

**A PROMISED (BUT ULTIMATELY UNREACHABLE) LAND:
THE FALLACY OF “POLITICAL NEUTRALITY” EXEMPLIFIED BY
FMR. U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S APPEARANCE
AT THE 2021 ALA ANNUAL CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION**

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Introduction

According to Rory Litwin, “neutrality as it is often understood [by library workers]” effectively means that “in our professional lives we will be absolutely uninfluenced by personal opinions.” But, as he points out, this is functionally impracticable and therefore “impossible” (77). And indeed, it is telling that there has been remarkably little scholarly writing done in defense of this idea (Wenzler 57). It follows, then, that library workers should probably not “maintain claims of neutrality” on the job (Bales and Engle 16). And yet, this concept remains a touchstone of contemporary librarianship, as any cursory examination of professional literature, organizations’ codes of ethics, and other materials will attest. A fairly recent post at *Public Libraries Online* even contends that “*librarians are ethically bound to observe political neutrality* according to Statement VI of the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association [ALA]: ‘We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions’” (Hart; emphasis added).

But if neutrality is fundamentally preposterous, what exactly is being insisted upon when it is insisted that library workers be neutral? Henry T. Blanke suggests the most compelling possibility here: that the organizations touting neutrality are effectively asking their members to “unconsciously adopt a dominant value orientation, one all the more tenacious for being unexamined” (39). In the case of the ALA, for instance, many have observed that what has passed and continues to pass for neutrality sure looks a lot like a decidedly “centrist” (Litwin 72); “liberal, pluralist, capitalist” (Jensen 89); or “status quo” (Rosenzweig, “Editorial” 3) position. For proof of these criticisms, we need look no further than the choice of Former U.S.

President Barack Obama as Closing Session speaker for the 2021 ALA Annual Conference & Exhibition -- a decision that could hardly be called politically neutral at all, even by the organization's own vaguely articulated standards.

A Brief, Critical History of “Neutrality” in Librarianship

Despite the long shadow it casts over the profession, neutrality nonetheless manages to be an incredibly elusive concept. By way of illustration, neither *The American Public Library Handbook* (Marco) nor ODLIS, the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science (Reitz), contain entries for the term. Dani Scott and Laura Saunders further note that “the ALA does not use the word ‘neutrality’ in any of its major standards or codes, although it does use language that might be considered equivalent in some places” (154). It was this lack of clarity about a term of such supposed importance that led to a study by the authors which “examined public librarians’ definitions of ‘neutrality’” and found that “the most commonly held definition was ‘being objective in providing information’” (153). Litwin, however, understands these terms very differently: “We should understand ‘objectivity’ as referring to whatever is verifiably true apart from what anyone might believe, without an implication that to be objective means to lack a point of view or an opinion” (76). Objectivity, then, has to do with respecting the incontrovertibility of facts while neutrality has to do with compartmentalizing personal beliefs or opinions so that they do not unduly influence the work of librarianship. Litwin further notes the troubling implications for the profession when these two things are conflated: “Taken simplistically, in practice this understanding sometimes treats ‘objectivity’ as a reason to support mainstream information sources, because these centrist sources are able to affect a tone of neutrality and balance on contentious issues (as if neutrality and balance are the same as

objectivity)” (75). Of course, the melding of terms to this end also means that defenders do not have to take political neutrality to its logical conclusion: as Shannon M. Oltmann argues, an absolute commitment to the idea would mean that things like “fake news and misinformation [could not] simply be excluded from a library” (71).

To be fair, though, “affecting a tone of neutrality and balance on contentious issues” has been a long-standing concern within the profession. As Blanke explains: “concomitant with the [librarianship’s historic] pursuit of professional status has been the desire of librarians to portray their profession as politically value-free” (39). For example, Archie L. Dick has shown how a “desire for acceptance as an intellectually respectable academic discipline” (220) led to “[the pursuit of] a social scientific path of disciplinary growth...when library education was institutionalized at universities in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States” (216). And, of course, “a scientific mode of inquiry eschewing political commitments, social ideals, or value judgments has been a desideratum of the social sciences since Max Weber” (Blanke 39). In other words, the most expeditious path to professional respectability for librarianship was to not disturb the status quo and simply embrace the mode of inquiry preferred within the social sciences. The concept of “library neutrality” certainly seems to have been one of the ripple effects of this decision.

That being said, the field’s understanding of the concept has definitely evolved over time. As Mark Rosenzweig reminds us, “the idea of the neutrality of librarianship, so enshrined in today’s library ideology (and so often read back into the indefinite past), was alien to...earlier generations [of practitioners]” (“Editorial” 3). By way of illustration, he notes that our “library predecessors” were engaged in such “ideologically-informed” (2) activities as “the regulation of literacy, the policing of literary taste and the propagation of a particular class culture with all its

political, economic and social prejudices” (2-3). Or, as Alessandra Seiter explains: “...under the guise of [what could be understood as a] morality-based neutrality, U.S. libraries in [the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] were champions of dominant power structures responsible for the oppression of people of color, women, and anyone else deemed immoral” (110). The version of political neutrality that typified this era was so nakedly partisan that it makes contemporary floundering in the name of this concept look rather quaint by comparison.

Political neutrality as it is understood in librarianship today comes into sharp focus historically with the rise of a corollary notion: “intellectual freedom.” Unlike “neutrality,” the term “intellectual freedom” appears in many professional documents, including (most notably) the ALA Code of Ethics (“Professional Ethics”). At the same time, it too is somewhat difficult to pin down: Judith F. Krug points out that the ALA has repeatedly avoided defining the term, preferring instead to “[promote] a variety of principles aimed at fostering a favorable climate for intellectual freedom but without the limits imposed by a rigid definition” (2387). A closer look at the history of the term explains exactly why this is. As Sam Popowich describes it:

In the 1930s, when [intellectual freedom] was formulated in early versions of the [ALA’s] Library Bill of Rights, communism was an attractive alternative both to capitalist depression in North America and to the rise of Fascism in Europe. Its attractiveness meant it was a challenge to a mode of production based on private property, free exchange, and the exploitation of labour. Librarianship was faced with an alternative: commit to antifascism in the name of defense of the democratic republic -- the line pushed by Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish -- and adopt a strict neutrality *in the name of the values and principles of that republic*.

Embracing this “neither left nor right” alternative helped see the field safely through McCarthyism, albeit at the cost of the profession “standing in solidarity with those targeted by U.S. power structures.” It also set the template for the “neutrality-based intellectual-freedom-as-professional-defense ideology [that] pervades LIS today” (Seiter 111).

Fmr. U.S. President Barack Obama at the 2021 ALA Annual Conference & Exhibition

In view of this history, Rosenzweig remarks that “the question...is not whether politics enters into professional matters (it always has), but rather what politics, and to what effect” (“Editorial” 4). However we define or describe it, the point is always the same: what is erroneously referred to as “political neutrality” is always some kind of politics, and accepting the idea of political neutrality amounts to a tacit endorsement of those politics, like it or not. Within the ALA, this has tended to mean middlebrow liberal centrism.

Nevertheless, many library workers continue to take political neutrality at face value. John Wenzler is probably fairly representative of how a lot of professionals think about it: “By protecting a space where all views receive equal respect -- including those of the majority, the minority, the powerful, and the poor -- the library can counterbalance the tendency to enforce conformity of opinion in democratic communities” (69). It seems reasonable to assume, for instance, that any criticism of President Obama’s appearance at the 2021 ALA Annual Conference & Exhibition would be met with the response that he was but one of a constellation of speakers meant to create a conference space that exemplifies this view. (Unsurprisingly, though, the conference lineup stopped well short of including purveyors of the fake news and misinformation to which Oltmann refers.) The issue might be further obfuscated by pointing out that the choice was probably most strongly influenced by the fact that the former president is the author of the bestselling book of 2020: the memoir *A Promised Land*.

Granting these points, though, there are still many aspects of the decision that run afoul of how the organization has historically understood political neutrality. For example, consider the way President Obama’s Closing Session speech was announced. When the ALA first posted the

news on Twitter, it did so with an eyes-wide emoji, writing: “Are you sitting down? President @BarackObama is our closing speaker at #ALAAC21! We’ll give you a second to collect yourself and then smash that REGISTRATION button at bit.ly/obama-alaac21” (ALA).

Similarly, in the text of their official press statement, the organization says categorically that “in times of great challenge and change, President Obama’s leadership ushered in a stronger economy, a more equal society, and a nation more secure at home and more respected around the world” (“Barack Obama to Close ALA’s Annual Conference”). It certainly seems inarguable that the breathless tone of these communications runs counter to the notion that library professionals should avoid doing anything that might (even inadvertently) “express fondness for one political party and dislike for the other” (Hart).

Additionally, the tone here forecloses any possibility of discussion, debate, or dissent; we are simply directed to be excited and/or awestruck. There is clearly no room in this climate of adulation to inquire into the veracity of such enthusiastic claims about the leadership of President Obama. And is it not reasonable to at least mull over how these statements square with reality? For instance, an NPR analysis draws attention to at least “one huge failure” of his administration: the steady and precipitous loss of Democratic Party power over his eight years in office, which ultimately led to the Republican Party taking control of all three branches of government in 2016 (Liasson). If everything was as the ALA’s official press statement says it was, then how are we supposed to account for the balance in power in Washington reversing completely by the end of Obama’s presidency? Of course, such referendums are moot if we are merely supposed to be enthused about the choice. So not only does the tone of the ALA’s communications fail to demonstrate political neutrality, it also contributes to the undermining of intellectual freedom to an appreciable degree.

Indeed, in an environment that truly encouraged intellectual freedom -- even in the ill-defined way that the ALA talks about it -- it seems like there would have been a vigorous debate about whether or not Barack Obama is even an appropriate speaker for the ALA Annual Conference & Exhibition. When it comes to “free, equitable, and confidential access to information for all people,” his record is, to put it very mildly, mixed (“Intellectual Freedom”). For instance, a damning analysis in the *Columbia Journalism Review* notes that “an exhaustive study of every official exchange Obama had with the press corps in 2014, supplemented by a review of daily press briefings and interviews with more than a dozen current and former correspondents and White House press secretaries, reveals a White House determined to conceal its workings from the press, and by extension, the public” (Milligan). If democracy is a “core value of librarianship,” as the ALA says that it is, and this “presupposes an informed citizenry,” then the Obama Administration’s antagonism towards one ought to give us considerable pause (“Core Values of Librarianship”). Similarly, if “rights of privacy are necessary for intellectual freedom and are fundamental to the ethical practice of librarianship,” should we not be bothered by revelations about the administration in the global surveillance disclosures made by Edward Snowden in 2013 (“Privacy”)? As Elaine Harger explained to her fellow library workers at the time: “...If you compare the comments of President Obama when he was a candidate for Senate, when he was a candidate for president, and now when he is commander-in-chief, you’ll see that his position on the issues of domestic surveillance and accountability for violations of privacy by government officials have been moving very much against us” (24-5).

And even if we restrict ourselves to talking about only *A Promised Land*, problems remain: despite its critical acclaim and popular success, the book raises related serious questions about transparency and accountability. In his review for *Dissent*, for example, Timothy Shenk

notes the many “silent adjustments” to official versions of events that can be found throughout the memoir. In his view, “they suggest what [Obama would] most like to forget about his career -- his mistakes in office, the compromises he made during his rise, and where he fears history will judge him most severely.” Gary Younge adds in his review for the *Guardian* that “the 700% increase in drone strikes in Pakistan [during the Obama Administration] receives just a couple of lines here; the escalation in deportations, thanks to a policy inherited from [the George W.] Bush [Administration], which he decides not to reverse, gets a paragraph; the prosecution of twice as many whistleblowers as all his predecessors combined is not mentioned.” These omissions and “silent adjustments” would seem to suggest that *A Promised Land* is smuggling no small amount of propaganda under the aegis of memoir. That would seem to go against the spirit of both the ALA Resolution on Disinformation, Media Manipulation & the Destruction of Public Information (“SRRT Resolutions 2005”) and Resolution on Access to Accurate Information (2017), even though they were developed in response to the sins of other presidential administrations (those of George W. Bush and Donald Trump, respectively). The first “encourages...members to help raise public consciousness regarding the many ways in which disinformation and media manipulation are being used to mislead public opinion in all spheres of life,” while the second establishes that “inaccurate information, distortions of truth, deliberate deceptions, excessive limitations on access and the removal or destruction of information in the public domain are anathema to the ethics of librarianship and to the functioning of a healthy democracy.” If librarians are meant to boost accurate information, should there not be at least some concern about these “silent adjustments” and glaring omissions? And if librarians should help curtail attempts at disinformation, media manipulation, and the destruction of public information, then should there not be questions asked about putting this or any presidential memoir front and center at the ALA

Annual Conference & Exhibition? And how does silence on these issues serve intellectual freedom? How is that silence “politically neutral”?

Conclusion

To be fair, this situation is likely compounded by liberal centrists’ groupthink about both President Obama and the U.S. presidency generally speaking. “Liberals struggle to subject Obama to the rigorous critique that the power he held demands,” Younge notes. “They are always liable to give him the benefit of the doubt, as if his position didn’t grant him enough benefits already.” Sarah Jones has also observed that “in the eyes of some, the office [of the President] is so meaningful that it mandates the absolution of all who occupy it.” In addition, as Litwin points out, “the political center can exert a strong attraction for conformists, because...[the] social sense of acceptability can be a substitute for critical thought, because it offers answers that are approved in advance” (76).

To be sure, it may seem alarming to acknowledge what this episode shows: that even our premier professional organization seems incapable of practicing the political neutrality it preaches. But we should be just as concerned about being “a profession of sheep, finding safety only in numbers” (Rosenzweig, “The Answer to ‘Bad’ Speech” 62). For one thing, some have argued that the ALA’s commitment to neutrality at a time of “post-truth” politics represents a kind of “retreat” (Buschman 431) and is therefore not “ethical” (Cheshire and Stout 219). For another, “trying to be apolitical when one exists in a starkly political world” has been shown to “not [be] a good survival strategy” for librarianship (Jaeger et al. 378). Funding is “under threat for libraries in communities of all sizes and all across the [continent]” (“Budget in the Crosshairs?”), and this has at least something to do with the professional aversion to being

decisive in our politics. And, of course, we should consider the optics of neutrality in terms of library patrons: not only is it “not objective” (Bales and Engle 32) but it also amounts to a “negation of moral responsibility” in favor of “moral relativism” (Good 26-7).

Political neutrality is clearly a promised land we will never reach – a mirage. Alternatively, social responsibility, a possible substitute put forward by critics, comes with exciting and tangible possibilities: among them, coming together to protect “the embattled values of knowledge” (Klein 49); “[widening] and [invigorating] a ‘public sphere’ of discourse” in the Habermasian sense (“Editorial”); and, perhaps most importantly, “actively working to center the information needs of those impacted by past and current masks of neutrality” (Seiter 110). Is it not time for the ALA to acknowledge that, as human beings, we are political creatures, and that any stance we take (including especially neutrality) is inherently political? And might the organization’s full embrace of social responsibility help us to make the next evolutionary leap in our profession?

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