

NEUTRALITY, OBJECTIVITY AND THE POLITICAL CENTER

by Rory Litwin

Editor's note: From time to time, Progressive Librarian publishes "thinking pieces" written by our readers as contributions to current debates within librarianship. We encourage responses and new contributions.

A discussion on the topic of "web site evaluation" from a bibliographic instruction listserv a couple of years ago made me think about the common confusion between neutrality, objectivity, and the political center. Neutrality, in our professional ethics, means being unbiased in our work and separating it from our personal viewpoints. Objectivity, whether we say we believe in it or not, is something we expect in factual information, and evaluate various resources based on our perception of its degree of presence or absence in them. The political center is that balance point in society on individual issues or in political identities, where the mainstream feels that "both sides of the issue" have been properly considered, policies are at their least controversial, and competing power interests are at an equilibrium. This essay will attempt to elucidate the confusion that exists between neutrality, objectivity, and the political center and show its relevance to our discourse about reference service, book selection, bibliographic instruction, and our professional role as librarians.

First, neutrality. The idea of neutrality springs from a truly important value — to respect the minds of our patrons, to let them think for themselves. However, this idea sometimes goes beyond the simple recognition of the patron's autonomy and says that we can do something undesirable: remove ourselves from our individual perspectives and suspend our personal, and perhaps even professional, judgment about information sources and information needs. While it is possible to present a wide range of materials to a patron that includes opinions that we personally disagree with, it is not possible to represent these information sources entirely neutrally when we talk about them. We characterize them in certain ways, however subtly, that reflect our own feelings. This is inescapable. In collection develop-

ment, too, we cannot help but be influenced by our own opinions about what is most important or credible, even though we can select materials that we disagree with. Where we do not follow our own opinions, we follow someone else's (which, sometimes, is appropriate). There is no getting around having opinions if we are authentic beings. And this leads to the most unfortunate problem regarding the idea of neutrality in librarianship: the belief by some librarians, in history and today, that the ethic of neutrality should discourage us from taking positions on social issues, either as a profession or as individuals. To be "neutral" on social issues is to pretend that one's life and one's mind is in a separate sphere from the world as it is affected by the issue in question. There is no escape from our connection to the rest of society and our ultimate involvement in every issue that affects it. And, there is nothing in the demand to respect our patrons' right to think for themselves that should preclude us from taking a stand, as individuals who are parts of a profession with a certain role in society and certain values, where it matters. When we do choose to be "neutral" on an issue, to pretend that we don't have an opinion or that it doesn't count (because as librarians it is not our "role" to have opinions), we are effectively supporting the existing balance of power. And that is, in effect, a significant position to take, and one that ought to be justified explicitly if it is to be chosen, and not hidden behind a phony understanding of an important ethic.

And then there is objectivity. As the question of the possibility of objectivity has been debated to death both near and far, I believe certain things have become clear. It is possible to use standards for what counts as objectivity that make objectivity impossible to achieve. This accomplishes nothing but the loss of a good word. In fact, we use the word "objectivity" all the time. The question is, what does it stand for when it is used properly? What is objectivity? Are we as librarians clear on its meaning?

In my view, objective information is simply information that is verifiable by any other person with their sensory and reasoning faculties intact. If you say I that have a blue aura, that is not objective information; it can't be verified. If I say that the WTO, through a secretive, undemocratic process, is rewriting the laws of sovereign states, including our own, and getting rid of important environmental and labor laws and regulations that were created through nominally democratic processes, that is objective information. It can be verified by examining the WTO's own internal rules, and their agreements and how they have been enforced in courts of law around the world (all information which is publicly available). Similarly, if a death-row

inmate who claims to be innocent has his claim verified by a DNA test, it is the objectivity of that information which gives it its power in society. Objective information is what we can know to be factually true. Now, depending on our point of view, we can use different words when we talk about the objective facts. For example, I might talk about an Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, and you might use other words to describe the situation (less justifiably, in my opinion), even if we have access to the same objective, factual information. Ultimately, we can't communicate about facts without lending our own point of view to our representation. However, there is something in factual information that is independent of our personal perspective. Objective information, if it is not distorted by its representation to the point that it says something very different, has a way of advocating for itself, as a result of calling human values into play. What this means is that sound opinions are founded on objective information and objective information will lead authentic beings to adopt opinions and act on them, according to their understanding of their interests. Accordingly, we are making a mistake if we regard information sources that express opinions as less than objective. They may in fact be more objective, in any given instance, than an information source that appears "unbiased" or "neutral," particularly if the existing balance of power requires misinformation in order to be justified. (If you want examples of how the mainstream media commonly propagates misinformation, or inaccurate representations of fact, in the interest of existing powers, read some of the articles on the website for Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting and their quarterly magazine, *EXTRA!*, at <http://www.fair.org/>. Two books that do something similar for popular versions of American history include *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, and *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, by James Loewen.)

[A side note: The popular notion of objectivity has been damaged by the philosophical viewpoint known as "positivism" (which, while it remains the dominant way of thinking in the human sciences, has been increasingly challenged throughout the last few decades), and aspects of its historical antecedent, the Humean Empiricist tradition.

According to Positivism, only statements that can be verified by science as either true or false have an actual meaning, and such statements, known as propositions, can never contain an attribution or judgment of value (goodness, badness, right or wrong). Therefore, according to this view, science, which is our path to the truth, can only tell us what "is," never what

"ought" to be. It is because of positivism and the older, Humean tradition (which was the source of the general distinction between facts and values) that statements that advocate anything are so often seen as less than objective. Various philosophical currents, allowing for various different ways of understanding factual truth and its relationship to values and interpretation, have sprung up and grown up alongside positivism, borne out of a dissatisfaction with its hermetic separation of the thinking mind from lived reality. Some of these have weaknesses in terms of providing a foundation for knowledge in any kind of objective sense, but others, including Frederic Jameson's *Critique of Post-Modernism*, Roy Bhaskar's *Critical Realism*, and some developments of Hans Georg Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics* provide high degrees of knowability for independently-existing reality.]

In terms of librarianship, my feeling is that the concept of objectivity is often misused in teaching information literacy and in bibliography and collection development. Often, in instructional materials that teach students how to evaluate information resources, the concept of objectivity is often contrasted with "bias" or "advocacy." This is potentially misleading. 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). But these sources do represent a particular point of view and particular interests, and "balance" is in the eye of the beholder. One way that information sources affect an "unbiased" tone is by not challenging the existing balance of power, and therefore not giving the appearance of advocating anything. But the existing balance of power does favor certain interests over others, interests that are certainly advocated by such "unbiased" materials. (Indeed, the existing balance of power is what it is in large part because of the influence of these supposedly "objective" sources of information.)

The way that a debate is framed in an information source is an important but often unrecognized aspect of rhetoric. The ability to recognize the framing of a news story, for example, is part of what is known as Media Literacy, and should be an everyday part of information literacy teaching. For example, are the sources quoted mostly industry and government sources and representatives of industry-supported think tanks? Are people from the community used as sources? How are the different sources and their interests characterized by the reporter? If we apply the principles of media

literacy to mainstream sources, their appearance of objectivity becomes questionable and their neutrality is exposed as an invisible advocacy.

Finally, the political center. Of course, centrism isn't touted as a professional value or consciously sought out in reference sources. But having a bias toward the political center is often mistaken for objectivity, and the effect of "neutrality," as it is usually understood, is to support the interests of the political center, the existing balance of power. The political center can exert a strong attraction for conformists, because of its promise of acceptability. This social sense of acceptability can be a substitute for critical thought, because it offers answers that are approved in advance. While it is true that within subgroups the phenomenon of conformity can lead to politically varying beliefs, and that no ideology has a monopoly on independent thought, there is a definite, erroneous sense that the truth is to be found at the average of what various people believe, that the truth must be "somewhere in the middle." This comes partly from a graphical representation of a political spectrum that ranges from one side to another on a horizontal plane, and an accompanying metaphor of the scales of justice. But this is not necessarily the most accurate representation of the political field. The political field is the field of competing interests in society, competing power interests. In a class-based society (such as any mass society now in existence, in one way or another), a more accurate representation of politics might be vertical — the power elite at the top (who claim the profits of the people's work and determine what that work will be) and the people further down (who create the profits but don't see them or exert control over the nature of their own work or its uses). Serious theories along these lines are complicated, but the basic idea of a vertical differentiation is sound, and while it is commonly understood in a certain sense, it is seldom applied to public discourse about specific issues. Nevertheless, in a nominally democratic society like ours, the people use politics to have some control over what happens, and to improve their situation by degrees without changing the basic, class-based state of affairs. The resulting, ever-shifting balance of power is what is commonly understood as the "political center."

The political center should not be mistaken for objectivity, though it often is. And it should not be supported by our interpretation of professional neutrality, as it often is. 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. We should certainly be on the lookout for that bias that says that

centrist ideas are more objective. We should respect the call for professional neutrality insofar as it amounts to offering our patrons full respect for their right to think for themselves, and we should be happy to present to them information sources with which we personally disagree. We should not be unsatisfied if they reach conclusions that are different from our own, as long as we have provided them with good information and offered realistic, well-founded caveats. But neutrality as it is often understood, meaning that in our professional lives we will be absolutely uninfluenced by personal opinions, is impossible. And where it is taken to mean that we should refrain from taking positions on social issues either personally or as a profession, the idea of neutrality is a definite evil, because it supports the existing balance of power, and does it invisibly, in cases where caring individuals, armed with objective information, likely would not.

Postscript:

When I posted a previous version of this essay to LISnews.com, one critical reader, Bob Watson, responded, "That's all very fine, but what one does also has an imbedded nature due to the institution in which one works. The institution has values of its own." This is surely an important part of the picture, to which I can only respond by pointing out that it is the people who act within institutions that give the institutions their values. While it is undeniable that our freedom within institutions is limited, there are times when we should take personal risks — great or small — in order to exercise a greater degree of that freedom and commit ourselves to a moral purpose. Adolf Eichman wrote in his memoirs (still unpublished), "Now that I look back, I realize that a life predicated on being obedient is a very comfortable life indeed. Living in such a way reduces to a minimum one's own need to think." That is an extreme statement to juxtapose with an issue like collection development decision-making or information literacy instruction in an institutional setting, but the principle applies.

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