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## **French Libraries Post-Charlie Hebdo: Between Freedom of Expression and the Neutrality of Cultural Institutions.**

**Keywords:** freedom of expression, censorship, librarianship, public service, neutrality, engagement.

### **Introduction:**

In the beginning of January 2015, attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the HyperCacher kosher supermarket in France rocked the nation, and the French people suddenly found themselves confronted with the violent reality of what it means to be denied freedom of expression, freedom of the media and the freedom to believe. In a country where some of the Charlie Hebdo draftsmen, such as Cabu and Wolinski, were known by several generations (whether through their drawings in other newspapers or on television), this event had a great emotional impact on the French people, and was followed by a large mobilization of citizens in a march on January 11<sup>th</sup>.

As information professionals, France's librarians reacted immediately, posting messages of support for Charlie Hebdo and/or messages against censorship, and displaying the *Je suis Charlie* ("I am Charlie") sign inside and outside of their libraries, in exhibitions of journalistic art, and in selections of resources and conferences on *laïcité*<sup>1</sup>, freedom of expression, and so on. In a spectacular gesture, the library of Pierres-Vives in Montpellier nearly emptied its bookshelves in order to symbolize censorship.

Though all these actions and mobilizations are praiseworthy, it remains unclear how exactly these actions can be linked to the duty of French librarians to uphold neutrality and confidentiality (Hubert, 2013). Were these the actions of civil servants working in cultural institutions to uphold the pillar of democracy, or the emotionally driven actions of French citizens, carrying a certain vision of freedom and community, but centered above all on the event itself? In other words, how have these political acts confronted the librarian's role as a citizen on one hand, and on the other, a civil servant working in perhaps the only public arena for the application of democracy?

In order to better understand the role of French libraries during times of crisis, and their relation to neutrality, a detailed study on the kinds of actions that were carried out after the attacks was necessary. The following

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<sup>1</sup> The word *laïcité* is so inextricably linked with French history that there is no equivalent in the English language. This word refers to the law of *laïcité*, which followed the separation of church and state in 1905. This law, which is absolutely fundamental to the French republic, requires religious neutrality on the part of the state and public services. Government employees, for example, cannot display their religious beliefs while on the job, whether physically or verbally, whether through actions or the passive wearing of religious garments and jewelry. According to the law, citizens are free to practice the religion of their choice, and wear signs and symbols of their religion, everywhere but in public schools, where children are forbidden from wearing religious garments or paraphernalia in the interest of avoiding discrimination. Furthermore, religion is considered a private practice, which should therefore not be practiced in public spaces.

article is based on a survey of around 200 actions that were carried out between January 7<sup>th</sup> and late December 2015, and will be presented in three parts: first, a presentation of the methodology implemented in the collection and analysis of the data, second: an analysis of the results, and finally, a discussion concerning neutrality, political engagement and debate.

## 1: Methodology

### 1A: Theoretical Framework

The question of neutrality in French libraries has been examined in library charters, laws, codes of ethics, and so on, both at the national and international level. In times of crisis, however, this duty to uphold neutrality, and the ways in which it is performed, is often reevaluated.

In 1999, Jean-Luc Gautier-Gentès responded to certain acts of censorship carried out by far-right local governments on their libraries, and pressed the duty of the librarian, both a potential (and even probable) censor and defender of free speech, to take a political stance: *“This is the case with librarians. Also, as we’ve searched for ways to help librarians avoid arbitrary decisions, should we not now be searching for ways to protect citizens from arbitrary decisions, to which librarians themselves can contribute?”* (Gautier-Gentès, 1999). He also examines the paradoxical position of the librarian, a civil servant and citizen, a political actor subject to both neutrality injunctions and the duty to exercise discretion:

*“...the library thus presents a sort of double-aspect. On one hand, notably, it contributes to the molding of minds (including the particularly vulnerable minds of children), in which case it seems that neutrality is understood to be of the utmost importance, and held to a more scrupulous standard than in other public services (excepting schools). On the other hand, the fact that libraries find themselves in the position of having to manipulate pure politics, politics that are shown more or less as they are, notably the in news, means that neutrality appears to be markedly more fragile and threatened than in other public services.”* (Gautier-Gentès, 1999)

In a 1999 text written in the same political context, Anne Kupiec pressed the eminently political and critical role of the public cultural institution: *“As a public service, the library is committed to four well-known principles: continuity, adaptability, equality and neutrality. In the case of neutrality, it means that libraries must not promote any personal opinions (especially political or religious opinions, or racial biases) when carrying out their services, and in doing so avoid a critical conception of the constitution of the collections”*. She recalls the contours of emancipation, a democratic opportunity in which libraries play a key role. Her texts question libraries’ actual capacity to emancipate citizens. *“From a historical perspective, it is obviously in libraries’ interests to remember the use of critique in the fight against ignorance and belief, as well as the fight for the advent of Enlightenment for all, and consequently, to show the soil in which the development of the library slowly and sinuously took root.”* (Kupiec, 1999).

Finally, in 2015, three months after the attacks of January 2015, Anne-Marie Bertrand examined the role of the public institution in the debate and conflict, recalling the state sources of the role of libraries as places of education and emancipation. *“The analyst observes an avoidance of politics rather than a strong articulation, because the library is in an ambivalent position: on one hand, assuming its civil role, and on the other, assuming the role of an institution devoted to maintaining social links. Firstly, the library represents*

political conflict via pluralism. Secondly, it cultivates a “vivre-ensemble”<sup>2</sup>, elevating that which unites over that which divides.” (Bertrand, 2005).

In this article, we aim to examine the actions carried out in the wake of the attacks through the lens of the three following approaches to neutrality: the possibility of discussion and political action on the part of libraries, their willingness to enter into debate and process conflict, and the paradoxical position of the French librarian.

## 1B: Statistics

On January 11, 2015, we<sup>3</sup> launched the “#Bibenaction” campaign on Twitter, which called upon French librarians to share the actions carried out by their libraries in the wake of the attacks. This first step in the survey was conducted using Internet searches as well as first-hand accounts<sup>4</sup>. These actions were collected and listed on Twitter in an improved<sup>5</sup> Excel spreadsheet, which allowed us to organize the collected actions by the following criteria:

- Type of action: message, exposition, selection, acquisition, debate, meeting, free speech, or professional action. This was to see what kinds of actions were carried out in a time of political crisis.
- The presence or absence of *Je suis Charlie* (“I am Charlie”), whether in the form of a photo, a message, a news headline, a blog post title, a hashtag (#jesuischarlie), or otherwise. This was meant to gauge the presence of this message in cultural institutions that used the image or slogan as a means of mobilization, or even counter-mobilization (for example, using the message *Je ne suis pas Charlie*, or “I am not Charlie”).
- Type of library: public libraries, territorial libraries, academic libraries, national libraries, and professional organizations. This was to see in which kinds of libraries the attacks reverberated the most.
- City: this was to measure the distribution of the actions throughout the French territories.
- Date: this was to delineate the different phases of political action in 2015.
- Means of communication: websites, social media, email, the press, and so on. This was to see how libraries and librarians gave visibility to these actions.
- Theme of the action: freedom, solidarity, cohabitation, and so on. This was to see what motivated and triggered the action.

The actions thus identified with this table were then passed through the filter of our theoretical framework in order to find some answers answers to our question regarding neutrality.

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of *vivre ensemble* (with or without a hyphen) is related to the construction of the French nation. How can individuals share a territory and a collective vision, all the while maintaining their own individuality with regard to religion, opinions, and ideas? Since 2015, many appeals have been made to this concept, whether as positive reminders of the capacity of the French state to offer a rule of law that is based on the notions of liberty, equality and fraternity, or as critiques on the notion of *vivre ensemble*, which was challenged, or at the very least disturbed, by the different attacks carried out on French soil, as well as the responses by the state in the wake of the attacks (such as the declaration of a state of emergency).

<sup>3</sup> My sincere thanks to Nathalie Clot for asking me to proofread and edit her translation of David Lanes’s text, which led to our launch the first step of the #bibenaction survey together. Thank you for the opportunity to transform my feelings of powerlessness into something positive.

<sup>4</sup> Either within the framework of parallel collection (Dominique Lahary and Philippe Charrier), or within the framework of personal contacts.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Marie Larochelle for creating a unified Excel spreadsheet which improved upon my original document.

## 2: General Results

### 2A: General Results

The survey allowed us to identify 187 different actions<sup>6</sup>.

These actions were carried out by all kinds of French libraries: public libraries, departmental libraries, university libraries, national libraries, and so on. Of all of these, it was the territorial libraries (that is to say public and departmental libraries), which carried out the majority of the actions identified in our survey (56%).

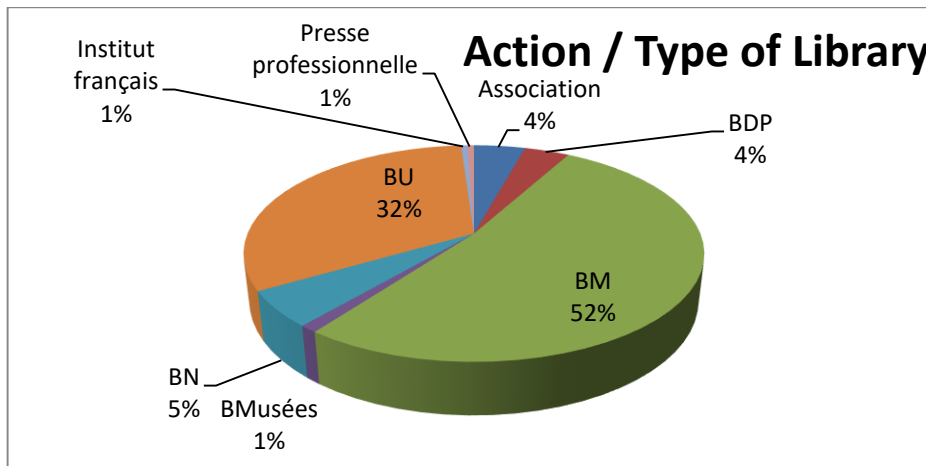


Figure 1: Actions, categorized by type of library.

Despite this evidence, we cannot conclude that public libraries have been more active than academic libraries. Indeed, 116 libraries or organizations appeared in this survey, each with one or several actions to their credit. Relative to the number of libraries in France, the mobilization can seem insignificant; however, only libraries that publicized their actions on the Internet, or employed librarians who were part of the network of this article's author, were able to be observed in the study. It should be noted, however, that nearly a third of all academic libraries in France publicized their actions.

In the case of public libraries, the proportion is significantly higher, that is to say 0.43% of the libraries and reading stations counted by the government in 2011. This extremely small percentage can be explained by the fact that public libraries are less active on the Internet and social media than academic libraries. Moreover, in order to know the actual number of actions carried out in reality, we would have had to contact France's 16,000 public libraries and reading stations identified by the government. As we were unable to undertake such an enormous project at the time, we had to limit ourselves to studying the actions that were diffused, publicized, and politically positioned in full view of the public, adding a second political level to an already politicized action.

The actions we observed were carried out by libraries through all of France, both in small towns (with 500 habitants or fewer) and larger cities such as Paris, Lyon, and Lille. Paris, the city directly affected by the shootings, was not the only city to react, and the mobilization in the wake of the attacks clearly reached far beyond the geographical context of the attacks. We have yet to determine whether the common point between these institutions is: their status as an institution dedicated to information, or their status as a French institution. In other words, should these actions be qualified as the actions of citizens or libraries? It is worth noting that in the smallest villages in the study, the library personnel was often entirely composed of volunteers, a fact which renders the status of the library as a public institution (within the context of the

<sup>6</sup> As of January 1st, 2016. We continue to observe these actions today.

actions carried out) and the obligation to uphold neutrality as completely separate from the staff.

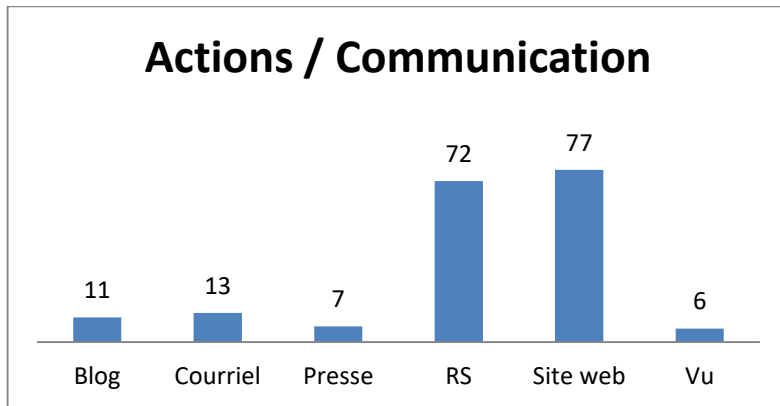


Figure 2: Means by which the action was communicated.

As is evident in the above chart, the information on the actions was most often attained through the library's website<sup>7</sup> (77 times) and social media pages<sup>8</sup> (72). The other sources, which reflected direct experience or first-hand accounts, were less frequent; nevertheless, we continue to observe the latter. Putting these actions online shows that they are not hidden under the cover of a neutrality injunction, but on the contrary, very much in the public eye. It should be noted, however, that because this survey was not exhaustive, we were unable to examine the absence of action in detail, or distinguish the libraries which publicized their actions from those which did not act at all. In other words, that which was unobservable was not considered as an active stance, but as the absence of a stance, that it to say a position which was not entirely in line with the reactions of local and national governments, nor in the general reaction of the French people. This brought us to wonder if neutrality is in fact a question of quantity: perhaps the more visible reactions there are, the less the object of the reaction can be neutral.

Finally, the categorization of actions by type shows a significant proportion of messages and document selections. The actions were carried out between January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and December of the same year, even if the large majority were carried out that January (159 out of 187). This demonstrates both the quick reflexes of France's libraries, which went into action from the day of the attacks, and the gravity of the event which, 12 months later, continues to inspire specific actions.

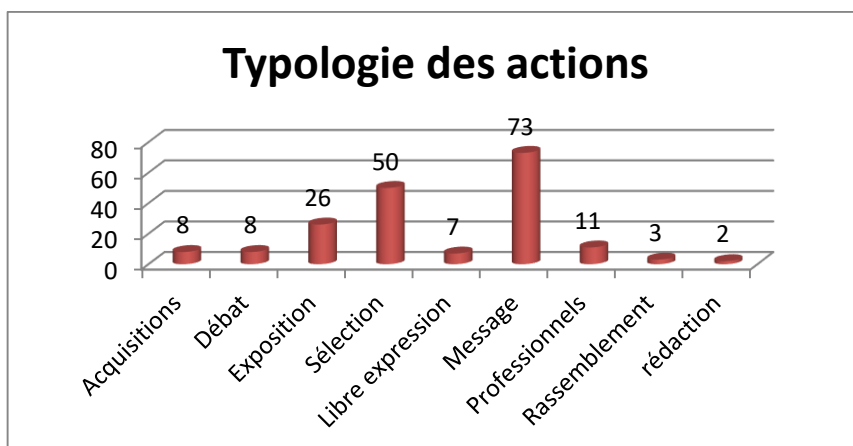


Figure 3: Type of action.

<sup>7</sup> Or a photo-hosting site such as Flickr.

<sup>8</sup> Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

The combined analysis of type and time of action allowed us to distinguish three distinct phases: a period of high emotions during the first month after the attacks, a period of transmission during the first quarter of 2015, and finally a period of transformation which lasted for the duration of the year 2015.

## 2B: Results and Discussion

### 2B-1: Emotion

The month of January was an emotional one due to the attacks. This emotion was evident in the messages diffused by libraries (73 out of 187), calls for collective action (3) and spaces dedicated to free speech available to the public (7). The total number of actions carried out in January represent 45% of the total actions observed in the study. The messages that were diffused expressed condolences and support for the victims' families, paid homage to the victims, and reaffirmed the determination of France's libraries to support freedom of speech. Public walls dedicated to free speech also served as spaces for the expression of thoughts for the victims, their own worries, or other responses to the attacks. "*They wanted to bring us to our knees, but they've made France rise up*" was written by two students in Caen on the wall dedicated to free expression in their university library. Furthermore, actions that focused on solidarity, rather than liberty or *vivre-ensemble*, represent 48% of the total actions, of which 61% expressed solidarity with the victims and 39% with Charlie Hebdo. Finally, the *Je suis Charlie* sign was posted in library windows where it was visible to passerby, on the walls and windows inside the libraries, and sometimes even posted on the librarians themselves. In the library of Lyon 1 University, for example, the staff wore *Je suis Charlie* armbands. 52% of the total actions in the study, all categories included, included the message *Je suis Charlie*, whether in the form of a photo, a title, or in the URL of the messages broadcasting the action.

These messages, and above all the *Je suis Charlie* posters, cannot be considered neutral for two reasons: on one hand, in posting these messages, the library takes a stance on a current event, on the other hand, the *Je suis Charlie* posters elevate a slogan which does not represent all French citizens, when state institutions are supposed to avoid making distinctions between citizens. This emotional reaction, as understandable as it is, demonstrates that these librarians reacted as citizens rather than civil servants, taking a certain distance from the events and the conflicts which mark, and even underlie our society. Does this mean that this lack of distance is acceptable in times of crisis, and that the library must therefore take a side in the issue? Or must we distinguish between messages diffused by the libraries and, much less frequent, invitations to expression such as walls dedicated to free expression and calls to rally?

Though some say that this expression of the library, and by extension, the public institution, is a renouncement of its neutrality, others evoke the notion of each individual's freedom to express their opinion in a public institution, a space which precisely because of its duty to neutrality guarantees freedom of expression, or in other words, is a public space. As Sandra Salomon reminds us, Hannah « *Arendt defined politics as courage and speech: the kind of free speech that can only exist in a public space where a plurality of free men (citizens) can exchange diverse ideas in free confrontation (the Athenian democratic model, the Greek ecclesia).* » (Salomon, sd). Thus, we can say that the messages and posters reflect the reaction to current events, whereas walls dedicated to freedom of expression and calls to rally consist of a veritable political action in support of democracy, without upholding the neutrality of the institution.

### 2B-2: Transmission

During the first two months of 2015, we observed a second type of action, which was more focused on the transmission of information: selections of documents (50 actions), acquisitions (8) and expositions (26). This

second wave of actions was more specifically library-oriented, and, we can suppose, more neutral due to the cover of professional expertise. These actions often reflected the effort of librarians to contextualize, explain, show, and put into perspective the events of January 2015, and represent 44% of the total actions observed. Librarians' selections also dealt with the themes of freedom of expression, censorship and religion, as well as homages to victims through exhibitions of their work. The selections of books, audio and video sources, songs, and electronic documentation were diffused on all types of media and materials: on the windows and tables inside libraries, via links on their blogs and websites, through thematic pre-selections in their catalogues, and so on. Sometimes these selections were explicitly directed toward parents, as when Tourcoing public library offered a selection of digital resources on talking about traumatic events with children. Acquisitions mostly consisted of renewed subscriptions to Charlie Hebdo when the publication of the magazine was temporarily halted, or the purchase of the first issue after the attacks. The Pierre Villey sound library, for example, offered free access to the audio description of the January 14<sup>th</sup> issue. With regard to exhibitions, libraries often displayed covers of past issues of Charlie Hebdo, or illustrations drawn by journalists from all over the world. The Hérouville library, for example, displayed drawings that were paired with excerpts from both the UNESCO Manifesto for Public Libraries and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These actions test the neutrality of libraries, not in reaction to the attacks, but leading up to them. Indeed, in order to foster freedom of expression, there must be many different collections that offer a real sense of neutrality with regard to the construction of the collection. This neutrality, though a myth, doesn't prevent librarians from trying to reach this goal as much as possible - but the acquisitions of Charlie Hebdo issues, or the renewal of subscriptions to the magazine, show that this kind of pluralism is far from being reached. We hypothesize that this pluralism is avoided due to the potential conflicts it could create, conflicts that librarians may not know how to mediate. The Champs Libres library, for example, posted a reminder of the constitutional pluralism of democracy, and filled their shelves with documents as disparate as *Charlie Hebdo*, *Minute* and *Monde Libertaire*. The reaction of some of the public was virulent: tracts, protests, and so on denounced the presence of extreme-right literature in a library.

This question of conflict also arose during the third period observed in the study, with the organization of debates. At a moment when the key concepts of the French republic such as *laïcité*, *vivre-ensemble* and freedom of expression were being re-examined, few debates were held. Though some were organized later in the year, this trend nevertheless raises the question of the place of contentious topics in state institutions. After displaying a *Je suis Charlie* poster, one library director offered to organize a debate centered around religion – the mayor, however, reminded her that “here, we don't discuss politics”, the implication being that anything which leads to conflict and debate is inherently political, while actions that lead to consensus are inherently social, in the sense that social ties are rediscovered and reaffirmed.

It is here that we can further question the issue. Should the library be a reflection of these social links, specifically those which unite, or should it, as Anne Kupiec wrote (1999) “*serve as a reflection of divergences and conflicts, borne of social divisions, that occur in democratic societies. The library brings to light the tensions and differences of opinion that come with vivre-ensemble: democracy is not synonymous with general and perpetual consensus*”. In other words, embracing conflict allows us to better examine neutrality, and divorce it from the definition that depoliticizes librarians, moving it closer to the exercise of a plural and critical examination of society and the evolution of democracy (Lewis, 2008). By thus renewing the democratic debate of ideas, and we can consider that democracy does not come about when we agree, but when we confront ideas head on. As Chantal Mouffe wrote: “*A democratic government must establish institutions which allow conflict, not in the form of a confrontation between enemies, but in a form that I call*



*“agonistic”*: a confrontation between adversaries who know that there can be no rational solution to their conflict, but recognize their opponent’s right to defend their point of view” (Mouffe, 2016).

### **2B-3: Transformation**

The final period was observed over the course of the year 2016, and was most reflective of a transformation which manifested itself in a renewal of debates, as well as a particular attention given to reflection, discussion and training. This transformation took on a double form: first, that of debates and conferences that were open to the public, and second, day-workshops, articles, and training programs for professionals. Admittedly, these statistics are rather low: we observed 11 out of 187 actions directed towards professionals, and 8 actions that can be qualified as public debates. However, these low numbers should take timing of the actions into account. These actions did not take place during times of high emotion, but over the course of the entire year, continuing even into 2016. This was thus a period of fewer actions, but these actions were carried out after more thorough reflection and consideration.

Thus, the Lyon public library published a message of solidarity, and put Charlie Hebdo covers on display in several locations in the days following the attacks. Soon after these messages and images were posted, the windows of one library were vandalized. This even prompted a city-wide meeting of all public library personnel in January, which was organized in order to exchange information and prompt discussion. This internal discussion preceded several actions that wouldn’t occur until June or even autumn of 2015, such as conferences on the caricature, workshops examining caricatures of former presidents, and the launch of the Democracy project<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, starting in February, the Dunkerque public library suggested that patrons leave a hand-written commentary on the books that they returned, hoping to respond to the attacks by recreating the social ties both within and without the library. Finally, the departmental library of Pierres-Vives in Montpellier temporarily emptied its shelves of documents in order to help patrons visualize the consequences of censorship, and provoke discussion and debate.

While this was not the first time that debates on freedom of expression or religion were organized by libraries, for many it was perhaps the first time that they touched on these kinds of themes, as libraries are often hesitant to broach subjects that can create conflict. Similarly, with regard to professionals, we can take the example of the Champs-Libres library, which organized a series of workshops for their staff on the reflection and discussion of the neutrality of public institution, and the pluralism of the library’s collections. What interests us here is the willingness of libraries to offer themselves up as spaces dedicated to transformation – or, at the very least, reflection - on the transformation of society, notably questioning key notions of our republic and democracy. It’s the idea of neutrality, exercised by librarians through their engagement in a political mission, that is being questioned. While we have no trouble recognizing the militancy of the generation of the 70s and 80s, which fought for the institutionalization of libraries, and defended the book and public reading, we also consider a militancy which advocates issues that are less centered around libraries (feminism, ecology, LGBT militancy, anti-racism, and so on) to be non-neutral. This kind of delayed militancy was amplified in 2015 by the attacks and incoming refugees.

En 2005, Dominique Lahary painted a picture of the different generations of librarians, and found the most recent to be the most depoliticized:

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<sup>9</sup> This project aimed to organize a cultural season (2016-2017) centered around democracy that would have a very strong participatory element, both internally with the teams organizing the event, and externally with the public.

“[Dominique Lahary] proposed a delineation from which arise four kinds of professionals. The oldest are mostly militants and creators. Those in their 50s also show these tendencies, but are primarily concerned with implementing a republican approach to public reading, cultural exchange, and taking a normative approach to the profession and the tools that come with it. Those in their 40s have had managerial training, and have a different, more political vision of the profession (the state vs. local authorities). Finally, the youngest generation is distancing itself from a centralizing approach to the role of the book, and are better trained in new technologies; they are more “counselors” than prescribers, committing themselves to the needs of the patron, and using a more relativistic cultural approach.” (Verry-Jolivet, 2005)

Perhaps we should see this last generation not as depoliticized, but as a generation that has shifted the object of its politicization, and in this time of crisis has finally found a way to express this politicization through action, notably library-related actions. One text, presented at a conference on emotions and politics, thus explains between professional careers and political engagement (Arrigoni, 2015). Indeed, militancy naturally takes a form that is driven by the combination of skills and knowledge that are often developed in the professional world, a combination which also serves to legitimize the militant action being carried out. In fact, an analysis of the actions by theme reveals a silence on the subject of religion, with freedom of religion representing only 2% of the themes addressed by these actions, while the freedom of the press represents 24%, and freedom of expression, the concept at the heart of library activity, and the foundation of the library itself, represents 74% of these actions. Furthermore, the aforementioned emotion present during the first period in this chronology could be the catalyst for political engagement (Fontaine, 2015) which relies to a certain extent on professional practices, but which focuses on subjects linked to politics in general, rather than the book policy in particular.

## Conclusion

This study on the actions carried out in the wake of the attacks of January 2015, which was conducted with the question of neutrality with regard to librarians in mind, allowed us to witness a revival of the question of politics in libraries. In raising this question, these libraries have blurred the line between the political and the social, and revived democratic debate, and begun to think of themselves not as emancipators, but as participants. We hypothesize that we are witnessing a turning point in the construction of a new model of the French library, in which the role of the institution is not to passively defend the democracy we have, but to actively construct the democracy we want. To this end, librarians perhaps need the appropriate training and education, not just managerial, but political: training in political culture, training on the values of libraries, and training in critical thinking.

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