

The personal is political; decision making and the myth of neutrality in libraries.

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The personal is political is a slogan out of second wave feminism. Fifty years later the idea that there are many deeply personal issues that are politicised by those who wish to impose themselves into other people's lives, and conversely, many deeply personal issues that historically people in power have claimed to /not/ be political, is still just as relevant as it ever was.

It's relevant in libraries as well.

Who can access the library is deeply personal for those who, perhaps, wish to have a safe place to study (e.g. students who can't study at home), rest (e.g. homeless people), or educate (e.g. parents with children). Public libraries are public, but public spaces don't mean that everyone is accepted, everyone is allowed to be in a place, or that everyone /feels/ accepted.

In this talk I will look at the idea that libraries are neutral; and if that even means anything. I will examine how decisions (including around collections, opening hours, and even furniture and the names of rooms), including the absence of decisions, can influence who feels welcome at your library and who doesn't. As there is no perfect solution, I won't tell you what decisions you should or shouldn't make; instead I ask you to consider the possible consequences.

And remember, /everything/ is political.

Introduction

Hi folks, I'm excited to be here again today, for what is my 3rd NLS. Though I'm no longer "new" in the profession. I only have eight minutes and I could go on for a lot longer than that on the subject. So please do check out the talk by Nikki Andersen, "Deviating with diversity, innovating with inclusion", at NLS9. Their talk raises many of the same issues as I will today, from a different perspective. This entire talk will be on my [website](#) in the fullness of time.

Neutrality

Neutrality is a contested concept. It's not, however, a complicated concept. In this talk I will be using the term to simply mean "not taking sides" (which normally presents as "presenting both (or all) sides equally").¹ In the context of libraries this invariably means having material that supports "both sides" of an argument equally, which is contradictory with the role of libraries to provide factual useful information. A medical library should not be presenting information on humours, leaches, magnets, and crystals as valid and equal to modern medicine (though they may include the information in the library in a section on "don't do these things" or similar). Presenting information on flat earth and young earth creationism is fine; giving equal weight to these ideas as to all of the physical sciences (physics, geology, evolution, etc.) is not.

Now, you might say, but those are crank ideas! libraries should at least be neutral when it comes to politics! No. Unless you're a fascist, I think we can agree that collecting material promoting fascism and presenting it as equal and as valid as anti-fascist material is not on. But what about actual not crank politics you may cry! Yeah, but the trouble is, anyone who doesn't agree with me is a crank.

¹ If you want to define neutrality as simply as not denying access to resources and services despite someone's belief or background, then that's a pretty low bar and frankly wouldn't make for that interesting a talk.

“Neutrality” invariably means supporting the status quo.² Ideas critical of capitalism and its role in climate change are too out there for most libraries to promote³. Suggesting that perhaps we should go back to the “good old days” will not win you friends. Whether from the ‘left’ or ‘right’, if the ideas are too far from the current “mainstream” (in other words. status quo) there will be calls of bias. A position that is against or for all positions equally (an attempt to be “apolitical”) is suspect, in that it is *also* a political position⁴. Status quo is considered “neutral”, and thus I consider neutrality meaningless in this context.

Libraries are not, and cannot, be neutral institutions. Anyone who claims that they are, or can be, neutral is lying. At best to themselves; at worse to you. We can strive for scholarly detachment and attempt objectiveness and disinterest, but invariably, we are people with opinions and we must recognise that we cannot *be* neutral, and to be honest, we shouldn’t want to be in so many cases.

Politics

Next is the idea that *everything* is political. This might sound a bit radical and even a bit out there, but it’s true⁵. Politics is thinking about and discussing society, people’s place in society, and how things should be organised and run.

It stands to reason then that libraries are political spaces and what we do in our libraries is political. Libraries refuse to collect or recommend “bad books” or books by “bad people”. Whatever reason they are “bad”. Libraries put up displays for Australia Day, ANZAC Day, or Pride. Or don’t put up displays. If they were truly neutral, they would put up displays for Invasion/Survival Day, anarchist literature, etc., along with Australia Day. And material on anti-Pride ideas, feminist separatists, transphobic lesbian separatists⁶, etc. along with the general Pride material. And not putting up a display is also a political decision, including if a decision is made to *never* put up displays for fear of offending someone, somewhere.

Whether you are in a school library, public library, health library or in any other it’s all political.⁷

Decisions

So, libraries are not neutral and politics is everywhere. It follows that making decisions is political, and that every decision has potential consequences.

2 Not an original idea. Please consult your favourite Internet search engine for examples.

3 As distinct from merely having on the shelves.

4 For one, it invariably won’t include all positions. Opposition to the EU is invariably presented as a “right-wing” position. And yes, nationalists and far-right parties across Europe oppose the EU. But there is also the position from the far-left that the EU is a capitalist, oppressive tool of the ruling classes. Which it is.

5 Just do a search for “everything is politics” or “everything is political” on your favourite Internet search engine if you want other people arguing the same thing. See also Bivens-Tatum (2013).

6 Perhaps not as common an idea as in the 1960s, but lesbian separatism is a thing. Transphobic lesbians exist. I’m just assuming that transphobic lesbian separatists are a thing. Maybe I should look that up.

7 Politics in health? Why so much of health is political, from what procedures are even available, to what resources on those procedures are in the library, to the cost of treatment and medicines. Background Briefing did a piece on Catholic hospitals recently see Blau (2023). School libraries might not stock controversial titles, but that’s political.

Every library has its cohort. But what we collect, and discard, how we organise and describe our collections, etc., all can impact on users of our spaces, and whether they feel welcome or not. Policies also have side effects and unintended consequences.

Collections: Buying material by or about people of diverse backgrounds and with diverse issues for your children's collections will help to make people from those backgrounds feel welcome. Yet, it will also be seen as pandering to the "woke left" (or something), by those who are benefiting by the current structures in place in society and who do not wish for others to get those benefits.

Furniture: You may have heard hostile architecture, if you haven't, look it up. In this area, even just buying adjustable desks will make a big difference for those who need them. If you only have beanbags some people just won't be able to sit down.

Obvious and visible security makes some people feel safer, but makes other feel less safe. There are obviously communities and sections of communities that have negative interactions with police and security.

If you require proof of identity to access resources (for example whether computers or material in closed stacks) then you may prevent young people, homeless people⁸, tourists, and other from accessing these resources.

Unintended consequences are everywhere.

A decision to purchase more electronic resources, at the expense of physical resources may lead to certain segments of your community accessing these less often. It also can lead to your collection becoming anaemic if you are not buying perpetual licences. This might be fine for a public library, but not so good for a research library where patrons reasonably expect to find both older and newer resources.

Reducing opening hours can also impact on the ability of people who work those hours from attending your library.⁹

What about names? The decision to rename a room or a library will upset those who want to keep the old name because of "tradition". The decision to keep the name of "problematic figure" on a space will upset others.¹⁰

Classification system, shelf marks and subject headings: Library of Congress and Dewey are both very problematic. But if you decided to go with a different system, you risk making it much harder for patrons to find material. As such, you may consider supplementing these systems with additional

8 Everything's political. Homeless people. People experiencing homelessness.

9 Regardless of the type of library you are running. (In a school library you might be restricting hours before/after school for some reason, and removing a safe place for students.

10 In Brisbane, the John Oxley Library. In Sydney the Mitchell Library and the Fisher Library. In Perth there is the Battye Library and the Reid Library. And many others across the country.

terms, like from [AustLang](#) (see [Trove for advice](#)) or [Homosaurus](#). But it's certainly possible in some cases to go your own way¹¹.

What behaviour is allowed in the library and how it impacts on other users of the space is also something that you need to consider.¹²

For example, if you allow people to lay down on your furniture and/or sleep in your library, you will make other segments of community feel less welcome or perhaps feel less safe. Note "feel" rather than necessarily actually being less safe.¹³

Sometimes decisions are made that are obviously political. A library in the USA turned off wifi accessible from outside after opening hours. Preventing, among others, homeless people, from accessing this resource. Apparently a deliberate decision.¹⁴

Of course, people have different expectations of the library, whether because of their ages, cultures, etc. Trying to be inclusive is a great thing, but it's not possible to be perfectly inclusive. Think about who your target cohort is.

What about absence of decision? If there is a reason that people are not coming in, then not doing anything will result in those people continuing to not come in.

I'm not here to tell you what decisions you should or shouldn't make. All I want to do is to ask you to consider the consequences of what you do and don't do and think about ways to mitigate potential negative impacts.

Conclusion

There you have it. Libraries¹⁵ can't be neutral spaces, because by merely existing in society they take part in all the politics that permeates society. Every decision you make¹⁶ has consequences. So think about it.

11 See, for example, Whitehead (2012).

12 See Whitehead (2019) and comments for examples.

13 You also need to consider noise, food and drink, and how these impact on other users of the space, and whether or not

14 See, for example BeauHD (2023) and Zawinski (2023).

15 And countries.

16 Every breath you take, I'll be watching you ... to make sure that you take the correct decision ...

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