

# THE MYTH OF LIBRARY NEUTRALITY

---

Candise Branum (2008)

---

## *Introduction*

A common discourse taught in library school is the importance of the librarian as an objective and neutral professional. As a public service, librarians must serve the entire public equally regardless of moral values and political views, and as librarians our primary role is that of a mediator in the public's access to information and knowledge. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution states that Congress cannot create any laws limiting people's freedom of speech or expression, and in the library setting this is used to ensure that patrons maintain the right to receive information. It is in this quest to provide information to *all* people that libraries have adopted the idea of neutrality.

Since the 1920s, librarians have been advocating for the transformation into an intellectual and scientific academic discipline, which has historically placed the importance of neutrality and objectivity above those of ethical and moral considerations. Although alternative professional models were available, the library field's desire for professional status led to the acceptance of a "scientific" path (Dick 3). The extreme end of this concept of neutrality places the librarian as a passive mediator, devoid of emotion but reflexively delivering information. In his seminal paper, Foskett stated that, "The librarian ought to vanish as an individual person, except in so far as his personality sheds light on the working of the library" (Foskett 10). This idea of the librarian as a neutral medium takes away the powerfulness of the lived experiences and learned knowledge of librarians.

In addition, this move towards professionalism distances itself from the traditionally "female" traits that have defined the profession by avoiding female work, i.e., service positions. Technical

and administrative positions continue to be filled by professional librarians, while reference and service jobs are now routinely being filled by paraprofessionals. In continuing to investigate this profession's complex relationship to stereotypically gendered roles, we can also see that although the scientific model the profession has adopted includes values that have historically been associated with men, though the foundations of librarianship are quite the opposite: as Harris bluntly states, "The pursuit of the type of professionalism exhibited in the male fields is basically incompatible with the equitable sharing of resources" (Harris 875).

In reference services, the definition of "neutrality" has been used interchangeably with "objectivity" to indicate the librarian is providing information in a non-judgmental way, but neutrality also conveys a sense of unimportance. Additionally, when librarians do not use their vast knowledge to assist patrons to the extent of their ability, passive librarianship becomes a hindrance to library users (McMenemy 180).

Librarians have been publicly voicing dissent towards neutrality since at least the 1980s, when a number of radical librarians coming out of the climate of social upheaval in the 1960s-1970s began to call for a re-examination of the idea of library neutrality (Dick 220). Individuals on the margins have been writing on this topic for decades, but there is still a rift between librarians who desire a distant and professional objectivity and post-modern librarians who hope to bring an ethical edge to librarianship. In looking at the inherently political nature of libraries, the inability of the concept of "neutrality" to actually be neutral, and the move towards social justice in librarianship, this paper aims to address some of the faults of librarian neutrality and entice readers to begin thinking about the real role of libraries.

### *The Political Nature of Libraries*

Though libraries claim a space of neutrality, one of the major responsibilities of libraries is to fill information deficiencies and bring knowledge to the masses, which is inherently political; in this way, the idea of neutrality de-politicizes the very political nature of librarianship. The transformation from an industrial society to a knowledge-based society has had a great effect on

the library profession. Information is now a commodity to be bought and sold to the highest bidder, and because power is intrinsically tied to the ability to access information, those without access continue to be marginalized. Sandy Iverson makes the assertion that, as the information leaders charged with providing access to information to those who do not have the resources to buy information, librarianship is an inherent act of social and economic justice. Though the concept of neutrality works to provide fair and equitable treatment to people of all social, economic, religious and philosophical variants, it also attempts to silence those who are working within the system from rocking the boat and creating radical change. As the guardians of information in a society based around gaining access, librarians are in a powerful position, even though they continue to reject the political nature of the work they do. In this way, neutrality is much like a collar and leash to keep librarians from crossing over any abstract lines the profession has drawn.

The very procedures by which librarianship is built upon are also intrinsically political, such as collection development and reference services. West notes that librarians practice self-censorship every day in book selection for collection development. Librarians buy primarily from corporate vendors, a practice that has not changed much since the publication of West's work. In a study conducted during the same time period, a mere 5% of libraries surveyed made systematic efforts to collect "alternative, independent, and dissident material" (West 1652). Providing book recommendations is also a biased practice. If librarians were to be truly neutral, they would not voice any opinion and providing recommendations would be completely algorithmic. Librarians do not limit our reference services in order to be neutral, and this example is just the first of many chips in the carefully constructed image of the neutral library professional.

Scholars suggest that Western institutions are never neutral but based around the dominant white, heterosexual male society. In a society that favors "assertiveness, competitiveness, sportsmanship, linear thinking, individualism, and the sublimation of emotion", women and

minority viewpoints are often counter to the dominant ideology (Stoffle and Tarin 47). In this environment, minorities are expected to assimilate and conform or risk not being taken seriously by the library community, being passed over on grants or new work opportunities, or lacking institutional support. Attempts have been made to diversify the library profession by doing outreach to minorities, but when the library profession pushes the idea of neutrality, they are essentially asking people who have complex lived histories that fall outside the dominant paradigm to adopt a pretense of neutrality. Suggesting that people who have experienced oppression need to remain neutral is not only inconsiderate, but it is blatantly oppressive, as it is asking people to repress their core identities and ignore their lived experiences.

### *Is Neutrality Really Neutral?*

The move towards the neutral professional is not without bias; the very idea of neutrality is one that is based on the values of fairness, honesty and detachment, which are values that privilege one point of view over another. In this light, neutrality is actually based on a set of moral and political values that are non-neutral (Harding). Jensen follows up, stating that there is a distribution of power in all situations, and that the act of taking no political stance by claiming neutrality is in itself a political choice (29). Those who critique the dominant ideology are seen as “political”, but those who uphold dominant values are no less political: the privilege of taking no action is in an of itself a politically charged move (Jensen 30). As a partisan ideology, librarian neutrality is based in a “democratic humanism” that masquerades as general human interests but in fact challenges power and privilege, even though librarianship would like to contend that it is a neutral entity (Rosenzweig 42). Harding asserts that due to the social and economic effects of institutionalized racism, the class system, imperialism, and sexism, minorities often have values that fall outside the dominant “neutral” values (572). Because minority perspectives may conflict with dominant values, they are often dismissed as “alien”, and engaging in cultural behaviors may be regarded as practicing “bad habits” (Harding 572).

The very definition of neutrality is a non-specific ideal that is not set in stone. Though definite values can be applied to it, it is difficult for humans with bias and lived histories actually to adhere to set applications of neutrality. Since World War II, the Swiss government has continued to be emblematic of neutrality, but their actions during the war were far from how we define neutral. While maintaining vocal neutrality, the Swiss banks (funded by the government) conspired with the German Nazi government to smuggle millions of stolen Jewish Deutschmarks out of Germany (Good 26). Though the government claimed political neutrality, these actions had obvious bias and consequence. Switzerland (and for a while, the “neutral” United States) turned a blind eye to the genocide of an entire ethnic group, and in the process became complicit in immoral actions. By being politically neutral, these groups ignored the atrocities that were occurring, in the process validating genocide by not speaking out against it. This essentially changes our definition of what it means to be neutral: *neutrality* can be seen as a privilege that an individual or institution can use to dodge issues that may not directly affect them and fall in line with the dominant powers.

Though librarians may attempt to maintain an air of objective and neutral professionalism, institutions that claim neutrality are in danger of unconsciously adopting the values of the dominant paradigm. This can be dangerous because it hides under the guise of neutrality and is thus unexamined. As Blanke notes, “Librarianship’s reluctance to define its values in political terms and to cultivate a sense of social responsibility may allow it to drift into an uncritical accommodation with society’s dominant political and economic powers” (39). Because information is now a commodity, by not defining itself in political terms and hanging onto the myth of neutrality, librarians may have a difficult time defending the fundamental ideals of free and equal access to information from powerful and wealthy influences (Blanke 40). Neutrality is “a code word for the existing system. It has nothing to do with anything but agreeing to what is and will always be — that’s what neutrality is. *Neutrality is just following the crowd*. Neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be” (Horton and Freire 120).

## *Ethics*

In the neutral professional model, librarians are seen as value-neutral, and objectivity is highly valued; this leaves a greater emphasis on the delivery of information over the result, regardless of the morality of the end product (Dick). In a post-9/11 environment, librarians must work hard to safeguard the individual rights of library users. The American Library Association views some sections of the USA Patriot Act as a threat to the constitutional and privacy rights of library users, but there are also ethical considerations to bear in mind. Studies have shown librarians to provide excellent reference services even in reference interviews where it is implied by the information seeker that the information will be used for illegal activities, including creating a bomb that would blow up “a normal suburban house” (Dowd; Hauptman). Neutrality gives the information profession the ability to take a non-stance on important issues and avoid accountability by abdicating any ethical responsibility.

Library neutrality does not exist in a vacuum, and social and political issues affect not only library patrons but library employees as well. Librarianship has not been exempt from the history of homosexual oppression; historically, queer librarians (like LGBTQ individuals in all other employment areas) were at-risk for job loss and being socially ostracized (Joyce). When American libraries take neutral, non-political stances on issues such as homosexuality, the collection and community members suffer the consequences: in a historical look at how the neutrality of public libraries affected the queer community, Joyce found that library collections had been completely deficient in materials about homosexuality unless the material condemned it or spoke of it in a completely clinical (and dehumanizing) way (43-44).

In 2005, Phenix and de la Pena McCook looked into the ways in which other professionals such as doctors and lawyers have worked towards human rights while still maintaining their professionalism. Libraries have begun to move in this direction as well, as library organizations such as the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Roundtable focus on social justice libraries; in addition, the ALA’s 2010 Strategic Plan includes a commitment to the public good and an

emphasis on social responsibilities (Phenix & de la Pena McCook). Social science neutrality is incompatible with a commitment to human rights, as it does not allow for compassion or a desire to create change. A neutral society does not care about potential human rights violations, because it is focused on a detached equality, albeit one that does not take into account pre-existing social and economic inequities.

It is oppressive of the library profession to ask people from marginalized groups to adopt a neutral point of view. In doing this, we are asking them to ignore their community history, struggles and identity. We cannot ask librarians of color to neutrally assist a patron in searching for information supporting Eugenics, just as we cannot as a queer librarian to be neutral on the subject of gay hate crimes. Oppressed groups do not have the option of neutrality. Neutrality is a privilege afforded to those who do not live in fear, have not experienced genocide and war, do not have to daily face the effects of institutionalized racism. Neutrality is seeing people who suffer and choosing turning your back. It is seeing institutionalized racism and not having to form an opinion on it (or not even noticing it in the first place). It is seeing queer youth being taunted and turning our heads. All hatred is on a continuum, and on the far end, it is seeing explicit racism, gay bashings, or even genocide, and deciding to say and do nothing. This is what neutrality is: an excuse to not care.

### *Outdated Discourse*

So why is librarianship as a profession still holding onto the idea of neutrality? In this paper, I attempted to find academic information supporting the idea of library neutrality, but only found (sometimes decades-old) pieces by those questioning the concept. It looks like what we have ended up with is outdated discourse that does not reflect what the library profession is doing and how they actually feel about it. It is obvious that librarianship (as with many other professions) is moving away from rigid objectivity and towards a socially responsible model, but there is a disconnect between the practice and the discourse. Perhaps it is time that the

profession begins to formally move away from the social science model and towards a social work community-based practice one.

## REFERENCES

- Blanke, Henry. "Librarianship & Political Values: Neutrality or Commitment?" *Library Journal* 114.12 (1989): 39-43.
- Dick, Archie. "Library and information science as a social science: Neutral and normative conceptions." *Library Quarterly* 65.2 (1995): 216-235.
- Dowd, R.C. "I want to find out how to freebase cocaine or yet another unobtrusive test of reference performance." *Reference Librarian* 25-26 (1989): 483-93.
- Foskett, B.J. "The Creed of a Librarian: No Politics, No Religion, No Morals." London: The Library Association (1962).
- Good, Joseph. "The Hottest Place in Hell: The Crisis of Neutrality in Contemporary Librarianship." *Progressive Librarian* (2006/2007): 28.
- Harding, S. "After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics, and 'Strong Objectivity'." *Social Research* 59.3 (1992): 567-587.
- Harris, R.M. "Gender, power, and the dangerous pursuit of professionalism." *American Libraries* 24.9 (1993): 874-876.
- Hauptman, R. "Professionalism or Culpability? An Experiment in Ethics." *Wilson Library Bulletin* 50 (1976): 626.
- Horton, Myles and Paulo Freire. *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.
- Iverson, Sandy. "Librarianship and Resistance." *Progressive Librarian* 15 (1998): 14-19.
- Jensen, R. "The myth of the neutral professional." *Progressive Librarian* 24 (2004/2005): 28-34.
- Joyce, S. "A few gates redux: An examination of the social responsibilities debate in the early 1970s and 1990s." *From: Questioning library neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*. Library Juice, 2008.
- McMenemy, D. "Librarians and Ethical Neutrality: Revisiting The Creed of a Librarian." *Library Review* 56.3 (2007): 177-181.

Phenix, K.J., and Katherine de la Pena McCook. "Human rights and librarians." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45.1 (2005): 23-25.

Rosenzweig, M. The basis of a humanist librarianship in the ideal of human anatomy. *Progressive Librarian* 23 (2003): 40-45.

Stoffle, C.J., and Tarin, P.A. "No Case for Neutrality: The Case for Multiculturalism." *Library Journal*, July 1994: 46-49.

West, Celeste. "The Secret Garden of Censorship: Ourselves." *Library Journal* 108.15(1983): 1651-1654.