Neutrality Isn't Neutral: Institutional Racism and the Mythic Notion of Library Neutrality

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Introduction

On June 23, 2019, the American Library Association (ALA) passed a resolution that removed Melvil Dewey's name from their top professional library award (Albanese, 2019). Dewey is regarded as "the father of modern librarianship" (Flood, 2019), but he had a history of antisemitism, racism, and sexual harassment. ALA cited that he "did not permit Jewish people, African Americans, or other minorities" admittance to his resort (Harrington, 2019). ALA's choice to remove Dewey's name from their medal is part of a larger cultural reckoning, where figures of power are being held accountable for their racism, sexism, and other misdeeds.

Removing Dewey's name from the medal is a symbolic, but not insignificant, step towards libraries addressing historic inequities. Racism in libraries is not always as brazen as what Dewey was guilty of—racism in libraries manifests institutionally. To counteract this, institutional racism in libraries must be identified and addressed. This paper will argue that institutional racism is perpetuated in libraries by the concept of library neutrality. This argument will be supported by a literature review of library neutrality and institutional racism. The content of this literature review will be analyzed, then the findings will be shared.

Library neutrality colors every aspect of librarianship. Broadly speaking, library neutrality means libraries are "content-neutral, open, and accessible to everybody" (American

Libraries, 2018). Although the term neutrality is not mentioned explicitly in the *Library Bill of Rights* (ALA, 2019), neutrality is one of the document's guiding principles (American Libraries, 2018). This is evident in the first sentence of the *Library Bill of Rights*: "Books and library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves" (ALA, 2019). The *Library Bill of Rights'* articulation of egalitarian community service and access is noble in theory.

In practice, library neutrality leads to a host of ethical and philosophical issues for libraries and librarians. For instance, the second policy of the Library Bill of Rights highlights the impossible challenge neutrality presents: "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues" (ALA, 2019). How is it possible to present all points of view on an issue (Lewis, 2008)? Should hate manifestos be given equal shelf space to works by African American writers? To better address these issues, this paper will examine arguments both for and against library neutrality with the intent of answering two questions: are libraries neutral? And, how does library neutrality affect institutional racism?

Despite the emphasis on neutrality in the *Library Bill of Rights*, libraries are anything but neutral organizations. Libraries are inherently not neutral because they reflect the moral and political character of the culture that created them. This means that libraries emulate the institutional racism embedded in American culture. Indeed, libraries have a long history of institutional—and sometimes overt—racism. Rubin acknowledges that the ALA failed to speak out against racism in library service for African Americans until the 1960s because they "did not want to be perceived as judging the political or social beliefs of its members" (2016, p. 71). Libraries still struggle to fully account for the pervasive effects of institutional racism.

In 2018, library neutrality became a hot-button issue in the LIS community when the ALA "adopted an interpretation revision to its Library Bill of Rights that states that libraries should allow hate groups to use their facilities for meetings" (Schaub, 2018). Some librarians felt that this interpretation went too far, while others—like the ALA Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, James LaRue—viewed the interpretation as a lawful expression of the values of neutrality (Schaub, 2018). The intensity of this debate among library professional shows just how important library neutrality is to libraries and LIS.

Literature Review

A review of literature was chosen as the research method for this paper. Since this paper merges two topics, library neutrality and institutional racism, this is a two-part literature review. First, literature on library neutrality were surveyed, selected, and reviewed. Then, this process was repeated for institutional racism in libraries. The bulk of this literature was in academic journals, library websites, textbooks, and library policies. This was sufficient for identifying trends in academic discourse involving library neutrality and institutional racism. Significantly, many of the texts surveyed on institutional racism as part of this literature review discuss library neutrality.

Library Neutrality Literature Review

ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* (2019)*, Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights* (2020)*, Core Values of Librarianship* (2019) are central to understanding library neutrality and the policies associated with it. In this paper, the *Library Bill of Rights* is understood to be the ultimate expression of library neutrality.

The essays featured in *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian* (Lewis, 2008) were critical in formulating this paper. This essay collection features writers that view library neutrality through a politically progressive, liberal lens. The book's final essay *The Hottest Place in Hell: The Crisis of Neutrality in Contemporary Librarianship* (Good, 2008) provides an ethical framework for understanding the implications of neutrality. Good draws from history, classic literature, and ethics to make a philosophical argument against library neutrality.

Good's argument against library neutrality is primarily philosophical. In contrast, a debate called *Are Libraries Neutral?* (American Libraries, 2018) provides practical perspectives both for and against library neutrality from some of the top names in LIS. This debate elucidates how library neutrality is currently debated in academia. Bourg (2018) argues libraries are inherently non-neutral organizations, while LaRue (2018) and Knowles (2018) view library neutrality as fundamental to intellectual freedom. Remarks made by Bourg, LaRue, and Knowles as part of this debate will be explored later in this paper.

Allen (2016), Farkas (2018), and Turner (2020) provide practical examples of how libraries and librarians respond to incidents that test library neutrality. Allen's letter of solidarity supports Black Lives Matter and other historically marginalized groups. Farkas addresses how libraries can support community members affected by hate groups. Turner supports allowing a hate group in a Seattle public library, citing library policy and the *Library Bill of Rights.* Turner's message is an example of what library neutrality looks like in practice. These three texts provide a modern context of how library neutrality is expressed or resisted.

Institutional Racism in Libraries Literature Review

Honma's *Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisilibilty of Race in Library and Information Studies* (2005) proved to be a significant contribution to academic discourse about how institutional racism and whiteness manifest in libraries and LIS. Honma's work was instrumental in developing the thesis of this paper. Although Honma does briefly discuss neutrality, it is not the central theme of the essay.

Schlesselman-Tarango (2017) references and expands on the work of Honma through the analysis of critical whiteness studies in the context of LIS. Critical whiteness studies "name, problematize, and make (more) visible" (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017, p. 8) issues caused by white supremacy. Schlesselman-Tarango believes the field of critical whiteness studies is a useful lens for understanding issues of white privilege, white supremacy, and white spaces in LIS.

Martin et. al (2013) analyze the effects of institutional racism on LIS and our information architecture. Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) is a deep dive on how discovery systems and search engines, especially Google, perpetuate racist attitudes. Martin et. al and Noble's research proves how institutional racism affects libraries and LIS.

nina de jesus (2014) directly links neutrality with institutional racism more than any other text featured in this paper and serves as a more detailed analysis of Bourg's argument.

Synthesis of Literature Reviews

The texts referenced in this literature review work to dispel the myth that libraries are inherently egalitarian institutions. Not only does racism affect libraries at an institutional level, racism is also baked into the information architecture of our society. My position on library

neutrality is a combination of Good and Bourg, and a refutation of LaRue. Libraries are not neutral, nor should they aspire to be. Neutrality in the face of ignorance and hate is unethical. Libraries reflect the culture that created them; in the case of libraries in the United States, this means they inseparable from a racist legacy. This legacy carries on in libraries as institutional racism.

Analysis and Findings

One of the main challenges of analyzing library neutrality is that there is no consensus of what library neutrality means. Some professionals like LaRue (2018) and Knowles (2018) view library neutrality as an expression of intellectual freedom—one of the *Core Values of Librarianship* (ALA, 2019). This conception of library neutrality is rooted in ALA policy and legality; in that sense, it is the view held by the library establishment. However, since this conception is mainly concerned with intellectual freedom, it has a flattening effect on the discourse of library neutrality at large. For instance, it does not address whether libraries should take an ethical stance on moral or political issues.

In contrast, Good (2005) and Bourg (2018) scrutinize library neutrality as part of a broader discussion on neutrality. To them, neutrality can be summarized as “not taking sides” (Bourg, 2018). Bourg is concerned with the practical implications of library neutrality; specifically, how library neutrality reinforces cultural inequities at an institutional level. Good advocates for non-neutrality from a philosophical position: neutrality is fundamentally immoral. These positions will be analyzed in the following sections.

Non-Neutrality

Good quotes President Kennedy to begin his moral commentary, “Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality” (2008, p. 142). Good argues this point by acknowledging the moral failure of those who maintained a stance of neutrality towards the Nazis in the lead up to World War 2. Good writes, “For it truly seems that somewhere in neutrality lays the negation of moral responsibility. President Kennedy and Dante Alighieri both understood that there is an inherent moral duty in the virtuous citizen to take hold of everyday events” (2008, p. 143). Although Good’s argument is sound, his militaristic examples are not without fault. Politicians have used the argument of moral responsibility as the rationale for unjust wars, like the Bush administration did with the War in Iraq (Powers, n.d.). However, those who abuse the argument of moral responsibility to justify heinous acts do not absolve those who act without morals.

But what does this mean for librarians? Good argues that expecting librarians to neutrally present both sides of an issue “merely for the sake of ensuring that both sides are heard” (2008, p. 143) creates a false binary. “Indeed, the very notion that both sides of an issue are inherently equal, and therefore entitled to an equal share of the public’s attention, smacks of moral relativism” (2008, p. 143). For instance, a librarian that adds books to a collection about social justice should not be expected to also include racist texts for the sake of maintaining a neutrality. If a librarian is expected to give homeopathy equal weigh to medicine, astrology equal weight to psychology, and conspiracy theory equal weight to history, then librarians are guilty of “peddling a hollow set of wares: ideas denuded of any moral or intellectual consequence” (2008, p. 143). Should a library carry books encouraging suicide just

because its collection also has books about coping with suicidal thoughts? The neutral answer is "yes." Good believes the ethical answer is "no."

Bourg (2018) argues that non-neutrality is intrinsic to libraries because they represent the values of a community. Every aspect of a library reflects the values, customs, and material culture of the communities that it is a part of. If that is true, then it must be acknowledged that libraries in the United States are "inextricably tied to the fact that the history of settler colonialism, slavery, and segregation" (Bourg, 2018). Bourg supports this claim by citing quantitative research. Librarianship is over 85% white as a profession, even though the population of the United States is only 63% white (Bourg, 2018).

Bourg argues against the pro-neutrality version of collection development—that all points of view should be represented. Bourg cites a survey that found 35% of people would approve of removing a book that argues black people are inferior and 17% would approve of removing books by homosexuals (Bourg, 2018). Not only do these statistics reveal discriminatory attitudes of the communities that libraries serve, they also show that having books representing all points of view is a non-neutral position. When a library chooses to carry books against the majority will of its community, it is taking a non-neutral position.

Neutrality

LaRue (2018) views library neutrality as an absolute expression of the First Amendment—that the intellectual freedom of patrons is unassailable, and librarians must put everything on the line in support of that freedom. He writes: "I argue that *neutrality* has a precise and essential meaning: We do not deny access to library services and resources. We do not seek to silence people on the basis of their backgrounds and beliefs" (2018). This means even satisfying the

needs of hate groups; he gives the example "'Suppose someone asks me for contact information for a hate group. Do I have to give it?' The answer is yes" (2018).

Although LaRue claims precision, the examples LaRue provides to support his argument complicate matters. LaRue acknowledges that while libraries should not limit speech, it is permissible to limit behavior. LaRue gives the example of shouting at or punching other patrons as grounds for removal. He contrasts this with examples of speech that are permissible, "speech, whether spoken or written, filmed, sung or worn on a T-shirt, is not the same thing as action. There has to be imminent and immediate physical danger" (2018). This does comport with the First Amendment (Hill, 2019), but imminent and immediate physical danger is open to interpretation.

For example, an African American librarian would be justified in viewing a group of patrons in Ku Klux Klan garb as a threat of imminent physical danger, despite their choice of dress being, as LaRue puts it, "not the same as action." Expecting librarians to wait until there is a threat of violence to remove a patron needlessly puts them in danger. Librarians should not be expected to put their bodies on the line for the sake of a job. Libraries should be safe spaces for staff and patrons alike.

LaRue (2018) justifies his argument that libraries should allow hate groups by claiming that speech that goes against the status quo is often labeled as hate speech. He suggests library neutrality protects groups like Black Lives Matter as much as it protects hate groups, noting that some critics have called Black Lives Matter a hate group. Just because *some* people label Black Lives Matter as a hate group does not mean that it is. It is not (Cohen, 2016). People who call Black Lives Matter a hate group use the phrase cynically to delegitimize it. LaRue's equation of

Black Lives Matter with real hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan is an example of a false binary, just like Good warned of. Hate groups that endorse genocide should not be equated to people of color that simply want to live free from terror. Protecting the intellectual freedom of hate groups does not also protect the intellectual freedom of historically marginalized communities.

Knowles' (2018) version of library neutrality is less rigid than LaRue's. Knowles acknowledges that true neutrality is not possible, but she argues that it is something libraries should strive towards. Knowles imagines that there is a middle ground between neutrality and non-neutrality, where librarians are not "all neutral or all for advocacy/social justice" (2018). Indeed, this is the most accurate depiction of what librarianship is like right now, except neutrality is the dominant mode at institutional and policy levels. While Knowles analysis is perhaps the most levelheaded, it is not without contradiction. When discussing neutral access and collection development, Knowles confesses, "If materials are inaccurate or products of fake news, they must be excluded, of course" (2018). Ask any Democrat or Republican what "fake news" is and you will get two very different definitions. This get to the contradiction at the core of neutrality: that an objective, non-partisan truth can be reached by consensus if everyone tries their best not to be biased. Unfortunately, even believing in facts is not a neutral position.

Institutional Racism in Libraries

Honma (2005) is particularly relevant because he identifies neutrality as an instrument of whiteness. Honma argues that framing libraries in the language of democracy and neutrality "conceals the covert structural forms of racial exclusion that protect white racial interests" (2005). Honma contends that LIS has failed to keep up with academic discourse on race, and

instead “functions in a race-blind vacuum” (2005). Scholars and students in the field of LIS know that this is an issue, but Honma argues that a critical discussion of race in libraries in absent.

Martin et. al give examples of how technology “influences or reinforces falsely constructed views or implicit biases of its designer” (2013, p.3). The technology we use seems neutral at face value, but often reflects a white, Eurocentric worldview. For instance, computer keyboards are designed for English speakers; non-English speakers may have to “resort to multiple steps to type in another language” (2013, p.3).

Noble (2018) urges readers to understand that despite the perception of big data, algorithms, and search engines as being neutral or objective, these systems reflect the values of their designers. There is ample evidence that many designers of these technologies “openly promote racism, sexism, and false notions of meritocracy” (2018, p. 2). Noble gives the example of an “antidiversity” manifesto written by Google engineer James Damore to reinforce this claim. Noble identifies this as a part of a “technological redlining,” which she defines as “the power of algorithms in the age of neoliberalism and the ways those digital decisions reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling” (2018, p. 1). Noble writes about racial profiling built into Google’s search engine, noting that search phrases like “black girls,” “Latinas,” and “Asians” tend to return sexualized, if not pornographic, results.

The library catalogue also has implicit biases. Ros (2019) research found racial and sexual bias in the Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings. Searches for “women” and “men” revealed unbalanced results. There were 4065 results for the term “women” and 444 results for “men.” Ros uses the subject “astronauts” to explain why this matters: “Women are designated with ‘Women astronauts’ and ‘African American women

astronauts,' but there is no subject heading for male astronauts" (2019). The catalogue assumes astronauts are straight white men.

This is not a new trend. The Dewey Decimal Classification system, which was created by Melvil Dewey in 1876, reflects a 19th-century, Christian, Eurocentric worldview (Rubin, 2016). Of course, this aligns with the hegemonic culture of Dewey's time, but that still proves the point that technology is inseparable from a creator's biases. It was not just outed racist Dewey that was guilty of creating Eurocentric classification systems; Rubin acknowledges that most other classification systems also have this issue (2016).

de jesus (2014) makes the case that the Eurocentric worldview embedded in librarianship is part of a "white supremacist settler state" ideology. de jesus supports this claim by examining the historical roots of libraries in the United States. The primary goal of libraries, de jesus argues, is to create "better citizens" for American democracy—a democracy that thrived on the enslavement of black people and the genocide of Native Americans (2014).

Results & Findings

Despite the guise of neutrality, libraries are not neutral. Libraries reflect a white, Eurocentric worldview that was built on the enslavement and destruction of black and brown people and is reinforced by a professional class comprised of 85% white people (de jesus, 2014; Bourg, 2018). Not only does racist power imbalance exist at an institutional level, but the information architecture of our society reflects a Eurocentric, and sometimes explicitly racist, worldview (Martin et al, 2013; Noble, 2018). Neutrality advocates argue that library neutrality is an expression of a commitment to intellectual freedom (LaRue, 2018; Knowles, 2018). The pro-neutrality version of intellectual freedom is egalitarian, but is not equitable. It fails to account

for the disfiguring effect institutional racism has on librarianship. Intellectual freedom is essential, but it is only one component of neutrality. Moreover, the intent of non-neutrality is to equitably affirm intellectual freedom.

The discussion of institutional racism in libraries has improved since Honma first published *Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies* (2005). Writers like Bourg (2018) and de jesus (2014) made significant contributions by linking neutrality to institutional racism. Farkas (2018) and Allen (2016) provided examples of how libraries can be supportive of historically marginalized communities, while Hodge (2019) taught how to integrate cultural humility in libraries. The ALA started the #LibrariesRespond hashtag to encourage discussion about how libraries respond hate groups; they also published a number of equity, diversity, and inclusion statements (n.d.).

Conclusion

This literature review revealed the connection between institutional racism and library neutrality. Libraries are not neutral. Indeed, neutrality is not real—it is purely aspirational. This aspiration means overlooking the history of racism in libraries and how institutional racism still affects libraries to this day. Libraries should take a stance of non-neutrality at an institutional level to oppose racism and white supremacy. Libraries and LIS must continue working towards implementing cultural humility and equity at all level of librarianship. This can be encouraged by updating library policy to reflect a non-neutral stance. For further study, consider how *Library Bill of Rights* and its interpretations could be updated to emphasize non-neutrality, cultural humility, and equity.

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