Library neutrality in collection development

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Abstract

The way in which librarians understand the concept of “library neutrality” can have an important impact on the availability of diverse works in a library. In this article, two concepts with opposite understandings of “library neutrality” will be presented: passive library neutrality and active library neutrality. The main purpose of this article is to draw attention to the issue of “library neutrality” in developing, maintaining and promoting diverse library collections and to give incentive for the research on various aspects of that topic. Important inspiration for consideration in this article came from the article written by Professor Buckland: Five Grand Challenges for Library Research. Therefore, relevant parts of that article will be presented. For the last six years, Professor Aparac-Jelušić has been the mentor of the author of this article and in that role she has had a beneficial influence regarding the development of the author’s interest for various research topics, including the topic presented in this article. Some remarks about that will be given as an introduction.

Keywords: library neutrality, diversity, collection development, collection promotion, enlargement of the publishers, economic censorship.

In the year 2009 the author started working in Zadar at the Department of Information Science as a teaching and research assistant. This job is not without some considerable challenges, at the very least because of the various assignments and because of the requirement to continually contribute new ideas and help with their successful implementation. One considerable initial challenge was to acquire, as soon as possible, the theoretical foundations of library and information science. Professor Aparac-Jelušić was very helpful in that regard. Apart from introducing the author kindly to his work colleagues, she also recommended the foundational literature
in the LIS field and referred the author to the important authors and their works. In the year 2009 the author enrolled in the PhD programme “The Knowledge Society and Transfer of Information” where the author had a great opportunity to gradually accumulate different insights valuable for his new career. The credit for the creation of that programme goes considerably to Professor Aparac-Jelusić. In particular, the author would like to emphasize the fact that Professor Aparac-Jelusić revealed to him the works of the LIS pioneers and legends. Their works had and still have a major impact on how the author understands this field of research. At the same time, these works are still giving him fresh inspiration for his research topics. The author will enumerate a few authors and works that he studied on Professor Aparac-Jelusić’s recommendation:

Patrick G. Wilson (Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority; Public Knowledge, Private Ignorance); Marcia J. Bates (Berry Picking Model Of Information Retrieval); Michael K. Buckland (Redesigning library services; Library services in theory and context; Emanuel Goldberg and his knowledge machine; The Heritage of Public Librarianship; Five Grand Challenges for Library Research), Tefko Saracevic (Relevance and how it was studied); Douglas John Foskett (Information service in libraries), Jesse Shera (The complete librarian – and other essays; Knowing books and men; knowing computers too).

Every one of these authors was important for advancing the author’s understanding of the LIS field. The author would especially like to single out Professor Michael K. Buckland because it was one of his papers that gave the author the inspiration to explore the topic of library neutrality. As soon as the author started working in Zadar, he had the priceless opportunity to meet Professor Buckland in person. More specifically, at the LIDA (Libraries in the Digital Age) conference in May 2009, at which Professor Buckland was the invited speaker. The author’s task was to record his presentation with a video camera. The author remembers this presentation as being interesting and inspiring. In the same month, the author also had the opportunity to listen to Professor Buckland’s lecture at the PhD programme which the author enrolled. The lecture was about Emanuel Goldberg, a visionary inventor whose revolutionary device for organizing and retrieving a huge number of (micro)documents was for a long time unfairly forgotten. This lecture was equally interesting, so the author was intent on finding and studying Professor Buckland’s books and papers. The author did not know then that in the next few years he would have another convenient opportunity to thoroughly study some of prof. Buckland’s works. Namely, from 2009 to 2014, the author was an assistant at the university course “The Foundations of Information Activity” – which was a course created by Professor Aparac-Jelusić. As some of Professor Buckland’s works were required reading for this course, the author got a chance to explore them meticulously in the process of preparing test questions in cooperation with Professor Aparac-Jelusić.
How neutral could libraries be?

Among the many inspiring works of prof. Buckland which the author had a privilege to encounter, the author would like to single out this one for this paper: *Five Grand Challenges for Library Research*. The reason why the author emphasizes this work is that he found the incentive to think about the topic of library neutrality in it. As its name suggests, in the article *Five Grand Challenges for Library Research*, Professor Buckland recommends five topics for LIS research because he thinks that a more detailed understanding of these topics would be helpful for the considerable advancement of library services.

One of these five research topics is the topic of library values. In relation to this topic, Buckland draws attention to the importance of the following question: “How neutral can libraries be?” Buckland emphasizes the fact that library neutrality is based on the commitment of many librarians, their governing boards, and their professional associations to open inquiry, freedom to read, and “balanced collections.” He points out some barriers for library neutrality. For example, public libraries are guided by the purposes of their funding bodies that have agendas. Buckland also points out the “self-censorship by the librarians seeking to avoid censorship being imposed from outside.” He indicates that both of these issues have been discussed many times before. Therefore, he pledges to explore one other barrier to library neutrality, which has not been much explored yet, but which has a profound impact on reducing the access to diverse materials (Buckland 2003). Buckland emphasizes the importance of exploring the following questions:

“How well do we understand the factors and mechanisms by which inquiries are steered towards or away from some sources? How, and in what ways, can librarians exercise effective influence, given the powerful roles of publishers?” (Buckland 2003, 682).

One of the reasons why he thinks that these questions are decisive is a continued consolidation of media publishing into fewer companies. He thinks that a thorough analysis of these questions would provide a better understanding of how a library services are situated in this regard and of what the options are (Buckland 2003, 682).

Inspired by Buckland’s considerations, in this paper the author intends to focus on the issue of library neutrality, its relation to the process of conglomeration of the publishers and the undesirable consequences of that process: market predominance of the popular, most promoted literature. This was also one of the topics which the author considered in his PhD thesis “Film Collections in Croatian Public Libraries.” One important finding
from that research was that film collections in Croatian public libraries are to a large degree not diverse regarding the film types, the time periods in which the films were produced and the countries of the films’ production. Namely, it was found that in those libraries there is a substantial predominance of the most recent American feature films.

**Conglomeration of publishing and economic censorship**

Conglomeration of the publishers can have a harmful impact on the possibilities of developing diverse library collections. Likewise, conglomeration of the publishers can have a harmful impact on the whole market, lowering the diversity of works (books, films, music, etc.). J. Habermas warns about the cultural homogeneity of the world:

“Global markets, mass consumption, mass communication, and mass tourism disseminate the standardized products of a mass culture (overwhelmingly shaped by the United States). The same consumer goods and fashions, the same films, television programs, and bestselling music and books spread across the globe; the same fashions in pop, techno, or jeans seize and shape the mentalities of young people in even the most far-flung places” (Habermas, 75).

By the year 2006, fewer than ten corporations, most of which are from the USA, owned the majority of world media industries (Thussu 2007, 49). J. Buschman (2005) is the author of the paper *On libraries and the public sphere* in which he admonishes that libraries, universities and schools are threatened by the interests of profit-oriented organizations. Buschman (2005, 7) thinks that we have been transformed into an unbalanced society because the economical way of thinking about society and its problems dominates the public philosophy. N. Kranich, former ALA (American Library Association) president, thinks that market, i.e. economic censorship, is influencing decision making in publishing in such a way that publishers are refusing to publish new authors and critical perspectives because they fear that untested authors and titles will not sell well enough. Therefore, she warns that libraries cannot develop balanced collections without considerable investment in alternative sources that exist as opposition to the big publishers (Kranich 1999, according to Lilburn 2005, 7).

One guideline from the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto is important in this context. That guideline says that collections and services should not be subjected to any kind of ideological, political or religious censorship, but also not to the commercial pressures (IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, 1994).
A peculiarly important issue is what kind of impact the decrease in diversity of works in a library has on children and adolescents. Being in the process of growing up, they are developing an interest in certain types of books, films, music, etc. – so it is important that they have access to diverse works and that the educational and cultural institutions are capable of presenting them with valuable, diverse works that are appropriate for their age and that will develop their tastes and broaden their cultural and educational horizons. K. Drotner points out the challenge in offering diverse and quality works:

“In terms of entertainment, a major challenge is to offer what children would not easily encounter in visits to the local mall or surfing the internet” (Drotner, 2009).

The development of diverse collections in conditions of conglomerations of the global publishers is a major challenge for libraries. For example, in the sphere of development of film interests, D. Denby regards that “[...] the studios are not merely servicing the tastes of the young audience to whom they want to sell; they are also continuously creating the audience to whom they want to sell” (Denby 2012, 35). Departing from this statement, Denby raises a question: “[...] will these constantly created new audiences, arising from infancy with all their faculties intact but their expectations already defined [...] – will they ever develop a taste for narrative, for character, for suspense, for acting, for irony, for wit, for drama?” He considers a possibility that the audience “will be so hooked to sensation that anything without extreme action and fantasy will just seem lifeless and dead to them” (Denby 2012, 35).

Two views of library neutrality

If the libraries want to build and maintain diverse collections, it is of the utmost importance which activities the libraries, i.e. the librarians are undertaking and to which extent they are trying to eliminate or decrease previously highlighted problems. The way in which librarians understand the concept of “library neutrality” can have an important impact on the quantity and quality of those pro-diversity activities. Here are some questions whose answers could indicate how librarians understand the concept of “library neutrality”: To which extent do the librarians intend to be active in relation to the decrease in diversity of works in the market? To which extent do the librarians understand the concept of “library neutrality” as a principle that tells them that they should not or that they could not have any influence on market supply? To which extent do the librarians understand the concept of “library neutrality” as a principle that tells them that they should not or that they could not have any influence on the interests
or wants of their current and prospective users? To which extent do the librarians understand the concept of “library neutrality” as a principle that tells them not to get involved in the market laws of supply and demand, i.e. to primarily and exclusively fulfil the wishes of their users by primarily acquiring the works that are most popular and most available on the market?

There is one possible answer on these questions in a paper by S. Durrani and E. Smallwood. They think that a considerable number of libraries are unrelated to the social and political reality that surrounds them. They say that these libraries have McDonald’s restaurants as their ideal, the restaurants that serve identical or very similar meals in all parts of the world. The authors think that “McDonald’s” libraries are becoming more and more isolated and that their librarians are proud of the neutrality they have in the middle of numerous social divisions (Durrani, Smallwood 2006). The following quote describes this type of library neutrality well:

“Forces of corporate globalisation then push them even further from their communities by offering to save staff and mental effort by supplying pre-packaged ‘bestsellers,’ guaranteed to meet the wants of 30 percent of the population – and to boost the profit margins of transnational publishers and booksellers. The success of their libraries is then judged by the number of such bestsellers they manage to loan out. No critical questions are asked or answered here: What is a library all about? What is its social role? Who has the power to make key decisions, and on whose behalf are decisions made?” (Durrani, Smallwood 2006, 4).

G. Handman is worried about the nature and direction of the development of film collections because they are frequently developed according to the law of least effort. In that way, libraries are primarily eager to acquire popular feature titles and relatively cheap non-fiction titles intended for the mass market, i.e. films which could be easily obtained from regular suppliers (Handman 2003, 38). R. Pitman (1989; according to Harris 2008, 6) is equally concerned about libraries which acquire only bestseller films because he considers that a library should develop a collection of the best and most interesting films. F. Bouthillier (1998, 17) speaks about two contrasted library ideologies – ideology of popularization and ideology of education. The first ideology suggests that people need to get what they want, and according to that ideology the following types of documents are primary library material – films, music and easy-to-read fiction. According to this ideology, books that are more serious or complex do not have the importance that they have according to the library ideology of education. A. Huynh (2004) thinks that in the last few decades, public libraries have redirected their budgets to satisfying users’ wants and these wants are strongly shaped by publishers’ promotional activities and advertise-
ments. Although he does not have anything against popular culture in libraries, Huynh (2004, 29) nevertheless asks the question whether survival is the hidden motivation why public libraries are primarily orientating themselves toward users’ wants and at the same time neglecting their educational mission. He acknowledges that fear from complete loss or a decrease in funds is a real and important factor in the management of public libraries, but he adds that this fear should not divert libraries from their mission.

In the previous quotes, the attention is indirectly drawn to the understanding of the concept of “library neutrality” as a principle that tells librarians that they should not or that they could not have any influence on the market supply, i.e. that they should not or that they could not have any influence on the interests or wants of their current and prospective users. Therefore, they are primarily fulfilling users’ wishes by first acquiring the works that are most popular and most available on the market. We will call this type of view of the concept of “library neutrality” “passive library neutrality.” On the other hand, it is possible (and we think that it is necessary) to accept another, entirely opposite concept of “library neutrality.” We will call this other type of view of the concept of “library neutrality” “active library neutrality.”

**Active library neutrality – the way to go**

The library can and should be active neutral, which means that the library should develop, maintain and promote the neutrality of its collections. In that manner, the active neutral library will continue to develop, maintain and promote diverse and balanced collections with a considerable share of less available, less popular works so that the library’s users can have access to them and so that they have the chance to find out about these works and get interested in them. Therefore, the important role of the active neutral library is also to strongly promote less available and less popular valuable works with the role of expanding cognitive and bibliographic horizons of its current and prospective users.

In the text *Fostering media diversity in libraries – strategies and actions*, there are plenty practical, useful proposals for the activities whose goal is to develop, maintain and promote diverse library collections and services, activities which are in spirit of the active neutral library (American Library Association, 2010). This text was created by the Subcommittee on the Impact of Media Concentration on Libraries which is a part of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee. This is a quote from the beginning of this text:
"The purpose of this document is to provide libraries, library consortia, and library networks with a centralized list of strategies and actions to help them fulfil one of their key responsibilities: to provide access to a diverse collection of resources and services. Throughout the document, special attention is given to the acquisition of and access to small, independent, and alternative sources—including locally produced and international ones—in all formats: print, AV media, and electronic" (American Library Association 2010, 9).

The authors have the opinion that in the times when democratic discussion is more important than ever, the information system is unbalanced and therefore libraries need to provide forums — physical and virtual — which open possibilities for the individuals to join in the exchange of perspectives and ideas (American Library Association 2010, 9). The authors emphasize that libraries should no longer depend on traditional, passive approaches to the acquisition:

"They must be vigilant and assertive in seeking out alternative voices. In short, libraries must assume an active leadership role if they are to ensure access to a broad spectrum of ideas. Otherwise, they will abrogate their responsibility to guarantee free expression and promote the public interest in the digital age" (American Library Association 2010, 11).

Here are some of the strategies which are suggested to librarians in order to build responsive, diverse and high-quality collections: prepare a selection policy and a collection development policy that articulate the importance of a diverse collection of resources; promote the diversity of sources, outlets, and viewpoints essential to an informed citizenry and a robust marketplace of ideas; assign library staff to monitor new small/independent/alternative press titles and make recommendations for the collection; train staff in the importance of including alternative sources of information in the collection (American Library Association 2010, 12).

The authors of this text have recognized many considerable problems encountered by the librarians who strive to develop, maintain and promote diverse collections. Unfortunately, other studies that are concerned with similar problems are hard to find.

**Final remarks**

Two views of the concept of “library neutrality” — active and passive neutrality — should be primarily understood as two poles of neutrality between which there is a range of many possible levels of library neutrality. Hence,
in its total activities, a certain library can act active neutral to a certain level which lies somewhere between maximum active neutrality and minimum active neutrality or it could even be a zero level of active neutrality, in which case it could be said that the total activities of that library could be designated as passive neutral.

There is another important differentiation which needs to be taken into account. Namely, a certain library, i.e. librarians can act more active neutral in developing, maintaining and promoting a certain collection than when developing, maintaining and promoting some other kind of library collection. For example, the library can be passive neutral in developing its film collection, whereas the same library is in a considerable level active neutral in developing book collection. The level of active neutrality with which a certain library is approaching the development of certain collection depends, among other factors, on the value that librarians in that library attach to that collection. If films are considered to be a less valuable resource than books (in cognitive or some other aspects), then it is not surprising that the film collection will be developed in the spirit of passive neutrality. Accordingly, the film collection will most likely consist mainly of the most popular, most available films. On the other hand, if in the same library it is thought that books are the most valuable resource for the users, there is a good chance that the book collection will be developed in the spirit of a high level of active neutrality. Hence, the librarians will strive to develop a more diverse book collection. Of course, it is possible that librarians will have an entirely opposite value system - that they would consider films to be more valuable than books. The situation in every library and network of libraries in a certain region, country or part of the world is determined by the different environments, attitudes and interests of current and prospective users and librarians. Therefore, we can expect considerable differences in the politics of neutrality which are adopted and implemented in a particular library. Research about the understandings of the concept of “library neutrality” in a particular library or group of libraries and research about the diversity of the collections in these libraries can give us valuable insight into this important aspect of librarianship. As we have already mentioned, there are not many studies about these topics. The main purpose of this article was to draw attention to the issue of “library neutrality” in developing, maintaining and promoting of diverse library collections and to give incentive for the research of various aspects of that topic.

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In the year 2009 I started working in Zadar at the Department of Information Science as the teaching and research assistant. This job is not without some considerable challenges and one of it was to acquire, as soon as possible, theoretical foundations of the library and information science. Professor Aparac-Jelušić introduced me to the foundational literature in the LIS field and referred me to the important authors and their works. From 2009 to 2014 I was an assistant at the university course created by Professor Aparac-Jelušić “The Foundations of Information Activity.” This was also a very good opportunity to advance my knowledge of the field.