

My Scandalous Future in Libraries

In the last few years I've become mildly addicted to a certain genre of non-fiction that I think of as "Administrative Scandal." Years ago I read and, I admit, loved Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold*, which is a pretty scathing critique of libraries and librarians and the Library of Congress and the Council on Library and Information Resources for their role in microfilming and destroying physical newspapers and books. And I hoovered up *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World's Richest Museum* with its positively Aeschylean story of the downfall of Getty curator Marion True, who for years spoke out against the practice of museums buying art reasonably suspected to be stolen from archaeological sites – until she herself was indicted for that very infraction.

The best sources of guilty entertainment for a fan of cultural heritage administrative scandal, however, are not books but administrative reports. Now is the summer of our calm content made glorious winter by two recent castigations of major research libraries: Chrysalis Management's coyly-titled *Boston Public Library: Operational and Financial Assessment* (May 2015) and the Government Accountability Office's blunter *Library of Congress: Strong Leadership Needed to Address Serious Information Technology Management Weaknesses* (March 2015). (That's certainly the kind of title designed to obviate any need to read the 133-page report it names.) SPOILER ALERT: both reports contributed to the departure of both libraries' heads, Amy Ryan and James H. Billington.

I've been in my current tenured position as Director of Digital Research Services at the Virginia Tech University Libraries for just over two months. In this new position, I have six direct reports. I'm in charge of the institutional repository, VTechWorks, and I'm tasked with coordinating digital humanities and digital preservation at the library as well as the research division's educational offerings, marketing, and website content. I'll also be participating in university-wide and national initiatives and very likely doing some presenting and writing. It's a pretty big job, and surely the job will only get bigger as the years pass. And I very much hope that all my reading in Administrative Scandal has taught me a few lessons about how not to have a long library career that careers toward catastrophe. Drawing especially from the recent cases of the BPL and LOC, here's what I think those lessons are:

1. Get non-library perspectives on what you're doing early and often, and make real change based on those perspectives. In 2000 and 2009, other external reviewers had recommended that the Library of Congress hire a Chief Information Officer, yet LOC still hadn't managed to hire one by the time the GAO recommended the same thing yet again in 2015.
2. To repeat: make *real* change, and in a timely fashion. According to Chrysalis Management's report, "In June of 2013 a full Youth Services Report was prepared and published by Wondercabinet Interpretive Design, Inc. This 54 page report was well received by the staff and contains many strong

implementation ideas with benchmarking substantiation. Now, twenty-one months later, ‘determining which recommendations to implement’ is an action that has been pushed out from 2014 actions.”

3. Digitize everything you can, and then digitize more. Both BPL and LOC were criticized for not digitizing more of their collections, even when such digitization efforts would have cost in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars. To outside observers, it seems obvious that a library’s mission is to provide access to its collections, and that where it can it should provide online access. Digitization counts as a core function of libraries now, it seems.
4. But also be sure to keep really good track of your physical stuff. The chief crux of the BPL scandal was that rare books and special collections kept being acquired without being properly processed and stored, and with no logs kept of materials’ internal access and return. Meanwhile the GAO became exasperated with the LOC not only for its unprocessed acquisitions, but also for its untracked equipment, buying new monitors when hundreds of old ones sat in warehouses never distributed to staff. Keeping track of things is also a core function of libraries.
5. Try to find your own blind spots and point a mirror at them. It was laudable that Ryan was concentrating on providing programming for poor kids at the Boston branch libraries, but making that her priority meant that BPL Special Collections was left to its own devices.

I should add that although they’re both serving as cautionary tales here, neither Billington nor Ryan need be considered absolute failures. History might well vindicate Billington, who after all remained in office for nearly 28 years and only announced his retirement at the age of 85: commentators such as Matthew Battles and Phillip Kennicott on [The Kojo Nnamdi Show](#) note that Billington did wonderful work in positioning the Library of Congress as a cultural leader in Washington, DC. And Ryan oversaw several successful initiatives, as Chrysalis Management acknowledged, praising her for overseeing a major construction project and for supporting the Digital Public Library of America and the Massachusetts Digital Commonwealth. Moreover, after her resignation, Ryan was listed in the *New York Times* without a single asterisk against her name as a potential successor to Billington as Librarian of Congress.

The competing demands on librarians are so many: people (especially librarians) expect libraries to be both analog and digital, both space and virtual space, to provide services and social services and computers and classes and publishing and preservation and more. It is then perhaps no wonder that a librarian can lose her or his job in a storm of media coverage not for fraud or theft or plagiarism or libido, but for neglect of one part of a multifarious duty. Heaven send that in my new position I may remain a mere reader of Administrative Scandal, but if such is not to be the case, and if I in turn am to be held up as a hissing and a byword for incompetence, grant me the knowledge that I did at least one thing well, and that I sacrificed my

reputation in the service of a worthy calling.

Further Scandalous Reading

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