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## On Being Non-neutral

I have written before about the American Library Association's (ALA) long-held position to counter self-serving attempts by the few to have books banned, to deprive other citizens of their basic rights of access. These few wish to shape collection building on their own biased, "non-neutral" terms. A previous Magic Library Card! essay, entitled "Banned Books," is archived at the Murrysville Community Library website, as are all other essays of this column.

On June 10, 2022, Publishers Weekly carried an on-line article by "five prominent library educators," entitled "Once More for Those in the Back: Libraries Are Not Neutral." It makes a different case for non-neutrality in rather plain language. The five, all Associate Professors, are: Nicole A. Cooke, Augusta Baker Endowed Chair at the University of South Carolina; Renate Chancellor, Chair at Catholic University of America; Yasmeen Shorish, James Madison University; Sarah Park Dahlen, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; and Amelia Gibson, University of North Carolina.

The non-neutrality position offered by these five professionals is given in rebuttal to a cited, guest opinion piece that appeared in the New York Times. The piece argued that Libraries should return to a "neutral sphere above the fray," that to which constitutionally free people are entitled. But write the five, "most people at the time of our nation's founding – and for much of our history – were not free." Presumably, that "most" includes women as well as African-Americans. "For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, Black people were not permitted to use the library in many parts of the country. What exactly was neutral about that?"

This is the main point in the rebuttal: "Certainly we can all agree that libraries should provide materials with different perspectives, especially in times of growing political polarization. But we must recognize too that there is a difference between providing multiple perspectives and providing a platform for hateful, intimidating, dangerous, or dehumanizing speech that targets a specific community."

The five rebut a loosey-goosey view expressed in the Times article, which I have heard expressed elsewhere too, that Libraries are guilty of "politically one-sided collection building." That librarians are politically non-neutral. Well, that is an amazing accusation, as it implies that the accuser has gone around the country reading whole collections at a selection of statistically meaningful Library sites, so as to fill out an incomprehensible number of spreadsheets from which to process this clearly unsupported accusation.

That is why these five professional librarians write that: "What library professionals learn in graduate school and in their training is to make these decisions ethically, not in some vacuum of partisan political neutrality."

By the very nature of what Libraries do, and how they serve their communities of constitutionally "free" users, as defined now by the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> (a woman's

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right to vote) amendments, they strive to serve in accordance with the Mission Statement of the ALA. That is: “to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information FOR ALL.” The capitalization at the last is mine.

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