EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION
LIBRARIES IN CRISIS

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Andrew Carnegie funded the construction of 2,509 libraries between 1883 and 1929 (Bobinski 1968). These buildings occupy a special place in our shared imagination as bastions of stability, with thick stone walls that weather storms and protect the ideas of humanity. The buildings still stand, but many have been repurposed, as they have proven to be inefficient and too expensive to retrofit for modern communication technologies. The public, too, demands more out of the spaces of the library; in new libraries, rigid walls have been replaced with flexible shelving and open spaces for social interactions (Shoham and Yablonka 2009). Library buildings, as houses for knowledge, thus provide a metaphor for changes in the purpose of the institution as well as for how people know.

Until the 1960s, librarians focused their attention on building book collections, though other material artifacts, such as film, LP, and microform were also collected. Physical objects, such as print materials, are relatively easy to gather and catalogue compared to the digital documents that librarians now curate. The former are stable and owned; the latter are not—or are less so, despite librarians’ efforts to standardize formats and negotiate amenable terms with publishers, copyright holders, etc. Making digital documents accessible also poses a challenge. The devices and platforms that patrons use vary widely. Even upgrades of operating systems can disrupt access. Adapting to innovative communication tools and techniques is a systemic stress on the library as a whole—budgets, interdependent technologies, software and collection vendors, patrons and librarians alike. And it contributes to a perceived crisis, a fear, that librarians will be displaced by technology. Linked to this are periodic but very real crises in funding: technology is expensive, it drives change in the institution, and yet it is necessary.

One way to conceptualize crisis is visually, as an apex or an arc in a timeline of events. The crisis is a point at which a life, a system, an institution, etc., either falls apart or changes in order to survive; it is the juncture at which the system must adapt or die. A crisis might also be represented as a three-act
play or in simple narrative structure: the plot is set, a conflict ensues, after which the conflict is resolved—the denouement. But this analogy is an oversimplification. Any complex system has many actors with competing and sometimes incompatible motives. Locating the beginning of the crisis or the setting of the plot is difficult, sometimes even in retrospect. Likewise, the apex is unlikely to be an objectively observable point. When charted on a graph, the events of a crisis might look more like a mountain range than a single decisive spike. Resolution, likewise, is unlikely to be simple (or, returning to the metaphor above, may not necessarily appear as a visible decline). Nor is resolution equally distributed; inevitably, there is some collateral damage. Still, the image of the arc is helpful for conceiving a confluence of actions and events that force change—in this case, in the institution of the library and in the library and information professions.

This special journal issue presents a number of different views on crises involving libraries and other institutions of cultural record. The essays variously focus on challenges that result from changes in the greater environment (such as politics, technology, and publishing) as well as those that stem from change or stress within the profession. Some of the essays gathered here take an historical approach to crisis, and as such consider the aftermath or resolution in retrospect. Others discuss ongoing issues that remain unresolved. Does the closure of libraries constitute a crisis? Do we lament the loss of physical library locations because children will no longer be able to get lost in the stacks, or is it because we fear that knowledge itself is at stake? Are we afraid that research will come to a halt? Taken as a whole, the essays in this issue highlight why the mere act of naming a crisis calls for reflection, if for no other reason than to find a “new normal” or equilibrium.

In the first essay of this issue, John Buschman capsulizes two decades of his work concerning the fundamental role of libraries in the democratic public sphere. Buschman’s studies have centred on examinations of the neoliberal policies that drive public spending, on how those policies undermine the fundamental purposes of our public institutions, and on the centrality of libraries in the public sphere. According to Buschman, the crisis is a consequence of reduced public spending on libraries and there is no resolution in sight. Libraries must obtain their funding from somewhere, and that somewhere has increasingly been from private sources and corporations. The problem with private or corporate funding is that it potentially intrudes on the purpose of the library. While Buschman has written primarily from the standpoint of the United States, his concerns pertain to Canada as well, as attested by the commentaries in the Dossier on Canada at the end of this issue.
John Burgess reflects on events of the twentieth century that culminated in the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association (ALA). Professional codes of ethics are often produced to bring a sense of purpose or identity to a profession. The ALA’s Code of Ethics was written in the aftermath of the two World Wars. Burgess concentrates on the Library War Service of World War I, when librarians eliminated entire foreign (especially German) book and newspaper collections in support of the war effort. He calls this form of wartime participation a “moral crisis,” which he defines as an “event in the history of a person or an organization brought on by the realization that actions and self-identity no longer coincide, revealing something significant about the character of that person or organization.” The events of the Library War Service during World War I represent a crisis wherein the acts of censorship and surveillance perpetrated by librarians stood in sharp contrast to the ethics and values that have come to form the core identity of the profession. Burgess presents evidence that shows how librarians who participated in the War Service were moved by professional insecurity; the war presented an opportunity to raise the status of librarianship through mobilization. The resolution of the crisis, or the “new normal,” following World War I, included an espousal of neutrality in the library collection, which was later embodied in a new Code of Ethics. This resolution brought about profound and lasting positive change in the ethics of both the library and the profession.

The essay I co-authored with Michael Sweeney discusses libraries and democracy, much like Buschman’s, but through a focus on publishing. It concentrates on how pre-Internet publication models and the publish-or-perish system for tenuring university professors have contributed to the “Serials Crisis”—the name for the uncontrolled rising cost of many serial publications. The essay draws on Deweyan conceptions of democracy and Habermas’s theory of the public sphere to discuss open access scholarship and the role of research libraries in developing institutional repositories. The study concludes that librarians’ extensive work with institutional repositories, data management, and greater involvement in serious research consultation and collaboration together offer a way out of the crisis.

Beth Patin describes a different type of crisis. Her essay offers recollections of and reflections on her experience as a school librarian in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Patin worked at a private boys’ school in the Lower Ninth Ward that was completely destroyed by the hurricane. An analysis of the destruction reveals the strengths and limitations of the systems of support within the city and community. Warnings about the city’s weak protective levees had been largely ignored, resulting in massive devastation. The political system broke down under the stress of the natural
disaster. However, as Patin explains, the rich social fabric that supported the community provided the strength needed by the city—and the library as one of its vital institutions—to rise again. Today, one decade after Katrina, New Orleans is thriving, though in a new state of “normal.” Patin’s essay rounds out the issue and ends on a hopeful note. She emphasizes that the communities within which—and for whom—libraries work ultimately hold the power for positive evolution, even in the face of potent destructive forces.

Finally, four commentaries are gathered in a special Dossier on Canada. Jody Berland; Brian Greenspan; Vincent Larivièrê, Stefanie Houstein, and Philippe Mongeon; and Wayne Jones variously address the crisis in research and in the preservation of collections in the Canadian context. Berland’s and Greenspan’s commentaries critically examine the attack on Library and Archives Canada under the administration of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who held that office from February 2006 through November 2015. Many scientific libraries, among others, were shuttered in what was widely acknowledged to be an ideological effort not simply to cut costs but to silence communication about scientific research that was not aligned with government policy. The authors point out that gag orders and the dismantling of archives was part of a systematic effort to control information and knowledge. The commentaries by Jones and Larivièrê et al., much like the essay by Bossaller and Sweeney, focus on change in academic libraries: funding, the serials crisis, and Google. Do such changes constitute a crisis? Together, these four commentaries make it clear why funding—for physical libraries and for librarians to preserve and make available the contents of the production of human knowledge—are crucial for the free exchange of information, and for democratic citizenship.

Libraries must respond to pressures from their environments and constituents. Some crises are tangible, if not visceral, such as hurricanes and tornadoes that cause mass destruction. Others appear in retrospect to have been symbolic, though not without tangible effects. The shuttering of libraries and archives is arguably both tangible and symbolic, if not ideological: closing facilities to prevent access to knowledge is indeed a crisis.

As described above, crises arise from an imperative to change or evolve. Advances in technology have opened vast possibilities for advancing scholarly communication and have transformed how the general public accesses information. A fundamental tenet of librarianship is that libraries are growing organisms (Ranganathan 1931). Rigidity results in obsolescence. Sometimes a retrospective view might be needed in order to determine whether change constitutes a crisis, or whether it is merely confusing or inconvenient. Libraries
are, without a doubt, in a state of flux. However, the unimpeded exploration of ideas that libraries offer is a fundamental premise that must never be discarded as collateral damage.
References

