

## A Tale of Two Neutralities

Neutrality is a divisive topic because of the varying definitions (and attainability). Its origins in librarianship has varying starting points and meanings. For example, some sources claim that neutrality started in the 19th century, others claim near the 1930s, and some claim that libraries have never been neutral. Just like the varying starting points and definitions neutrality has many differing views attached to it. In this paper we will explore four views of neutrality and look at possible solutions.

Stephen MacDonald and Briony Birdi offer four views of neutrality. Those for neutrality claim that it does not advocate for a particular side, it guards against censorship, and promotes a professional “welcome to all” attitude. Then there are the ones where the idea of neutrality is great, but by claiming to be neutral libraries are seen as maintaining the status quo and create a “value vacuum” that only can exist inside a library. Adding onto this MacDonald and Birdi highlight that collections mimic social times, and with a neutral stance “skew collection decisions in favour of dominant values”. Next, they offer a view opposed to neutrality by stating that libraries have non-neutral social responsibilities, such as getting patrons ready to take on the world, having discussion about big social issues, and simply engaging the community they serve. Lastly, they focus on library values and that by fulfilling those the day-to-day work of library workers isn’t neutral (335-337). These views are important to view because they highlight the inconsistent definitions, views of neutrality, and offer insight into why neutrality is such a complex issue. The aim is to use these views as guiding principles to navigate the complexities of neutrality and offer a step towards an equitable future.

Conceptually, neutrality was born out of changing views of library duties and censorship. American libraries started out as an extension of the education system and the assumption that “the outcome of engagement with a text is known or can be predicted, and that educators must lead students to morally good texts at the proper time in one’s development” (Shockey 103). This way of thinking allowed for censorship in a morally-appropriate sense. However, new generations of librarians and views of librarianship emerged and created new safeguards for intellectual freedom (as noted in ALA Library Bill of Rights). Dr. Em Claire Knowles, retired Dean of Students at Simmons University, argues for neutrality as well. Dr. Knowles states that, “Neutrality is a process to which libraries and librarians must actively commit, a goal that must be continually sought, an aspiration that must be regularly renewed and reimagined so as to remain relevant to the institution and to the community it serves”. She is mainly speaking on equal access to materials, building space, and services. She expands on this idea by focusing on intangible qualities as well. “Promote the importance of reading and learning to keep our residents informed; respect people’s cultural views and understanding, but we must also help users to explore new perspectives; be open to reasonable accommodations to concerned patronage, and be prepared for any controversy created by those accommodations; and lastly, we must use all the available PR and marketing efforts to get our message out to the widest audience and to emphasize the positive role libraries and librarians play in a civil society” (Knowles). Her view of neutrality is a positive one that points to a sense of professional openness that leads to respect and opportunity for all to feel welcome and heard at a library.

Despite the positive views and goals of neutrality American libraries still exist in a divided nation with a very questionable past. “[Libraries] that push against dominant values are accused of bias, which then ignores pre-existing non-neutral positions” (MacDonald and Birdi 345). Despite libraries existing as a trusted non-political space they still are products of their time and products of a biased governing body. A participant in MacDonald and Birdi’s study says: “ You can aim for objectivity, but to remain completely neutral in a system that was already functioning at a time before neutrality was aspired to [is impossible]” (345). Adding to this view, Amelia Gibson et al, also assert that “libraries are not, and have never been, socially, politically neutral institutions” and also state that by being apolitical or neutral “they excuse themselves from engaging with social movements like BLM. From this perspective, choosing neutrality (or disengagement) in time of conflict is choosing to maintain status quo at the expense of one portion of a community” (753-754). Their argument is that by doing nothing libraries are ignoring their past, and in an effort to not alienate one group they are actively and continuously alienating another group. Kyle Shockey furthers the idea of tacit values by framing American librarianship under Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic capital; stating that “symbolic capital legitimizes existing economic, social, and cultural capital by granting and reinforcing systems of “objective” authority-- e.g. social prestige, academic credentials, common sense (107). Shockey argues that certain standards are set by a strong social power which because of that power legitimizes certain aspects of librarianship (and society). One example of this is a library’s collection; “[they are] structural features of the library institution, since they transcend both individuals and time. This makes library collections resilient and hard to shift. This means that the racial [and other non-white heteronormative] ideologies present in library collections more than one hundred years ago have consequences for future iterations of the collection” (Wickham and Sweeney 91). Furthering this claim is the fact that the dewey decimal system is still the type of classification used despite its 19th century inception. Books have stances and these stances have the power to promote status quo ideologies or promote change.

Not only does librarianship have hidden hegemonic values but according to the ALA they also have a responsibility to “embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion in everything they do” based on a every persons inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (American Library Association). In other words libraries have a responsibility to uphold DEI standards and to make sure to not infringe on people’s rights. This isn’t possible with neutrality because as noted earlier taking no stance on social issues promotes status quo values. Paul T. Jaeger et al expand on this assumption stating that “a so-called commitment to neutrality limits the ability of libraries to advocate for themselves, their patrons, and their communities. Citing examples of government agencies delegating health tasks to libraries, lack of political strength, and diminishing opportunity to affect negative educational trends (371-373). “If librarians want the public library to be considered a vital community resource, they are going to have to be actively engaged with the issues that affect

their patrons" ( Bossaler 198). ALA set a standard for libraries to have social obligation to DEI efforts, but by failing to take a stance on political disputes they put the burden on local libraries to serve their community as they see fit. Although this sense of local control is beneficial in a tailored policy development sense, offering no clear stance or insight libraries can pass off their social responsibility as neutrality (hindering service to marginalized groups, community served, and advocacy for themselves).

Library values determine what staff do everyday, how they interact with customers, and who is even hired to serve. These are determined by library board members, directors, ALA, schooling, and there is a slight indoctrination that happens to library workers in their onboarding process and more. Even then if a library was to promote impartial neutrality as their mainstay there has to be a slight rejection of personal values from library workers. Dani Scott and Laura Saunders ran a 9 question survey with 540 library workers responding; they found that "the topic of neutrality is nuanced, and that librarians may be operating under different definitions in different circumstances [...] These findings raise the question of whether librarians define neutrality differently in different situations. In other words, are librarians conceptualizing neutrality as 'not taking sides' when applying it to social justice issues and "being objective" when talking politics? Or, are librarians suggesting that neutrality is completely separate from social justice and, therefore, does not apply? If this is the case, what does this mean about how librarians see the relationship between intellectual freedom and social justice? (163). These questions and their findings validate the idea that neutrality is more value based than anything else, and that depending on the worker their perceived value will determine their approach. Confirming that day-to-day work is not neutral.

### **Possible Solutions**

Neutrality is a subject that has differing views dependent upon service community, worker, and view of social justice. Although, the definition of neutrality may never be agreed upon, steps libraries and library management can take include: recruiting and maintaining a diverse workforce, creating clear policy for instances of building usage and allowed speech, and a balanced collection.

In Espinal et al article on "Decentering Whiteness in Our Profession" they offer two ways to hire more diverse candidates. One, get more creative and flexible with offering incentives (more pay or training) to BIPOC who may have slightly higher or lower credentials. This approach opens the door for individuals with more transferable skills and creates a welcoming standard for BIPOC, essentially stating that they want the individual here. The other is to transform work environments "from microaggressions to microaffections" (158-159). The aim is to make the work environment more open to BIPOC without fear of feeling alienated or having to constantly battle racial battle fatigue. The diversity of workforce is important because if libraries have a history of whiteness and still a majority white profession

getting other voices, opinions and representations can help libraries advocate for themselves, their patrons, and their community.

Creating clear policy for building usage and hate speech is another important step. Clear policy gives library workers something to fall back on if challenged. Also, when advocating for everyone to use a library it's important to know what is deemed as hateful rhetoric instead of just voicing an opinion. In the section header of Katie Kritikos "From Neutrality to Justice" they state that "neutrality does not justify harm". That's the key to having these clear policies in place it's to not have the burden of determination to fall onto individual library workers. "The idea that certain views may be harmful to marginalized people and should thus be excluded in order to make all feel welcome have taken precedence over the idea that all individuals have the right to explore and express views no matter how

Abhorrent... For free speech to work, it must bend towards social justice; it must favor inclusivity over harm; it must become a progressive, not just a liberal, value" (Kritikos 26-27). The policies in place cannot promote harm or hate to any group and should actively work to progress a community towards inclusion and fair treatment.

Lastly, there has to be a balanced collection (i.e more diverse collections). Right now collections are typically dominated by white authors, white protagonist, and English. Population wise it makes sense but there are also elements of canon and classification in play as well. Despite these forces the biggest problem is the underlying messaging that takes place (creating a norm). "We must pay attention to not only how certain narratives are culturally produced, but how they are given material expression

and how they are performed" (Schlesselman-Tarango 14). By promoting materials that advocate for a certain way of life or relegate certain races as antagonist it hinders a libraries ability to build empathy, promote diverse voices, and limits the choices for patrons.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries have a lot of work to do on the side of neutrality and the first step is to define what exactly it means. Promoting access is a fine place to start but the commitment to community, future generations, and DEI show that access is not enough. By focusing on diversifying American librarianship and their offerings libraries will be able to back up their claim as community and political cornerstones.