



NEUTRALITY

Lately, there's been a discussion in the library profession about whether libraries are, can be, or should be neutral, and about what neutrality means in libraries.

TO REFRESH

In the **Glossary of Terms Badge Module**, we learned that United for Libraries defines **neutrality** as “the idea that libraries should remain ideologically neutral spaces to ensure all patrons’ access to any information they please, regardless of their identity, status, background, or beliefs.”

HOWEVER

Neutrality can mean many things, which makes the discussion more complicated. Sometimes people seem to disagree when they actually define neutrality differently.

Here are a couple of dictionary definitions to give you an idea of what people might mean when they say neutrality:



Traditionally, neutrality has been a core value in libraries and considered the best way of providing good service to patrons.

From the American Library Association's (ALA's) [Code of Ethics](#):

“We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.”



IN FAVOR

Those in favor of neutrality believe it is important to ensure that patrons have access to a variety of materials, services, and programs.

Douglas John Foskett, a librarian who is in favor of neutrality, says the ideal librarian “ought to virtually vanish as an individual person, except in so far as his personality shed[s] light on the working of the library.”

People who favor neutrality also argue that patrons respect libraries in part because libraries have traditionally been seen as neutral and above politics. Therefore, if libraries stop claiming to be neutral, we could lose some patrons’ respect.

OPPOSED

Critics of neutrality claim that neutrality is impossible and undesirable. Libraries exist in a society with deep-seated biases such as racism, classism, and more. A neutral library that does nothing to work against this environment will reinforce the biases of our culture. This prevents us from giving equitable service to patrons.

Equitable service is different from equal service. Equitable service gives each patron what they need, while equal service is the same service for everyone, regardless of their individual needs.

Libraries must make choices about where they will be located, what kind of parking they'll provide, which hours to be open—even decisions like these are not neutral.

Libraries are committed to access, the free flow of information and ideas, and intellectual freedom. Promotion of these ideas is not neutral.

Compared to the average person, librarians are more likely to be white, female, liberal, and upper middle class. When a group of librarians less diverse than our patrons determines what is neutral, we risk replicating the biases of the average librarian.

AT ELMHURST PUBLIC LIBRARY

The question of neutrality in libraries is ongoing. At EPL, we strive to provide materials reflecting “the widest possible diversity of views and expressions,” and EPL “does not advocate for the ideas found in the collection.”

However, we are not truly neutral. We do not collect pornography or allow it to be viewed on our computers. We are a public library, so we purchase mostly popular, traditionally published, and general materials rather than technical, self-published, or academic ones.

BROWSE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- 👤 [Master Thesis: Current stance of public librarians on the issue of neutrality and its practicality](#)
- 📄 [Article: Libraries and the Contested Terrain of “Neutrality”](#)
- 📄 [Article: Libraries Should Take Sides: Breaking Down the Neutrality Myth](#)
- ★ [ALA President's Program: Are Libraries Neutral?](#)
- 👤 [Op Ed: The Battle for the Soul of the Library](#)

