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Scarlet Galvan  
*Grand Valley State University*

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## More Than Things

Scarlet Galvan 

University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan, USA

### ABSTRACT

The often invisible labor of serials, technical services, metadata, and electronic resources workers sits in the space between required and preferred, assessment and surveillance. Although libraries and information workers did not explicitly create the systems many of us live in, we are responsible for their everyday functioning. In many ways the narratives from technical services to the library are centered in objects: item counts, COUNTER stats, door counts, discovery, and other transactional data. And yet, we are stewards and maintainers, innovators and storytellers of the countless ways these objects are experienced. How can we help our colleagues understand the outreach component of this work? How do we responsibly confront power in our systems—which often miscalculates the necessity of care in favor of the shiny? What does it mean to honor expertise behind the scenes, and how might we gain agency in our systems once more?

### KEYWORDS

collections; electronic resources; labor; technical services

Sometimes colleagues or students will ask what I would do if I were not in libraries. I didn't have an answer to this until I saw *Avenue Q* for the first time and realized I'd missed a very specific calling as puppeteer. I've always loved being behind the scenes—this might be why I ended up in technical services and systems. Whatever the reason, when friends of mine called to ask if I wanted to take a road trip in the middle of New England winter to see a weird puppet museum, the answer was yes.



The Bread and Puppet Museum is in an area of Vermont called the Northeast Kingdom, several hours from most places (see [Figure 1](#)). It's housed in a large barn, and during winter when the museum isn't staffed there is a guest book and polite sign asking you to be sure to turn the lights off and latch the gate when you leave. Visitors leave donations of nonperishable food and other items at the door. It's floor-to-ceiling papier-mâché of figures, aisle after aisle of collections and art so dense it can't be seen in one viewing. The depth of field is incredible; it's one of the most immersive museum experiences I've had.

Bread and Puppets offers fellowships for people to come from all over the world to create art, live on the property, and spend the summer joining a community of artists that has been active since the Vietnam War.

They offer free sourdough rye bread to audience members before each show. Their art is participatory, challenging, and tells a story. What's miraculous about puppets to me is that like all forms of technology, puppets are a machine animated through human agency to tell a story. It's probably why even as a child I didn't find them frightening, from *The Muppet Show* to *Dark Crystal*, or watching the music video for the song *Land of Confusion*, where I first encountered Spitting Image. I can pinpoint my earliest sense of political consciousness there, that British satire of President Reagan.

Humans do this work, but their elegance makes their labor vanish. Actors have talked about this working with Jim Henson—how puppeteers disappear. Everything about them is behind the scenes. I can't help but find my own origins and orientation to librarianship in this love, in this peculiar capacity.

I am grateful to be among practitioners this morning because I too live in knowledgebases, link resolvers, catalogs, and workflows. There are days when I can shut my eyes and still see Excel or OpenRefine, and when I got the invitation to speak here I accepted because I knew it meant being with solvers of problems. We are the people others come to when they have to work through a puzzle, even if it's not specifically our job.

**CONTACT** Scarlet Galvan  [galvansc@gvsu.edu](mailto:galvansc@gvsu.edu)  University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI 49401.  
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**Figure 1.** The Bread and Puppet Museum, by author.

The last few days at my job there have been people idling at my desk with some variant of “So ... Elsevier, huh?” Now is an interesting time to be in library resource management.

As Big Deals begin to fall apart, I see discussion of how any library could sign on in the first place—we knew they were a bad idea almost as soon as they arrived, but we did it to shed staffing costs required to manage subscriptions and access. In doing so, administrators prioritized a temporary gain over securing the expertise libraries need to leave Big Deals today and protect patron privacy. I see discomfort from people who don’t touch this work as they realize how ambiguous resource management, access, and discovery can be. Tech services work requires a certain comfort with ambiguity and fearlessness in the face of power that needs continuous education to understand why our jobs matter to the library.

There are competing narratives here—that this work, which ultimately forms the foundation of the library and how the contemporary patron experiences our knowledge forms, is both ordinary and magical.

The other aspect of technical services work that makes education and advocacy difficult is that there’s so very much to learn, so many contexts to apply the work in, that it’s easier for our colleagues in many cases to accept that we’re magical instead of learning about our work. That’s not a great position to be in because it perpetuates the idea that our work is embodied, which is to say the knowledge exists in you, it’s part of your body, that you have the skills and abilities you do because of your age or because you’re a magical fey creature or witch, and not because you spent hours trying to avoid throwing your laptop against a wall learning regular expressions or JavaScript.

We can trouble this magic by resisting this narrative, by exposing not so much our systems but our forms of care. Tech services engages in deep care, even in those cases when we are not public-facing staff. Our work is public even if we aren’t. We manage the largest pieces of the budget; our jobs translate into the first and sometimes only experience our patrons have with the library. And yet, we remain underresourced with high turnover.

How do we make visible that care and show that humans are responsible?

This is a difficult task. We end up signaling other things about our work instead.

I started out as a circulation desk clerk in a large public library system. Over winter break that year I visited an affluent suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. I toured the public library, and I was impressed with the college and career prep resources available. At my home branch I asked if I could make a similar display. I was told “Our kids aren’t really the college type.” We went back and forth about this while I explained that the resources wouldn’t just be about college as the marker of success; the display would include GED resources, vocational books, and similar content because several members of the community had dropped out of high school—anything to help orient someone toward a possible future. Within 10 minutes, every book we put on that display was in the hands of someone who “wasn’t the type.” Collections are for use, not reinforcing assumptions.

I say that as though elite research institutions like Brown University are better at managing conditions of access, and they’re not. Our collection is hard to use, and we communicate a number of messages about what you cannot do in the public-facing expression of our work. There are all kinds of barriers for people wanting to access the collection. Early after my hire, I walked in the stacks with the flashlight on my phone out until a grad student showed me where the light switch was, to say nothing of the stacks not being accessible in the first place. Message received: My body is the kind of body allowed to navigate this part of the collection. I later learned this library doesn’t do in-house paging for undergraduates. Combine this with the condition of the stacks, and it becomes hard for library staff to find things, let alone students. There’s a project underway to fix this issue, but it seems like a reasonable move here is allowing undergrads to page materials. We’re getting there, moving toward a service level that reflects the care I know my colleagues have.

Our journal list is centered on what’s prohibited by our license agreements. It’s a structural element of

how patrons experience electronic resources that hasn't really been updated with the rights and privileges we negotiate now. But I understand why block text about licenses is there. It comes from a need to explain and promote why licensing and copyright are important, this desire for work to be seen and acknowledged. But in doing so, the library focuses on limits instead of the possible.

At another institution, I was mapping machine-readable cataloging (MARC) fields to migrate discovery layers when I found my name in the 970 subfield of the publicly available MARC record of a copy of Simone Brown's work, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*.

Why is this anyone's business? No one should know what I personally request to buy, just like no one has a right to know what I've checked out. Is assessment warranted beyond recognizing that someone in the community wanted the book, so let's get it here? I contacted several colleagues when I found this and received replies from catalogers and metadata specialists who found similar but no less anonymous identifiers in their library's MARC records. In most cases they were vestigial workflows, and it took a meeting to stop the practice and suppress those fields.

Is it acceptable to pay huge costs for content or infrastructure with support that transmits passwords in clear text over email? Or content with dark patterns that get in the user's way? What about an administrative log-in that requires my gender at registration? Or expensive platforms that outsource their usability testing to our users?

These platforms are owned by companies with huge resources. MARCedit, developed and maintained by one person with a very intense hobby, should not be running circles around your accessibility.

If learning analytics are embedded in library systems the way providers wish them to be, where will measures of student success originate: research libraries or third-party vendors with significant interest in our continued investment?

Who defines "value" when the library value agenda is sold to us rather than cooperatively developed?

Values aren't articulated in value statements. Values manifest in organizational behaviors and in the kinds of people and ideas that are permitted to occupy organizational spaces. Research libraries almost never reject subscription agreements that expose patron data and behaviors. Research libraries reject over inflated costs because it's a principle easily communicated across campus lines with the ever-

present serials crisis graph: Coverage about University of California's decision to end negotiations with Elsevier is about access to content and price, not Elsevier's positioning as an analytics—and by extension, surveillance—company.

Technical services shows an ethic of care through connections. We're the people behind the systems and machines that construct the library for the user. Will our assessment ever capture the number of selves reflected, or rabbit holes discovered, or narratives changed? Do we have to measure something for it to happen or have impact?

How do surveys from organizations like Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) shape the stories we tell about our work? Because what we measure has consequences. Take the University of Wisconsin–Madison's former Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs' statement on consolidation of campus libraries: "Until recently, UW-Madison had been the only institution among the 114 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) that provided data showing more is spent on salaries and wages than on library materials" (Mangelsdorf, 2016). While this statement is in the context of campus library consolidation at a land-grant institution, there's no denying that the use of ARL statistics—with huge local variables and inconsistent collection methods—play a role in the discussion, if not the decision to claim that materials are more important than the skills people leverage against those materials. *Titles held* isn't a useful measurement, nor is a material spend total absent context, and yet these influence decisions at the highest level as though volume count were a reliable measure of a collection's strength.

We have the power and responsibility to intervene in our systems without invading privacy, and the line dividing assessment and surveillance is in our work. What might that look like?

If you search for "low-income students" in Google, you'll get a range of autosuggestions. Today if I type *low income students ...*, before I can finish my query, Google has offered *college dropouts* and *struggling* in addition to helping me understand what a low-income student might be, or why I might want to teach them at all. Search results and suggestions are shaped by the culture—what do any of these results say about the searcher, the index, and the subject?

The same search in our discovery layer doesn't perform much better. Some articles imply that certain

students shouldn't be at a school like Brown. What if I'm the student running a search at Brown? Or Duke, as I'm in North Carolina today. Or anywhere it's made explicit I don't belong.

What happens if the library acknowledges that difference? In our discovery layer a search like this one now links to the campus Undocumented, First-Generation, and Low-Income Student Center. The message is clear: You're not alone here. To see and acknowledge each other is one of the most powerful things we do.

What if it was intentional? What if we ditched aspirational personas and talked to real people to see how effective discovery could be?

Let's talk to the people who have to fight to be here; who didn't have librarians in their high schools; who have real hopes, fears, and worries about the future.

What if a search for "all lives matter" offered the Ferguson Archive as an option alongside the scholarly articles?

Let's ask someone who has to use a screen reader *every time* how well we're doing. I want to emphasize that doesn't happen overnight, that improvement is iterative and builds on itself through testing and

failure and sitting with a whole lot of discomfort. Because if we optimize for anyone, we'll do it for everyone. What if we optimized for underdogs?

What if we embraced the truth with purpose: that libraries will never be neutral organizations?

Let's consider how we could incorporate our empathy and compassion into our systems. How could we work together to signal to users that we see them in ways that don't violate their privacy, in ways that encourage growth and development, in ways that help us help users get on with their story. Our work is the first place to start.

Let's make some trouble.

## ORCID

Scarlet Galvan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9057-2680>

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