

The future of librarianship: Challenging professional norms

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Abstract: In this column, we seek to foster a conversation about how maintaining the status quo of neutrality is detrimental to the capacity of librarians to claim their own scholarly space within academia.

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In recent years, many librarians have critiqued the axiom that libraries are neutral within the larger institution they serve, noting that the “failings of libraries can be re-interpreted not as libraries failing to live up to their ideals and values, but rather as symptoms and evidence of [their] foundational and oppressive ideology” (de Jesus, 2014). Yet in critiquing libraries, how do we also consider the role of the librarian? In Fobazi Ettarh’s (2014) words, “Libraries are just buildings.” For the authors of this piece, asking this question entails examining our roles within academia more broadly and the ways in which we are not neutral actors.

There is no consistent way to categorize the position that academic librarians hold within any given institution. Some are granted faculty status, while others are staff. Inconsistency in appointment status reflects the idea that librarians exist purely in a supporting relationship to the institution, rather than as scholars in our own right. We began to think of this in new light when, during a candidate interview, we heard a senior faculty member ask a librarian if they considered themselves an “academic.” The fact that the librarian answered in the negative prompted us to consider the roles we occupy more deeply. Perpetuating the myth of neutrality further ingrains perceptions of librarians solely as service providers.

We hope to encourage a conversation about how the fallacy of neutrality limits our ability to fully realize librarianship as an academic discipline beyond the service relationships with which we have historically engaged and cultivated. We seek to challenge the perception of a “neutral” librarian, which limits our work as scholars and hinders our ability to engage with diverse audiences. Neutrality positions the librarian as a mere steward of information, as an intrinsic vestige of some mythical idealized version of the library. We see this attitude play out in the orations of popular figures, ranging from Hillary Rodham Clinton to Neil Gaiman. How can we begin to unpack the oppression librarians

have themselves helped spread without turning a critical eye on ourselves, on our profession, on our institutions?

To challenge the biases inherent within our information systems, we must embrace the scholarly frameworks both within the library and information (LIS) literature, and beyond in the wider academic profession. By developing praxis that incorporates critical theories from related disciplines such as education, sociology, postcolonial, and cultural studies, librarians can help push our field forward. There is no lack of librarian-created research, and many librarians utilize scholarship from outside of LIS in their work. The usefulness of this work is limited, however, because we produce it only for ourselves, and we are hesitant to share our findings more broadly.

Librarians have a deep knowledge of the research lifecycle, yet the scholarship we produce, and the arguments we make, are aimed at other librarians. Disciplinary faculty, who often have a deeply-rooted perception of our neutrality, are often surprised to learn the level of engagement librarians have as scholars in our own right. As librarians, we often only take strong positions for the benefit of each other, and not in a way that is accessible to other scholarly communities. We remain isolated from the rest of academe when we only look at, or contribute to, LIS literature. Even as we work to break out of the most limiting traditional frameworks, such as initiatives like #critlib (<http://critlib.org/>), we retain an almost incestuous insularity regarding who engages with the topic.

Abandoning the insularity that neutrality has demanded from us is a powerful way to break the cycle of perceptions that cause faculty to remain unaware of the scholarly conversations within librarianship. The idea that librarians function within the larger institution as a neutral support system for scholars harkens back to Enlightenment-era philosophy, which ignores the role that we have in spreading cultural values as we collect, organize, and disseminate information (Bivens-Tatum, 2014; de Jesus, 2014). This view also relates to the gendered nature of the modern American library, where

benevolent cisgender white women act to spread the dominant culture, perpetuating structural inequalities that exist within institutions more broadly (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). Continuing to function as traditionally gendered support labor only continues to uphold problematic stereotypes that create barriers to claiming space as an academic scholar.

Librarians are expected to exist seamlessly within the institution, to be neutral conduits of information, and to exist behind the scenes of scholarly production mechanisms. The expectations placed upon academic librarians are the same whether we work in a major research institution, community college, or liberal arts college, in that librarians are asked not to “interfere [with] the aims of our institutions” (ALA Core Values, adopted 1939, revised 2008). Although many of us view the ALA Core Values as foundational, it is time to begin exposing the seams within our profession and engaging in dialogue with those outside of librarianship.

We can and should challenge problematic professional norms such as the disciplinary impact of heteronormative and racist cataloging structures, the role of white supremacy in peer review processes, the discursive nature of citation styles, and a host of other scholarly mechanisms of which we possess intimate knowledge. As Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel famously said, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere” (The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity). Our perspective is needed throughout the disciplines, and voicing critical opinions within our institutions can help us find a stronger place within academe. We need to shed our cloaks of invisibility and participate in scholarly practices ourselves for the future of librarianship to thrive.

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