

# digital literacy with a why

politics and ethics in public library tech help

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Welcome. I'm Justin Unrau (or J Jack Unrau if you know me from the internet, don't worry I will answer to whatever) and I'm the Digital Literacy Librarian here at Strathcona County Library.

Just for a tiny bit of background on me, I grew up Mennonite in Manitoba, where one of my grandfathers was a preacher on the socialist end of the spectrum who was good at challenging nonMennonite society and my other was a farmer who was a much fiercer individualist capitalist who was good at challenging his Mennonite community. And both of my grandmas were awesome caring people.

I let you know all this because this whole talk distills a lot of my reading through my experiences and I know these familial examples I grew up with have shaped these thoughts.

# digital literacy librarian

When I try to describe the kind of librarian I am, I usually tell people something along the lines of "I'm the kind of librarian who..."

# digital literacy librarian

helping  
glowing  
free

helps people with their glowing slabs of silicon for free." Depending on the audience and on how impressive I'm trying to sound that can change a bit, but really that's the essence.

Now a short description like that for what I think Digital Literacy is leaves a lot out, which is fine. But I think it's important to note that my view of digital literacy is the kind of tent that fits a lot of circus elephants. And in that definition we've got the three core elements to what I want my job to be. The "glowing slabs" is the technology that makes my job a bit more focused than some other library workers' but the important things for today are the "helps" and "for free" because right there I've got ethics and politics embedded.

# politics & ethics

This combination of ethics and politics is important to me because it is part of a larger conversation in librarianship. I see very smart people talking about how libraries should or shouldn't be hosting Nazis or doing displays about Pride in Utah and those stories fall under the banner of libraries and neutrality.

# libraries are not neutral

I agree with the statement that libraries are not neutral entities.

In the past I've tended to put my opinions on what libraries need to do in general out there, but as I mature as a librarian I've needed to reflect on and connect what our library does, and what I *\*specifically\** do, to the wider ideas. So connecting library tech help to the question of whether libraries should be neutral was the spur to the thinking I'm going to tell you about today.

some writers to read

- Chris Bourg [Debating y/our humanity, or Are Libraries Neutral?](#)
- nina de jesus [Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression](#)
- Emily Drabinsky [Are Libraries Neutral?](#)

These are three articles I'd recommend if you are thinking that well, libraries are/should be neutral. They are all smarter people than me and have better, more specific reasons for why they support that position. But in the third of these bits Emily Drabinski shifted the question from "Should libraries be neutral to..."

"How, concretely and materially,  
do we deploy our power to  
produce material worlds that  
give all of us meaningful access  
to life?"

- Emily Drabinski

In my experience, librarians aren't really good at talking about power in the everyday. But we have it and wield it and the way in which we wield it can have concrete and material effects on our users and the world.

# digital literacy values

So even in the slightly less material realm of "help with technology" we are constantly making choices about the kinds of help we provide. These choices are shaped by a number of things, including the skills of library workers, what we have the funds and staffing to provide, but also by more explicitly political concerns like protecting the library from litigation, and satisfying the world-defiling corporations that fund us. But they are also driven by "librarianly values" whatever they are. So what are librarianly values? Do we have the ability to live out those values?



When our future is opaque ...  
such ideals may then fail to  
motivate us.

- Shannon Vallor  
*Technology and the Virtues*

Digital literacy (at least in our library's plan of service and my job description) has to do with teaching and empowering our library users to deal with this technology-driven world. One of the big problems we have in library technology help is the power imbalance between the library user and the gigantic corporations that are providing these services.

Part of the reason why we need to provide this help to users and hence support this technology-driven status quo is that the system we buy into (with our money) and support (with our teaching) is opaque to our users. Large corporations set the rules and we teach people how to think within those systems. This is the big education project we are engaged with: teaching users to be compliant with systems they don't understand.

# status quo politics

We struggle through and we give our instruction on how to borrow ebooks but not how to make them usable on a device the corporation we sign agreements with doesn't approve for them. Or we tell people it's easy! and tap away, demonstrating the ease with which you too can share your life with Google for its profit. Do your users know why they have to wait for someone else to be "done using a file" before making a copy they can read? Have they thought about why that is actually crazy? Even if we're (laudably) teaching users how to secure their information using the tools we have, it turns out that Facebook is using the 2FA phone numbers to serve advertisements.

We're teaching people how to fit into a political system where the entities with money have authority, and our only options are to complain or not to use these systems at all (assuming you're fine with leaving digital life behind). Is compliance with authority a librarianly value? If we go by our actions, yes yes it is.

# serving customers (up on a platter)

But why are we doing this? What are we trying to achieve with all this digital literacy/help with technology? Isn't the alternative to say that isn't my problem, which seems irresponsible? Don't we want to help our community members, even if they're doing things that aren't in their best interest like being on Facebook?

I think it's easy for us to slip into a customer service model where we're looking for a happy user at the end of our interaction. Library workers are helpful. We generally like to help. We help our library users better than we help our family when they have the same questions. This is what we do.

But doing this is a choice. It's a political choice, and an ethical choice and those are all tied together. Here's the thing that keeps me up at night (or did before we had a baby) that goal in our service plan of individual empowerment often comes at the cost of obscuring systemic complexity.

# obscuring complexity for “happy” users

I think people, our users at least and most likely us tech-helpers too, want things to be easy. We've trained ourselves into thinking that easier is better. That only weirdos want things to be more complicated. But the faux-simplicity of a Google interface hides all sorts of shit. This opacity, this difficulty in seeing what is happening in an interconnected world, is what is preventing us in the digital realm from being able to help access life meaningfully.

We can't just be aiming for happy customers. It cheapens everything.

If we're trying to get meaningful access to life, at least the parts of life that are related to digital technology, we need to get people fluent in the language of privacy and security and advertising and propaganda in a way that they don't want to (or more likely, have time to) hear.

There is no app people can install to protect them from the "dangers of the internet" because the biggest danger of the internet would be whoever funded that app.

... the program suggests that the power to protect personal information lies entirely within one's own hands and locates responsibility for doing so with the individual.

- Joanna Petrone

*Google's Got Our Kids*

When we help a person navigate the bizarre and byzantine labyrinth of the many apps the library uses, we are telling them that their user experience is something that we outsource to our vendors, that doing this is easier for our organization and that is what is important.

When we show people how to sign up for Facebook we are, even if we tell them about the privacy implications of turning over life and conversation to Mark Zuckerberg, we are saying that there is a good way to use Facebook, a way that doesn't support evil. I get asked sometimes by new Facebook users, so what do I do with this? And I say I don't know. It is a shitty way to live. I hate Facebook so much.

Even the notion of the user just needing to educate themselves or not use the product is part of a neoliberal political project.

It is an old story. Evil is offering us the world: “All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.”

- Wendell Berry  
*Unsettling America*

So we are stuck in a status quo that pretends to be simple because that is what is profitable, not what is of value. A shallow education in "what works" is a matter of throwing people into a thresher, not providing them meaningful access to life.

> “It is an old story. Evil is offering us the world: “All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.” And we have only the old paradox for an answer: If we accept all on that condition, we lose all. What is new is the guise of the evil: a limitless technology, dependent upon a limitless morality, which is to say upon no morality at all. - Wendell Berry, *Unsettling America*

So this is sounding biblical and I have to apologize but like I said before one of my grandfathers was a preacher and my grandma told stories.

The practically wise will notice and respond to morally significant phenomena to which the rest of us will often be oblivious or indifferent.

- Shannon Vallor  
*Technology and the Virtues*

But what are our values and how do we educate people in these values? If we take Emily Drabinski's question from before as our guide I think we end up at something like Shannon Vallor's Technomoral Virtue Ethics.

This is a great book that isn't specifically about libraries, but one of the goals in there is to have more technomoral education available for people. And part of being virtuous is having exemplars to follow. I think there is nothing more useful for librarians to do than to actually be the virtuous technosocial actors that we could be.

# technomoral virtue ethics

So Shannon Vallor wrote this book: *Technology and the Virtues* and it is great. In her view, the best way to deal with technology is through the lens of virtue ethics. This is the idea that the way to be an ethical person is to try to act the way an ethical person would. The book looks at Aristotelian, Confucian and Buddhist virtue ethics as possible models for what technosocial virtue ethics could look like, and oh my glob is this ever a better model than vague ALA statements. Virtue ethics assume that you can't just make a simple rule to follow and remember because the world and its circumstances constantly change and we need to approach situations *\*specifically\**.

Vallor points to virtues and habits - while the virtues are good ways of thinking of what makes an ethical person, it's the habits that are more complex.

These traditions make a distinction between what children can learn and what grown adults can, and one of the big things is to cultivate good habits and approaches that can be applied flexibly to the changing situation of life.



## seven technomoral practices

- moral habituation
- relational understanding
- reflective self-examination
- intentional self-direction of moral development
- perceptual attention to moral salience
- prudential judgment
- appropriate extension of moral concern

[Paraphrase/don't read all of these out loud]

1. moral habituation - not mindless habits but with a reason - accustoms the person to better action and eventually integrates
2. relational understanding - ethics aren't autonomous (as in Kant or utilitarianism) - we have roles in our relationships -> how do our actions affect others around the globe?
3. reflective self-examination
4. intentional self-direction of moral development - what technologies help and which inhibit becoming the kinds of people we want to be (this is the big fight against marketing)
5. perceptual attention to moral salience
6. prudential judgment - no fixed rules that can simply be applied - "... how can we keep our deliberative skill from being exercised outside of practical wisdom, in ways that serve the interests of personal, national, or corporate expedience rather than the broader aims of human flourishing in our techno-social environment"
7. appropriate extension of moral concern -> a very simple norm—extend your existing moral attitude of concern from its natural or current target(s) to all those who deserve it—is nevertheless one of the most challenging moral habits to practice. Of course one general source of difficulty is determining who deserves our moral concern, and how much of it. - Vallor

When we express more concern over fulfilling our license agreements with our vendors over getting a library user access to the community of readers she yearns to

be a part of, what does that say about our appropriate extension of moral concern?

## 12 specific virtues for technosocial life

- honesty
- self-control
- humility
- justice
- courage
- empathy
- care
- civility
- flexibility
- perspective
- magnanimity
- technomoral wisdom

[Paraphrase/don't read all of these out loud]

1. honesty - respecting truth
2. self-control - becoming the author of our desires
3. humility - knowing what we do not know\*
4. justice - upholding rightness
5. courage - intelligent fear and hope
6. empathy - compassionate concern for others - compassion is something we learn to feel
7. care - loving service to others "we become moral selves largely by teaching ourselves to actively respond to and meet the needs of others..."
8. civility - making common cause\*
9. flexibility - skillful adaptation to change - beyond live and let live to actively deliberate together and agree upon prudent courses of technosocial action - there will be conflict but we are all actually in this together
10. perspective - holding on to the moral whole - scaling our moral desires even if there is no one scale - our actions support or dismantle global projects nowadays
11. magnanimity - moral leadership and nobility of spirit - those who have earned the moral trust of others -> this speaks to the unearned moral trust we have in librarianship this shit that people think even though we can't even protect our users' privacy from adobe data breaches
12. technomoral wisdom - unifying all that

We can talk (and Vallor does) about how each of these virtues can be brought to bear

in technosocial life, but let's just point out two that apply directly to the tech help we provide at the public library.

Humility is so important. Trying to bring in the idea of kindness and empathy into technology work is one of the most important things we can do. Especially if we are trying to help people on to a deeper understanding of the power structures that shape this world of technology we need to acknowledge that it isn't easy. That of course I know I should be using Tor for my normal internet use but I don't because of the lag it induces on a connection. It takes a lifetime to be better. and we're always going to fail and it's always going to suck and it will always feel like the world is collapsing and we should just go find a mountain to die on with a nice view.

And civility, working together and not being fragmented into our neoliberally isolated individual consumer modes is so important. Like yes, library workers should be unionized, but we should be making our common cause with our users to wield our power. It's not about the glowing slabs. Here's Vallor again...

The collective desire, skill, and virtue necessary to cooperatively wield new media technologies for civic aims are all (wrongly) assumed by this model.

- Shannon Vallor

*Technology and the Virtues*

> This reflects a fundamental error in the thinking of Shirky and other heralds of a digital civic renaissance such as Kevin Kelly, Jeff Jarvis, Eric Schmidt, and Nicholas Negroponte: the assumption that you will get a thriving civil society simply by supplying citizens with the proper tools. 'If cooperative and fruitful civic action online is not forthcoming,' so the thinking goes, 'then we obviously have not yet given our wouldbe citizens of the global digital polis the right instruments with which to construct it.' The mantra seems to be: if we equip them, they will build it. What is missing is any attention to the particular civic characters, motivations, and capacities of the 'them' in question. The collective desire, skill, and virtue necessary to cooperatively wield new media technologies for civic aims are all (wrongly) assumed by this model. - Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues*

# concrete & material

So let's get back to the library's role in trying to live out these values, which I think are more specific than anything you'd find on an ALA statement.

I believe public libraries need to be Vallor's "practical spaces for technomoral education".

## technomoral education

- active habituation and practice across a variety of technosocial contexts
- fostering habits of technomoral reflection
- the study of technomoral exemplars
- developing skills of moral discernment and judgment needed to adapt and flourish in new and evolving technosocial circumstances

[not talking about these aspects yet, will return to this slide]

> ... places where people may apply the habits of moral self-cultivation to the contemporary challenge of living well with emerging technologies, and the inevitable surprises awaiting us in our technosocial future. Technomoral education must eschew passive learning of fixed rules and the associated 'compliance mindset' in favor of active habituation and practice across a variety of technosocial contexts, fostering habits of technomoral reflection, the study of technomoral exemplars, and the skills of moral discernment and judgment needed to adapt and flourish in new and evolving technosocial circumstances. - Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues*

# public library tech help

So we come down to applying this stuff. In our library we do a couple of general kinds of tech help.



# something is broken

1. Why isn't this working? Something is broken

something is broken  
something is new

## 2. How do I use ...? Something is new

And then there's the hierarchy where we look at whether it's a library thing or a rest of the world of technology thing. Generally I think library workers prioritize the library stuff whether it's fixing broken stuff or teaching the use of stuff. But there are clear cases where the other world of technology comes into play -- last year's Netspeed keynote Jessamyn West's example of needing to go online to get a hunting licenses being a good one.

## technomoral education

1. active habituation and practice across a variety of technosocial contexts
2. fostering habits of technomoral reflection
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But we also get more and more "I have a lot of photos. What do I do with them?" We get asked for more classes on this all the time. It's not exactly a library topic, but we do have ideas on how to deal with something like that (because we've practiced it #1). I love these ones because they're a great opportunity to show users that organizing things takes time (#2), even if often that time is hidden from us. Sometimes you will just need to do a pile of work, and decide for yourself if it's worth it (#4). And the "easy" alternative is for Google to facially recognize everyone in your photo library automagically, which is easy but still squicks people out (kind of an anti-#3).

I think all four of those aspects of technomoral education can be brought into the mix regardless of whether something is broken or something is new

# digital literacy at SCL

we do classes for the how do I... kinds of questions and we do one on one (101) appointments, drop-in sessions and the general stuff you do on desk at a library for the this isn't working kind of stuff.

One of the things we've been moving towards is an embrace of the learning together approach (putting that virtue of humility to good use) and tackling more of the wider world of technology. I think it's irresponsible for us to say "because we pay for Overdrive we will help you, but we don't pay for Instagram so tough luck" just because it is more difficult to learn something new and hurts our pride to not be an expert.

Virtues like humility aren't just a nice idea but foundational to empathizing with our users. And this is where yes, the user who has their issue promptly resolved in an efficient manner by an expert is getting pretty good "customer service" but that practice isn't developing skills of moral discernment in our users. Arguably it could be a "providing exemplars" kind of thing but only if the tech helper is talking through the things they are trying.

Even though it might not be obvious from my desire for library workers to be technomoral exemplars, I hate the use of language like tech gurus and experts. These words are such bullshit and it's something we need to remove from our marketing - even though that's a political bit of messaging that libraries love because it's trying to show our relevance. But fuck relevance if we aren't being kind.

Anyway. I think it's important for us to work with the complicated weird edge cases of

non-library technology as well as library specific stuff like Adobe Digital Editions because the whole thing behind virtue ethics is that if we want to improve the world we have to model the behaviour we want more of and that's most effective to do in the helping with a problem kind of interaction.

... they thought that those who would be impacted by a new technology deserved a voice in how it was being deployed.

- TheLuddbrarian  
*Why the Luddites Matter*

> That which makes the Luddites so strange, so radical, and so dangerous is not that they wanted everyone to go back to living in caves (they didn't want that), but that they thought that those who would be impacted by a new technology deserved a voice in how it was being deployed. - TheLuddbrarian, Why the Luddites Matter

Beyond helping fix things that are broken, we do occasional programs about more traditional politics in this realm -- I try to make sure we do something around labour and organizing for May 1. We try to bring up the interconnectedness of all things in our classes, about how all these tools and apps just exist to sell more glowing slabs of silicon filled with rare earth metals.

Do we connect the use of all this stuff enough to the threat of climate change? We could do more. I do make sure to use my leftcoast self as an example of someone who hates the companies like Enbridge (that fund this library), and connect that to a reason why I might prefer to keep my communications hidden from a government that wants to build pipelines I would rather be dismantled. It's important to connect tools like Tor and Signal to their civic use.

Technofatalism isn't logical; it's a highly destructive failure of imagination & unwillingness to resist the status quo. It's the sullen twin of technophilia. Both assume tech can & will determine society. It's not that simple. We have a fighting chance. But we have to fight.

- Marie Hicks  
[@histoftech](https://twitter.com/histoftech)

I guess that's about what I wanted to talk about. I think that putting our values into our tech help is important and I think it can be done practically, mostly through working through things reflexively and telling the truth about the ways our systems work and trying to be better, and not just empty ALA-style "better" but better in these specific virtuous ways.

I think people are better served by being told that things are complicated than they are by having false confidence in their ease with using technology. I know that it doesn't look good in the stats when everyone who comes to the library ends up being more rather than less agitated about the technosocial world we live in. For me, I do try not to engage in Hicks' technofatalism, but in order to get people to fight against these systems that could be so great if they weren't being used in the most shallow stupid totalitarian ways, we need people to understand.

## reading list

- [Are Libraries Neutral?](#) - Emily Drabinski
- [Debating y/our humanity, or Are Libraries Neutral?](#) - Chris Bourg
- [Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression](#) - nina de jesus
- [Google's Got Our Kids](#) - Joanna Petrone
- [Why the Luddites Matter](#) - TheLuddbrarian - Librarianshipwreck
- [Intellectual Freedom and Virtue Ethics](#) - Sam Popowich
- *Technology and the Virtues* by Shannon Vallor
- *Algorithms of Oppression* by Safiya Noble
- *Unsettling America* by Wendell Berry
- *Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber
- *Crack Capitalism* by John Holloway
- *Cyber-Proletariat* by Nick Dyer-Witheford
- *We're Doomed. Now What?* by Roy Scranton

I am Justin Unrau  
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Thank you.

This hasn't been a research project. I apologize for the lack of rigour, but I'm hoping this has been at least a little bit provoking of thought. If I were an academic I'd have more of a literature review, but as it is I've got a reading list that helped bring me to this talk if you want to see some sources and come to different (probably more rigorous) conclusions. Warning that they might all seem a bit miscellaneous, but these have all affected this talk.

Thus endeth my sermon. Thanks very much for listening.