (Brown and Jackson, as cited by Chiu, Ettarh & Ferretti 2021, p.56). In attempting to eliminate bias, “neutrality denies our authority and ability to share information with context or history” (Williams 2017). Thus, in attempting to make libraries as safe, accessible, and non-threatening as possible, “depending on your identity, they are no more or less safe, accessible, or non-threatening than any other public space” (Petersen 2020). Neutrality is not a virtue, but a concept that requires questioning and challenging, particularly within the context of libraries. Afterall, “the affirmation of freedom and access to information are not neutral” (Cheshire & Stout 2020, p.222).

Likewise, the continued expansion of librarians’ job duties, such as providing e-government services (Bishop, McClure, & Mandel 2013), offering job readiness training (Morgan 2018), and administering Naloxone (Ettarh 2018), without additional support and compensation furthers the

idea that “libraries on their own aren’t worth the tax money and librarians aren’t really doing anything with their actual jobs” (Dodd, as cited in Petersen 2020). This overworked and under compensated state can then lead to “burdens such as low morale, increased anxiety and depression, and ultimately retention problems, [which] disproportionately impact early career librarians, underrepresented minorities, and women” (Kendrick 2021, as cited in Meyers, Martinez-Montavon, Narlock, & Stathers, 2021, p.4). In these pandemic times, when libraries are among those services deemed to be essential, this is even more true. For “by calling workers ‘essential’ and turning them into heroes, their deaths become justified – a noble sacrifice for the greater good” (Vazquez, 2020). And for librarians, “the mental, emotional, and physical toll of the hero narrative is hard to shake free from because of the pernicious way vocational awe encourages the librarian to assume the role of their noble profession without complaint” (Meyers, Martinez-Montavon, Narlock, & Stathers, 2021, p.6).

This panel seeks to challenge the VA narrative and the harmful ways in which it has embedded itself within our behaviours and attitudes towards LIS research. We seek to answer the call within recent literature for a paradigm shift, wherein we dismantle notions like neutrality and martyrdom and instead begin striving to live up to the democratic values that libraries espouse by advocating for library workers and responsible allyship with marginalized groups. We seek to engage the LIS research community on appropriate responses to VA in our work and begin a conversation of change by sharing our experiences as we struggle with VA and what it means for the future of our research and LIS research in general. To paraphrase Cheshire and Stout (2020), we cannot truly serve the profession of librarianship if we uphold ideals over librarians’ and patrons’ humanity.

## **Structure**

This panel session will consist of three parts:

Part 1 (approx. 5-10min): Sam will briefly introduce the concept of vocational awe and how it is currently being situated within LIS literature.

Part 2 (approx. 40-50min): The panel will have an unmoderated conversation about how they have experienced vocational awe and/or are struggling with its implications for their research.

This conversation will be loosely guided by three central questions:

- How do we deconstruct vocational awe while still advocating for increased resources?
- How can librarians advocate for themselves if that is seen as going against the interests of the institution?
- How can researchers responsibly interact with practicing librarians (arguably our primary stakeholder) without creating opportunities for vocational awe to be upheld?

Part 3 (approx. 30-40min): The audience will be invited to participate in the conversation and express any thoughts or feelings they are experiencing about how vocational awe could be impacting their research and field work.

## **Connection to Conference**

This panel connects strongly with the concepts of highlighting emergent, inter-disciplinary perspectives and systematic reassessments of previous modes of investigation and thought within the LIS field.

## **Relevant Qualifications/Contributors**

Janet Allen, LIS PhD student. Janet's research focuses on the systemic roots and impacts of information overload and how they intersect with individuals' emotional, relational, and political experiences of technologically mediated communication and information systems. Her work in LIS is influenced by years as a clinical social work practitioner and educator where her previous research explored critically reflective processes of professional identity formation.

Heather Hill, associate professor. Her work centres on disability, accessibility, and public libraries. Her recent publications include examining public library websites for how they frame accessible services and adaptive formats and examining ALA and CFLA policies on providing services to persons with disabilities. Her current research is examining the experience of public library staff with invisible disabilities.

Amber Matthews, LIS PhD candidate who holds a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship (Doctoral). Her research examines systemic racism in public libraries and its impacts on racialized youth in Canada. Through a variety of professional and scholarly mediums, she challenges institutional and systemic barriers to engagement and aims to create anti-oppressive spaces and practices that support all youth. Her work has appeared in Directions Journal published by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, Canadian Journal for Information and Library Science, Partnership Journal, Education for Information, and Open Shelf Magazine. Her work has received awards from the Canadian Association for Information Science (Best Paper and Best Student Paper - 2021) and funding from the Ontario Library Association.

Danica Pawlick-Potts, LIS PhD student and sessional instructor. Danica co-developed and is the current instructor for a community-centered MLIS course focusing on decolonizing and Indigenizing LIS. In developing and executing this course Danica works closely with Indigenous LIS professionals to better understand both the challenges that Indigenous peoples and libraries face and the significant contributions that Indigenous knowledge and practitioners make to the field. Her research explores how Indigenous knowledge systems can inform ethical frameworks for the development and deployment of algorithmic systems.

Sam A. Vander Kooy, LIS PhD student. His research focuses on how public libraries can improve their communities' resiliency during natural disasters. His most recent work has explored public libraries' use of social media in general, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and during the simultaneous wildfire crises in California, Oregon, and Washington in September 2020. Currently, he is developing a vocational awe framework to apply to his dissertation work, which seeks to provide concrete, stakeholder-driven policy recommendations for Canada's public libraries in the areas of disaster management and community resiliency.

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