

Making the world a better place

Compiled by Leanna Jantzi.

Joel Bakan, author, filmmaker and a professor of law at the University of British Columbia opened the 2012 B.C. Library Conference with a keynote address. The following is a summary of what he said.

Library love child

Joel Bakan probably wouldn't exist if it wasn't for libraries. The author, filmmaker and a professor of law at the University of British Columbia opened the 2012 B.C. Library Conference by addressing a packed room at the Sheraton Vancouver Airport Hotel.

Bakan told the crowd that his parents met in the 1940s at the Manhattan branch of the New York Public Library. His mother was a young library assistant in charge of late returns and his father a young college student.

"He began checking books out – in addition to checking her out – lots of books, and intentionally returning them late, one after the other, so as to create a chance to speak to my mother," Bakan said. "And when he finally got that chance, he turned on the charm, first – and perhaps foremost – to convince my mother to waive all of his fines, which she did; and, second, to convince her to go out with him, which she also did."

The two eventually married and Bakan described himself as a "a library love child."

"Bettering the world"

Bakan referred to a theme of the conference "better[ing] the world through librarianship" and said that he believed public libraries do better the world – "that they make the world a substantially better place; and that they do this by enabling us, as a society, to aspire to be enlightened and democratic."

Libraries ensure that all knowledge of public interest and public concern is collected, preserved, and circulated to the public. This includes, Bakan said, "dissident and radical knowledge; knowledge that takes aim at the powerful; knowledge that reveals injustice and corruption, that pushes people to think critically about dominant institutions and ideas; that challenges prevailing moral norms and social

conventions; that may lack commercial value, but has democratic or aesthetic value."

Bakan emphasized that libraries "ensure that all of this knowledge is equally accessible to all people, regardless of their social or economic status . . . Libraries are, in short, the great equalizers of knowledge in our society."



Joel Bakan. Photo by Gordan Dumka

Freedom of expression is, in the words of the Supreme Court of Canada, "the jewel in the constitutional crown" Bakan said. "What I want to suggest here is that libraries are the jewels in the crown of freedom of expression. They are the institutional embodiments of that ideal."

Bakan explained that freedom of expression is not just an absence of government restrictions on speech, but also a presence of knowledge. To be informed, to have the ability to form opinions, understand the world around us and learn, "we need public libraries" he said. "They are the only institutions in our society whose sole job is to provide access to knowledge, for all members of the public, free of charge, organized, catalogued, and with the help and guidance of knowledge professionals."

Libraries "concretize the ideal of freedom of expression, and thereby sustain democracy and enlightenment. And importantly they do so in relation to all forms and all contents of knowledge," he said.

Relevance of libraries

The argument that libraries are no longer relevant in the digital society "is a specious argument," Bakan said. "It entirely misses the point that the job of libraries and librarians is not tied to any particular form of knowledge, but rather is to make all forms of knowledge available and intelligible."

Not only are libraries and librarians needed to collect, preserve and disseminate digital and physical information, they are needed “to help us navigate the vast and uneven sea of information now available on the web. The fact is that the unprecedented quantity of information we can now access does not necessarily nor automatically translate into helping us become better informed.”

Bakan provided a number of issues and current events for which there are “websites purporting to be neutral, independent and expert, but that are in fact crafted by companies and their PR firms as parts of their marketing and public relations campaigns.”

Such campaigns highlight the fact “libraries and librarians have crucial roles to play in promoting Internet literacy, and thus countering the kinds of misinformation and distortions that are so easily and cleverly propagated on the web, whether by corporations or any other group.”

Libraries also provide public access to digital information that may not be easily or freely accessible, Bakan said. “For all of these reasons, what I’m suggesting is that libraries and librarians are likely more important today than they have ever been.”

Resisting privatization

Bakan also argued that we are living in time in which “the very possibility of public knowledge is under attack, mainly by the forces of privatization and commercialization.”

In the 1980s, neo-liberalism “was catapulted from the halls of academe into the driver’s seat of public policy,” Bakan said, explaining that the main concept of neo-liberalism is that “free markets are the surest way to achieve the greatest good for individuals and societies.”

The dynamic of neo-liberalism is impacting our society, in all areas including, for example he said, public education. Bakan pointed to the B.C. provincial governments treatment of public school teachers’ collective bargaining rights and the cuts to teacher librarians and then to the efforts to privatize public schools in the United States.

“Corporations are quickly moving in, becoming more and more involved in selling curriculum and standardized testing services to schools, hardware and software, food, janitorial, transportation and security services,” Bakan said, “even running entire schools. The number of public schools now being run

in the United States by for-profit companies – education management organizations, or EMOs as they are called – has increased by more than 600 per cent since 1998.”

Bakan asserted that the “privatization trend is not unique to schools. It’s part of a much larger trend, happening across the entire public sector and here in Canada as well as in the United States.”

“Privatization is particularly acute in relation to those institutions in our society that produce and disseminate knowledge – such as universities, scientific and medical research, museums, the arts, publishing, and public broadcasting.”

This means, Bakan said, “that the ideal of open, public, and accessible knowledge – knowledge that’s in the public interest, and not beholden to private and commercial interests – is becoming harder and harder to realize as the institutions responsible for making it real are privatized.”

Therefore, libraries “are likely more important today than they have ever been,” Bakan emphasized. “Their very existence is both a challenge and an antidote to our increasingly privatized and commercialized culture of knowledge.”

But, he said, libraries are under attack from government budget cuts. Hours are being reduced, employees are being laid off “and for the first time since 2009, this year’s provincial budget did not include library funding as a line item.”

A move to privatize libraries, which has started in the United States is “likely to spread to Canada,” he warned.

Library Systems and Services (LSSI) a company that has been involved in the privatization of U.S. libraries, “has now set its sights on Canada,” Bakan said, quoting LSSI CEO Brad King.

But, Bakan said, there is good news. Physical and virtual library visits and library programming in B.C. has increased: “People love and use their public libraries and seem ready to defend them against cutbacks and privatization.”

However, Bakan said, local governments do see privatization as an “attractive option” and citizens must “reject it when and if it comes.” The ultimate outcome of privatizing a library means that the company must run the library more cheaply and make a profit, he explained, “which inevitably they

do by restricting services, charging user fees, laying off staff, closing branches, and de-professionalizing libraries."

Privatization must also be resisted because libraries are "key institutions" in society, he said. "It is just intrinsically wrong, I believe, to hand over to private for-profit corporations an institution so fundamental to our aspirations as human beings and societies."

Privatization is not the answer, Bakan said. Demanding that the government properly fund libraries is the solution. "To fight for that solution we need to be very clear about what libraries are, what they do, and why they are fundamental to our aspirations."

Making democracy possible

This is why, Bakan said, the B.C. Library Conference is so important

"That's what we're doing here – articulating and clarifying why libraries and librarians are not just nice to have, but are needed in our society – needed to make all knowledge accessible to all people; needed to help individuals flourish and realize their potentials; needed to make enlightenment and democracy possible."

"Needed," he said, "to make this world a better place."

Learn more about Joel Bakan at www.joelbakan.com.

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