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Journal Review and Analysis

*Progressive Librarian* Review

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Progressive Librarian Review

Progressive Librarian: A Journal for Critical Studies and Progressive Politics in Librarianship, is a publication of the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG). PLG, now with the tagline of “Radical views on library and info news,” was formed in 1990 by librarians who, in reaction to troubling trends that they had recognized in the field, were inspired to challenge the current state of affairs, particularly by rejecting what they saw to be the unquestioned evolution towards the anti-democratic commercialization of information and “sterile notion of neutrality of librarianship” (PLG, 2017b). To this end, the peer-reviewed Progressive Librarian was started in direct response to the American Library Association’s Library Journal, the dominant forum and publication in the Library and Information Science field, and how it was starting to devolve into advertisements while also shutting out any opposing voices that may speak truth to power (PLG, 1990). In citing inspiration from activist librarians like Sandy Berman and Zoia Horn, Progressive Librarian’s first issue outlined its foundational goals of dissecting trends and defending civil society through active partisanship. Through a survey of issues #36-46, it is evident that Progressive Librarian continues to serve to its mission to ardently protect democracy and challenge institutional thinking: every published article serves as a rallying call to action, not just for fellow radical cultural workers but also the greater library profession as a whole.

Upon first look, Progressive Librarian’s black and white print gives it a distinct look that is very reminiscent of the cut and paste feel of a zine. Short for fanzine, zines have origins in the waves of nonprofit “informal, underground publications” put out by activist groups in the 1960’s and punk rock circles in the 1970’s (University of Texas Libraries, 2018). Covers of the journal are typically adorned with basic text accompanied by black and white illustrations, such as the
preview issue’s stamp of a group of fists lifted in solidarity (PLG, 1990). The most recent issues also follow this trend with images primarily drawn by regular Progressive Librarian contributors Sara Plaza Moreno and/or Edgardo Civallero, such as Issue #40 (PLG, 2012b) which depicts people standing together with the words “LIBRARY ANARCHY” or Issue #41 with eyes swirling above the words “under surveillance” (PLG, 2013). Perhaps it is no coincidence that Progressive Librarian was first released at the beginning of the 1990’s when zines experienced a resurgence as a communication tool of the riot grrrl movement. Much like how the PLG rejects many “-isms” – including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, and classism – so, too, does the Riot Grrrl Manifesto through its radical likeminded proclamations, such as:

BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits of being cool according to traditional standards. (Hanna, 1991).

Aside from easily apparent visual and context clues, the continued correlations between the journal and zines are also revealed through some of the forms of submissions that have been accepted for print. For example, Progressive Librarian #42 (PLG, 2014) includes excerpted pages from a zine called Librarians and Archivists to Palestine DS128.4 that is full of art and writings by library and information science professionals describing what they witnessed surrounding human rights during their travels. The atmosphere created by the journal’s style choices evokes the determined, impassioned mentality of outsiders speaking truth to power.

The target audience for Progressive Librarian is anyone who strives to uphold the ideals set out by the organization’s Statement of Purpose, whether they be academic librarians, public librarians, archivists, educators, or activists. The founding Statement of Purpose (PLG, 1990) called for librarians to steadfastly protect access to information and eliminate disparities so that
the field could actively combat what was perceived to be the growing threat of information management:

Above all, we will dispute the claim for the library as a neutral, non-political organization that serves best when preserving the status quo, and attempt to renew’ the library as an agent for progressive social change. (p. 44)

This first issue was very specific and served as a special edition on librarianship and democracy in South Africa, with articles focusing on Apartheid and how the resulting boycotts impacted the flow of information. Though originally published with the intent to distribute two issues a year, recent editions of *Progressive Librarian* have become much more sporadic. After releasing the combined issues of #36/37 (PLG, 2011) and #38/39 (PLG, 2012a), the publication of new issues has fluctuated, and they are now being released approximately once a year. The audience and submission pool has grown to welcome students and professionals alike, including people in Canada (particularly in Issue #43 that was centered on the newly founded Edmonton Progressive Librarians Guild [PLG, 2016]) and people in the United Kingdom (marked by the frequent inclusion of UK news in the union report found towards the end of every recent iteration of the journal). A revised Statement of Purpose was released just last year as part of Elaine Harger’s editorial, “Why PLG? Why paper? Why bridge generations?” (PLG, 2017b, p. 3-7). In addition to solidifying the distinctly political spirit of the PLG, the new statement has the added effect of announcing the journal’s newly refined objectives in the wake of the new administration:

We also recognize that libraries are sites where structures of injustice, exploitation, control, and oppression are nourished, normalized and perpetuated. The Progressive Librarians Guild exists to expose and call out librarianship's active and passive complicity and acceptance of those systems… (p. 6)
This anti-Trumpism focus, which fittingly denounces the ideologies of the 45th President in the 45th issue of the journal, signals that the new era of *Progressive Librarian* will be even more responsive and direct than ever before: Harger astutely pointed out that all of the articles featured in that landmark issue could have inspired chants at the Women’s Marches that happened soon before their publication. One such article was Aurora Cobb’s “Librarians Against Rape Culture!” (p. 8-19) that demanded for librarians to recognize their role as trusted quasi-social workers in order to end sexual violence and become a much-needed resource for survivors of assault. This article exemplifies how the sense of urgency behind *Progressive Librarian*’s articles has grown exponentially over the past few issues.

The main reoccurring thread throughout the journal is the idea that librarians need to become active partisans in order to stay relevant. Rosenzweig (2000) uses this to explain that in order to be considered a progressive librarian, one must understand that being an advocate for human liberation and democracy is built upon on practicing critical inquiry and welcoming alternative points of view. His six elements for progressive librarian work shed light on the beliefs that are held by the PLG’s core audience and, in turn, will be paraphrased here to outline the future trends that continue to be identified by *Progressive Librarian*:

1. **Promoting open access, particularly for poor and marginalized communities.** Not only is this a frequent topic in the articles but the PLG also puts this into practice by releasing its journal issues for free as .pdf downloads in its digital archive. It also now publishes issues under a Creative Common license, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0, so that others can readily benefit from the journal without having to pay.

2. **Preserving the library as a necessary community building place.** Libraries are regularly presented by the journal as necessary centers for outreach and social services.
For example, contributors such as Leif Kajberg call for the library as a civic forum in the age of the internet (PLG, 2011, p.30-41) and John P. Irwin urges readers to see the how libraries can be vital lifelines for vulnerable patrons, such as intervening when veterans are being taken advantage of by for-profit colleges (PLG, 2016, p. 28-39).

3. **Diversity of staff and materials, while opposing economic censorship.** The importance of BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of color), LGTBQ, immigrant, and women’s voices is demonstrated throughout *Progressive Librarian*. Newer articles, such as the piece by Katy Mathuews in Issue #44 (PLG, 2016, p. 6-27), take this even further by arguing that diversity is now just a buzzword and that libraries must consciously work under the philosophies of social justice so that they can truly ensure access and equity for all users.

4. **Opposing the corporate globalization and monopolization of information.** Evident since the PLG’s founding, *Progressive Librarian* is ardently against commercialism and neoliberalism. Recent issues have concentrated on specific facets of the economics of information, like the work done by librarians in the Occupy Wallstreet Movement. Though it has yet to be released digitally, a review of the table of contents for the latest edition of the journal shows that it is primarily concerned with alternative methods of gathering information, such using reddit for crowdsourcing and striving to uncover what is inaccessible, plus the importance of protest to fight for increased public library funding (PLG, 2018b).

5. **Defending cultural sovereignty.** Two of the main concerns that are discussed in *Progressive Librarian* are human rights and cultural genocide. Palestine is a regular topic, like in Hannah Mermelstein’s article, “Overdue Books: Returning Palestine’s
‘Abandoned Property’ of 1948” (PLG, 2017a, p.66-86), where she traces Zionist attempts to erase Palestinian art and culture. Amy Lau (PLG, 2014, p.82-94) also reveals how WWII Japanese internment camps led to the silencing of history and how archival work can open the door for healing and empowerment.

6. **Creating strategic alliances between cultural workers to advocate for political power.** Every issue surveyed for the purposes of this review includes a section that highlights union news and stands in solidarity with workers. The inclusion of the Braverman Essay, a spotlight in each issue that features a social justice piece written by an MLIS student, also works to embolden younger generations of progressive librarians and help them build connections that will strengthen their bonds in the community. Named after activist librarian Ruth Braverman, the prize includes a $500 scholarship and the opportunity for students to present their papers at the ALA Annual Conference (PLG, 2018a).

The most recent issues of PLG’s *Progressive Librarian* show that the deeply political journal is still fighting the notions of library neutrality and institutional commercialism, now with a stronger bite than ever before. The forward-thinking contents of *Progressive Librarian* are not intended just to inform or describe current events for its audience. The journal is crafted to fire up the reader and inspire a revolutionary action across the field. The radical writers and editors remain activated because they have faith in the potential power of libraries and want to push their fellow cultural workers to keep making them dynamic and vital resources. Though originally bred out of critique, it is clear that *Progressive Librarian* comes from a deep love for libraries and a desire to build a better world for all.
References


