

Neutrality Is For the Birds:
Libraries As Non-Neutral Spaces

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October 2, 2022

Many patrons and professionals alike describe libraries as neutral spaces. Every viewpoint is represented on the shelves and in online resources. There is no discrimination when it comes to who can be serviced at the reference desk. Any individual may book the meeting rooms and surf the web on public computers. Although these are wonderful and necessary qualities a library should have, these factors focus more on equality of access than political or social neutrality. Due to the nature of libraries as free for all to enjoy and their mission of equity, libraries are not and should not be neutral spaces.

The ALA adopted the Library Bill of Rights in 1939. The majority of the articles in this bill emphasize intellectual freedom for all, and Article III asserts, “Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.”¹ Furthermore, the ALA has published the Core Values of Librarianship on their website, including sustainability, social responsibility, and the public good. All of the descriptions for these three values mention equity and willingness of libraries to take a position.² The call for advocacy of librarians is not an apolitical action and supporting democracy is not a neutral stance. Another essential element of the public library in 2022 is its affordability for patrons. In a late-stage capitalist society such as we are today, it is radical to produce a service and provide goods for nothing in return. It is revolutionary to offer these free services and goods to everyone (who has the ability to get a library card). It is inaccurate to say that the library takes no stance on social issues because the nature of libraries is not politically or socially neutral in today’s world.

While the ALA’s policies seem noble in today’s world of disinformation, fake news, and spun stories, the association and the library science field in general has a troubled history of

¹ American Library Association. “Library Bill of Rights,” Issues and Advocacy, January 29, 2019, accessed September 24, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>

² American Library Association. “Core Values of Librarianship,” Issues and Advocacy, September 28, 2020, accessed September 24, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>

racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Author Sandra Hirsh sugarcoats it: “The library and information science profession has a long, complicated history acknowledging and working to take on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.”³ In the past, the lack of urgent movement toward a more equal library environment for all resulted in a lack of resources for everyone. Examples of the library profession falling short on fulfilling needs are everywhere in American history, such as in 1959, when an African-American boy named Ronald McNair had the police called on him for trying to check out books at his white, South Carolina library.⁴ While today it is easy to say libraries are radical places of peace in our frantic lives, the history of the library is intertwined with the history of America, which is filled with stances on either side of neutrality—pro and against everyone having access to materials. When librarians discuss neutrality, then, it is very important to note the distinct and outlier position libraries have in our communities today, while also acknowledging the sometimes horrific foundations of the field. Neither of these positions, in present day or historically, reflect neutral spaces, or neutrally-minded people working in those spaces.

Libraries are not only not neutral spaces by default, they *should not* be neutral on political, social, or economical issues. When working within diverse communities, information professionals will encounter issues of equity. As R. David Lankes points out in a 2018 ALA panel, “If you differentiate or prioritize service in any way to those you serve, you are not neutral.”⁵ Differentiating or prioritizing patrons can be small jobs, like seeking out materials for a younger patron who cannot read well, but it can also be bigger actions. For an example from my own experience, there was a regular patron at the New York Public Library who often visited the

³ Sandra Hirsh, *Information Services Today*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 62.

⁴ Carl McNair, interview by Steve Inkseep, *Morning Edition*, NPR, January 28, 2011.

⁵ American Library Association, “Are Libraries Neutral,” American Libraries Magazine, June 1, 2018, accessed September 27, 2022.

general research room to read scholarly books about Native American tribes. This patron is also blind. Because of her disability and because of the frequency of her visits, library workers programmed a public laptop to read books to her, reserved for her whenever she was present. Every library worker within the General Research Division knew who she was, and what extra steps—renewing books she needed again while keeping them in the same space on her cart, having working headphones ready for her, walking her cart and her to the enclosure, audibly reminding her of closures and other signage—we needed to take to fulfill her information needs. We would not do these actions for a fully-able patron, meaning the reference transaction between an able-bodied patron and a patron with disabilities are not equal. Because the end result is the same, giving patrons full access to information which they can use and comprehend, these transactions are equitable. Moments of equity, to better serve everyone in the community, are a necessary and daily part of library work.

It is challenging to not see equity as more valuable than neutrality in the library. It is equity, awareness of the fraught history of libraries, as well as understanding their place in our communities today, that will help librarians be the best they can be. These non-neutral spaces truly allow everyone to receive the information they need or want.

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