

Public Libraries, Intellectual Freedom, and Social Justice:
A Search for Actionable Guidelines for Lasting Change
By: Lyra Alley

Introduction

The topic of social justice advocacy as a public librarian is a tricky one with seemingly contradictory guidelines, ethics, and ideologies around every corner. This literature review serves as a starting point in an effort to untangle this issue and hopefully arrive at some semblance of guidelines to follow in the conclusion of my overall research. To start I would like to set some definitions and lay out the key ideas that will be discussed in the review of the literature.

Intellectual freedom is the concept that, regardless of the nature of that information, patrons should be free to access information without judgement or retribution. This idea comes from the Library Bill of Rights which further elucidates that “Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.”¹ These guidelines are the backbone of libraries’ anti-censorship stance and shape the Code of Ethics laid out by the ALA. It is important to note that this differs from the First Amendment free speech rights which bars government agencies on all levels from restricting freedom of expression. While intellectual freedom applies as a guideline to all libraries, the first amendment only applies to libraries run by the state (e.g. public libraries, academic libraries in public institutions, etc.).

Social justice is a broad term that is generally used to describe a type of advocacy focused on issues of inequity for various marginalized groups.² The scope of the issues is wide and varied, but some key trends are generally a stance against prejudice on both a systemic and individual level. The overall goal being a society where people are treated fairly, regardless of age, economic status, sex, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. In 2021 the ALA code of ethics was updated to say:

“We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.”³

Given both the directive of intellectual freedom and the limitations of the First Amendment, the question I find myself asking is how much can we actually do? What are the bounds and limitations of the advocacy that we can pursue? I will be focusing on three main articles in my search: one which focuses on the philosophical background to these issues, another which questions the nature of neutrality in libraries, and finally a call for advocacy in regard to free speech protections of hate speech.

1. Admin, “Library Bill of Rights,” Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, September 7, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>.

2. Christine Clark and Kenneth Fasching-Varner, “Social Justice,” in *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Sherwood Thompson (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGlibGU6NDMyNTg0?summaryArticle=true&aid=113901>.

3. Rberquist, “Professional Ethics,” Tools, Publications & Resources, July 21, 2021, <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.

Review of Literature

“Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice”

The central premise of this article is that the primary cause of the tension between the ideals of intellectual freedom and social justice is that they come from two different political ideologies, liberal and progressive respectively.⁴ These ideologies are often focused on economics policies, however, Knox narrows down the focus to the liberal ideals of individual liberties and the progressive ideals of group rights.⁵ Knox argues that through attempting to incorporate policies protecting group rights into liberalism it necessitates the constriction of individual liberties, thus creating the dissonance between these two ideals.

Of concern to the author is the idea that some materials could be seen as harmful to marginalized groups and might then be excluded in order to protect those groups, which hampers intellectual freedom.⁶ While this exact course of action is extreme, given the current social climate of mis/mal/disinformation, it is easy to see how information professionals may come to this conclusion. I would be a liar if I said I did not have an impulse to protect my patrons from sources that want to exploit their fear and anxieties for monetary or political gain. However, I know that intellectual freedom also works for social justice in its own ways by protecting against book banning, and as Knox points out “Librarians are looking for practical and actionable methods for moving forward that take both values into account.”⁷

Knox posits a potential solution in the idea of Danielle Allen’s social flow model, by saying that librarians should consider whether or not the material has already been widely disseminated, since the preclusion of already widespread knowledge is unlikely to have the desired impact.⁸ While this article does present an interesting ideological model to view this issue from, its scope as to what social justice can mean in libraries is very singularly focused on exclusionary practices, which is too narrow to really take the entire issue into account.

“Libraries on the frontlines: neutrality and social justice”

In this 2017 article Gibson seeks to criticize the perceived silence of the library community in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement and argues neutrality should not mean separating the library from ‘community crisis’.⁹ Gibson argues that because public libraries exist as part of governmental systems that, by making choices, inherently act politically:

“The very question of access is a political one; the placement of library branches and allocation of resources, programming choices, and content of library collections all represent social and political interests.”¹⁰

Gibson then goes on to criticize how the current ideology of neutral librarianship is ahistorical, citing the barring of black patrons during the Jim Crow era. They advocate for a redefinition of the approach of library neutrality away from one of apolitical separation, and instead towards a more cooperative but non-partisan approach.¹¹ In the eyes of Gibson, by choosing to actively address community concerns around social justice issues, through providing information and a safe space for activists to organize, the library can remain non-partisan while still supporting social justice.

4. Emily J. M. Knox, “Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice: Tensions Between Core Values in American Librarianship,” *Open Information Science* 4, no. 1 (March 31, 2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opis-2020-0001>.

1–2.

5. *ibid.*, 5.

6. *ibid.*, 6–7.

7. *ibid.*, 8.

8. *ibid.*, 9.

9. Amelia N. Gibson et al., “Libraries on the Frontlines: Neutrality and Social Justice,” *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 36, no. 8 (November 20, 2017): 751–66, <https://doi.org/10.1108/edi-11-2016-0100>.

10. *ibid.*, 753.

11. *ibid.*, 756

While this idea may have been more sound 7 years ago when it was written, I have trouble believing that it would work similarly given the current political climate. In 2021 over 50 bills were introduced in states to ban schools from teaching about critical race theory and we have since then seen even more partisan politicization of information about social justice issues.¹² This argument is aimed at librarians who are hesitant to act due to fear of reprisal, which is understandably more intense now than it was then. I would, however, argue that the ethic of intellectual freedom states not only that you can follow Gibson's recommendations, but that you must do so. If your community is in need of information, it is your job to supply it, at least if it is still legal to do so where you work.

“From Neutrality to Justice”

This article by Kritikos was published in 2022 and is the most recent one that I chose to review as part of my research. In it Kritikos criticizes the focus on the disconnect between free speech and social justice ideologies and advocates instead for finding ways for the two to work together, as well as promotes advocacy to have hate speech reclassified as unprotected speech.¹³ The central crux of this argument is the idea that free speech, as it stands today, serves to enable hate speech. Kritikos cites the 2011 court decision that allowed the Wesboro Baptist Church, a group with a known homophobic platform, to demonstrate outside military funerals as an example.¹⁴ While they do note that this is not the norm in Europe and Canada, it is acknowledged that this suggestion can raise its own concerns.

Kritikos asks the reader to consider the mark that they will leave on history and asks a question I found rather relevant to my research efforts:

“Are we ignoring equity under the guise of promoting equality?”¹⁵

This is particularly cogent when we look at the argument Kritikos discussed earlier in regard to how the traditional library neutrality stance can serve to facilitate harmful speech. What is not said, but I feel is implied, is that the maintaining of this stance is a form of complicity in the consequences of hate speech. Ultimately Kritikos concludes that information professionals need to find the ways in which free speech and social justice can work together and to not focus on the tension between the two in our discourse.¹⁶ This conclusion left me with a simple question. How? How, *precisely*, should we do this? This article lacks actionability. The conversation about the tension between these two ideologies is one that at least seeks to address why more direct action has not been taken. Only by addressing these concerns will we be able to see action on the scale that is needed.

12. Jennifer Schuessler, “Bans on Critical Race Theory Threaten Free Speech, Advocacy Group Says,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/08/arts/critical-race-theory-bans.html>.

13. Katie Kritikos, “From Neutrality to Justice: Aligning Free Speech with the Social Justice Imperative,” *Journal of Information Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2022): <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/neutrality-justice-aligning-free-speech-with/docview/2701146019/se-2?accountid=10528>.

14. *ibid.*, 25–26

15. *ibid.*, 27.

16. *ibid.*

“The Role of Multidimensional Library Neutrality in Advancing Social Justice”

In this article Michael Dudley and John Wright argue that the cause of the tension between neutrality (which they claim is embedded in the Library Bill of Rights) and social justice is that: first, neutrality has not been clearly defined by the ALA and second, that “librarianship has no fully articulated political theory”.¹⁷ To begin to construct a potential political framework they decided to analyze political theories and similar struggles in the field of urban planning. By analyzing Dunleavy and O’Leary’s “Theories of the State” the authors arrive at the conclusion that while the public views libraries as a “cipher-state” while librarians have positioned themselves as a “guardian-state”.^{18,19} The authors argue that libraries should work as guardian-states, however without clear guidelines on how to implement that, this tension is created. This is what they seek to remedy with their analysis of urban planning ethics.

The historical analysis of urban planning, while interesting, is not particularly pertinent to this paper, so I will not be summarizing it. However, through this analysis the authors identified four kinds of neutrality:

- Value neutrality is either an inherent view of the librarian as a purely objective actor or one where the librarian will not impose their values on others.²⁰
- Stakeholder neutrality is simply treating everyone equally.
- Process neutrality seeks to give everyone equal access to information and resources to participate in decision making.
- Goal neutrality seeks to allow stakeholders to come to their own conclusions without interference.

Ultimately with this framework in mind the authors argue that we should follow each of these. There is some nuance by using the latter definition of value neutrality as well as a complication of stakeholder neutrality saying that, on an individual level, we can work with patrons more individual needs.²¹ They also argue that there is some discretion to the librarian in terms of value neutrality when it comes to the scope of different materials offered. In the example the authors give, they advocate for prioritizing evidence-based information and still offering alternative viewpoints “to the degree that users may be informed of their basic ideas, evidentiary status, ... and social context.”²²

This idea seems to work in a similar way to the proposed social flow model interpretation by Knox as a means to mitigate the potential damage of misinformation that is prevalent today. However, a major flaw I see in the overarching argument is the one that neutrality is an inherent goal of librarianship. It does not show up in either the Library Bill of Rights or the Code of Ethics, which the authors do acknowledge, but still move forward with the assumption that it is intrinsic to librarianship. Barring the single collection development suggestion, the authors argue for what amounts to maintaining the status quo. I would respond by asking: if the status quo is working, why is this discussion happening? Why does this discussion keep happening?

17. Michael Dudley and John Wright, “The Role of Multidimensional Library Neutrality in Advancing Social Justice: Adapting Theoretical Foundations From Political Science and Urban Planning,”

Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy 7, no. 3 (April 19, 2023): 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.5860/jifp.v7i3.7840>.

18. The cypher-state is defined by the authors as one that is ostensibly more concerned with social winds and makes policy decisions based on current public belief. The guardian-state is defined as one that seeks to step in and balance public interest and working against potential larger societal issues.

19. Dudley and Wright, “The Role of Multidimensional Library Neutrality in Advancing Social Justice: Adapting Theoretical Foundations From Political Science and Urban Planning”, 16-17.

20. *ibid* 19-20.

21. *ibid*, 20.

22. *ibid*, 21.

“Bringing Critical Race Theory to the Library Bill of Rights”

This essay written by Celeste Bocchicchio-Chandhri, in *Social Justice and Activism in Libraries*, argues that this debate between social justice vs intellectual freedom is a constructed conflict that has been stuck in a loop since 1976.²³ She cites the ALA’s resolution on “Racism and Sexism Awareness” in 1976 which urged libraries to create programming to raise awareness on these issues. However, the Intellectual Freedom Committee strongly opposed it, saying that it compromised library neutrality.²⁴ Some proponents of the resolution called for the Library Bill of Rights to be updated, to reflect the current understanding of the importance of social justice issues, however no action was taken. While the resolution was made, Bocchicchio-Chandhri found that no substantive action has been taken.²⁵

Bocchicchio-Chandhri then argues that ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom is overly prioritized, while the Social Responsibility Round Table and the Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services are marginalized.²⁶ She quotes the ALA’s newsletter describing the SRRT as “a constant source of alternative viewpoints on libraries and their role in society since 1969” as an example of this marginalization.²⁷

The marginalization of the SRRT argument is sound if we look at both the historical context provided, and the previous lack of willingness to change that I noted in the Dudley and Wright article. Seeing that this is an ongoing struggle throughout the past 50 or so years paints a rather unflattering picture of the ALA and librarianship as a whole. Bocchicchio-Chandhri goes on to criticize librarians current incremental approach and cites the lack of success in programs to diversify the field of LIS as an example of the failure of this approach.²⁸ Due to this, Bocchicchio-Chandhri calls for a more radical approach and reinterpretation of the Library Bill of Rights.

In Bocchicchio-Chandhri’s discussion about an article by Daniel Older she points out, that due to systemic racism in the publishing industry, we need to reinterpret Article II of the Library Bill of Rights to more actively seek out marginalized voices that may not be included in typical collection development policies.²⁹ She suggests that we rely less on vendors and review sources, which would typically only include books by major publishers, and instead look at small publishers and self-publishing to find more diverse voices in our collections.

23. Celeste Bocchicchio-Chandhri et al., “Bringing Critical Race Theory to the Library Bill of Rights,” in *Social Justice and Activism in Libraries* (McFarland, 2019), 137–43.

24. *ibid.*, 137-138.

25. *ibid.*, 139-140

26. *ibid.*, 140.

27. *ibid.*, 139.

28. *ibid.*, 142.

29. *ibid.*, 142-143.

Discussion

I have identified two key areas where I believe the conversation is breaking down and where we as LIS professionals could do better.

Intellectual Freedom as Neutrality

In my review of the literature, there seemed to be a conflation of intellectual freedom and neutrality, that one necessitated the other. However, as I pointed out in my criticism of Dudley and Wright, the Library Bill of Rights makes no mention of the word neutrality. By continuing to cling to the phantom of intellectual freedom as neutrality, we completely arrest any ability to make effective change and in fact, only serve to harm marginalized communities.

In 2021 the ALA signed the “Resolution to Condemn White Supremacy and Fascism as Antithetical to Library Work” and formed the Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice Working Group.³⁰ In the report on the working group’s findings they strongly condemned this narrative of neutrality:

“We aspire to a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive future and refuse any longer to hide behind the practice of neutrality.”³¹

At the end of their report, they mention that they hope the ALA will do something with their findings, however no news of further action is available. This is an eerie echo of the resolution mentioned earlier by Bocchicchio-Chandhri back in 1976.³² One of the topics discussed in this report was the lack of definition for neutrality and an encouragement of the ADA to provide a definition, or to even make a statement on if it is a core aspect of intellectual freedom.³³

Until such a time that the ALA decides to settle this matter once and for all, I propose that we decouple the ideas of intellectual freedom and neutrality. Gibson provided the most cogent framework to use in this regard by proposing a non-partisan approach to intellectual freedom as opposed to the vague “neutral”.³⁴ This can come in the form of the books we choose to highlight and collect, programming, and community partnerships. There is some interesting work being done by Project VOICE through reaching out to underserved communities through community partnerships that could serve as a potential framework for more direct social justice work.³⁵

I will acknowledge that this approach does present challenges. The current political climate is one where the conservative movements in the US will view any move towards social justice issues as partisan. But, right now, they view the work we do with presenting diverse voices in our collections as partisan and try to combat it with book banning. This is where intellectual freedom can serve to protect us and why I would not advocate for deprioritizing intellectual freedom. In the same way I think that programming and outreach to underserved communities can be equally defended as doing what we as librarians set out to do in the first place: serve our communities.

30. Martin Garner, Valerie Bell, and American Library Association, “Final Report of the Working Group on Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice,” July 12, 2022, https://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/governance/ExecutiveBoard/20222023Docs/ebd%2010.0%20IF_SJ%20Final%20Report%207.12.2022.pdf.

31. *ibid.*

32. Bocchicchio-Chandhri et al., “Bringing Critical Race Theory to the Library Bill of Rights.”

33. Garner, Bell, and American Library Association, “Final Report of the Working Group on Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice.”

34. Gibson et al., “Libraries on the Frontlines: Neutrality and Social Justice.”

35. J. Elizabeth Mills, Jacqueline Kociubuk, and Kathleen Campana, “Understanding Social Justice Through Practitioners’ Language,” *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* 5, no. 2 (May 6, 2021): 54–70, <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v5i2.34760>.

The Censorship Debate

I also noticed the pervasive perception that fighting for social justice in libraries must mean censorship of hate speech. This argument is simply reductive and only serves to deflect any social justice imperative that we might have when considering the public good. Bocchicchio-Chandhri criticizes the current conversation of censoring individual incidents of hate speech by saying:

“If we see racist hate speech as the bad speech of radical individuals, then it makes sense to think that more good speech from mainstream, nonracist, society will cure the ills caused by racist speech. However, if we see episodes of racist hate speech as symptomatic of a larger structural racism within the culture of the United States as a whole and LIS in particular, then it makes sense to take a more active role in working to dismantle that structure.”³⁶

The problem here lies with the structure, and we should be working against that. I pointed out in my previous segment, there are several ways to approach social justice in the library that are more additive once we discard the notion of intellectual freedom as neutrality that can address that structure.

What is most concerning to me is when we have a study about self-censorship of marginalized voices in school libraries to avoid controversy, there seems to be very little hubbub (it’s only cited by 2 other works in Google Scholar).³⁷ However, the moment we talk about self-censoring hate speech/politically motivated misinformation (i.e. Milo Yiannopoulos book), there are endless articles about the protection of intellectual freedom.³⁸ As Bocchicchio-Chandhri asks, “intellectual freedom for whom?”³⁹ It seems to me that, at this time, the current interpretations of this idea of intellectual freedom as neutrality acting as a bulwark against self-censorship seeks only to actively protect the already dominant voices: the white, the patriarchal, and the cis/heteronormative. Any ethical protection of marginalized voices is treated as merely consequential.

We need to be asking ourselves, as librarians, why the conversations around intellectual freedom and social justice are this way. I believe that an examination of our own bias is in order. The stark difference between our response to these two types of censorship is not at all subtle and we need work harder to protect intellectual freedom from threats both outside and inside the library. We as librarians need to do better, and we need to hold each other accountable.

In order to do so we must move the conversation around social justice and intellectual freedom away from censorship, which has held us in a rhetorical loop since the 1970’s. Censorship should never be the goal and to continue to present it as such is only dishonest. I believe this is rooted in a desire to provide our patrons with true information which cannot be met with a binary solution. While I disagree with their notion of neutrality, Dudley and Wright did bring up an interesting framework of examining the scope of the materials we collect.⁴⁰ More importantly, we need to acknowledge that social justice is so much more than simply censorship of hate speech. Only then can we begin to do the work and actually follow through on the ALA’s core ethic of fighting for social justice.

36. Bocchicchio-Chandhri et al., “Bringing Critical Race Theory to the Library Bill of Rights.”139.

37. Alissa Tudor, Jennifer Moore, and Sephra Byrne, “Silence in the Stacks: An Exploration of Self-censorship in High School Libraries.,” Document - Gale Literature Resource Center, March 1, 2023, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=rive58327&id=GALILE%7CA749929766&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon&aty=sso%3A+shibboleth>.

38. Knox, “Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice: Tensions Between Core Values in American Librarianship.”

39. Bocchicchio-Chandhri et al., “Bringing Critical Race Theory to the Library Bill of Rights.”

Conclusion

This issue is a complicated one and one that will require continued active work to solve. However, despite the current focus on rhetoric instead of action, I have identified the following recommendations that can help you bring social justice to your library.

1. Craft a robust collection development policy that includes independent publishers to avoid systemic bias against authors in marginalized communities.⁴⁰
 - a. Additionally, the Knox's interpretation of the social flow model can be useful when making decisions about books that contain political misinformation and hate speech.⁴¹ This can be synthesized with the scope suggestions of Dudley and Wright.⁴²
2. Strengthen your outreach programs to partner with community organizations that work on social justice issues.⁴³
3. Advocate for the ALA to define if “neutrality” is truly a core idea to intellectual freedom.
4. Individual advocacy for the redefinition of hate speech as unprotected speech.

This list is not definitive, and I will continue to find ways to expand it. However, I know that we can do better, and I hope that one day we can free ourselves of the rhetorical stranglehold that this debate has on the LIS community. This is just a start, something solid that we can use as a jumping off point towards building the libraries and communities that we want to see.

40. Bocchicchio-Chandhri et al., “Bringing Critical Race Theory to the Library Bill of Rights.”

41. Knox, “Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice: Tensions Between Core Values in American Librarianship.”

42. Dudley and Wright, “The Role of Multidimensional Library Neutrality in Advancing Social Justice: Adapting Theoretical Foundations From Political Science and Urban Planning.”

43. Mills, Kociubuk, and Campana, “Understanding Social Justice Through Practitioners' Language.”

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