

“Do you want to talk about this today?” The politics and power of conversation in a librarian podcast

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No Librarians Allowed is barely a year old, but already, it has received over a thousand listens, something a research article or book chapter would not be able to bring to two librarians with no academic freedom nor support to publish. Rather than a self-congratulating humblebrag, this talk is an opportunity to reflect on what can be learned in a sustained and purposeful organization of conversations.

The podcast emerged out of the desire to create space to engage in professional development outside of “traditional” publication venues. My co-host, Carla Iacchelli, and I were intentional about every aspect of the project - from the guests we invited, to the way we held the conversations, to the questions we asked, to the process of editing. We eschewed the podcasting “best practices” of planning out each sentence of our show in advance. We sought to strike a delicate balance between finding opportunities for honest conversation with professionals from marginalized backgrounds with not putting their livelihood at risk by capturing opinions that may be perceived as problematic or misrepresentative of their employer.

Though the form is not new, nor is No Librarians Allowed the first in the professional landscape, this podcast has taught us lessons about several themes being explored at CAPAL 2019: issues of diversity within the profession, the power of conversation and the imbalances of power that persist when those conversations are recorded, mechanisms to reach communities beyond libraries, questions of what counts as “serious thought” and “scholarly communication”, not to mention the endless labour that goes into the production of a single episode. Additionally, I reflect on the process of belonging to multiple imagined groups, such as creators and consumers of digital media, both locally and globally. Critics of the proliferation of the genre expose the anxiety that exists within academia around questions of expertise, specialization, and association with the amateur, while recent examples of podcast peer-review (Secret Feminist Agenda pilot by Wilfrid Laurier University Press) indicate the broadening of the understanding of sharing scholarship. Issues of intellectual freedom have never felt more material than being faced with a microphone and a delete function, while conversing with library workers who may or may not have academic freedom to express themselves without fear of repercussions, thinking about issues such as social justice. This talk is therefore a reflexive case study of the intersections of these threads as well as an argument for the power of conversation.