October 18, 2014 marked the Edmonton chapter of the Progressive Librarians Guild’s fourth annual symposium. The event was held at the University of Alberta’s School of Information Studies and, for the first time, our compelling speakers came from across Canada and the United States. We are proud to share the symposium’s proceedings with the larger Progressive Librarian community. The theme of this year’s event was the commodification of information and library services. The theme was chosen because of its broad relevance to librarians, archivists, and information professionals, and the papers and presentations from the symposium do an excellent job of highlighting the diversity of issues in commodification along with the importance of resistance to this commodification by progressive librarians.

PLG Edmonton has been an active group during the five years of our existence. We begin this collection of essays with a short history of our chapter by co-founder Braden Cannon. Cannon faithfully reports the chapter’s successes, challenges, and controversies as we grow and respond to the contradictions inherent in an organization of radical professionals.

Samuel Trosow’s keynote did an excellent job of setting the tone for the day, highlighting many themes that were explored by the presenters. He implored progressive librarians to consider the political economy of information as we advocate for information policy and determine the future of the profession. Michael McNally, in his response to Trosow, points to a number of essential works of political economy and LIS scholarship that would support any attempt at a holistic analysis of information policy and commodification. Trosow also spoke to the necessity of reversing the process of commodification through alternatives such as the open access movement. This topic is further explored by Robyn Hall who draws out the challenges experienced by librarians offering
open access publishing in the face of ever-stronger commercial academic publishers. Without understating the scope of the task, Hall argues for increasing the role of libraries in publishing and creating transformative change in the publishing industry.

The impact of neoliberalism, also raised by Trosow, was a common theme featured most prominently in the works by Courtney Waugh and Jonathan Cope. Waugh’s piece provides an insightful analysis as to how neoliberal rhetoric is being increasingly used in academic libraries’ strategic documents to describe our professional values and purpose. Cope’s piece provides a valuable discussion of the neoliberal view of the market as the ideal allocative mechanism for information, using Karl Polanyi’s idea of the fictitious commodity to address the weakness in the neoliberal conception of information.

Bartlomiej Lenart and Miranda Koshelek, grounding their theory of human rights in human need, argue that the unique dependency between librarians and library users is the foundation of the human right to information, which makes librarians duty-bound to protect those rights. Lenart and Koshelek’s piece is one answer to questions that reoccurred throughout the symposium: when and how are we empowered to make transformative change, and when and how can we communicate to our colleagues about these issues? LIS education was also identified as an essential site for encouraging future professionals to engage with these issues.

Concluding the symposium was a unique presentation by Wendy Highby. Her contribution combined the narrative of her transformation from a neutral to an activist librarian, an analysis of a corporate-sponsored educational website about the controversial process of hydraulic fracturing, and performances of the satirical protest songs that form part of her resistance to the oil and gas interests in her home town. Included here is an annotated libretto of her upcoming musical in tandem with an interpolated bibliography of resources sure to be of use to librarians interested in the intersections of environmental activism and information work.