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Neutrality in public libraries: How are we defining one of our core values?

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Abstract

In recent years, library professionals have been struggling with the idea of neutrality, debating whether it is even possible to achieve and, if so, whether it is desirable. This study examined public librarians' definitions of "neutrality" and asked questions about how this "neutrality" affects their work in libraries. A total of 540 US library workers from 40 different states responded. The most commonly held definition was "being objective in providing information." Although definitions varied somewhat, there was a high level of agreement with what constitutes neutrality across different scenarios. There were also indications of conflict between personal beliefs and professional values.

Keywords

Ethics, intellectual freedom, neutrality, public libraries, values

Introduction

In recent years, library professionals have been struggling with the idea of neutrality, debating whether it is even possible to achieve and, if so, whether it is desirable. The library and information science (LIS) literature is rife with articles examining the role of neutrality in the profession, and a host of national and regional LIS conferences has devoted sessions or even entire conference themes to the topic. Similarly, the topic of neutrality in libraries receives regular attention on social media, including through Twitter's #critlib, and in blogs like *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. However, in working through the discussions and literature, it seems that those involved in these debates are not always working from the same definitions of neutrality. Indeed, the American Library Association (ALA) does not include the word "neutrality" in its standards or values statements, and thus offers no direct guidance on the role of neutrality in the profession. Instead, that role is debated within the LIS literature, but often without a clear definition or operationalization of terms. In fact, the term "neutrality" seems to be used for, or conflated with, everything from not taking a side on a controversial issue to the objective provision of information and a position of defending intellectual freedom and freedom of speech.

Each of these possible definitions for or aspects of neutrality has a bearing on how information professionals implement services and engage with patrons. The importance of neutrality to the field is evidenced by the fact that debates on neutrality often cast the concept as either a fundamental professional value, albeit one that is not explicitly mentioned in the professional codes of ethics and values, or, conversely, as a false ideal that interferes with librarians' role of social responsibility, which is an explicitly stated value of librarianship (American Library Association, 2019a). Since neutrality is not written into professional codes, one might wonder how it has come to be viewed as a core value by some. As explored in more detail in the literature review, the concept of neutrality, especially by those who defend it, tends to be equated with intellectual freedom, which, like social responsibility, is a core value (American Library Association, 2019a).

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As Oltmann (2016b) explains, the library tradition of providing unfettered access to information is rooted in American and democratic ideals of intellectual freedom and freedom of speech, which themselves are founded on three main theories. The marketplace of ideas holds that if all information is made accessible and left open to debate, the best ideas and information will eventually surface. According to the democratic ideal, information access is necessary to a functioning democracy, as citizens must be able to access and use information in order to exercise their rights, including the right to vote. Finally, the theory of individual autonomy posits that free speech is empowering and the ability to exercise free speech enables self-fulfillment. Thus, by enabling access to information, libraries are facilitating citizens' rights to self-government and self-fulfillment.

Intellectual freedom may well be a core value of librarianship and of democracy writ large, but is it the same thing as neutrality? The argument seems to be that in supporting intellectual freedom, librarians are, at least in theory, not taking sides because they are not acting as gatekeepers by deciding what information should be accessible or passing judgment on the types of information that people choose to access. In other words, they are not taking sides on the content of or the access to the information they provide. However, librarians are indeed taking a side by choosing to support intellectual freedom and work against censorship. What is more, their choice in that regard has consequences which may not be neutral. Further, one could question whether librarians really are not taking sides on the content of and access to information. Certainly, they make decisions about what resources to add or not add to their collections, displays, book clubs, and so on, and those choices could imply judgment of content. And, when librarians assist people in finding answers to questions and evaluating the information they find, they are making judgments about authority, accuracy, relevance, and credibility. In such cases, they might strive to be objective in their selections and evaluations, but is that the same as neutrality? Which of these aspects of neutrality, if any, are librarians supporting or challenging?

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the emotionally charged debates, it is critical that information professionals are clear about the terminology in order to ensure that everyone understands exactly what positions are being debated and defended. What, exactly, are we talking about when we talk about neutrality? This question is perhaps especially important in public libraries, which are generally assumed to be limited public forums and therefore have certain legal obligations and responsibilities regarding free speech and free assembly. While copious literature exists arguing various positions on neutrality, or considering its role in libraries from a philosophical standpoint, substantially less empirical research exists examining how librarians define neutrality, or their concerns and attitudes towards neutrality in their day-to-day practice. This article begins to address that gap. The authors engaged in a nationwide survey of public librarians, probing their conceptualizations and attitudes towards neutrality in an effort to better understand how the term is being used in practice, and how library professionals believe neutrality impacts their practice. The results of the study could help to focus the ongoing debate about neutrality across the profession, and will be of particular interest to public librarians and public library directors grappling with these issues.

Literature review

"Neutrality" is defined as "the state or condition of not being on any side; absence of decided views, feeling, or expression" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2019, neutrality entry). Interestingly, librarians tend to see the neutrality debate as a debate of core values in the profession. However, the ALA does not use the word "neutrality" in any of its major standards or codes, although it does use language that might be considered equivalent in some places. For example, the word "neutrality" does not appear in the "Code of ethics," but the document does assert that librarians should provide "unbiased responses" and "distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties" (American Library Association, 2008). Similarly, the "Library Bill of Rights" does not mention neutrality, but does describe positions that might be understood as "neutral" in declaring that librarians must create collections that represent "all points of view on current and historical issues" and make meeting-room spaces available "on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use" (American Library Association, 2019b).

The intent of these codes seems to be that librarians should not privilege any perspective or community group (or, conversely, restrict any perspective or community group) over another, which could be viewed as "not taking sides." Perhaps more tellingly, not only does the word "neutrality" not appear in the "Core values of librarianship" (American Library Association, 2019a), but the core values include some well-defined positions, such as upholding intellectual freedom and resisting censorship; protecting patron privacy and confidentiality; promoting diversity, democracy, and the public good; and being socially responsible. In some cases, LIS professionals seem to equate democratic ideals of freedom of speech and assembly and intellectual freedom, as laid out in the US Constitution or the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), as neutral positions. These documents provide people and entities with the same rights to speak, assemble, and access and share information, and do not privilege or abridge the rights of any individual or entity, even if their views are generally seen as offensive or repugnant. If, on the other hand, the government were granted the authority to regulate speech and the flow of

information, it would likely favor speech and information that promoted its own interests and suppress speech that challenged its power. The logic seems to be that these freedoms are neutral because they prohibit the government from taking sides, aligning with the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of neutrality presented above. While not stated explicitly, library proponents in the USA seem to draw on these democratic ideals and traditions when they defend neutrality as a professional value.

Of course, not everyone agrees with this position. Legal scholars note that the First Amendment is not truly egalitarian because its protections benefit different people and entities differently (Kessler and Pozen, 2018), and point out that the US government has indeed limited certain kinds of speech, including fighting words and child pornography (Chen and Marceau, 2015; Wright, 2011). Likewise, critics within the library field argue that upholding free speech and access to information are not neutral positions; rather, they are supporting certain democratic ideals, which entails choosing a side (Bourg, 2018).

Thus, neutrality is widely discussed in the LIS literature. Journals such as *Progressive Librarian* and the *Journal of Information Ethics* regularly publish articles broadly related to the issue of neutrality. Library Juice Press compiled 11 of these philosophical and practical essays that question and critique the concept of neutrality in the profession (Lewis, 2008). The topic also is widely discussed and debated in LIS blogs (see, for example, Bourg, 2018; Drabinski, 2018; Ferretti, 2018; O'Brien, 2017), and has been a theme or special topic of various professional conferences, panels, and presentations. Often, these discourses are philosophical in nature and framed as debates about what neutrality is, whether it is possible to achieve, and, if so, whether it is desirable. Indeed, the amount of philosophical literature on neutrality in library science is extensive and it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive overview. Rather, this review attempts to sum up the major aspects of the debate.

Some who question the usefulness or applicability of neutrality in library work seem to echo the dictionary definition, saying that neutrality is "not taking sides on social issues" (Sparanese, 2008: 77) and "a mask to support the status quo" (Litwin, 2006: 6). In summing up the debates about neutrality, Wenzler (2019: 56) identifies three main areas of contention for those who oppose neutrality as a professional value: namely, that it precludes librarians from advocating for social justice issues; it diminishes librarians to "mere technicians" who provide access to information without evaluation; and it is a myth, wherein "those who assert that libraries ought to be neutral ignore deeper structural forces that shape our social world." Indeed, Sparanese and Litwin assert that when people choose not to take sides, those who are currently in positions of power or whose voices are loudest remain so. These definitions seem to look at neutrality through the lens of politics and social justice, and purport that neutrality gets in the way of that social responsibility and advocacy.

Wenzler (2019) points out that any search in the literature will turn up little in the way of pro-neutrality research or articles, but much has been written in defense of intellectual freedom and in opposition to censorship. For instance, Swan (1989: 3, 11) asserts that "as librarians our cause is, in a very practical sense, not truth but freedom" because "the suppression of any idea can be dangerous to the flow of all ideas." This juxtaposition of neutrality with censorship is echoed elsewhere in the literature, pointing to a conflation of neutrality and intellectual freedom that is not often explicit. In order to discuss this neutrality debate more fully, we must make the purported connection between neutrality and intellectual freedom more clear.

Berninghausen's (1993) essay "Social responsibility vs the Library Bill of Rights" discusses neutrality as part of intellectual freedom. Therein, Berninghausen (1993: S1) says that adopting a social responsibility as opposed to an intellectual freedom philosophy "would force librarians to cease trying to maintain free access to all points of view . . . [They would] not even claim that *libraries* maintain neutrality and provide the full picture of reality." There are three important points being made by Berninghausen here: (1) social responsibility and neutrality would seem to be opposed to each other (although elsewhere in the article he says that maintaining intellectual freedom is part of social responsibility); (2) social responsibility is opposed to providing access to "all points of view"; and (3) neutrality is conflated with intellectual freedom to mean providing "free access to all points of view," therefore providing a "full picture of reality." Compare this to the definition of intellectual freedom given in the 9th edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, which states that intellectual freedom "is used in the library profession to mean the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction" (Magi and Garner, 2015: 3).

This linking of neutrality with intellectual freedom was reflected at the ALA 2018 Midwinter Conference. The Presidential Program presented a panel debate on the question of "Are libraries neutral?" where those defending neutrality seemed to do so in terms of intellectual freedom. For instance, James LaRue, former Director of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, discussed neutrality as not "[denying] access to library services and resources" and not seeking "to silence people on the basis of their backgrounds or beliefs" (Anon, 2018: 33). He further stated that neutrality is "enshrined in our values, our laws, and our policies" (34). In the same program, after extolling the value of intellectual freedom, Em Claire Knowles said: "I further believe that we can achieve, or aspire to achieve intellectual freedom only by beginning with a commitment to neutrality" (35). Knowles (2018) goes on to distinguish

"active neutrality" from passive, and says that "active neutrality" combined with "objectivity," which she defines as the ability to "consider or represent the facts, and other information without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions," is the key to fostering intellectual freedom in our libraries.

Despite the widespread attention to neutrality in the field, little research exists on the topic. Articles and conference panels and presentations focus almost exclusively on philosophical discussions about the moral and ethical implications of neutrality, often juxtaposing it with intellectual freedom, but far less empirical research has been conducted to understand practitioners' attitudes towards neutrality or to ascertain how these values play out in practical library work. The existing studies on intellectual freedom and censorship can be instructive, given the repeated link made between these two concepts and neutrality. For instance, Hauptman (1976) approached 13 different reference librarians and asked for assistance with finding information to create a bomb, and found that not a single librarian objected to his question or refused to help him find the information on ethical grounds. A similar experiment several years later conducted by Dowd (1989) produced similar results.

Interestingly, the researchers had very different reactions to their findings. Although he does not use the word "neutrality" in describing the responses, Hauptman (1976: 626) inferred that these librarians "appeared to abjure responsibility to society in favor of responsibility to their role of librarian as disseminator of information," and indeed one librarian insisted that the nature of the request was "irrelevant" and that if he refused to help the patron, it would be tantamount to "discrimination." Hauptman (1976: 627) is disturbed by his findings, suggesting that these librarians are "confusing censorship with ethical responsibility," and later describing the librarians' approach as an "ethical vacuum" (Hauptman, 1996). Dowd (1989), on the other hand, lauded the free access to information as a societal good and a professional necessity.

More recent studies have tended to focus on the intellectual freedom and censorship in collection-building. For instance, while not focused on neutrality per se, Oltmann's (2016a, 2016c, 2019) studies of public librarians' views on intellectual freedom lend a hand in understanding the interplay of professional ethics and library work. In one study, public librarians in the Midwest were asked if they agreed with a series of statements on intellectual freedom. One such statement—"Public libraries should provide their clients with access to information from a variety of sources"—garnered a 98.4% agreement rate (Oltmann, 2019). Oltmann (2019: 9) found that "those with MLS [Master in Library Science] degrees were more likely to be aligned with stances taken by the ALA," although, overall, when respondents were asked if their personal beliefs ever conflicted with ALA stances on intellectual freedom, 39.8% said "yes." Other research studies similarly found that respondents felt a conflict between their personal beliefs and professional values at a rate of about 25% (Harkovitch et al., 2003; Moody, 2004).

Oltmann (2016a: 307) found that when public library directors discussed intellectual freedom, they used the phrase "community standards" not only to justify not spending taxpayer dollars on items that would not circulate or were likely to offend, but also to describe the community's understanding that public libraries are meant to house resources with diverse viewpoints for diverse library users. There was also an emphasis on intellectual freedom as "a responsibility owed to the community by the public library" (Oltmann, 2016a: 307). This view suggests that maintaining the ideal of intellectual freedom ensures diverse resources and makes the library better able to serve all members of the community. The concept of community came up in Oltmann's (2016c) research on collection-building as well, though characterized as pressure on librarians from community members to purchase, withdraw, label, or move items, with an average of 26% of the respondents saying that they had felt these pressures.

Moody's (2004) research into collection-building and censorship showed librarians' focus on accuracy and balance. Specifically, librarians felt that "it was irresponsible to knowingly present incorrect information" (Moody, 2004: 176), with 44% of librarians rejecting creationist texts. The application of this standard was confusing, however, as a Holocaust-denial text was rejected by only 24%. The urge to provide accurate information showed up in another of Oltmann's (2016c) studies, where librarians said that they would not purchase certain items for the collection if they were "false or inaccurate." With regard to "balance," 25% of Moody's (2004) respondents said that libraries should provide "balance," although descriptions of what balance looked like ranged from having resources from all viewpoints to not purchasing "highly political items" and a belief that each individual resource should show balanced content.

The literature clearly shows that librarians are concerned with the idea of neutrality and how it impacts their practice. However, throughout the literature, neutrality is given myriad definitions, ranging from not taking a position to providing balanced collections and actively promoting intellectual freedom. This study will add to the body of literature by exploring whether public librarians share a common definition of neutrality and how the idea of neutrality impacts their daily work.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how public librarians in the USA understand neutrality and examine how questions of neutrality impact their practice. The importance of the topic is evidenced by the vast literature devoted

to neutrality, as well as the number of professional conferences, debates, blogs, and social media threads centered on the topic. The debates on neutrality are not just widespread; they are emotionally charged. As Bourg (2018) noted, library history, programs, and services are all rooted in a specific context, some of which is racist, sexist, and degrading. She posits that those who refuse to take a stance by claiming neutrality are furthering these oppressive structures. However, as illustrated in the literature review, and noted by Bourg (2018), critics and advocates are not always using the same definitions of neutrality or conceptualizing it in the same way. Given the stakes of the debate, this article aims to contribute to the discussion through an empirical investigation of public librarians' understandings of and attitudes towards neutrality, as well as their perceptions of how neutrality should manifest in the profession. Specifically, this study focused on the following research questions:

- How do public librarians define neutrality? Is there a commonly held definition of neutrality?
- When and to what extent do public librarians think about neutrality when engaged in everyday practices such as collection-building and creating displays?
- Given specific scenarios, to what extent do public librarians see each scenario as an illustration of neutrality, and to what extent do they agree that librarians should engage in the behaviors depicted in the scenarios?

In order to understand more about how public librarians are defining "neutrality," the researchers developed a survey using Qualtrics software. The aim of the study was to establish a baseline of understanding on the issue, which requires a large sample. Thus, a survey was selected as the most appropriate method, as it would allow for greater distribution and a larger response than other methods such as focus groups or interviews. Before the survey was sent out, it was pretested by colleagues of the researchers, and adjustments were made to the questions. Once a final version of the survey was ready, it was approved by the institution's Internal Review Board.

The survey had 9 questions and took approximately 10 minutes to complete (see Appendix 1). The first question asked the respondents to choose the statement that best defined neutrality to them from the following options: not taking sides on an issue; being objective in the provision of information; lacking bias; and not expressing opinions. While not necessarily exhaustive, the choices reflected the definitions and conceptualizations found in the professional literature and often employed in the debates. In some cases, the definitions might appear to dovetail or overlap, but the forced-choice option was purposeful and meant to discern the definition that most resonated with the respondents. Because neutrality seems to have many possible interpretations, and because those debating its merits do not always clearly particularize which definition they are challenging or defending, the aim of this question was to examine which of those various possibilities the survey respondents most associated with the term "neutrality." By forcing a choice, the researchers could first see if there was any consensus on the term, which could be used to contextualize other responses. Further, they could probe whether the definition chosen in this question corresponded to the actions that the respondents identified as examples of neutrality in later questions. The respondents were given an "other" option and were also provided with a free-text response question later in the survey where they could expand on their thoughts.

The next set of questions asked the respondents how often they considered neutrality when performing certain job functions. The purpose was to see if concerns about neutrality surfaced more in some service areas than others, especially given the extent of discussions about neutrality in relation to collection development.

Next, the respondents were presented with a set of brief scenarios. The first set of questions asked the respondents to indicate whether they believed the scenarios were examples of "neutral" behavior, regardless of whether they agreed with the behaviors depicted. The purpose of this was to probe what actions or behaviors librarians equate with neutrality. The last set of questions presented the same set of scenarios, but this time the respondents were asked to indicate if they agreed with the behaviors and actions depicted. This set of questions allowed the researchers to determine the extent to which the librarians supported actions that they viewed as "neutral." Although not a one-to-one correspondence, the scenarios were developed to elaborate on the various definitions and conceptualizations of neutrality discovered in the literature. For example, the statement "A patron comments on a particular political figure and you do not offer your opinion" could be interpreted as not taking sides or not expressing an opinion. The survey ended with an open-ended question asking the respondents if there was anything they wanted to add.

In order to reach a wide range of participants and increase the sample size, the survey was distributed by email to a variety of professional listservs aimed at public librarians. An email invitation explaining the purpose of the research and a link to the survey were sent to listservs including the New England Library Association and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, and requests to distribute the survey were made to many ALA listserv moderators. The library association of every state was contacted and asked if they would be willing to send the survey out on their listserv.

The researchers reviewed the closed-ended portion of the survey by examining the overall counts and percentages of answers based on the total participation. In addition, cross tabulations were run to compare various demographic variables with the responses. Keyword

searches on the text answers were performed as well. Open text answers were analysed using an emergent coding scheme, in which the researchers read and reread the text comments to identify themes and patterns that arose from the responses themselves.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. To begin with, the survey was distributed through listservs and, while the number of responses was substantial, the study did not attempt to achieve a random sample, and so care must be taken in generalizing the results. Further, it is possible that the survey suffers from responder bias. It is possible that the people who were motivated to respond to this survey are different from those who chose not to respond. For instance, people with strong opinions about neutrality, or those who already think frequently about the issue, might have been more likely to respond than those who are not interested in the topic, and those differences might have skewed the results.

Also, although the survey was pretested, the researchers acknowledge that one question was misworded. This question asked whether, when purchasing a book on Democratic ideals, librarians should also purchase a book on Conservative ideals. The juxtaposition of Democratic and Conservative is misleading. The question should have used the word "Liberal" in place of "Democratic," and the researchers acknowledge that the wording potentially may have skewed the results for that scenario. This wording entailing the mistaken comparison of Conservative and Democratic values was part of two sets of questions: one asking participants' opnions on whether the scenario represented "neutrality," regardless of whether they agreed with the action described, and one asking whether they supported the action described. It is also worth acknowledging that, in an attempt to keep the survey brief, the scenarios listed were not only simplified, but also neglected some important issues surrounding neutrality—specifically, those regarding religion and neutrality in cataloging were not included.

Finally, it is important to note that the researchers hold their own opinions and positions on the issue of neutrality. Throughout the survey's development and data analysis, they took steps to check their own and each other's bias, including through constant self-reflection and consultation. Although attempts have been made by the authors to limit their own biases and the interference of their world view, this can never be achieved completely.

Findings

A total of 540 library workers from 40 states completed the survey. The respondents were fairly evenly distributed across a large range of job titles and functions, with the largest group of respondents identifying as library directors (26%), followed by public services librarians (17%). Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents by job title.

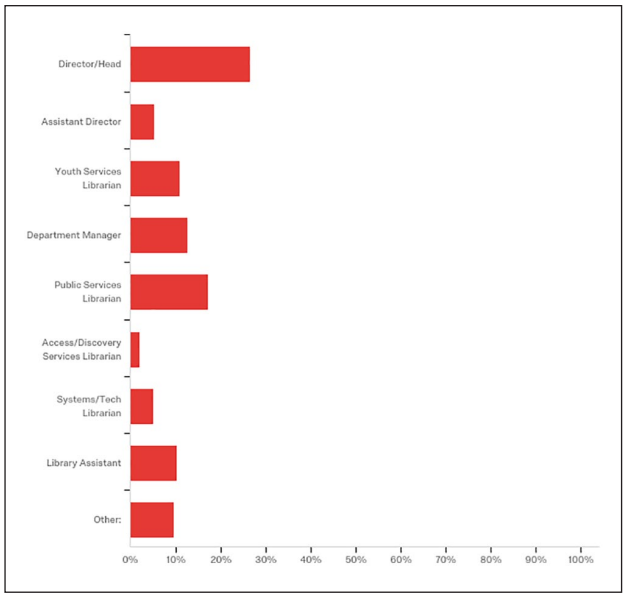

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents by job title.

The majority of the respondents (72%) held Master of Library and Information Science (MSLIS) degrees, and some respondents indicated that they were in MSLIS programs at the time of filling out the survey. The respondents came from a variety of geographic areas and settings. As noted above, 40 states were represented by the participants, but the vast majority of the library workers who responded (224) were from Massachusetts, followed by 56 from Maine, 31 from Missouri, 21 from Rhode Island, and 19 from Florida. Most of the participants identified as working in a "suburban" library setting (47%), while 30% said that they worked in a rural setting, and 23% answered that they worked in an urban library environment.

The first content question of the survey provided the respondents with a list of words and phrases, and asked them to select the one that best described "neutrality" to them. Regardless of the work environment, degree held, and geographic location, the vast majority of the respondents (68%) said that they defined the term "neutrality" as "being objective in providing information." This answer was consistent across geographic regions, settings, and job titles. Twelve percent of the participants defined neutrality as "not taking sides on an issue," followed by 9% who selected "lacking bias," and 5% who defined neutrality as "not expressing opinions." An additional 28 participants (5%) chose to write in their own definitions, and there was some overlap in their responses. Twenty-five percent of the write-in definitions indicated that neutrality could be defined by all of the options given, while another 25% believed neutrality to be a myth, with some elaborating to say that neutrality is actually the maintaining of the "status quo." Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of the responses to this question.

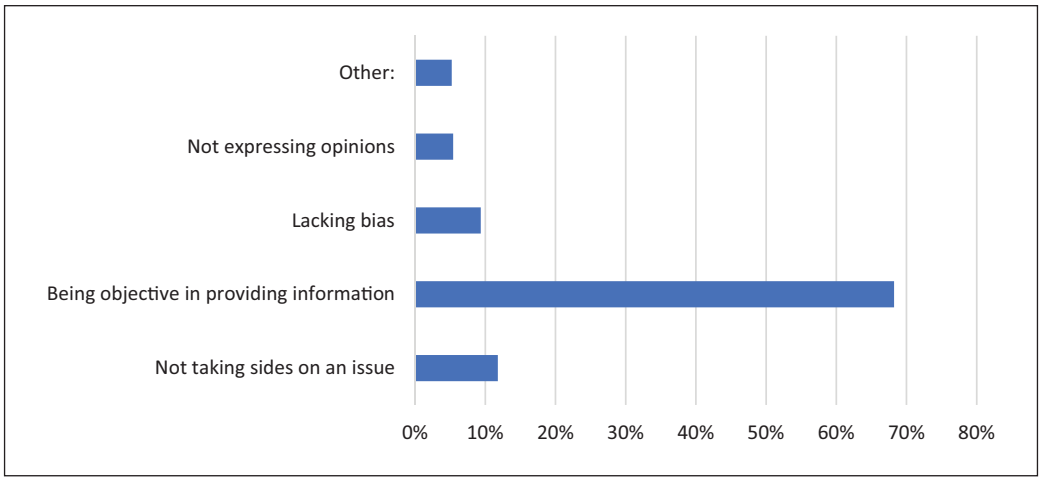

Figure 2. Definitions of neutrality.

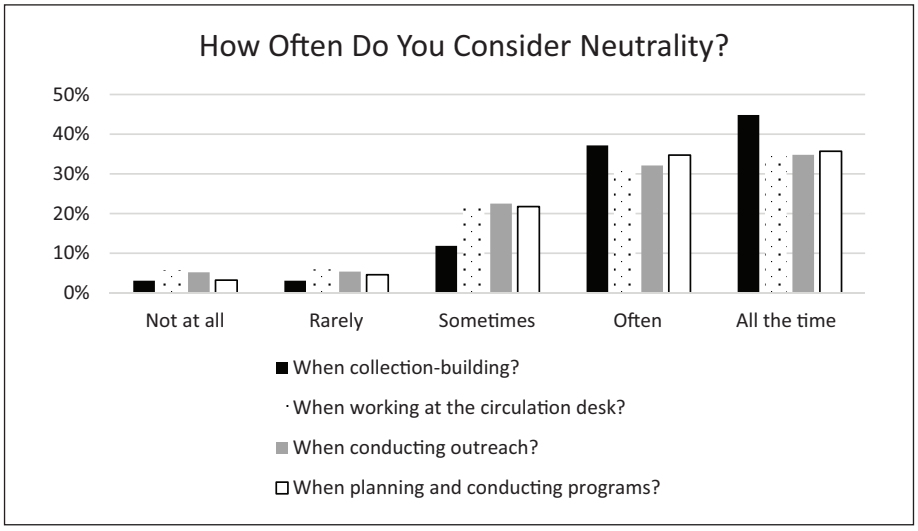

Figure 3. The figure shows the rate at which participants indicate that they think about neutrality when engaging in specific job functions.

The next question presented the respondents with a list of activities and asked them to indicate how often they think about neutrality when engaging in those activities. The findings suggest that most librarians think about neutrality fairly often across their job duties. Collection-building prompted the most consideration of neutrality, with 82% of the participants indicating that they think about neutrality "often" or "all the time" when collection-building. This was followed by 71% who think about neutrality "often" or "all the time" when planning and conducting programs, 67% who think about neutrality "often" or "all the time" when conducting outreach, and 66% who think about neutrality "often" or "all the time" when at the circulation desk. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of the responses to this question.

The rate of response on these questions was fairly consistent across job titles, library setting, and MSLIS status. In fact, cross tabs showed that there were no statistically significant differences in the responses, except between those who hold an MSLIS and those who do not hold an MSLIS for two activities. Interestingly, those respondents who do not have an MLIS were more likely to say that they think about neutrality "often" or "all the time" when at the circulation desk and when conducting outreach, and the differences were statistically significant ($p = .005$ and $p = .04$, respectively).

The next question presented the respondents with brief scenarios and asked them to indicate whether they believed that the actions described in the scenarios demonstrated a position of neutrality. Note that this question did not ask about their level of agreement with the scenarios, but whether they believed that the actions illustrated neutrality. The purpose of this question was to probe more deeply how librarians were conceptualizing neutrality beyond the simple definitions provided in the first question.

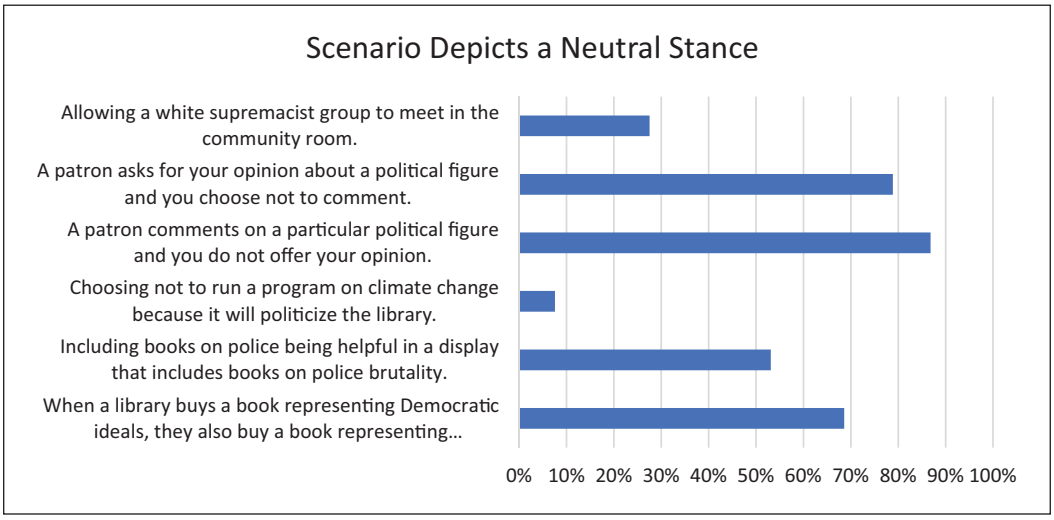

Figure 4. The chart shows participants' level of agreement that the given scenario describes a neutral stance.

The scenario that "A patron comments on a particular political figure and you do not offer your opinion" was most commonly selected, with 87% of the respondents indicating that this scenario demonstrated neutrality. Other scenarios included: "A patron asks for your opinion about a political figure and you choose not to comment" (79% indicated that this demonstrated neutrality); "When a library buys a book representing Democratic ideals, they also buy a book representing Conservative ideals" (67%); "Including books on police being helpful in a display that includes books on police brutality" (53%); "Allowing a white supremacist group to meet in the community room" (28%); and "Choosing not to run a program on climate change because it will politicize the library" (8%). Again, it is important to note that the scenario "When a library buys a book representing Democratic ideals, they also buy a book representing Conservative ideals" was phrased incorrectly and was meant to oppose Liberal and Conservative ideals. This incorrect phrasing may have impacted the results, though many who wrote in answers responded further to this statement with self-corrected phrasing, indicating that they understood the spirit of the question. Figure 4 shows the results for this question.

Once again, cross tabs showed that the respondents were fairly consistent in their answers. However, a statistically significant difference existed in how strongly the respondents agreed with the statements "Librarians should remain neutral in the provision of library services" ($p = .029$) and "Neutrality is an important professional value in the library field" ($p = .042$) across job titles. Library assistants and systems and technology librarians seemed to agree with these statements at somewhat lower rates than other professionals.

The participants were then asked to rate their level of agreement with these same scenarios. The purpose of this question was to see if people defined a scenario as neutral, whether they also supported the action as a desirable one. This section will provide the overall findings for this question first and then compare the answers for this question and the previous one. The participants were more likely to support positions of neutrality directly related to politics. Eighty-one percent of the participants "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that if a patron commented on a political figure, the librarian should not offer an opinion, and an additional 69% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that even if a patron asked for an opinion on a political figure, the librarian should not provide one. Conversely, less than 5% believed that the library should refuse to run a program on climate change because it is too political, and only 22% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that libraries should allow white supremacist groups to use their meeting rooms. Figure 5 shows the level of agreement with each scenario.

Broadly, the answers to the two scenario questions seem to align fairly well, but reveal some discrepancies. For each scenario, the proportion of respondents who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the scenario was very close to, but slightly under, the proportion of those who said the scenario illustrated a stance of neutrality. For instance, 87% of the respondents said that not offering an opinion if a patron made a comment about a political figure demonstrated neutrality, and 81% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that a librarian should not offer an opinion in that situation, demonstrating strong support for a position largely identified as neutral. Table 1 shows the percentage of people who selected a scenario as neutral and the percentage who "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with the actions or behaviors depicted in the scenario.

Finally, the participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement that "Librarians should remain neutral in the provision of library services" and the statement that "Neutrality is an important professional value in the library field." These statements were included

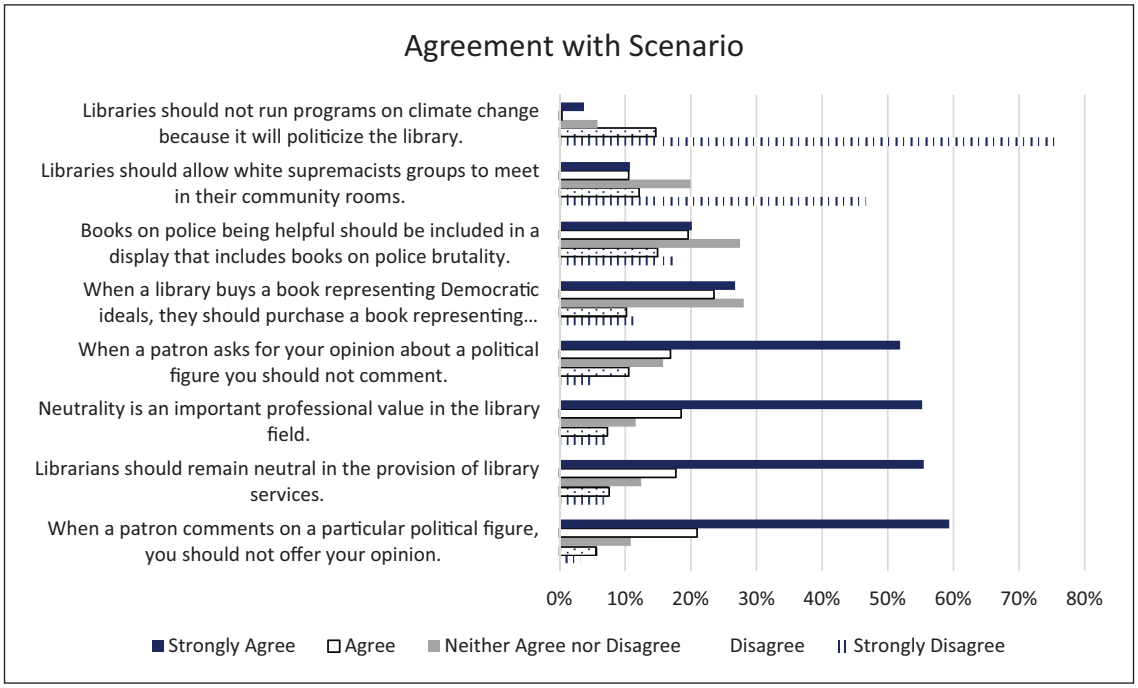

Figure 5. The figure illustrates the rate at which participants agreed with the librarian's action as described in the scenario.

Table 1. The table compares the rate at which respondents identified a scenario as neutral compared with the rate at which they strongly agreed or agreed with the action taken by the librarian as described in the scenario.

Scenario	Percentage (%) identifying the scenario as "neutral"	Percentage (%) "strongly agreeing" or "agreeing" with the scenario
A patron comments on a particular political figure and you do not offer your opinion	87	80
A patron asks for your opinion about a political figure and you choose not to comment	79	69
When a library buys a book representing Democratic ideals, they also buy a book representing Conservative ideals	69	50
Including books on police being helpful in a display that includes books on police brutality	53	40
Allowing a white supremacist group to meet in the community room	28	21
Choosing not to run a program on climate change because it will politicize the library	8	4

to gauge the overall level of importance that librarians place on neutrality as a professional ideal in their everyday work. The participants seemed to support the general importance of neutrality in the field, with 74% selecting "strongly agree" or "agree" for each statement. The responses to these two questions are interesting when compared with the two preceding questions, in which the librarians identified certain scenarios as neutral and then indicated their support for those scenarios. As described above, the librarians' support for each scenario was always slightly lower than the proportion of respondents who identified the scenario as neutral. These findings suggest that while the respondents sometimes disagreed with each other about what constitutes neutrality, they were fairly consistent in their own positions.

A total of 212 people wrote a response to the final open-ended question—"Is there anything you would like to add?"—and some common themes arose from those responses. Twenty-five people said that neutrality is a "myth" or that it is "not possible." Several respondents elaborated by saying that libraries are part of white supremacist systems and, therefore, cannot be neutral. Another 15 people stated that public libraries should not be neutral. The reasons given for why libraries should not be neutral included that they have a duty to lift up marginalized voices and they must serve the communities they are located in. Meeting rooms

were written about 19 times, with 14 respondents stating that they would look to their meeting-room policy to understand how to deal with the scenario of a white supremacist group meeting in their library. Several people, however, said that they did not believe that white supremacists should be allowed to use library meeting rooms, regardless of intellectual freedom principles. Others said that meeting rooms should be "open to all, regardless of viewpoint."

Less common, but still noteworthy, themes include six participants who believed that "neutrality means protecting the status quo" and six who felt strongly that climate change is a scientific truth that is not up for debate and should not be debated in library programming. Counter to this idea was a respondent who said: "There really and truly are *reputable* science sources that question the validity of AGW [anthropogenic global warming]; I would be sure to at least present this point of view in the course of a program on climate change." Similarly, another respondent said that the program must include the views of those who do not believe in climate change, otherwise "the program is trying to influence people in a political way."

Community and collection-building also emerged as themes in the open-ended responses. In the text answers, the word "community" appeared 41 times. Of those who wrote about community, 43% were respondents working in a rural setting. The words "collections" or "collection-building" appeared 27 times, with a focus on the connection between community needs and collection-building. Others mentioned that collection-building is not a one-to-one practice and that they thought about "balance" more than anything when purchasing books for the library. The respondents talked about representing a "diverse set of views," but at no point did those writing in answers mention "diverse books" or "diversity in books." The respondents also mentioned community demand and budget and time constraints, specifically in regard to collection-building.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how public librarians are defining "neutrality" explicitly and as seen through their actions, and to explore their attitudes towards neutrality as a value in the profession. The findings broadly reflect the struggles described in the LIS literature. To begin with, the respondents clearly disagree about whether librarians should be, or even can be, neutral. On the one hand, more than two-thirds of the respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that neutrality is an important value in the field and that librarians should remain neutral in the provision of services, suggesting a clear majority in favor of neutrality. However, nearly one-third of the respondents disagreed that neutrality is an important value that librarians should try to achieve, and some of the open-text responses revealed strong views on the matter. Several of these respondents described neutrality as a "myth" and as "supporting the status quo." One respondent stated that: "The neutrality of libraries is a fallacy; the choice to offer information and services to all is already a political and philosophical stance, and since conservatism hinges on the suppression of information." Another wrote: "Neutrality is not possible. To attempt a 'neutral' position reinforces the status quo and structural bigotry."

Even among those who seemed to support neutrality as a value, the respondents struggled with the nuances of the term. One respondent illustrated this struggle in writing: "I do think that neutrality is an important professional value in libraries, but only so far as it does not contradict other important professional values." They went on to say:

> If an action intended to uphold "neutrality" alienates users in the library from meeting their information needs, that is a problem. I don't think that libraries are inherently neutral organizations, but I think we should strive to provide unbiased access to information.

Further, many of these open-text responses illustrated the ambiguity of the term and confusion over definitions. For example, one respondent noted that "[t]here's a difference between neutrality and allowing morally objectionable (e.g. racist groups meeting) or factually incorrect (e.g. books about vaccines causing autism) things in the library," while another commented that "more import [*sic*] than neutrality, to me, is having safe and welcoming places with accurate information for patrons." These respondents seem to be trying to delineate between neutrality as not taking sides and objectivity in relating facts, even though the majority of the respondents equated neutrality with objectivity when asked to choose a definition. Another respondent supplied their own definition of neutrality as "working actively to ensure that everyone has equal access and proportionate representation." These varying definitions seem to confirm the lack of precision with which the term "neutrality" is used, and suggest that, in at least some cases, the debates within the field might stem from this confusion. In other words, debaters might believe they are on opposite sides simply because they are each using the same word to mean substantially different things.

The lack of consistency was also evident when the fixed-choice definitions of neutrality were compared with the scenarios. When asked to select a definition of neutrality, the majority of the respondents (68%) answered "being objective in providing information," while far fewer selected "not taking sides on an issue" (12%) or "not expressing an opinion" (5%). However, comparing these definitions of neutrality to which scenarios respondents selected as describing a neutral stance reveals some variability. For instance, the respondents "strongly agreed" that not expressing an opinion when a patron comments on a political figure, even if the patron asks for an opinion, demonstrated a stance of neutrality, which seems to contradict the low responses identifying not taking sides and not expressing opinions as definitions of neutrality.

A deeper drill of the findings reveals that these attitudes are not applied consistently across scenarios. While the vast majority of the respondents believed that librarians should not offer opinions on political figures, even when asked, fewer agreed that librarians need to maintain a strict balance between Conservative and Liberal ideas within the collection or a balance of ideas in their displays. And most disagreed that librarians should avoid programming on topics like climate change or should allow white supremacists to meet in their spaces. Thus, while many of the respondents expressed support for neutrality in the abstract, they were more divided on how neutrality should be applied, or whether it should even be applied at all, in particular circumstances.

While the reasons for these contradictions are not clear from the data, the findings suggest that the topic of neutrality is nuanced, and that librarians may be operating under different definitions in different circumstances. For instance, the fact that a majority of the librarians selected "not commenting on political figures" and "not offering opinions on political figures when asked" as demonstrations of neutrality implies a perceived link between neutrality and being or appearing apolitical in their job. The next scenario most often selected was buying Conservative books when purchasing Democratic books, which seems to further the link between politics and neutrality. In other words, in some situations, librarians might view neutrality as being non-partisan. However, the vast majority of the respondents disagreed that libraries should avoid programming on climate change because the topic is too political. In this case, then, the librarians seemed to be prioritizing objectivity and factual information over any concerns about appearing partisan.

The remaining scenarios add different layers to the definition of neutrality, revealing further complexities. Movements like Black Lives Matter have helped to raise awareness about social justice issues such as police brutality and white supremacy, and the scenarios on book displays and meeting rooms were meant to probe this question. Just as Hautpman (1976) speculated that the spate of bomb scares and bomb-related fatalities might impact reference librarians' willingness to answer questions about bomb-making, the researchers wondered whether the increased attention around these issues might impact librarians' views of neutrality when more explicitly tied to questions of social justice. Indeed, there was far less consensus around these two scenarios compared to the others. For example, half of the respondents said that including books on police being helpful was a way to show neutrality when books with police brutality were on display, while 28% felt that allowing white supremacists to meet in the library was a demonstration of neutrality. These findings suggest that the respondents feel more certain that neutrality pertains to political partisanship, but are less sure of the role of neutrality in relation to issues around social justice, even though those issues are often politicized. The greater hesitancy to support neutrality in these scenarios suggests that librarians resonate with the idea identified by Wenzler (2019), Bourg (2018), and others that neutrality hinders them from taking a stance on social issues which might ultimately reinforce the status quo.

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?

Even fewer people selected the climate change scenario as demonstrating a neutral stance (8%) than those pertaining to social justice and politics, with many saying in the write-in section that climate change is science and not up for debate. As one respondent wrote: "Issues of scientific consensus should not be approached as 'political.' It is a scientific issue, so 'neutrality' doesn't really apply." Perhaps the 92% of librarians who did not view this scenario as demonstrating neutrality would agree with that sentiment. This makes sense if most of the participants are defining neutrality as "being objective." If the librarians are defining objectivity as Knowles (2018) has it, "considering or [representing] the facts, and other information without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions," or as Litwin (2006: 9) puts it, as "whatever is verifiably true apart from what one might believe," then it follows that public librarians see defending the scientific truth of climate change as something they do not need to be neutral about. Certainly, the librarians in Moody's (2004) and Oltmann's (2016a, 2016c) studies expressed similar views when they said that they would not purchase resources with "false and inaccurate" information.

But, if holding a stance of neutrality is part of intellectual freedom, as suggested in the literature, then the idea that librarians should be neutral about some things and not others (in this case, scientific matters or towards social justice issues) runs counter to the definition of intellectual freedom from the ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual, which, again, is "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction" (Magi and Garner, 2015: 3). Such a stance, expressed fully, would suggest that climate change deniers, who represent 29% of Americans, with 44% of Americans who do not believe that climate change is manmade (Ballew et al., 2019), have a right to access information that supports their point of view, regardless of whether individual librarians agree with the material, or even whether the preponderance of scientific evidence supports it. Similarly, 72% of the participants in this study did not feel that

allowing white supremacist groups to meet in libraries was a neutral stance, but the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* tells us that if libraries make meeting rooms available to the public, "restrictions on their use must be viewpoint-neutral and content-neutral and pertain only to the time, place, and manner of use," per the First Amendment (Magi and Garner, 2015: 157). This same discrepancy was described by Oltmann (2019) in her research, when 39.8% of the respondents said that their personal beliefs sometimes conflicted with ALA stances on intellectual freedom. This held true in Moody's (2004) research, with 28% of the respondents saying that their personal beliefs had, at some point, conflicted with professional values. Taken together, the findings across these studies speak to the difficulty in conceptualizing neutrality and the struggles information professionals face understanding its role in their profession.

Conclusion

This survey found that while a majority of public librarians define neutrality as "being objective in providing information" in the abstract, in context, their conceptualizations of neutrality are more nuanced and can include non-partisanship or abstaining from giving opinions on political figures and striving for a balanced collection representing a diversity of viewpoints. Further, their conceptualizations of and support for neutrality vary across situations. While most librarians seem to believe that they should not take sides or express opinions with regard to political figures, they seem more comfortable with taking positions on scientific issues such as climate change, or social issues such as police brutality and hate groups in their meeting spaces.

The findings suggest that perhaps the word "neutrality" itself is problematic, since it is not being used consistently. After all, in the open-ended comments, the respondents who took issue with neutrality as a value in the profession almost exclusively seemed to define neutrality as not taking sides, and yet very few of the respondents defined neutrality that way. Indeed, the majority of the respondents appeared comfortable with taking positions on certain topics or in certain situations. This disconnect in definitions suggests that at least some of the debates in the field might result more from a lack of precision in terminology than from true ideological differences. We might do better by parsing out the terms within our debates to specify what aspect of neutrality we mean to discuss. It might also be helpful to discuss these issues in context, such as around meeting-room policies, displays, and collection-building, rather than having abstract, philosophical, or general discussions about neutrality across the field as a whole. Among the issues we might discuss are striving for a balance of perspectives in collections and displays; maintaining objectivity in the provision of facts and evaluation of information; non-partisanship with regard to offering opinions on political figures; and taking sides on issues of social justice. Indeed, while many issues, including social justice and even scientific debates, are often politicized, the respondents in this survey seemed most concerned with commenting on individual politicians, rather than appearing to support a particular issue. Of course, even these distinctions are fraught because particular social issues and ideas are often closely associated with particular political parties and even individual politicians. Thus, it might be challenging to explore an idea like free tuition at public institutions without at least implicitly commenting on a political party or politician.

The findings of this survey suggest that some proportion of the field is comfortable with the idea of "being neutral" with collection-building in the sense of trying to ensure a range of viewpoints within the curated collection of the institution and taking steps to help a patron access desired information that is not immediately available within the current collection, regardless of what the librarian thinks of the content of the resource sought or the perspective of the author. But, would we expect those same librarians to refrain from "taking a side" on content and sources if they are working with a patron during a reference interview? Or might those same professionals be comfortable with providing their professional opinion as to the authority, accuracy, and relevance of the information they encounter with a patron during a reference transaction? The distinction here might be one of allowing intellectual freedom by providing as free and unfettered access as possible, while still exercising professional judgment when assisting people in evaluating and using information. Further, it might be the difference between acting in a professional role as an information expert as opposed to providing a personal opinion as a fellow citizen. Greater precision around terms and context could help ensure that we are truly discussing the same issues. Further, if indeed most librarians are not defining neutrality as taking sides, greater precision might reveal that there is less distance than previously thought between those who see neutrality as a myth or as preserving the status quo and those who support neutrality in terms of objectivity.

Given the lack of research that exists on library neutrality, the authors suggest continued study, specifically in defining library neutrality and as neutrality relates to issues of meeting-room policies, community, cataloging, and the overall mission of public libraries. Continued research into various types of "neutrality" (political, social, scientific) would further help define this slippery word. Research into the evolution of the concept of "neutrality" and intellectual freedom would be helpful in understanding the contemporary frame of the library neutrality debate. The current study limited demographic questions to ones of geography and professional roles. However, the link between neutrality and politics or partisanship that emerged from the findings could be probed more deeply. Future studies might consider asking

respondents to identify where they fall on the political spectrum of conservative, moderate, and liberal, or what their party affiliation is to see whether these ideologies correlate with their stances on neutrality.

Finally, the authors suggest that part of the confusion on the topic comes from a lack of guidance from the ALA. In debating neutrality, professionals often frame the discussion as one of the core values, but, as noted above, the word "neutrality" is largely absent from the ALA literature. When neutrality is discussed, it is often conflated with intellectual freedom, as it was explicitly at the Presidential Program in 2018 and as it is implicitly in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. Perhaps the ALA should disambiguate these terms and, further, elaborate on its stance on library neutrality. The ALA should discuss the collision of professional and personal beliefs more often and more publicly. Further, it should elaborate on how librarians could respond to social issues in a way that preserves intellectual freedom.

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