

# *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*

## **Introduction**

**By Alison M. Lewis**

Why, here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are we putting together a volume of papers that question the role of neutrality within librarianship? In fact, why question neutrality at all? Isn't it a positive quality, one of the hallmarks of our professionalism as librarians?

Certainly it has been seen as a virtue among librarians that we do not allow ourselves to be driven solely by our own viewpoints, but rather strive to make available to library patrons a range of information sources covering a variety of opinions and ideas. In my own experience doing collection development in political science, for example, I've bought books by Noam Chomsky and by Ann Coulter – and by just about everyone else in between. And while I'd personally prefer to read Chomsky, I bought books by Coulter because I knew there was an interest in and a demand for them. Because I have a strong belief in intellectual freedom, I had no desire to suppress Coulter's ideas even though I do not agree with them. Historically, libraries have been one of the places where citizens can be exposed to a variety of viewpoints, including unpopular or minority views. In our democratic society, this has been held up as a public good. Access provided by libraries to materials on racial equality and women's rights, for example, have helped provide fertile ground for moving such ideas from the fringe to the mainstream.

This is well and good, but we soon find ourselves on a very slippery slope. The Library Bill of Rights, Article 2 states that "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues." As I write, in the sixth year of the quagmire of the Iraq War, I wonder if it is humanly possible to present all points of view on the war and what is to be done about it? No two people seem to express the same opinion on the topic, and the situation (and viewpoints along with it) changes weekly, if not daily. While we can strive to present a *range* of opinions and views on the war, the word "all" in the Library Bill of Rights statement is an impossible goal, dooming librarians to failure in following its dictates. "All" is a word generally to be avoided, along with "always" and "never," because they too often lead to overgeneralization and therefore, to untruth.

If we were somehow able to make available all viewpoints, or failing that, a healthy range of viewpoints, should we consider each of these viewpoints equally valid and deserving of equal amounts of shelf space and budget dollars? I also write at a time when a number of school boards and libraries find themselves under pressure from some religious groups to "equally" provide access to teaching and materials on the theory of creationism or intelligent design, as is already provided for the theory of evolution. And what about viewpoints expressing Neo-Nazi ideology or Holocaust denial? Do these deserve equal representation along with historical studies of World War II and personal stories of Holocaust survivors? Am I not a hypocrite for failing to enthusiastically embrace these "minority" viewpoints, given that I've already glowingly referred

to libraries' earlier role in providing access to "fringe" viewpoints on racial equality and women's rights?

The adage that "Everybody is entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts" is usually attributed to the late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, has some bearing here. I would certainly advocate including books on creationism and intelligent design in just about any library collection, not only for those whose faith leads them to consider these the "right" viewpoint, but also for those who strive to learn more about the ideas held by these groups in order to better refute them. Likewise, I would include some representation of neo-Nazi or Holocaust denial materials in an adult library collection, in order to understand their arguments and be better prepared to argue against them. But creationism and Holocaust denial have been discredited by the vast majority of the scientists and historians, respectively. They don't hold equal weight in the marketplace of ideas, and they are not deserving of an equal share of limited library resources.

It has already been "discovered" by particle physicists, anthropologists, and a range of other researchers, that it is impossible to be neutral. Even if it were possible for me to wash away all influences that sway me in a particular direction, I would not want to achieve that state of neutrality. From a moral standpoint, I have no desire to remain neutral when faced with a choice between science based on the scientific method or science based on theology, and between historical fact or hate speech. To hide behind the idea of "neutrality" in such instances is to be party to promulgating misinformation or worse.

Interestingly enough, it has been library administrators enamored of the business model of librarianship who have most visibly been abandoning the idea of "neutrality," at least where their own libraries are concerned. Funding has gotten so tight for all libraries and use patterns have changed so significantly over the past few years that no library is able to rest on its laurels as a public or institutional "good" and expect to survive. Administrators know that it is a matter of survival to become advocates rather than neutral bystanders, and that it is necessary for them to promote and even "market" and "sell" their library's services. As an educator of future librarians, I wish that this sense of advocacy extended beyond the individual library to the profession itself. I am continuously disheartened by the lack of understanding of or support for libraries and librarians in the larger society. Underfunding and deprofessionalization are two symptoms of a potentially fatal illness within the library profession.

For these reasons and more, it seems past the time to present a work focused on the concept of "neutrality" within librarianship. The essays that follow all relate to neutrality in a philosophical or practical sense, and sometimes both. They are a selection of essays originally published in *Progressive Librarian*, the journal of the Progressive Librarians Guild, and they are presented in the chronological order of their appearance there.

We begin with *Progressive Librarian* editor Mark Rosenzweig's editorial, "Politics and Anti-Politics," which provides a philosophical framework for considering the historical role of "neutrality" within the profession of librarianship. It is followed by Peter McDonald's "Corporate Inroads and Librarianship," which exposes the outsourcing of library functions in various settings and advocates for the retention of local professional involvement and humanistic

values. Sandy Iverson provides a post-modernist and feminist critique of neutrality or “objectivity” in “Librarianship and Resistance.” Steven Joyce revisits the so-called “Berninghausen debate” surrounding issues of social responsibilities within the American Library Association in the 1970s and relates it to a similar conflict within the profession over homosexuality in the 1990s in “A Few Gates Redux.” In “Activist Librarianship: Heritage or Heresy?” Ann Sparanese relates the circumstances surrounding her now-famous “saving” of Michael Moore’s book *Stupid White Men* and the motivations behind her own decision to act rather than remain a passive, neutral observer. Robert Jensen provides useful insights into the impossibility of remaining neutral with his comparison of librarians to professionals working in journalism and higher education in “The Myth of the Neutral Professional.” Jack Andersen’s “Information Criticism: Where is It?” looks at librarianship’s inability to critique and analyze the information it deals with and places the blame for this on the profession’s embrace of a technological and managerial discourse that overlooks practical use and societal impact. Likewise, John Doherty challenges librarianship’s lack of critical self-awareness in “Towards Self-Reflection in Librarianship: What is Praxis?” and provides practical examples of his own attempts to integrate the ideas of educational theorists into his practice of bibliographic instruction. In “The Professional is Political,” Shiraz Durrani and Elizabeth Smallwood examine the library within a global context, then narrow their focus to innovative practices in public libraries in Britain, providing a concrete example of a needs-based youth advocacy program. Lastly, Joseph Good critiques neutrality as a form of moral relativism in “The Hottest Place in Hell.”

Here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, “neutrality” no longer means “impartiality” or “objectivity,” but too often lapses into what might be better termed “indifference.” These essays are presented in the hope that they will stimulate further interest in and debate about the concept of neutrality within the library community, if not provoking the downright opposite of indifference.

This paper can be cited as:

Lewis, A.M. (2008). Introduction. In A.M. Lewis (Ed.), *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian* (pp. 1-4). Duluth, MI: Library Juice Press.