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In My Humble But Correct Opinion-You Might Be A Zealot If...

Rick Anderson

University of Utah, rick.anderson@utah.edu

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You Might Be A Zealot If...

Column Editor: **Rick Anderson** (Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Like many of us who work in acquisitions, collection development, serials, and publishing, I interact with lots of people from all over the scholarly-information world: librarians, library staff, students, publishers, editors, authors, sales reps, consortium officers, etc. As a group, we have a wide variety of views on issues like publishing and pricing models, cataloging, open access, peer review, collection development, customer service, etc. And almost all of us are reasonable, intelligent people of good faith who want to find workable solutions to real-world problems and are willing to work cooperatively with each other to get to those solutions.

But occasionally, we run into a zealot.

You know what I mean: a person who is not so much dedicated to finding solutions to problems as to convincing everyone of the One True Solution to every problem — or, conversely, to warning everyone about an Impending and Apocalyptic Danger.

The chief characteristics of zealotry, it seems to me, are two: first, a bone-deep resistance to the idea that there might be anything at all wrong with the zealot's position; second, an equally deep conviction that anyone who disagrees in any way with that position must be doing so from some combination of ignorance, fear, and ill will rather than from a principled and logical perspective.

Zealotry comes in many forms and can be found on virtually every part of the spectrum on every issue. Politically, we all know left-wing or right-wing zealots — it's even possible to be a middle-of-the-road zealot if you feel that political moderation is the only answer to every issue. Most of us know (and are friends on Facebook with) at least one dietary zealot. Hang around long enough in the scholarly-communication field, and you're liable to meet zealots who are either for or against print books, eBooks, open access, traditional subscription models, copyright, Creative Commons licensing, institutional repositories, and patron-driven acquisition. And Prezi — let's not even talk about Prezi.

It's important not to confuse zealotry with passion or enthusiasm. All of us are passionate about certain issues and pursuits, but most of us are able to keep our enthusiasm at least somewhat under control and in perspective. You may love government documents, but you probably don't turn every meeting you attend into a seminar on how to use government documents better; you may be enthusiastic about patron-driven acquisition, but hopefully you don't shout down anyone who raises concerns about it.

That said, most of us have zealot tendencies to some degree; for almost all of us, there is at least one topic about which we struggle to talk rationally, so great is our passion either for or against it. But again, most of us are aware of these quirks in ourselves and try to keep them limited and under control. Real zealots have no such self-awareness, which can make their company pretty exhausting — and if you work in close proximity to one, heaven help you.

Most of the time zealotry is pretty easy to spot, which is handy. But sometimes it flies under the radar, which is why I'm offering this brief field guide to some of its symptoms. Here are some rhetorical characteristics and tendencies that can clue you in to the fact that you're probably in the presence of a zealot.



Symptoms of Zealotry

- **Tendency to double down on arguments that don't support the position.**
Zealot: We can't migrate our print journal subscriptions online because not everyone has Internet access.
You: But far more of our patrons have Internet access than have easy access to our print collection.
Zealot: Maybe so, but there are still lots of people without Internet access.
- **Unwillingness to acknowledge downsides to the position.**
You: What problems do foresee if we adopt your proposal?
Zealot: Well, I can tell you what problems you'll have if we don't.
- **Confusion of "is" with "ought." (When shown that things are not as he wishes they were, the zealot will focus on how things ought to be).**
You: No one has used Database X in three years, and our budget is very tight. I think it's time to cancel it.
Zealot: But it's such a great database. People really should be using it more.
You: We've been actively promoting it for three years, and there's still no demand for it.
Zealot: We obviously need to promote it harder.
- **Ad hominem and "poisoned well" argumentation. (This one is drawn from real life, though I was not the target.)**
Zealot: Why are you giving Mr. X a forum in your publication? He works with an organization that opposes [favored political goal].
Editor: Our publication has absolutely nothing to do with [favored political goal].
Zealot: Well, I don't think you should give someone like him a forum at all.
- **Attribution of evil motivations to anyone who disagrees.**
You: I have real concerns about the implications of compulsory CC-BY licensing for authors' rights.
Zealot: Why do you hate openness and sharing?
- **Dogged focus on intended consequences, and unwillingness to acknowledge unintended ones.**
You: If Green OA mandates are implemented widely, it's really going to impact revenue streams for society publishers.
Zealot: No, no — the purpose of OA is not to hurt publishers; it's to make research results accessible to all.
- **Slippery-slope arguments.**
You: I think we should start wearing badges that identify us as library employees, so patrons can tell who works here and is available to help them.
Zealot: Great. The next thing you know, we're going to have tattooed barcodes on our foreheads.
- **Caricature.**
You: I think we should start wearing badges that identify us as library employees, so patrons can tell who works here and is available to help them.
Zealot: So you're saying you want to turn the library into Wal-Mart?
- **Every battle is a Glorious Victory, but the war is never won.**
Zealots understand these two principles right down to their bones: first, Glorious Victories are very important, because they keep the warriors feeling motivated and encouraged. Second, no matter how many Glorious Victories you achieve, you can never admit that the war is over, because doing so tends to cause your warriors to go home (and if you're a professional zealot, the end of the war may very well mean that you've lost your job).

Now, please note: to point out the dangers of zealotry is not to say that every controversial issue has two equally-reasonable sides to it, or that every opinion on every issue should be regarded as equally valid. There really are intractable realities that have to be acknowledged if we're going to move forward with our work in a reasonably effective way, and very often those intractable realities favor

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one opinion more than another. Budgets are limited; some access models serve the most people more effectively than others; spending a dollar on Project X leaves one dollar less to spend on Project Y. Perspectives that don't account for things as they really are can't be given the same weight as those that do.

But it's also true that every position, every solution, and every strategy involves tradeoffs of some kind, and every one features a mix of positive and negative aspects. Even when you have only one feasible choice, that choice will be characterized by both good and bad aspects and will carry with it both positive and negative consequences. An unwillingness to acknowledge and deal constructively with that mix is a hallmark of unconstructive zealotry — and does all of us more harm than good. It's also true that figuring out how “things really are” is not always easy. The number of books on a shelf is a matter of observable reality, and not really susceptible to multiple opinions; the appropriate balance of allocations between books and journals is a judgment call.

Most importantly, when it comes to keeping an eye out for zealotry, each of us should probably start by looking in the mirror and ensuring that we don't see any there. You and I won't, of course — and anyone who suggests we might is an idiot. 🌸

Rumors from page 71

This issue of *ATG* is guest-edited by **Stephen Rhind-Tutt** and is about **Media in the Academic Space**. Seems like everything has a visual presence in our virtual environment! Just saw that the **BBC** is set to launch a major new video content portal for the education sector.
<http://blog.book-fair.com/2013/10/10/bbc-set-to-launch-major-new-video-content-portal/>
<http://www.against-the-grain.com/2013/10/news-announcements-101113/>

The astute **Patrick Alexander** (Director of Penn State Univ Press) tells me (sadly) that he will not be in Charleston this year because the Conference corresponds with a meeting of the **F. Scott Fitzgerald Society** which is being held in Montgomery, Alabama. And, guess what, his daughter and grand-daughter live in Montgomery, some extra incentive.
<http://www.fscottfitzgeraldsociety.org/>

The picture this month (see page 1) is from **Miriam Farhoumand Long** who worked for me ten years ago (2002-2004) and has moved to Germany with her husband who is a Web designer. Her daughter **Kayla** just turned five!

During the Conference, be sure and say “hi” to all of us and especially to **Curtis Kendrick**, University Dean for Libraries and Information Resources, **CUNY**, Office of Library Services. **Curtis** is a speaker who says he is passionate about his family and friends, and music. He is looking forward to returning to Charleston, where his family has roots going back to 1790! Golly Gee Whiz! 🌸

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