KEYNOTE · MONTRÉAL

# Librarians Leading in Unprecedented Times

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# 11

minutes from the airport to downtown. Twenty-nine years of marriage, gone. A solitude day.

Her only connection outside her world that day was a stranger in the back seat.

# Unprecedented in combination.
# *Not in kind.*

# Beyond providing service, how do librarians provide leadership?

COMMUNITIES IN PAIN

# Three symptoms, one crisis

### Book bans

and attacks on the people who work in libraries

### Deaths of despair

suicide, overdose, and alcohol-related disease

### AI

a new way of coming to believe things

**Communities fragmenting, turning on themselves and on their institutions.**

A CAUTIONARY TALE FROM THE SOUTH

# Same profession, opposite laws

### Texas, Arkansas, Utah

Remove material or face penalties. In some states, possible jail. Collections reviewed, including by AI.

### Illinois, New Jersey

Required by law to protect access. Removal is not an option.

**Are we becoming Texas librarians and Illinois librarians?**

CASE AND DEATON, PRINCETON

# Deaths of despair

## Suicide

now among older people and people without degrees

## Overdose

the opioid epidemic we are still living with

## Alcohol

cirrhosis and its relatives

Life expectancy climbed for most of a century. Then, for some groups, it fell.

Anne Case and Angus Deaton, Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism (2020)

# Lower, but heading the wrong way

5.1 → 7.3

2018 2024

Suspected opioid overdose deaths in Québec, per 100,000. In 2024, deaths fell 17% across Canada. Québec's rose.

Sources: INSPQ, via MDPI (2025); Public Health Agency of Canada 2024 data, via CCSA (Aug. 2025)

# Not loneliness.
# Disenfranchisement.

*No one is listening. No one knows what I am going through. My vote doesn't matter.*

THE ARGUMENT

# Three steps

### Serve

Meet individual needs at the desk and in the building.

### Save

Connect people to each other and give them a stake.

### Lead

Take a direction on behalf of the community.

SAVING LOOKS LIKE THIS

# “A support group with a book in the middle of it.”

Eight women. A monthly book club. All recently widowed.

# The information shock: two modes of AI authorship

## 1. More stuff

Lots of material, fast, of marginal quality. Real pain, but a problem of the last shock.

## 2. New beliefs

Knowledge built in conversation, with no document to check and no one accountable.

# The chatbot never retires, never leaves, and answers to no one in her town. Librarians do.

We need to become the accountable conversant.

# Five ways to lead

From values. Outside the building. Through the hard conversation. On AI. Without the title.

1

# Lead from values

Librarians are nonpartisan. We are not neutral. Collecting widely so people can decide for themselves is a stand.

Service. Learning. Openness. Intellectual freedom and safety. Intellectual honesty. Diversity.

2

# Lead outside the building

An Alaska librarian walked into the statehouse and talked about disenfranchisement. The island kept its internet line.

Not just what we do for our communities, but what we do with them.

3

# Lead the hard conversation

Communities need a place to disagree in good faith. We earn the right to host it by having our own hard conversations first.

Texas librarians and Illinois librarians still have to talk to each other.

# 4

# Lead on AI

You don’t respond to a poisoned water supply with water literacy. You fix the water supply.

Advocate with AI builders. Shape policy. Make sure your community is represented, and represented well.

5

# Lead without the title

Leadership is stewardship: taking charge for the good of the community. Service and leadership are not opposites.

It is risky. You can always tell the pioneer. He’s the one with the arrows.

WE HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE

# 4,000

years of war, catastrophe, new technology, and inequality.
And we are still here.

THE ASK

# Choose joy

### A choice

not the absence of struggle

### Found in conflict

it happens in times of trial

### A gift

one colleagues give one another

# Thank you

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