Neutrality vs. social justice: a democratic perspective

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Abstract

Introduction. In recent years, there has been heated debate about the relationship between neutrality and social justice in library and information science. This intense dialogue is explicitly linked to democracy, yet, with few exceptions, the rich literature on democracy is not incorporated into the ongoing debate. The aim of this paper is to use theories on democracy as a lens to understand the ideological battle between neutrality and social justice.

Method. A systematic search in *Library, information science & technology abstracts* for relevant papers serves as the starting point for the analysis.

Analysis. Among scholars discussing democracy, there is general agreement that freedom and equality are core democratic values. However, disagreements arise in how these two concepts are defined and related to one another. This tension is also reflected in the debate over neutrality and social justice.

Results. Three distinct positions are identified: liberal freedom, freedom as equality and radical equality.

Conclusions. Democracy is a highly contested concept, and as a result, it is not possible to judge any one position as superior in democratic terms. Nevertheless, a democratic perspective can enrich and nuance future discussions in this area.

Introduction

Neutrality has traditionally been seen as a prerequisite for libraries to fulfil their democratic function. In this view, the library serves as a reservoir of society's entire knowledge and opinions, to which citizens should have free access in the ongoing process of forming their own opinions (Harris, 1973; Hafner, 1993). The British librarian D. J. Foskett (1962) encapsulates the ideal of neutrality in his title: *The creed of a librarian: no politics, no religion, no morals*. Neutrality is inextricably linked to intellectual freedom, where individuals have the right to explore and form their own beliefs without fear of reprisal (Knox, 2020). In a library context, intellectual freedom encompasses freedom of opinion, freedom of access to information and freedom of expression (Sturges, 2016). According to Macdonald (2024), the emphasis on intellectual freedom within the ethical codes of the library field gives it a legitimate claim as the most prominent value. However, the traditionally elevated position of neutrality has been increasingly challenged. In a bibliometric analysis, Gardner (2022) documents that the amount of research in library and information science addressing intellectual freedom increased only slightly from 1993 to 2020, while research related to social justice markedly increased. Samek (2001) analysed the starting point of this shift in an American context in *Intellectual freedom and social responsibility in American librarianship, 1967-1973*, which explores the growing critique of neutrality within the American Library Association. This critique began with the establishment of the Social Responsibilities Round Table, created as a supplement to the Intellectual Freedom Round Table. The Social Responsibilities Round Table argued that librarians should take a clear, progressive stance on non-library issues, such as the Vietnam war. Additionally, they engaged in efforts to prevent injustices stemming from racism and poverty (Wenzler, 2019). According to Berninghausen (1975), a prominent advocate of neutrality, it is impossible for libraries to uphold both neutrality and social justice simultaneously. Taking a stand, he argues, is incompatible with neutrality. Nonetheless, both in the past and today, social justice is frequently linked explicitly to democracy. One contemporary example is provided by Gibson et al. (2017), who argue that libraries must advocate for people of colour if they aim to challenge systemic racism and uphold an informed democracy. Popowich (2020) further contends that transphobia cannot simply be addressed through additional information or better arguments; rather, it reflects real inequalities and oppressive structures. Thus, if libraries aspire to support a more equitable and democratic society, they must abandon strict neutrality.

Apart from introducing the debate on neutrality and social justice, the text above also illustrates that democracy can be supported in different ways. In a frequently cited text within democratic literature, Gallie (1956) argues that democracy is perhaps the most contested of all contested concepts. For Gallie, contested concepts are both appraisive and complex. In a western context, democracy is widely regarded as desirable, and consequently, it is the most used concept for legitimising libraries (Yamagishi et al., 2024). Additionally, democracy is a complex concept with a history spanning over 2,500 years, during which new and sometimes contradictory meanings have been added. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that proponents of both neutrality and social justice seek to connect their positions to democracy, though they do so with differing arguments. Among scholars of democracy, there is broad agreement that freedom and equality are the most important values, though disagreement often arises regarding how these concepts should be defined and related to each other (Herman Hansen, 2010). The outlined debate on intellectual freedom and social justice essentially reflects these same discussions. Therefore, the following text will briefly outline three positions in the debate on libraries, neutrality and democracy, 1) neutrality as liberal freedom, 2) freedom as equality, and 3) radical equality.

The empirical foundation of this paper consists of articles, books and book chapters in English that address neutrality in public libraries. As experienced researchers on public libraries and democracy, we were already familiar with many relevant texts before conducting this study. However, to ensure comprehensiveness, in the fall of 2024, we conducted a search in the *Library, information science, and technology abstracts* database using the keywords *neutrality* and *public*

libraries to identify additional relevant works. This paper does not provide an exhaustive review of the literature on neutrality and public libraries, nor is that its purpose. Rather, the aim of this short paper is to relate the debate on neutrality and social justice in public libraries to concepts of democracy

Neutrality as liberal freedom

Neutrality has historically been closely connected to liberal democracy. According to Held (2006, pp. 56-95), a liberal democracy essentially combines a constitution with political democracy. Public libraries are linked to both dimensions of liberal democracy: they are part of the infrastructure for political democracy because they provide citizens with alternative sources of information, which is central to the minimal definition of democracy (Diamond and Molino, 2004). Additionally, intellectual freedom relates to the constitutional aspect of liberal democracy, as constitutions in many countries serve as the foundation for protecting individual liberties, including the rights to free thought, expression, and access to information.

As the term intellectual freedom suggests, freedom, rather than equality, is prioritised when neutrality is under consideration. In philosophy, it is common to distinguish between negative and positive freedom (or liberty), with intellectual freedom primarily associated with negative freedom. Negative freedom refers to freedom from interference or coercion by others, particularly by government or other institutions (freedom from). It allows individuals to think, read, speak and seek knowledge without external constraints, which is essential for intellectual freedom (Carter, 2022). Neutrality in a library context is hereby embedded in some fundamental freedom rights that should prevent external interference in the personal formation of opinion. Berninghausen (1975) is perhaps the best example of viewing neutrality as an absolute right in the context of libraries. For him, neutrality is the core value that should remain uninfluenced by other values. However, today it is rare to find such wholehearted reverence for neutrality. Among library professionals, there is clear Nordic support for neutrality (Koizumi and Larsen, 2023). Additionally, Wenzler (2019) and Larsen (2024) are sympathetic towards neutrality, though they acknowledge certain paradoxes and criticisms related to it.

Freedom as equality

Equal rights, such as free access to information, represent just one way of understanding freedom. Individuals may have access to written information, but if they cannot read, this right has limited value. This highlights the distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom. Sometimes, merely having certain rights is not enough for individuals to pursue their own happiness: relatively equal opportunities are also necessary. Positive freedom is the ability to act in a way that allows one to take control of one's life and realise fundamental purposes (freedom to) (Carter, 2022). In a library context, this approach involves providing varying levels of support based on users' needs to achieve comparable outcomes. Such a practice in libraries is relatively uncontroversial. Library services are not only a matter of equal rights but also of addressing users' specific needs. This reflects a modest definition of social justice that emphasises giving special consideration to those who are worst off (Khechen, 2013). This definition of social justice focusing on positive freedom incorporates elements of both freedom (the ability to act autonomously) and equality (having relatively equal opportunities or resources to pursue one's aims). Similarly, the present discussion includes participants who argue that neutrality and social justice are not mutually exclusive. Mathiasson and Jochumsen (2023) contend that the dichotomy between neutrality and non-neutrality is false. Instead, they advocate for a more nuanced discussion about neutrality and the professional identity of librarians, arguing that the self-reflexivity is key. With a theoretical foundation in political science and urban planning, Dudley and Wright (2022) try to overcome the incompatibility between neutrality and social justice by stressing communicative aspects of librarianship. The academic librarian Stephen Macdonald has also explored a nuanced understanding of neutrality in several works. Macdonald and Birdi (2020) demonstrate that

neutrality can take on various meanings in both the literature and among librarians. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Macdonald (2022) argues that neutrality is a heterogeneous and contextual concept. Finally, Macdonald's (2024) work, *Intellectual freedom and social responsibility in library and information science: a reconciliation*, further explores these themes.

Radical equality

Social justice, like democracy and freedom, is a contested concept. Above, a modest definition is associated with a fairer and more equal distribution of resources. However, social justice has also been defined in a more radical way, where addressing structural inequalities, promoting recognition and supporting representation are central to achieving equality. The American feminist Iris Marion Young (1990) argues that social justice is not only about the redistribution of resources; it also entails the elimination of institutionalised domination and oppression. Another feminist, Nancy Fraser (1998), adds that recognition is a vital part of social justice for marginalised groups. Later, Fraser (2009) identified another dimension of social justice: representation. Social justice, she argues, requires that individuals and groups have equal participation in democratic decision-making processes. This aspect addresses who has a voice in framing social issues and making decisions about them. None of the texts in the ongoing discussion on public libraries that we know of directly reference Young or Fraser. However, the above-mentioned characteristic of a more radical equality is apparent in this position. A fundamental premise is that neutrality is not possible. Jensen (2004) argues that neutrality constitutes a passive acceptance of the existing distribution and is, therefore, a political choice. For Bales and Engle (2012), neutrality in libraries is part of the '*ideological state apparatuses*' that implant the dominant ideology in a non-violent way. Schlesselman-Tarango (2017) contends that white female cuteness in libraries mitigates, veils and neutralises whiteness in these spaces. Recognition is primarily linked to taking a stand for Black Lives Matter (Pagowsky and Wallace, 2015) and antiracism (Gillis, 2023), but it also encompasses acknowledgement of religious minorities (Gerolami, 2020). Finally, Van Vegten (2022) discusses internal representation, advocating for the recruitment of a racially diverse staff in libraries, while Gibson et al. (2017) argue that libraries should facilitate the political participation skills of communities of colour.

Concluding remarks

Democracy is frequently mentioned in the ongoing debate on neutrality and social justice, but the rich literature on democracy is only sparsely referenced. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to connect the debate to theories addressing democratic issues. The starting point is the two core values of democracy: freedom and equality. The overall pattern observed is that proponents of neutrality primarily emphasise negative freedom, while advocates of a more radical interpretation of social justice regard equality as the hallmark of democracy. Both democracy and the debate on neutrality and social justice are complex concepts. Thus, with the aim of presenting a broad perspective, this paper outlines three overarching positions in the debate on neutrality and social justice: neutrality as liberal freedom, freedom as equality and radical equality.

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