Critical Librarianship and Core Values: Perspectives from Librarians Working at a Publishing Company

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Abstract

The concepts of critical librarianship, including the inflection of critical theory in library and information science, have long been embedded in the library profession. Librarians engage with critical librarianship in many different aspects of their roles from instruction to cataloging to acquisitions, by addressing issues of diversity, information ethics, access to information, commodification of information, labor, academic freedom, human rights, engaged citizenry, and neoliberalism. As three librarians uniquely positioned in a customer support role at an academic publishing company, we are creating a framework to incorporate critical librarianship principles into our work and raise awareness of these issues within our company. This paper presents the successes, lessons learned, and future plans for that framework.

Introduction

Critical librarianship is the inflection of critical theory in library and information science. Despite being practiced in academic libraries for more than a decade, critical librarianship has only recently been emerging in the health sciences library profession (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019). As more people have been recently thinking and writing about critical librarianship, it has become more well-known throughout the library field (Tewell, 2016).

The McGraw Hill Professional User Services department provides training and support for both domestic and international customers who subscribe to AccessEngineering, AccessScience, and the Access Medical suite of products. The department is composed of one STEM librarian, two health sciences librarians, a coordinator, and a manager.

While we do not have editorial influence over which books are being published or platform development control of site features, the stated core values of our company already include many aspects encompassed by the ideas of critical librarianship. With this as a starting point, there are many smaller actions that we can take to ensure that diversity, inclusion, and accessibility are integrated into our work of providing training, interacting with customers, and sharing feedback with other areas of the company.

With this paper, we will briefly explore the literature surrounding critical librarianship, particularly in medical and SciTech libraries, and report on our efforts to create and implement a framework in our own roles. We will also provide perspectives from other professions in the industry such as sales, marketing, platform development, and editorial on how these efforts and principles relate to and intersect with their work and with our company's core values. Overall, we hope to provide a unique perspective on how libraries and publishers can collaborate to influence positive change in the information landscape.

CRITICAL LIBRARIANSHIP IN HEALTH SCIENCES & SCITECH LIBRARIES

According to Drabinski, "At the heart of critical librarianship…is a conviction and a radical hope that things could be different from the way they are now," (2019). By thinking critically about existing structures and practices, librarians are able to effect change.

The idea of equality is certainly not new. However, actively working to disrupt oppression through librarianship is still a relatively recent concept. In her 2018 Janet Doe lecture, Martin outlines the history of promoting equality during Janet Doe lectures. She states that Martha Jane Zachert was the first person to speak about the importance of human values in medical librarianship during her Janet Doe lecture in 1978 (Martin, 2019). Martin acknowledges that some people think incorporating social justice into librarianship is too political, in particular too liberal. In our current political climate, bringing politics into the workplace can make one appear unprofessional.

Martin argues that librarianship is a humanistic field, and we should provide space and resources for open dialogue and discussion (Martin, 2019). Similarly, in science and engineering librarianship, one can create a safe space for conversation about ethics and morals. This includes a conversation about who is published and cited, as well as working to decolonize collections (Ford, 2019). Teaching students to think critically about how authority is defined empowers them to be open to new perspectives and understand issues of authority in their field (Kuglitsch & Bordeaux, 2017). This critical examination of authority is not only important for students, but for practicing professionals who serve as authors and editors, in that it encourages us to consider what voices are not being represented and how we might address those disparities.

Another way that librarians raise awareness is through library instruction. For example, by using search terms related to social justice principles when demonstrating search strategies (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019). Additionally, librarians can solicit student input for search terms and learning outcomes (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019).This provides students with an opportunity to include their diverse experiences and interests into the learning session. By taking the time to listen to students rather than forcing instruction upon them, we provide space for dialog and can become allies in disrupting existing power structures (Drabinski, 2019).

A recurring theme throughout the literature is providing a welcome and inclusive environment. Garcia states that in addition to information literacy and cataloging, academic librarians are practicing critical librarianship by making a commitment to supporting underrepresented students, librarians, and library staff (2015). This includes accessibility (Ford, 2019), as well as better-serving the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) patrons (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019).

BACKGROUND ON MCGRAW HILL

Company Overview

McGraw-Hill is an educational publishing company with a 125-year history and a global presence across the educational market. The company has four operating segments: Higher Education, K-12, International, and Professional.

> *"As a learning science company, our goal is to empower educators and learners with information and intuitive learning environments in which to engage more personally with each other and with critical concepts in order to promote more effective and efficient learning." (McGraw Hill, 2020)*

The Professional division, to which the authors belong, provides medical, technical, engineering and business content for the professional, education, and test preparation communities. This content mainly takes the form of "digital subscription services" which are platforms providing searchable and customizable digital content integrated with workflow tools. The flagship "Access" line of products includes AccessMedicine, AccessEngineering, AccessPharmacy, etc. The Professional division includes employees with roles in user services, marketing, editorial, product development, and sales.

Core Values

As a company with education at the core of its mission and purpose, McGraw Hill's core values (Figure 1) reflect a goal of continued learning and improvement. Starting from these core values provides a way to interrogate our roles in the company and consider how we can incorporate critical librarianship practices. While core values are usually more aspirational than accurately reflecting all aspects of company culture, they set the tone for behaviors and actions.
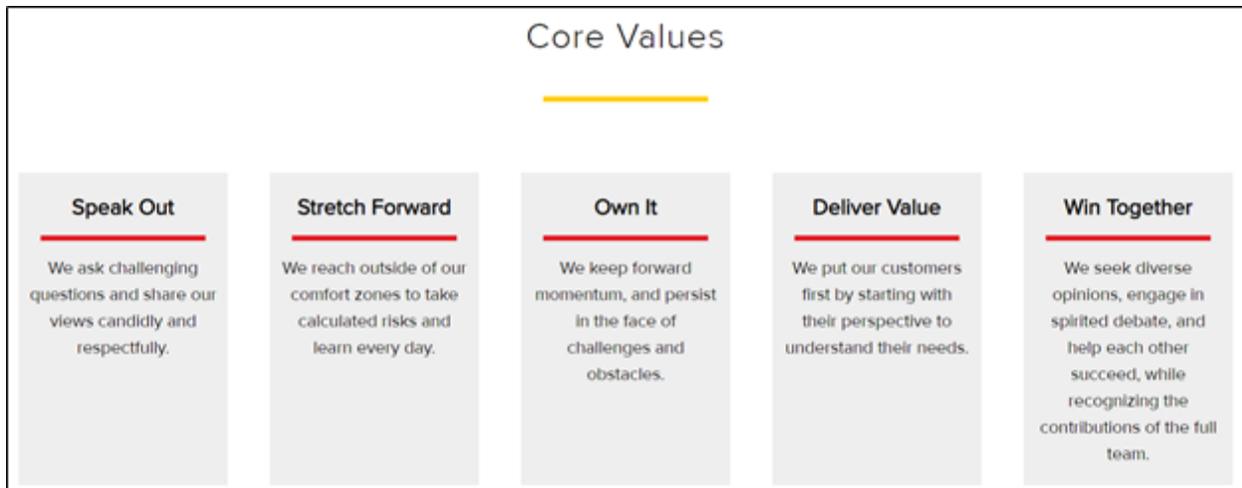
Figure 1: McGraw Hill's Core Values (from: https://careers.mheducation.com/why-us)

"Speak Out" and "Stretch Forward" in particular emphasize questioning the established way of things and seeking out and including diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Critical librarianship relies on the ability to critique and challenge common perceptions and beliefs and to critically evaluate our work and systems. This is explicitly encouraged by our core values, and the authors have seen this in action in our discussions with colleagues and through several of our internal groups.

The other core values, especially "Deliver Value" and "Win Together", emphasize collaboration both internally amongst our McGraw Hill colleagues and with our external customers. Listening to our customers and understanding their perspectives, experiences, and challenges helps us to not only provide better products, but also to reframe our content and services to align with the realities and needs of those customers. Especially for customer-facing roles such as user services and sales, we can take those conversations back to our colleagues in product and editorial to affect change in our content offerings.

In addition to these core values, McGraw Hill has an explicit commitment to inclusion and diversity (Figure 2). The company's inclusion and diversity team, which includes members from across divisions, regularly hosts events, speakers, and engaging discussions on the company intranet. This group has also defined "inclusive behaviors", taking the core values a step further and calling out the need to check your biases, listen respectfully, and live the behaviors you want to see. In response to the events of 2020 leading to an increased focus on social justice issues nationwide, this team and the company as a whole has produced thoughtful content and action to further our inclusion and diversity goals.
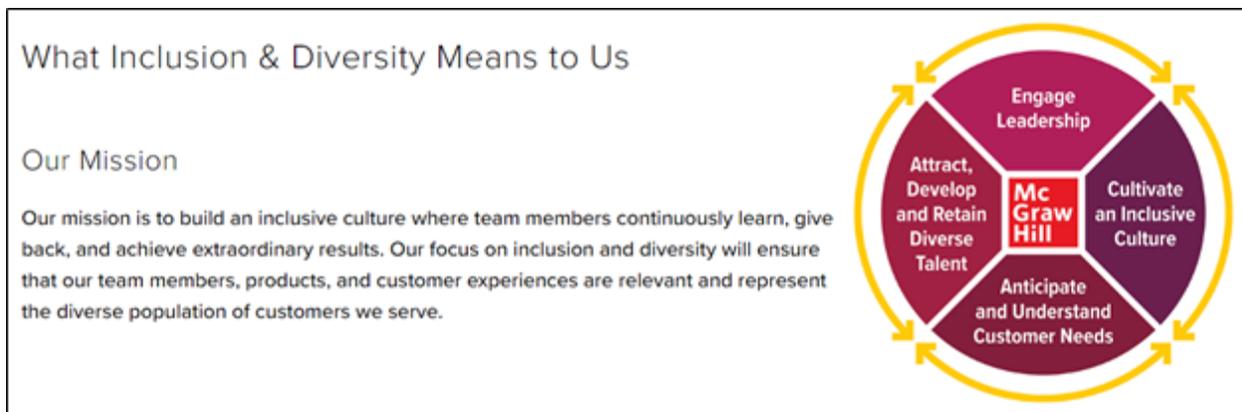
Figure 2: McGraw Hill's Commitment to Inclusion & Diversity (from:
https://www.mheducation.com/about/inclusion-diversity.html)

Using the company's core values as a building block, the authors felt that their efforts to interrogate their own roles and develop a framework for incorporating critical librarianship would be well-received and supported. By tying the framework to the core values, the User Services librarians were able to make changes to their work and raise awareness while avoiding being viewed as too controversial or political.

Framework for User Services

GATHERING PERSPECTIVES FROM COLLEAGUES

In gathering perspectives on the issues of critical librarianship, the authors used McGraw Hill's annual professional division sales meeting as an opportunity to start a discussion among our colleagues. The below email message was sent out to all meeting attendees (Figure 3). This message set up our goal for the discussion and provided some background reading and questions to consider. Interested participants then signed up for a time slot for a cocktail hour event during the first night of the multi-day meeting.

Hello McGraw-Hill Professional!

The User Services team would like to invite you to a cocktail hour event to share your thoughts and experiences with issues surrounding critical librarianship, which encompasses diversity, information ethics, social justice, and related ideas. The team aims to deliver value to customers by incorporating concepts of critical librarianship in our roles and will also be publishing and presenting on this topic at our professional library associations. Your participation is valuable to informing the conversation and enriching the support provided to customers, and we hope to spark discussion on what we as McGraw-Hill can do to engage with these issues and how they tie in to our company values.

When: Use this Google Sheet to sign up for a time slot from 4:30 to 6:00pm on Monday, January 27th to join us and discuss the topics/questions below

What: We will be discussing critical librarianship (brief definition below) and the application of these principles to our various roles. We want to hear from you regardless of your experience with the concept of critical librarianship- there are no right or wrong answers here! See the linked paper for more information on what critical librarianship means in practice and consider the following questions to inform our discussion.

"Critical librarianship takes many forms, but, at its root, is focused on interrogating and disrupting inequitable systems, including changing racist cataloging rules, creating student-driven information literacy instruction, supporting inclusive and ethical publishing models, and rejecting the notion of libraries as neutral spaces."

from Critical librarianship in health sciences libraries: an introduction by Jill Barr-Walker & Claire Sharif

After reading the article, please consider the following questions prior to meeting with User Services:

Prior to receiving this information from the User Services department, were you aware of the term critical librarianship?

Have you taken the Harvard Implicit Association Test? If not, would you be willing to complete one or more of the tests to help you become more aware of your biases?

Are you applying elements of critical librarianship in your role? For example, identifying underrepresented authors, reflecting on your own biases, etc.

If not, can you identify any ways that you could start to apply elements of critical librarianship in your role?

Are there reasons that you support or do not support applying these practices to your role?

Thank you for your help with this effort and we look forward to some engaging discussions!

Figure 3: Email body from invitation to McGraw Hill colleagues

In response to this email, 30 individuals signed up for 6 different time slots, with groups of 4 to 5 people per time slot (the last time slot having 8 participants). At the event, there ended up being a total of 5 groups with 21 total participants. The list of participants by job title is shown in the table below. The participants were a mix of different roles, with 10 participants in

editorial roles, 7 in sales roles, 2 in product development roles and 2 in marketing roles. Of the 21 participants, 12 were in medical-focused roles, with the remaining in sci/tech focused roles or in roles spanning across different content areas.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Senior Content Acquisitions Editor, Medical	Director, Digital Product Development	Regional Sales Director, Digital Sales, Medical	Publisher, Science, Technology & Medical	Regional Account Manager, Digital Sales, Medical
Associate Publisher, Business	Regional Account Manager, Digital Sales, Medical	Executive Editor, Science & Technical	Senior Content Marketing Manager	Sales Manager, International
Product Manager/Editor, Medical	Senior Content Acquisitions Editor, Medical	Senior Platform Specialist, Medical	Regional Account Manager, Digital Sales, Medical	Director, Sci/Tech Digital Products
Senior Editor, Medical	Regional Account Manager, Digital Sales, Medical	Platform Specialist, Medical	Sales Manager, International	Head of International Marketing
	Editorial Director, Medical			

Figure 4: Table listing discussion participants by job title

Only one of the participants had heard of the term critical librarianship prior to receiving our email invitation. People were thinking about these issues but had not framed them in terms of critical librarianship and were excited to meet with us for these discussions. The sessions went over time and more people signed up to speak than we had allotted for the groups. General themes and quotes from these discussions are highlighted in the following sections.

PERSPECTIVES ON DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION

One major theme that resonated with our colleagues across roles was diversity and representation. Our colleagues in product and editorial roles cited identifying and recruiting diverse authors as a major focus and challenge. Especially for those with a medical focus, creating an inclusive author list that includes women in a space largely dominated by men has been a struggle. One editor mentioned pressuring opinion leaders to recruit more women authors but getting the "same excuses that you get when trying to diversity recruitment" in hiring.

"You get stuck in the pattern where you have to fish for the under-represented authors who don't have quite the same following as those white men."

"The authors think worrying about including diverse voices is minutia- they want to focus on the table of contents. He wanted to get women, but everyone turned him down. It might work better if I reach out to the women myself- we embrace you."

Even in our author speaker series and endorsements, a colleague mentioned trying to stay mindful of having stories, examples, and quotes from all types of people after noticing all of the endorsements were from men and the importance of "planting the seeds" at the start of a project to ensure better representation. Advocating for gender diversity and more heavily marketing female authors were also mentioned as important steps, as well as listening to our customers and making sure our authors and content are relatable.

"The organization is becoming aware that the audience using our product is different from the legacy authors. How do we find contributors from schools, countries, that we typically wouldn't think of?"

"In editorial team meetings this is something that has always been at the forefront. 'Why would I read that book when it's written by people who don't look like me?'"

In addition to the authors, the content of what is published is another area where our colleagues have seen opportunities for more diverse representation. One editorial colleague has switched to using gender neutral pronouns in all their articles, and another mentioned the need for more diversity in patient examples.

"Haven't seen a case where the patient isn't male or female- it's never not identified."

"It's not neutral. There is a bias in neutrality."

A colleague provided an anecdote where an institution noticed that a book only had minorities with STDs as examples, and "that insinuated something." The editors mentioned that they could include in manuscript guidelines that cases must include gender, race, and images to help combat this. Especially with medical content, including and emphasizing women's health issues and not always having male as the default for anatomy modules were brought up as ways to create more inclusive content. Our international colleagues also mentioned that their customers are often looking for content on indigenous health issues and coverage of all races in examples and images.

PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESSIBILITY

As a team whose products are largely delivered online, accessibility came up in discussion as another major theme and focus of our colleagues' efforts. Our colleagues in product development had spent considerable time in the previous year focusing on and highlighting accessibility. A member of the sales team mentioned that conversations around accessibility are often led by our customers and having resources and an understanding of accessibility guidelines is extremely important.

"The company made a mandate to be WCAG compliant. Doubt how close people are worldwide to 100% but we are getting there- it's always on our mind."

"Two years ago, customers didn't what VPAT was, but now it's becoming mandated at the university level. Customers are asking for VPAT or companion, and sales would like to be well-versed in what these things are."

The product and editorial teams often work with third-party platform vendors and were concerned over the accessibility of some features, such as CAPTCHA, and that they weren't always involved in those decisions.

"[Vendor] instituted CAPTCHA technology. It's useful to have but they just did it- not very user friendly. WCAG has a working group to evaluate if CAPTCHA is accessible. Not always- ours is only images- no audio if the user is visually impaired."

As an international company with colleagues and customers from many different countries, language also came up as a barrier to accessing our products. One colleague from marketing said they are thinking about how to pitch products to decision makers for whom English might not be their first language. Currently basic information is translated, but there hasn't been the infrastructure to make anything beyond that accessible. Another colleague agreed that international customers also want to see content less focused on only America and more global content that reflects other cultures.

Our colleagues were aware of many of the issues inherent to critical librarianship, and in many cases were already actively working to promote diversity, representation, and accessibility in their realms. However, these discussions helped them to start to frame these issues differently, and many found it useful to share and discuss their experiences and ideas, and to consider additional steps they can take in their roles.

"Sales interfaces with so many populations- it's important that it's at the forefront of our minds. Just talking about it here was helpful."

USER SERVICES CURRENT ACTIONS

The User Services librarians at McGraw Hill have been incorporating meaningful practices of inclusion in our roles in several ways. Beginning with learning more on relevant topics through webinar discussions and literature, we have also been speaking with colleagues from other parts of the organization, refining scripts for greater sensitivity in webinar presentations with customers, and encouraging adding pronouns to our email signatures. The authors are also continuing to identify and acknowledge future actions to incorporate into their roles.

To learn more, the User Services Librarians attended Medical Library Association-sponsored webinars (see bibliography) on diversity and inclusion in professional practice and in libraries and library resources and services. They also searched the literature to understand the conversations around inclusive policies and practices. Additionally, they met with colleagues from multiple departments in McGraw Hill Professional at an annual internal conference as

detailed above. By interviewing team members from editorial, platform support, sales, and marketing, the User Services Librarians learned what inclusive practices are already being incorporated and what future actions are being considered. For example, multiple editors discussed author representation to include more diverse voices in medicine, including by age, race, and gender, as well as images, figures, cases, and multimedia that reflect a greater diversity of users and cultural consciousness (Martin, 2019).

Part of User Services Librarians' positions is to develop webinar presentations to encourage meaningful user engagement with McGraw Hill Access Medical and SciTech resources. In developing the online sessions, the librarians create scripts which document generic and tailored approaches to using the sites' collection of resources for general webinars and customer-specific needs. By taking an inventory of the existing scripts, User Services are working to codify a template to ensure the webinars are inclusive of diverse user communities. For example, search terms can demonstrate how to use the site and retrieve a variety of resources on a topic that reflects greater consciousness-raising and sensitivity to the interests of a diverse user community, e.g. health disparities or social factors (Barr-Walker and Sharifi, 2019; Tewell, 2016; Martin, 2019).

In efforts to represent gender identity in professional activities, User Services Librarians also adopted the practice of including pronouns in their email signatures. This practice also supports corporate policies toward greater diversity and inclusion.

Conclusion

By exploring critical librarianship, the User Services Librarians broadened their perspectives on issues related to diversity and inclusion, as well as critical self-reflection. Moving forward, the team can increase awareness of critical librarianship by ensuring colleagues include pronouns in their email signatures and by posting information company-wide through the intranet, in particular for colleagues with whom the User Services Librarians work most closely, i.e., editorial, platform support, sales, and marketing. The team also can make product suggestions that incorporate policies of diversity and inclusion. For example, account creation in the product platforms that ask for gender can be altered to include non-binary gender identities.

The User Services Librarians could partner with McGraw Hill's accessibility team to determine how to make the Access Medical and SciTech platforms and support resources on the Access User Center more accessible. In addition, the team could present webinar sessions using Zoom video conferencing software which includes an automatic transcript recording of the audio to make the meeting accessible to more users. User Services Librarians can continue to create user support resources on platforms which are vetted for accessibility, e.g. Springshare LibGuides. A limitation however concerns content which is coordinated through editorial and author experts, and User Services Librarians are somewhat limited by how accessible the sites are designed because they do not develop platforms for the medical collections. However they can continue to keep abreast of new developments and advocate for accessibility considerations.

To expand our framework, the authors could also partner with librarians working at other publishing companies, nontraditional libraries (e.g., associations), or university librarians particularly those with interests in critical librarianship. The User Services Librarians would be interested in learning from these experts about what they expect from a publisher partner, and how they think we can be more inclusive.

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