Joel Blechinger
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"Resilient or Resistant Librarians?: An Exploration of 'Resilience' Discourses In Contemporary Librarianship"

[SLIDE 1]

The subject of my talk today takes up the conference theme, "There and Back Again: Resilience and Libraries" and attempts to reflect critically on what I characterize as "resilience" discourses in contemporary librarianship. Now, I want to be clear here from the outset that:

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(1) in doing this, I am *not* intending this as a rebuke to the conference theme or to the efforts of my peers on the FIP organizing committee in orchestrating this great event;

(2) nor am I intending this as some kind of Ivory Tower criticism of actual library and information practitioners doing vital work in and for their communities.

[Another issue that I want to address here quickly is any dissimilarity of what follows from the abstract that I initially wrote for this presentation. Essentially, as anyone who has written a wildly over-ambitious abstract will hopefully understand, I think what I proposed may have been better suited for a thesis or dissertation topic rather than a twenty-minute talk. As such, I have necessarily "scaled down" the ambition from the abstract: I am only engaging with one of the listed texts (Brad Evans and Julian Reid's *Resilient Life*), not engaging with Rebecca Smith Aldrich's ALA volume *Resilience*, and not really tracing the term resilience's history from the work of ecologist C.S. Holling.]

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Anyone interested in the history of the term, I would direct to Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper's "Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation" from *Security Dialogue*. Here is the related citation.

[SLIDE 4]

Karen P. Nicholson, Librarian and Manager of Information Literacy at the University of Guelph, has this great moment in the introduction to her WILU (Workshop for Instruction in Library Use) 2018 keynote address, "Information Into Action? Reflections on (Critical) Practice," where she says that the conference theme that year "gives [her] pause. It makes [her] Spidey sense tingle" (1) and "[i]t's this theme, and this unease that [she] want[s] to explore with [the audience] in [her] talk [that day]" (1). She continues, "[her] aim then, is not to criticize but rather to critique, to use the theme to draw attention to broader issues within the profession … in the hopes of creating a space for reflection and dialogue and possibly bringing about some small change in our collective practice" (1). I would characterize what I am attempting today in this talk along similar lines.

"Resilience" within librarianship – and its related forms (being "resilient," manifesting "resiliency," etc.) – makes my *own* Spidey sense tingle, and this is what I would like to explore here. Prior to coming to SLIS, my background was in English literature where we learned close reading techniques, the ability to track the use of a word (or a cluster of words) across a textual corpus, noting any changes in usage, co-occurrent words, etc. One of the distinct challenges that I have experienced thus far in my library school education is – given the diversity of educational backgrounds that feed into the MLIS as a professionalizing graduate degree – we seem to lack a common vocabulary as a professional community. We frequently invoke lofty words – "information," "access," "freedom," "opportunity" – that entirely separate fields in the humanities and social sciences have spent large parts of their disciplinary histories attempting to think through and parse for nuance.

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Related to this semantic confusion, the search "resilient or resilience or resiliency" yields 1,043 hits in the Library & Information Science Source (LISS) database and 754 hits in the Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA) database. A sampling of titles from across these two databases includes: "A Resiliency Framework for an Enterprise Cloud" (a 2016 article in the *International Journal of Information Management*), "Abraham Lincoln, Management Guru! Lessons for Library Leadership on Resilience, True Grit, and Bouncing Forward" (a 2013 article in *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*), "Creativity and the Resilient Health Librarian" (a 2006 article in the *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association*), "'I Build Resiliency': The Role of the School Media Specialist" (a 2003 article in *School Libraries Worldwide*), "The Importance of Resiliency When Coping with Adversity" (a 2019 article in the *Voice of Youth Advocates*), "Like a Child: Restoring the Awe, Wonder, Joy, and Resiliency of the Human Spirit" (a 2015 article in *The Catholic Library World*), and, finally, "Education and Building Capacity for Improving Resilience of Coastal Infrastructure" (from the *Association for Engineering Education - Engineering Library Division Papers* in 2019).

Resiliency – as we can see from these titles – is varyingly attributed here to: technical infrastructure, management style, an individual librarian's temperament, at-risk youth, the human spirit, and physical infrastructure.

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To further complicate things, the ALA's Center for the Future of Libraries identifies "resilience" as one of its forty "trends relevant to libraries and librarianship" alongside others like "corporate influence," "fast casual," "experiential retail," "gamification," and "data everywhere."

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Curiously, as classified (and colour-coded) according to the ALA's STEEPED classification (Society [red], Technology [light blue], Education [dark blue], the Environment [green], Politics & Government [orange], Economics [purple], and Demographics [yellow]), we see that "resilience" is depicted as an *environmental* trend. (Actually, "resilience" is the *sole* environmental trend in this classification, which, in itself, is very interesting.)

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Citing a definition by Daniel C. Vock from the publication *Governing*, the ALA asserts, "'[r]esilience' or 'resiliency' incorporates preparations for and rapid recovery from physical, social, and economic disruptions, including environmental disasters, terrorist attacks, or economic collapse" (American Library Association). This definition is fairly typical of "resilience" discourses coming out of the disaster or risk management fields. The ALA trend "How It's Developing" section also includes a definition attributed to the Rockefeller Foundation from its 100 Resilient Cities Initiative started in 2013, whereby "resilience is 'the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience'" (American Library Association). The key difference here from the aforementioned Vock definition from *Governing* is the identification of (what we might call) resilient *subjects*: "individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems" – needless to say, radically different entities perhaps – all have an in-built capacity "to survive, adapt, and grow" in the face of "chronic stresses and acute shocks."

I would like to argue that our own disciplinary databases along with this ALA trend summary exemplify how, culture-wide, we are at a historical moment when we are requiring resilience of nearly everyone and everything. Why might this be?

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In a powerful book-length treatment of the subject, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, Brad Evans and Julian Reid, theorists in International Relations at the Universities of Bristol and Lapland respectively, explore resilience as symptomatic of what they deem "the emergence of a different kind of liberalism, less easy to recognize through the critical lenses of the past" (1). They continue,

> [a]s the belief in the possibility of security, once integral to the rise of the modern state and international system of states gives way to a new belief in the positivity of danger, new technologies for rule and subjectification are appearing, themselves based upon a suspicion of security … The very concept of security itself is being shod by liberalism as it embraces not simply forms of endangerment, but a new ideal of *resilience*. Resilience is currently propounded by liberal agencies and institutions as the fundamental property which people and individuals worldwide must possess in order to demonstrate their capacities to live with danger (1-2).

As the end of this quote evinces, resilience as a "technology of subjectification" entails the construction of resilient subjects, as I alluded to above when analyzing the Rockefeller Foundation's definition (as quoted by the ALA). We can return to thinking about this here, our analysis strengthened by careful attention paid to several selections that I've chosen from Evans and Reid. As I read these out, I would ask the audience to consider how much these descriptions "speak to" contemporary accounts of librarians and their necessary or essential attributes, as elaborated in and through our own professional discourses.

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> 1) The resilient subject is not a political subject who on its own terms conceives of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility. The resilient subject is required to accept the dangerousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world and accept the necessity of the injunction to change itself in correspondence with threats now presupposed as endemic and unavoidable.

> […]

Building resilient subjects involves the deliberate disabling of the political habits, tendencies and capacities of peoples and replacing them with adaptive ones. Resilient subjects … have accepted the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the dangers they face. Nor are they capable of viewing the world beyond the catastrophic. Instead, they adapt to their enabling conditions via the embrace of a neoliberal rationality that fosters a belief in the necessity of risk as a private good (Evans and Reid 42; emphasis added)

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2) Once the practice of freeing oneself from danger is rendered, as it has now become, a pathological disposition of humans who are not attuned to the dangerous realities of the times, the problem becomes not how to secure the human but how to enable it to outlive its proclivity for security. *How to alter its disposition in relation with danger so that it construes danger not as something it might seek freedom from, but which it must live in exposure to in order to become more reasonably human. Resilient subjects embody these reasonable lives.* They are subjects who have learnt the lesson of the dangers of the myth of lasting security, in order to live out a life of permanent exposure to dangers that are not only beyond their abilities to overcome, but necessary for the prosperity of their life. (Evans and Reid 58; emphasis added)

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3) Beyond showing how the discourse of resilience legitimates neoliberal systems of governance and institutions, it is necessary to attend to the forms of subjectivity it attempts to bring into being. The account of the world envisaged and constituted by development agencies concerned with building resilient subjects is one that presupposes the disastrousness of the world, and likewise one which interpellates *a subject that is permanently called upon to bear the disaster – a subject for whom bearing the disaster is a required practice without which he or she cannot grow and prosper in the world.* This is what we believe to be most at stake in the discourse of resilience. (Evans and Reid 72)

Now consider the following excerpt from "Characteristics of a Change Resilient

Librarian" written by Ron Aspe on Knowledge Management, Library ILS, and Collections

Management software company Lucidea's blog.

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(Significantly, this short article is currently *the* top ranked Google result for the search "resilience AND librarianship"):

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Adapting to change requires reacting positively to change – even creating change – and ultimately ensuring that it works to a special library's advantage. Equally important,

special librarians themselves can thrive, both personally and professionally, when they become change agents … *think "resilience," not resistance.*

Special librarians achieve sustainability by understanding that end user requirements and forces at work (e.g. new technologies, globalization and a mobile workforce) all demand change—and by *reacting positively. Libraries must cope with staff shortages, budget cuts, outdated technology, competition from unexpected sources, and even negative stereotypes. In the face of all these challenges, it can be powerful to develop those parts of yourself which make you "The Change Resilient Librarian."*

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, resilient means "able to … spring back into shape after bending, stretching or being compressed." That's with regard to an object. With regard to a person, it means "able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions." … *Combining those two definitions helps me think about what qualities define the Change Resilient Special Librarian: one who can bounce back from unexpected and uncontrollable change, and not simply recover from, but triumph over challenges—even creating positive change.*

[…]

A resilient librarian is a change manager. Accepting the new, the different, the exciting, the inconvenient—*even the stressful*—and developing a strategy for managing it can be extremely empowering. Leaders who manage change both reassure and inspire their teams—and individual contributors who do so build a professional confidence that allows them to thrive *even when they're stretched, compressed or facing difficult conditions.* (Aspe; emphasis added)

The Aspe post echoes Evans and Reid's theorization of the resilient subject in some truly remarkable ways. The Change Resilient Librarian is told outright (using the imperative tense) to "think 'resilience,' not resistance." Aspe's tenor naturalizes adverse conditions – "staff shortages, budget cuts, outdated technology, [etc]" – as simply a feature of the working world that the Change Resilient Librarian can not only "bounce back" and "recover" from but can "triumph over … even creating positive change." Fundamentally, Aspe's account of the Change Resilient Librarian emphasizes an atomistic, individual information professional – endlessly adaptable, continuously ambitious – perfectly suited to the contemporary neoliberal world of work and, beyond that, even willing to proselytize on behalf of resilience (as "technology of

subjectification"): Aspe (somewhat predictably) closes with "we'd love to hear more about how you express that resilience in your career, and how you encourage it in your staff and colleagues."

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Jacob Berg, Angela Galvan, and Eamon Tewell have written what is, to my knowledge, the only existing critique of resilience in librarianship, and it is specific to the academic context. Coming out of a presentation that they gave at the 2017 ACRL Conference, in "Responding to and Reimagining Resilience in Academic Libraries," they ask "[w]hat does resilience really mean in libraries, and how does it give the appearance of change and innovation while actively undermining them?" (1). According to the authors, "[r]esilience is repackaged trauma for organizations in a state of perpetual recovery" (1) and "[t]he narrative of resilience encourages adaptation to … conditions [of exploitation, inequality, and harassment] instead of resistance" (2). For managers, "[r]esilience tells us to manage up, to ignore systemic inequalities, to return to the status quo which too often upholds silence over difficult change, and reinforces fictions of neutrality" (2).

One of the key features of "resilience" discourse that Berg et al identify is what they term its "individualizing effects" (2). I have identified some of these earlier in the Aspe Lucidea post where the Change Resilient Librarian is characterized as a "leader" or "individual contributor" above all navigating a career filled with challenges and disruption. The authors are emphatic in articulating that "[r]esilience … must come from organizations, not individuals. Specifically, this means the adequate institutional funding of services and appropriate staffing levels" (1). They even include a section in their piece ("Reimagining Resilience") where they detail six ways in

which they believe resilience could be productively rethought and, in a sense, *reclaimed* from the role it has played in neoliberal governmentality.

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(One of these that I think is particularly strong is the second – "Libraries could recognize the ways their staff are already resilient, especially people of color in a profession dominated by whiteness" (3) – as this one draws attention to the imprecision that arises from the generalizability of resilient subjectivity. Its illuminates the paradox that, though "resilience" discourses have "individualizing effects" (as noted by Berg et al), they exhibit a marked *failure* to think in any truly intersectional way. This is to say, though "resilience" discourses seem to have no problem in reducing complex scenarios to atomized "individual contributors" facing "disruptions" and "challenges," they are bankrupt in articulating how a "disruption" or "challenge" might manifest differently for different individuals.)

I think that a potential problem arises, however, when we try to promote *institutional* resilience while preventing or mitigating against the profoundly *individualizing* effects of it as a discourse in our profession. Managerial discourses and the very notion of "human resources" consistently deflate from the institutional to the personal and I could easily foresee valid calls for *institutional* resilience being essentially "passed down" to *individual* workers in ways that we are certainly all too familiar with ("do the same or, better yet, *more* with less," etc).

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Meredith Farkas, on her *American Libraries* Blog "In Practice," takes up some of the ideas from Berg et al's earlier presentation and combines them productively with Fobazi Ettarh's concept of "vocational awe." Coined in 2017 by Ettarh, "[vocational awe] is the idea that libraries as institutions are inherently good. It assumes that some or all core aspects of the

profession are beyond critique, and it, in turn, underpins many librarians' sense of identity and emotional investment in the profession" (Ettarh).

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Says Farkas, "I believe vocational awe and resilience narratives make library staffers feel less comfortable expressing dissatisfaction with their work and advocating for themselves. They paint workers who feel burned out or frustrated as failures who couldn't overcome adversity rather than as people who need support" (Farkas). Ettarh's heuristic of vocational awe gives us another tool to use when analyzing "resilience" discourses and may even provide a useful way to move between the individual and the vocational and/or institutional. If the vocation (of Librarianship) and/or the institution (of The Library) is/are – as Ettarh's concept posits – "beyond critique," the shortcomings of the particular individual (in not manifesting "change resilience," for example) are even more acutely felt.

You may have noticed that, throughout this presentation, I have never offered my own concise definition of "resilience": this was deliberate on my part (and perhaps a little maddening).

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In withholding my own definition I wanted to highlight how any gesture to define "resilience" is, in itself, a political act, and this would be the main point that I would want people to take away today. As Evans and Reid help us understand, any definition of "resilience" will have, essentially, an in-built theory of biopolitics. That is to say, it will provide implicit answers to the questions: what is the contemporary "state of the world"? How inextricable are conditions of "danger" and "risk" from that world? How naturalized have conditions of "danger" and "risk"

become? How "vulnerable" are subjects in that world? How much agency do we assume those subjects to have in that world?

Whether or not we can "reimagine resilience" in the potentially productive ways that Berg et al assert – which, I think is an open question – our profession would only benefit from greater self-reflexivity around some of these issues.

Perhaps libraries – especially public libraries – do have a special role to play in navigating imminent climate catastrophe, disaster relief, or extremely volatile social conditions (as the above-discussed ALA definition from *Governing* implies). Last year, I had the privilege of interviewing Ferguson Municipal Public Library Director Scott Bonner for our student radio show *Shout! For Libraries* in what proved to be a deeply moving conversation (Season 3, Episode 7, "Libraries in Times of Crisis Part 1" – 15 March 2019). Maybe one could characterize Ferguson Municipal Public Library's role in the events following Mike Brown's murder as being "resilient" in and for its community. Is this experience in any way continuous, however, with Aspe (and Lucidea's) striving Change Resilient Librarian? What potentially gets lost when we collapse these experiences into one another, demanding resilience of nearly everyone and *everything* in libraries (and societies) in the contemporary moment – from our own careers to our souls to our cloud infrastructures?

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

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