

# Librarianship, art, and activism. A transatlantic interview with Alycia Sellie

Alycia Sellie is an activist, a librarian and the editor of the zine *The Borough is My Library*. She joined Martin Persson for a talk about hardships and possibilities for librarianship today, the intersection between art and libraries, and the struggle to promote free/open access culture and readers' rights.

Text: Martin Persson

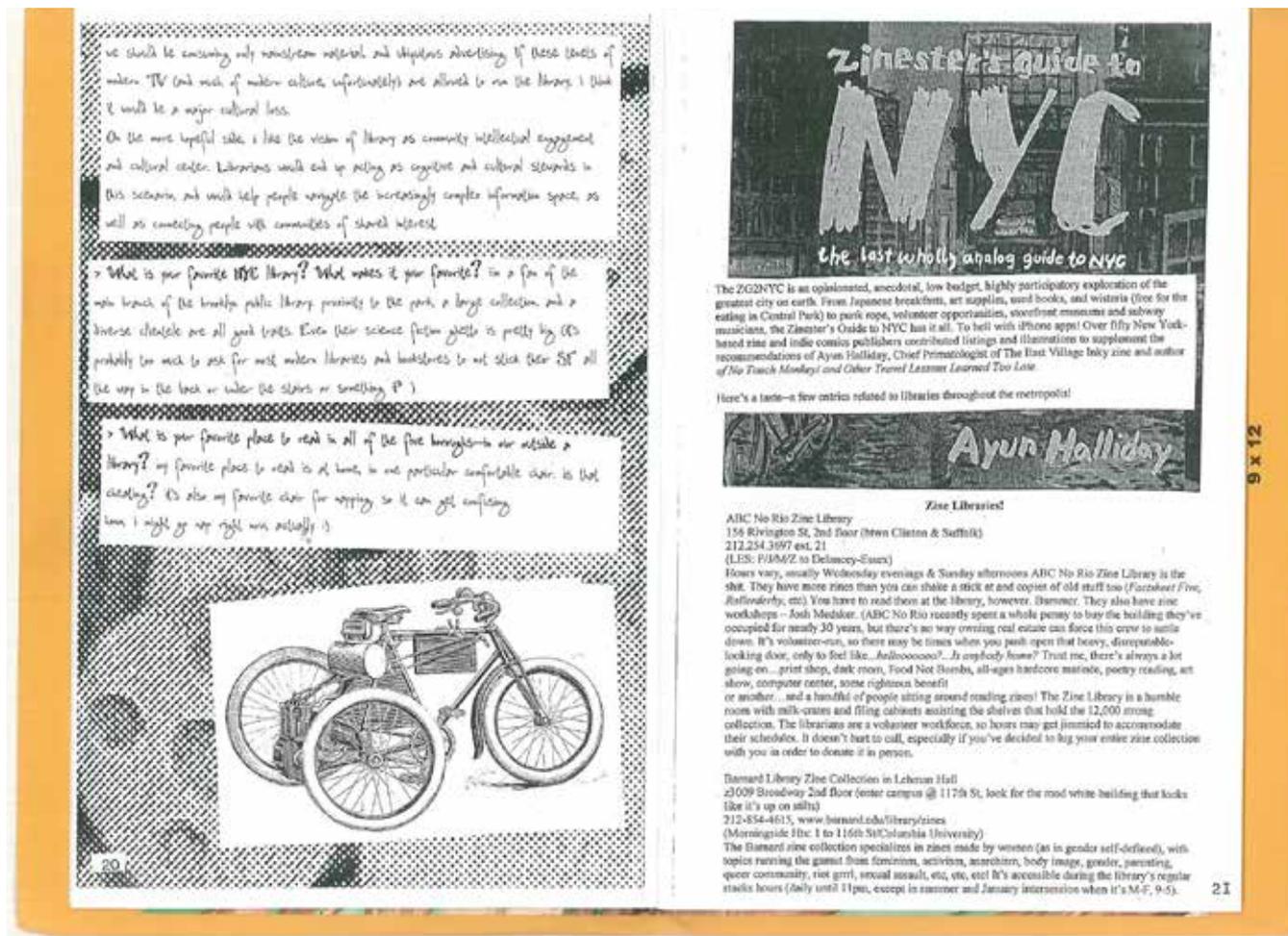
## **What's your library story? How did you come to work in libraries and what does your library work look like at the moment?**

I came to libraries, as a worker, for a sense of security; as a young person I made and studied art, and the perilous financial realities of art-making always petrified me as a working class person – without any safety net. I worried that I would forever be a financially stressed-out adult if I tried to make art professionally. And I also was wary of associating making things with making money. After going to a few art schools in the mid-U.S. and the East Coast, I landed at the state university in Madison, Wisconsin. There happened to be a library school in Madison, which I decided to explore. I had my first semester of library school simultaneously with my last semester of art school, and culturally it was a really bipolar experience going from the studio to library classrooms.

Since getting my MLS, I have worked as a part-time public reference librarian in Minneapolis, for a private art school in Brooklyn, and in two different campus libraries at the City University of New York (CUNY). I was never certain which part of the library I like working in best – I like talking about research in any context, and I also like the nuts and bolts of making things work and problem-solving. Right now I am primarily responsible for acquisitions at the Graduate Center Library, which in many ways is very far from what I imagined I would do in my younger days – balancing budgets and processing invoices. But I work as part of a great collaborative team of librarians, and I think we make a difference in our institution. I go home tired but feeling good.

At CUNY, librarians are also part of the faculty of the university. This aspect of my job is one that I have really come to love – having the ability and support to work on my own research and writing has been one of the most transformative aspects of my current job. I didn't come from an academic family, and I remember a strange feeling that the university was so separate from what I knew of "the real world" when I first started grad school, but I have come to appreciate academia from the standpoint of someone who has been transformed by/with it, and I like working alongside others who try to maintain a tradition of education as a transformative experience, rather than a strictly financial one.

**I recognize the longing for this "sense of security". The search for a decent public-sector job position – in which you can also make use of (and nurture) your interests in culture, media, and communication – has been one important reason for my turning to librarianship, and I think that goes for many of my librarian friends and colleagues as well. Even though earning an LIS degree is probably more "secure" than trying to make one's way as an artist, many library workers also face the precarity of the present Swedish labour market, navigating new public management-ridden institutions on short-term contracts. We recently dedicated a bis issue to working conditions in Swedish libraries, which highlighted this precarity and the need for an offensive labour union struggle. What is your general impression of librarians' working conditions in the U.S.?**



The Borough is My Library, issue 2 edited by Alycia Sellie (CC BY-SA).

I think the situation is more dire for workers in public libraries in the U.S. The work of the NYC-based group Urban Librarians Unite has done great work to bring these issues to the forefront locally in New York.<sup>1</sup> Austerity politics make working harder for those who do get jobs – we're often told to do more with less, etc.

But I also remember being told never to be certain of employment in libraries while I was still pursuing my MLS – every librarian I met told me that they had intended to be in a different position (say an academic librarian in a large institution) and had landed somewhere else (a children's librarian in a small public library). I struggled for a year to find a full-time position when I graduated, and that was before 2008 when hiring freezes were abundant. I know really awesome librarians who wait tables to make ends meet.

I remember reading a piece in the zine *America?* by Travis Fristoe in which he talks about libraries as a great profession to take up for zinesters or musicians because the jobs were always abundant – he describes quitting his position outright

to go on tour with his band, and then coming back home months later to the same job. The zine hadn't been written more than seven years before I read it, but I knew that by the time I had picked it up that what Travis was describing was no more. Everywhere I have lived, there has been fierce competition for even paraprofessional positions in libraries, and I couldn't imagine leaving any position with the assumption that I'd ever get back to where I had left off that easily.

**You are the editor of *The Borough is My Library*, a zine that gathers librarianship, art, and (radical) political activism. What roles have zine culture and alternative publishing played for you as a librarian? And the other way around, how has librarianship influenced your work as a zine artist?**

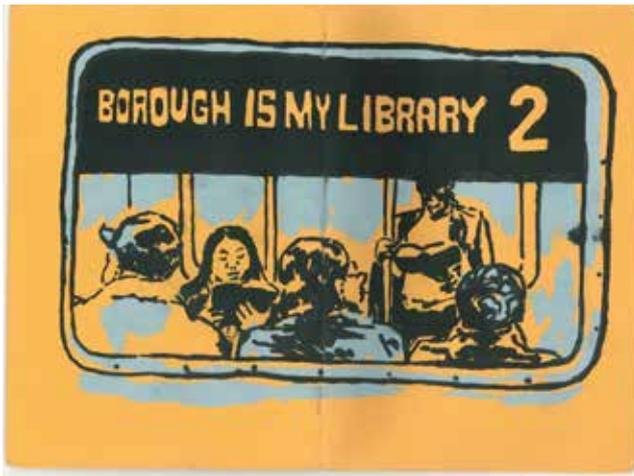
I think I have used zines as a tool to help me to see what the limitations of how library collections have been conceptualized. My desire as a librarian is to collect as wide a swath of human thought and creativity as possible. I think zines really show just how limited a sampling usually ends up on library

1. <http://urbanlibrariansunite.org/>.

shelves – mostly what has been highly edited, manufactured, and promoted by people other than the ones who created the content. This separation between the human makers and library collections has been something that I’ve struggled with through my career – it seems to me that the relationship between the institution and its people should be more immediate. It also makes our collections reflect those at the top, whose experiences and interests tend to differ from those at the bottom (of whatever scale we would like to use!).

I agree with Walter Dean Myers that people need to be able to see themselves in stories,<sup>2</sup> and I would add that they need to be able to find camaraderie in libraries too. To me, library collections need to be 1:1 reflections of their community. Starting zine collections has been a way that I have felt that I have been able to make what is housed in libraries accessible and reachable; these collections have been a way, as I think Zohra Saed describes well, to put oneself “up on a library shelf”,<sup>3</sup> because anyone can make a zine, that zine can be added to a collection, and thus anyone can part in, and become a part of the project of the library.

Libraries have likewise influenced my zine work – mostly because they are the subject thereof. In *The Borough is My Library*, I have focused on people and projects which are disconnected from what I do in a day of work, but which inspire me and make me stay in this profession. I want my zine to be a celebration of information activism that might not be touted in other literature.



*The Borough is My Library*, issue 2. Edited by Alycia Sellie (CC BY-SA).

## **There seems to be a lively progressive librarians’ “scene”, in NYC. How would you describe the state of American progressive librarianship or information activism in general?**

My sense is that, as a movement, radical librarianship is somewhat fractured – not so much in spirit, but attention. For me, regardless of where I was based, it would be hard to decide where to devote my energies: To helping independent archives that I think are important? To education about technology and privacy, or electronic activism? To issues of what is contained in libraries (and what isn’t)? It’s hard for me to keep up and to know just how much my colleagues are working on, too!

Despite the fact that the rent is too damn high and all the other examples of how living in NYC is fairly insane, its vibrancy is undeniable, and I think that is reflected in librarianship here too. There are so many libraries and librarians in NYC that it’s possible to have groups that advocate for certain kinds of libraries, for there to be a quick reception for library projects, and to meet and collaborate with all kinds of professionals. It can be very inspiring, and that’s the feeling I tried to capture in my zine.

**You have been involved in the struggle against DRM and in readers’ rights issues (e.g. the Readers’ Bill of Rights project),<sup>4</sup> and are also a strong proponent of open access and free (as in freedom) licensing of publications. What’s your view on how libraries face copyright issues in times of increased digital publishing? In Sweden, the debate about libraries, ebooks, and copyright has focused mainly on “business models” for “lending” ebooks, and the DRM:ization (or commercialization) of our reading interfaces is rarely mentioned at all.**

Thanks for the “free (as in freedom)” bit above!

The most difficult thing about these issues, as much as I care about them, is that it is really difficult to describe their complexities succinctly. These conversations can get confusing easily. It’s difficult for me personally to talk about these issues because I think so many of the words that are used – openness, freeness, access – are such simple words that can mean so many things. Commonly they are used without a clear or specific definition. It’s hard to know just what someone means when they say “open,” but to try to tie that down can make discourses feel very pedantic, narrow and slow. I’m still working through how I talk about many of the topics you mention in your question.

More so than open access, I believe in the importance of open licensing. Access is certainly a literal life and death issue when we are talking about sharing information that furthers medicine and science, but I am also concerned with allowing

2. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html?_r=1).

3. <http://brooklyncollegezines.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2011/08/19/upsetpress/>.

4. <http://readersbillofrights.info/>.

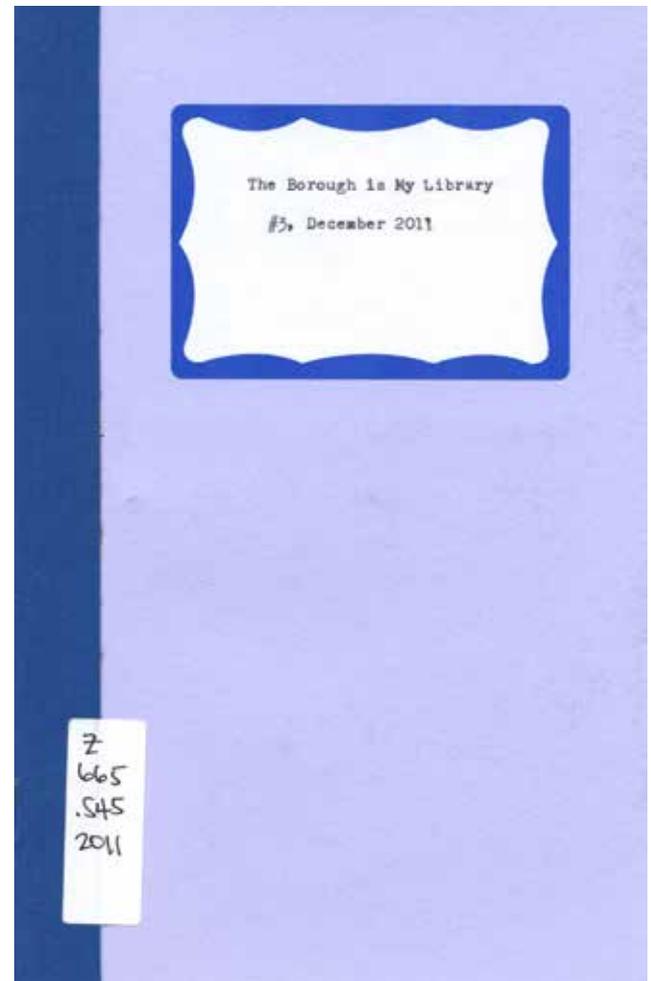
more use of a work than to merely see or read it. My CUNY colleague Michael Mandiberg has talked about this as the difference between being able to see something (or to access it) and to touch it (or to use another's work via the permission of a free culture license), and that concept has stuck with me – I want to be able to use, re-use and manipulate what I find in the world around me, rather than be a passive viewer of it. In a lot of ways this related to zines – the way that their spirit chops up, recontextualizes and appropriates from the world. But there are many other traditions of this in other movements. Courts and legislation don't easily translate culture and movements into rules well, and I think it's safe to say that the future I envision differs greatly from that of copyright and patent holders.

With libraries, there have been moments where librarians in the United States have rebelled quite openly against ebook restrictions (i.e. the Harper Collins' 26 downloads controversy). But I do worry that we are already getting stuck contemplating business models and whether ebooks smell good to readers (which is why when I used to talk about ebooks with librarians I had a list of well-worn topics I would not cover). To me, the Readers' Bill of Rights project was about insisting that our abilities to use books were not lost as we go digital, or even our abilities to ignore the law. That might be too much for some librarians, but thinking philosophically about the logical extensions of DRM in ebooks is really frightening to me – the threat that these restrictions bring to not be able to read and think without surveillance and controlled/ing systems.

**This part about access/freedom is interesting. I get the feeling that quite often, the discussions tend to go in the opposite direction to this line of thought, emphasizing access and disregarding freedom of use. To me, such talk illustrates a pedagogical task similar to that of the free software movement, arguing the case not only for public access to the code of computer programs (“open source”), but for the possibility to build upon, tweak, and take active part in the collective development of software (“free software”). What do you think, how do we best address the task of framing “open” culture/information as a question of both freedom to access and freedom to use?**

Yes – my conceptualization of the contours of these conversations are completely borrowed from the discourses of free software. I am always surprised when librarians aren't aware of these arguments, because they seem so completely tied to what we do with technology today. It is dangerous, though, to say that these fractures between open source and free software map completely onto library technologies, because of course these disagreements are still problematic and right now I feel like they are at a stand-still, or a stand-off, or have been isolating for programmers in some ways.

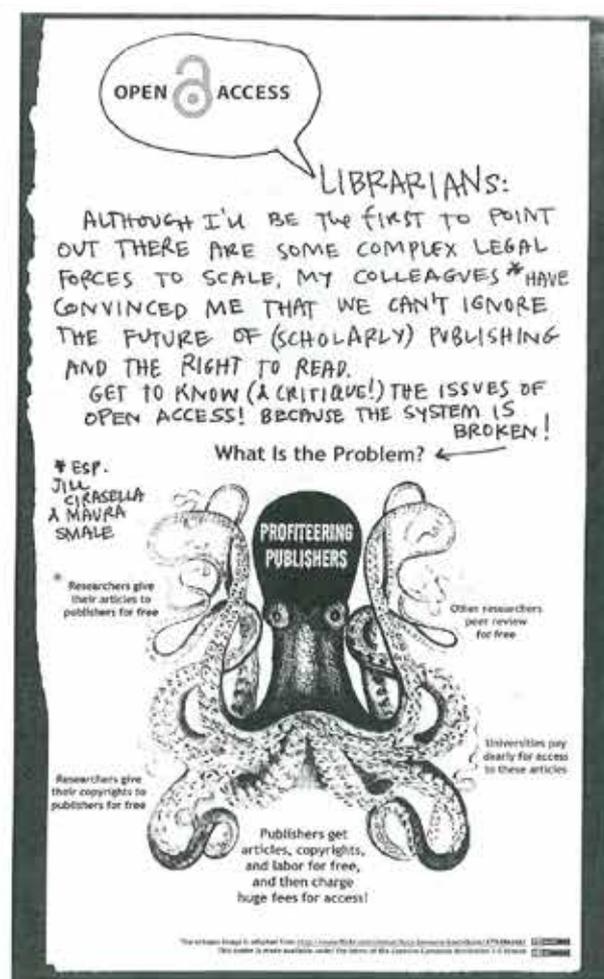
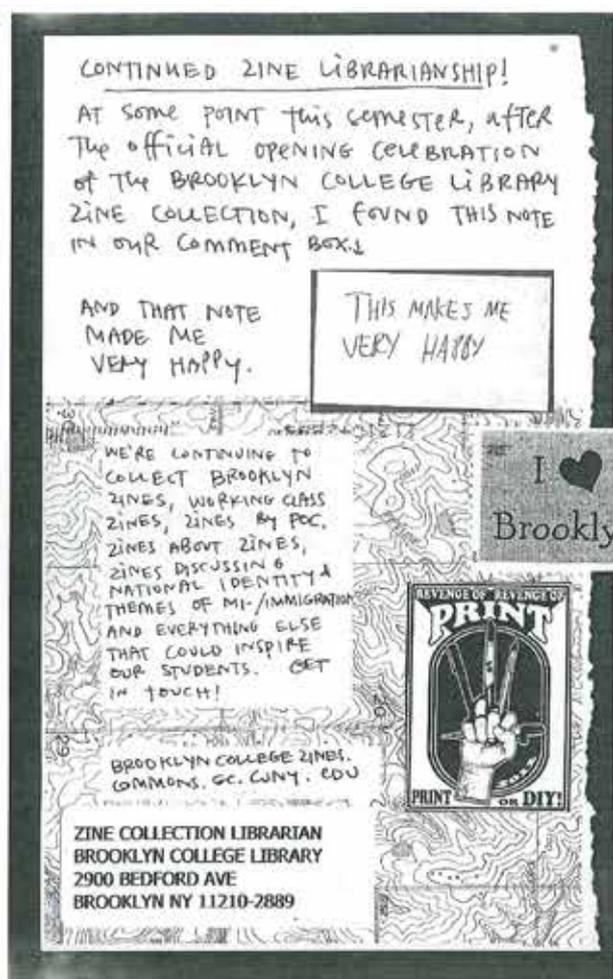
My own tendency is to argue that we have to retain the ability to hack, tweak and get under the hood, but I also see that this strategy is a polarizing one. I often advocate for open access, but for me access alone is not the ultimate goal, but more so a beginning of other opportunities for reconfigurations of how we use and share. But in many ways access seems like the first step. And now it feels like access alone is so revolutionary that arguing for even more might alienate. Internally, this is one of the biggest things I struggle with – whether to fight for a more radical path or to settle on freeing up a bit at a time (with the awareness that the larger gains could get lost along the way).



*The Borough in My Library*, issue 3. Edited by Alycia Sellie (CC BY-SA).

**What does global librarianship look like? How do we create global libraries?**

This question is one that I feel extremely ill-equipped to answer. As someone who has lived in just one country, and as someone who obviously has experienced the privileges of that country as a major world power, I get easily concerned about my own footing/positioning and assumptions when speaking about the globe.



The Borough is My Library, issue 4. Edited by Alycia Sellie (CC By-SA).

My activism felt the most connected on a global scale when I was working on the Readers' Bill of Rights for Digital Books campaign. When we released the Bill of Rights on our website with an open license, translations started appearing really rapidly – in Spanish, French, maybe more languages than I am aware of. Our graphics were used, translated, and re-appropriated by other groups.<sup>5</sup> Before this had happened, I didn't feel much of a connection to information workers outside my country. But releasing our work resulted in emails and appreciation from readers around the globe. I certainly wasn't thinking about the ways that digital restrictions are enacted on such a wide scale when I started writing about these issues, but it certainly altered my perspective once I had heard how great an impact these restrictions have technologically across borders.

One group that I feel has been successfully working on a global scale is the delegation of Librarians and Archivists to Palestine.<sup>6</sup> I really appreciate their approach, wherein they visited Palestine and did so with the intention of seeing, for westerners, what life is like in libraries and archives there. Out of that visit, they done a variety of "report backs" – they have talked about what they learned and saw through creating artwork, by holding events and overall they have tried to use methods other than "dense texts" and scholarly platforms.<sup>7</sup>

I think we build global librarianship through conversation (like this one!), and I feel like the way to move forward involves a lot of listening.

5. <http://www.ebouquin.fr/2011/03/14/vous-etes-contre-les-drm-montrez-le/>.

6. Se sidorna 6–11, reds. anmärkn.

7. <http://ozoneparkjournal.com/interviews/domini-effect-an-interview-with-rachel-matton/>.

**In the progressive librarianship movement, people have struggled, in various ways, for social justice through library work. How do we continue this struggle in the 21st century? What do you think are the most pressing issues or tasks at hand for progressive librarians/libraries?**

This is a question that I myself have asked mentors to answer in my zine because it is something that I wanted guidance in thinking about. I worry that considerations of social justice in libraries is not innate, and that there might be cultural blockades to approaching the intersectional nature of oppressions in the workplace.

**What are those “cultural blockades”, could you elaborate on that?**

By cultural blockades, I mean the daily struggles that go unnoticed or are assumed to be “natural” that can make one librarian’s work experiences vastly different from another’s. Situations that get underplayed or underreported, like getting sexually harassed at the reference desk (and further, whether others in your institution see incidents as harassment or merely part of the job), expecting certain kinds of work from people depending on their race/class/gender/sexual orientation, and all the tiny inequalities that add up over time and often feel invisible to outsiders who aren’t experiencing the situation first-hand.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the concept of declaring libraries “safe spaces” and what such a designation could signify for researchers and library workers (semi-related to the discussions of Code of Conduct at the American Library Association’s conferences and other LIS events<sup>8</sup>). Although it is true that the world is dangerous, I do think there is power in the act of dedicating your spaces as separate environments that are different from a subway platform, sidewalk, or other public space. There is still a need to state that there is a difference between the world at large and our libraries. There is a power in stating that everyone has a right to a non-threatening experience in the library.

For library workers, libraries are not just an imaginary metaphor used for showcasing enlightenment values. I think the most pressing issues are to begin to understand all of the things that we as librarians take for granted as “natural.” My goal is for us to deconstruct our own culture in a way that not only gets at what happens in our libraries as a workplace (i.e. who is promoted, who is supported and heard, who does the heavy lifting), but also how we might think about the ramifications of our actions, even on the smallest scale. Following Barbara Fister, if we don’t think ebooks are good for libraries then we should not purchase them – even if we are pressured by vendors, or asked by patrons for them.

**So, as librarians, and as libraries, we need to be more morally and politically engaged on an everyday basis. What happens when our values as engaged libraries and librarians clash with the wishes of our patrons (or the wishes of our bosses), as your ebook example hints to?**

I believe that contemplating these points of contention and clashes is in many ways part of our job as information workers. More than just our current policies, we also have to consider what each decision means to our libraries for years to come – from decisions about our collections to the day-to-day issues of operating in a space. To these ends, there are not always easy fixes – when personal and professional values are involved, things get messy. I don’t want to argue that standing up for what you believe in will always solve a problem – in my own first-hand experience, sometimes that makes you feel burnt-out, angry, and targeted. I don’t have simple solutions to outline here, but I do know that having colleagues who will listen and comrades who will support you makes a huge difference. The way to finding these folks is to continue to speak out, to seek other venues/spaces/mindsets when you are feeling pushed out, and, always, you can make a zine!



The collage on the following pages is a contribution by Alycia titled “P/Wages”.

“I was working from ephemera from my own library as well as images of Google Books, most images taken from the blog The Art of Google Books. This is one thing that I think is very fascinating about the process of ‘making everything online/digital’—is the labor it takes to make these things so, and the invisibility of these processes (and people!).”

8. <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2014/01/opinion/backtalk/why-a-needs-a-code-of-conduct-backtalk/>.