

https://broadly.vice.com/en_us

'Not Sitting Quietly Anymore': How Librarians Are Fighting Trump

by [Arianna Rebolini](#)

Feb 20 2017 5:23 PM



Photo by B. Harvey via Stocksy

Though some people may think the job involves more shushing than rallying, many librarians consider "making America read again" to be a radical political proposition.

When Audrey Lorberfeld woke up in her Brooklyn apartment on Saturday, January 28, she was, like much of the country, angry. In the first week of his presidency, Donald Trump had already signed executive orders reinstating an [expanded global gag rule](#), calling for the construction of a border wall between the United States and Mexico, reopening the possibility of the Dakota Access pipeline, and, on Friday, January 27, [barring](#) any travelers into the US from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Within hours of the order's signing, two Iraqis who'd flown into JFK—53-year-old Hameed Khalid Darweesh, arriving from Iraq, and 33-year-old Haider Sameer Abdulkhaleq Alshawi, arriving from Sweden—were detained. Overnight, while lawyers representing the two refugees worked to file a suit for their release, news of their detention spread, and by 11 AM on Saturday, organizations like the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) had put out a call for protesters outside JFK's Terminal 4.

At 9 AM that same morning, Lorberfeld didn't know this mobilization was in the works, and she decided to get a protest going on her own. She gathered up all of the information so far available regarding the executive order—what it actually comprised, what had happened since the signing, which countries were (and weren't) being targeted, who the detainees were, and what their lawyers had been able to do until then—organized it into an easy-to-digest list with links to sources, and published it, albeit nervously, as the first post in a public Facebook event she created calling for a shutdown of JFK. When concerned strangers, many of whom were seasoned activists, pointed her in the direction of the NYIC, Lorberfeld updated the event—which was already spreading further and more quickly than she could have anticipated—and turned it into a [supportive action](#) for the protest already underway.

By 2 PM she was onsite with roughly 200 people, a crowd which, by the end of the night, would [grow](#) to more than two thousand.

The page she'd created that morning grew with the actual protest, becoming a space for people to share time-stamped news updates (and then fact-check those updates), seek ride shares, post live video feeds, coordinate deliveries of handwarmers and refreshments, and declare support from around the country and globe. It was a real-time, digital forum. Lorberfeld, who stayed at the protest until 6 PM but continued to post updates from home until ten, was relieved, humbled, and energized. She hadn't led the protest, but she'd supported it by finding and disseminating accurate information, providing a space for the open exchange of ideas, and engaging with the community—just as any librarian would do.

An impromptu protest at an airport without legal or organizational support could have gone very, very poorly. It is a move Lorberfeld, who currently splits her time between grad school and her job as digital technical specialist at the New York Academy of Medicine, would not recommend.

"Once I started getting emails from people I was like, 'Oh my God, what did I get myself into?'" she told me about a week after the protest. "I was super lucky that [the NYIC]

protest that started before mine was planned to start. I want to be adamant that nothing I did on Saturday would've been able to happen without that."

Still, looking at the numbers on Lorberfeld's event page—which, at the time of this writing, shows 4,700 people invited, 3,200 interested, and 928 attending—one could assume Lorberfeld's supplementary organizing brought news of the ban and the protest to the attention of many, and perhaps encouraged some of that audience to show up. She helped sustain a protest that lasted nearly 12 hours, and in doing so, continued in a tradition of librarians using their professional skills to support civilian resistance.

That many librarians consider their role to be inherently political, and in some cases radical, might surprise a public whose perception of the job usually involves more shushing than rallying. But in recent history especially, librarians have played key roles in progressive movements. In 1960, [the *Library Journal*](#) condemned segregation in Southern libraries; in 1974 the American Library Association (ALA) [endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment](#). In 1990, the ALA created the [Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty Task Force](#) to disseminate information about poverty, and in 2003, Carla Diane Hayden—ALA president at the time, currently the first black and first female Librarian of Congress—fought for patron privacy in the face of the Patriot Act. "We are fighters for freedom, and we cause trouble!" she said in [a 2003 profile in *Ms. magazine*](#). "We are not sitting quietly anymore."



Carla Hayden, current librarian of Congress. Screenshot via YouTube

Certainly not. This year, librarians showed up in droves to marches across the country, promising with their signs that they would "make America read again." But their professional expertise—whether in information literacy, privacy protection, coding, or research—gives them a unique ability to drive our culture and educate the electorate. Take New York–based librarian Alexandra Lederman and archivist Katie Martinez, who created a zine about data privacy and handed it out at the Women's March. Or Linden How and J. Turner Masland, in Portland, Oregon, who linked up to create [a comprehensive reading list](#) offering historical and theoretical contexts for US labor relations, environmentalism, civil rights, women's rights, and queer liberation movements.

Indeed, librarians' embrace of freely shared knowledge puts them at an advantage when it comes to organizing—especially online. [Radical Reference](#) launched in 2006 as an online support site connecting radical librarians with each other and with those who might need their services; now chapters across the country host meetups where librarians and archivists discuss ways they can use their free time and skills to fight for social justice and equality. (Lorberfeld, Lederman, and Martinez are all members of the New York collective.)

There's also [Libraries4BlackLives](#), which launched in July 2016 to empower librarians to keep racial justice at the core of their work, and [#LibrariesResist](#), which launched shortly after the inauguration to offer resources and support. In [Storytime Underground](#), a Facebook group for youth services librarians, members have been sharing ideas for books about refugees, ways to celebrate World Hijab day, and protest signs for displays.

But not all librarians can resist so openly. Ana, 31, has been a public librarian in a "very rich, very red" county in Florida for the past two years, but she's originally from Puerto Rico. (She has requested we omit her last name.) She and her coworkers know being anti-Trump puts them in the minority where they live; over the phone, she recounted to me how, after the election, they huddled, cried, and comforted each other. This is a key difference between working for public and private libraries, and it gets to the core of a debate that has rattled the industry for decades: Should a library be politically neutral?

For Ana, who serves and is answerable to a community largely happy with the election results, resistance manifests creatively. When her library was celebrating its 15th anniversary, just about a month after the election, she suggested they throw a *quinceañera*. The community, and the library funders, were thrilled.

"I got a band to play Latin music," she told me over the phone. "We held bilingual programs all throughout the month. The city is relatively diverse, but the leadership is not, so I did it to showcase and highlight Latino culture, to celebrate that diversity."

It was a way of fighting for an issue she cares about—Latino visibility and empowerment—without being partisan. But in a political climate where truth is dismissed, diversity is disdained, and free access to resources is a radical notion, it can be

difficult to figure out where politics end and moral, or even professional, imperatives begin.

"There are things that librarians and libraries absolutely cannot remain neutral on, including defending intellectual privacy and intellectual freedom," said Linden How—which is to say that sometimes, the very act of a librarian doing her job can resemble activism.

"Librarians decide what gets preserved and how information is classified, which inherently affects how people find that information and who is likely to find it," said Lorberfeld. It's the *who*—the almost sacred relationship between librarian and patron—that inspires these librarians to resist a status quo that aims to further disenfranchise the people they serve.

Chantez Neymoss of Charlotte, North Carolina, echoed the sentiment, describing librarians as "radical protectors of information and their communities." It's not hard to see how political protest can feel like an extension of the job. When hateful rhetoric encourages hate crimes, the preservation of safe spaces and cultural exchange is even more vital. When "alternative" facts are legitimized, information literacy must be emphasized. When the future of public education is under threat, continued access to free and unlimited information is paramount. And when a travel ban promises to keep out immigrants and refugees, those who serve immigrant and refugee communities are impelled to fight it.