

## Yasmeen Shorish reflects on ALA President's Program: Are Libraries Neutral?

*Yasmeen Shorish is a 2009-2010 Scholar and Data Services Coordinator/Associate Professor at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Yasmeen co-wrote "Libraries on the frontlines: neutrality and social justice (<https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/EDI-11-2016-0100>)," published in August 2017 in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal with Amelia N. Gibson, Renate L. Chancellor, Nicole A. Cooke, Sarah Park Dahlen, and Shari A. Lee. The topics she and her co-authors cover are as timely as ever, and relate explicitly to the ALA President's Program: Are Libraries Neutral (<https://www.eventscribe.com/2018/ALA-Midwinter/fsPopup.asp?Mode=presInfo&PresentationID=336430>)? presented at the ALA Midwinter Meeting & Exhibits in Denver this past February. We asked Yasmeen to provide a reflection on the program in relation to her work on the topic.*

This is a longer story than a few sentences can convey, so here is some context.

Nearly two years ago, I and several of my colleagues (Nicole Cooke (<https://ischool.illinois.edu/people/faculty/nacooke>), Sarah Park Dahlen (<https://www.stkate.edu/academics/our-faculty/sarah-park-dahlen>), Amelia Gibson (<https://sils.unc.edu/people/faculty/amelia-gibson>), Renata Chancellor (<https://communications.catholic.edu/experts/Experts/Chancellor-Renate/index.html>), and Shari Lee (<https://www.stjohns.edu/academics/bio/shari-lee>) – the co-authors on the aforementioned article) were struck by our profession's silence during a peak period of the Black Lives Matter movement. We put together a town hall at the National Diversity in Libraries Conference in August, 2016 to address this topic and, based in part on discussion that occurred in that venue, we then moved our conversation forward in the article for a special issue on BLM for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal. We posit that libraries/librarians cannot live our values without engaging with our communities and supporting them through crisis.

In light of this work, how did the President's Program (<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/are-libraries-neutral/>) on libraries and neutrality resonate with me? Clearly, I do not believe that libraries ought to be neutral spaces in the context of how we live. Yet, I am aware of how one person's selection is another's censorship and how the freedoms some of us may take for granted can look very different, depending on who is in power at any one time. So I came to the President's Program with an open mind, curious to see if we would get a discussion (this was not an actual debate) about the nuance of neutrality in our society.

There were glimmers of this nuance, mainly through surfacing the different definitions of neutrality that many of the speakers used and Em Claire Knowles's position. But the initial offering of the pro-neutral position from James LaRue (<http://www.jlarue.com/2018/02/are-libraries-neutral.html>) was so academic, spoken from a place of ideals rather than reality, that it rang hollow.

The statement about trust in professions posited that firefighters and nurses don't determine aid based on what demographic you belong to. Yet this is demonstrably (<https://www.aclu-il.org/en/news/chicago-sun-times-911-dispatch-times-vary-widely-around-city>) untrue

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5333436/>). There are some good ideals in this position and we should ever be striving towards them, but it did not rise to the occasion of recognizing the realities of the world in which we live. The statements: “Public scrutiny is the best defense against the spread of poisonous ideology[.]” and “Everyone gets a seat at the table[.]” ignores the lived reality of most marginalized groups in this country. Our voices do not all carry the same weight and we certainly do not all have a place at the table.

Dr. Em Claire Knowles’s position in favor of neutrality in the library was more nuanced and brought up the consideration of objectivity. The treatment of neutrality as an active effort, and one different from objectivity, was an intriguing frame to view the argument. I wish there had been more opportunity to probe this further (and that I could have formed a question to this end during the Q&A). Perhaps we would be better served striving for more objectivity, recognizing the disservice that neutrality does to a community?

The non-neutral positions were held by Dr. Chris Bourg (<https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2018/02/11/debating-y-our-humanity-or-are-libraries-neutral/>) and Dr. R. David Lankes (<https://davidlankes.org/my-remarks-on-library-neutrality-for-the-ala-midwinter-presidents-panel/>). I have less to reflect on from these two speakers because I concurred with many of their points. I was not neutral when the program started and remain not neutral at its conclusion. However, it is worth noting that these two positions addressed different angles of the question. Bourg focused more on libraries as social institutions and on the persistent whiteness of the profession of librarianship. Framing libraries as social institutions and a part of the society that they may (or may not) reflect also reminds us of how transient the definition of neutrality is at any time in history.

Lankes position resonated with me, in terms of how we framed our article, because he focused the most on engagement with our communities. He also put forth that trust and neutrality can be different characteristics. I would advance that concept to say that a way for librarians to build trust with communities is by demonstrating commitment and engagement in ways that may be “non-neutral,” e.g. a Black Lives Matter exhibit.

I have clearly written more than a few sentences and I haven’t even addressed the excellent responders and how they navigated the grey areas of the topic, even if I disagreed with some statements (yes, ALA has conservatives speak...and even awards them (<http://alamw15.ala.org/node/26367>)). Two of the responders, Emily Drabinski (<http://www.emilydrabinski.com/are-libraries-neutral/>) and Emily Knox (<http://emilyknox.net/media/remarks-ala-midwinter-2018-presidents-program/>) have posted their remarks, and as those two in particular really resonated with me, I will touch on their talks in more detail (with apologies to Kathleen de la Peña McCook (<http://hrlibs.blogspot.com/2018/02/neutrality-and-people-presidents-program.html>) and Kelvin Watson, who both gave very different and substantial responses).

Drabinski brought a pragmatic and relatable perspective for those of us working in academic libraries. How would we have this conversation if we were talking about tangible goods or spaces? How can we think about our own power in these conversations and use that power effectively? Knox emphasized that our judgements of what is neutral can often be fluid and dependent on individual perspectives and that therefore neutrality does not really exist because we are always making choices. Framing her remarks around the perception of the Black Lives Matter movement was an effective way to illustrate her points.

In sum, I think this was a worthwhile program insofar that it is important for an organization as large as ALA to facilitate conversations can provide a foundation for our profession’s evolution. Our society is changing. If we want to be part of our communities, helping them be engaged and informed citizens, then we must strive

to live our values (democracy, access, diversity, social responsibility, the public good) in as engaged and as non-neutral a way as possible.

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