The Role of Multidimensional Library Neutrality in Advancing Social Justice: Adapting Theoretical Foundations from Political Science and Urban Planning.

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1. Introduction

The library profession and LIS scholarship have become increasingly polarized over a long-standing debate concerning the perceived incompatibility between on the one hand library neutrality and intellectual freedom, and concerns for social justice on the other (Knox 2020; Schrader 2020), with professional discourse focusing on the desirability or ethics of excluding "hateful" speakers from libraries (ACRL 2020; Litwin 2018). Some library practitioners and Library and Information Studies (LIS) scholars alike are foregrounding matters falling under the umbrella of social justice and as, a consequence, questioning what were once considered core professional values, including intellectual freedom, library neutrality, freedom of expression and, indeed, a commitment to democracy itself (for example see CAPAL 2019; Popowich 2019, 2020). In order to resolve this tension, there are calls in the literature for librarianship to "develop deeper and more nuanced foundations for its values" (Knox 2020, 9).

We argue that this crisis over professional values and ethics is owed not just to the fact that neutrality in the service of intellectual freedom has never been adequately defined (the term doesn't actually appear the ALA *Library Bill of Rights* or its Code of Ethics), but to an absence of an institutional (and in LIS programs, pedagogical) focus on situating the public library and librarians as political actors in a multicultural and largely urban society. Specifically, librarianship has no fully articulated *political theory* describing the library's role in democratic governance, as well as a *professional praxis* based on facilitating this role. In the absence of such theoretical foundations, library professionals have tended to reduce the debate to one over "abstract" principles unto themselves, rendering them more vulnerable to criticism or outright rejection. Yet the history of public librarianship since its inception – and in particular since the 1980s – is that of the general advancement of social justice through access, resources and inclusion for previously discriminated against, marginalized or unheard communities (Wiegand 2015).

To transcend this current impasse and establish a framework integrating intellectual freedom and socially-just processes whereby all community stakeholders may be brought to the table, we argue for a theoretically-informed, multidimensional understanding of neutrality in the context of libraries as public institutions, and a commensurate professional stance utilizing theories originating in the fields of political science and urban planning. By theorizing and understanding the librarian as a situated (but ethically constrained) political actor

we believe librarianship can find more durable foundations for realizing the conjoined goals of intellectual freedom *and* social justice. In this article, we introduce key political science and urban planning theories in order to demonstrate how they support principled institutional neutrality, and argue that such a framework bolsters the democratic role of public libraries in both facilitating intellectual freedom and in permitting expression by multiple diverse voices in the community.

We begin by noting that the debate over intellectual freedom and social justice in libraries is not occurring in a policy vacuum nor is it a current phenomenon, but instead has seen expression in a variety of forms for most of the last century since the ALA established the *Library Bill of Rights* (BoR) in 1939.[1] It begins in earnest with a 1972 article by David Berninghausen (in which he argued that librarians should not be advocating for social causes beyond their expertise [Berninghausen 1972]) and was the subject of an edited volume *Questioning Library Neutrality* (Lewis 2008) as well as a major historical analysis of its early years by Toni Samek (2001). In an effort to reconcile this tension, Burgess (2016) proposes a virtue ethics approach in which an ethic of fulfilling a given library's "purpose in order to promote flourishing" would assist in determining if a response to conflict would be prudent or imprudent (170). Given that partisans of both neutrality and social justice could easily interpret this ethic to apply equally to their respective points of view, this approach would seem insufficiently robust.

A significant manifestation of this debate emerged at the 2021 midwinter conference of the ALA, at which the association's Council adopted a "Resolution to Condemn White Supremacy and Fascism as Antithetical to Library Work" (ALA 2021a) which states that the profession's "misplaced emphasis on neutrality" had "upheld and encouraged white supremacy."[2] The social justice ethic behind the *Resolution* also informed ALA's decision to insert later in 2021 a 9th clause to its Code of Ethics:

> We affirm the inherent dignity and *rights* of every person. We work to recognize and *dismantle systemic and individual biases*; to *confront inequity and oppression*; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, *communities*, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces (ALA 2021b, emphasis added).

As part of our *problematique* we would point out that this new ethic raises significant questions, namely that it sets no practical limitations on the library

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[1] Adopted June 19, 1939, by the ALA Council; amended October 14, 1944; June 18, 1948; February 2, 1961; June 27, 1967; January 23, 1980; January 29, 2019.
[2] In December 2021 the Working Group made public a draft recommendation that the term "Radical Empathy" be considered as a replacement for neutrality-related language.

worker as an agent of social change. Will they be expected to "confront inequity and oppression" everywhere? If so, will it be universally accepted among library workers in each case who the oppressors are? It also doesn't clarify how library workers might address systemic biases in society or – more troublingly – that there might be ethical concerns in intervening in the minds of individuals to "dismantle" their "individual biases," an interventionist stance some have likened to social engineering or "soulcraft" (Hartman-Caverly 2022). To address these issues, we shall revisit this Ethic later in this paper in light of our analysis.

Before we present our argument we also need to clarify our use of key terms. *Social justice* as popularly understood is fraught with conflicting definitions premised on either a focus on achieving equality of socio-economic *outcomes* – i.e, the degree to which individuals belonging to particular marginalized groups have materially benefitted from the *distribution* of resources and opportunities – or on the transparent fairness of *process,* which is to say the *means* by which resources and opportunities are distributed (see Lind 2010; Silver & Iceland 2021). Given this paper's focus on political and planning processes, the latter definition shall prevail.

We are using urban planning theories to address this controversy for three reasons: like librarianship, planning is oriented to working towards the public interest, and planning as a profession has also had its own struggle defining and negotiating the tensions between practitioner neutrality and social engineering. Most importantly however is that, where contemporary librarianship is presuming to adopt a broadly interventionist mission of social change for which it was never intended, planning has always been an explicitly interventionist profession and, as such, possesses the history, theory, ethics and discourses fit to that purpose, and from which librarianship might learn.

2.) Literature Review: Politics and Planning

Libraries and Modes of Governance

The primary training of librarians is in information content, not politics. But we feel it is important that librarians and libraries understand themselves as political agents as well as information agents. More exactly, with regard to 'neutrality', that they are agents of the state, with all that entails. As such, expectations on library government and behaviour fall within the general operational parameters of these jurisdictions, including their governance, their legal obligations, and their engagement with what we quaintly now call their "stakeholders" i.e., the public they serve. Publicly-funded libraries are, in fact, government organizations and should be analyzed as such. Understanding libraries as government agencies allows one to generalize the case of community engagement and the role of public service professionals within that role.

We begin with the assumptions of John Rawls' *political liberalism* which is in his words a "freestanding" conception of political association in which a well-ordered society seeks a minimum base of shared morality – or ideal of the good life – on which all can agree, so that we can have a foundation on which to negotiate our larger political and metaphysical disagreements (Rawls 1993). Rawlsian liberalism has no content or ideal conception of society of its own beyond creating the political associations necessary for resolving conflict. Along with Wenzler (2019), we believe that Rawls' political liberalism offers a basic political and philosophical foundation for library neutrality, as both have powerful moral imperatives of their own.

Without delving too far into political theory, for practical purposes[3] it is sufficient to say that the nature of state institutions in a liberal-democracy can be seen as either: pluralist in terms of accounting for and representing actors and interest groups (Dahl, 1971); instrumental or structural agents of capitalism (or other structures such as patriarchy), or neo-institutional agencies with their own independent rationale, based on a construct to resolve socio-political problems (Khachaturian, 2019). Furthermore, what makes them democratic can be adjudicated as either the participatory decision-making of individuals, or a more normatively-legal form, based on a broad incorporation of human rights and cultures (Seeberg, 2012). It is fair to say that when looking at their own role and agency, librarians do not generally view, conduct or operationalize their work according to any of these frameworks.

We have therefore looked to Dunleavy's and O'Leary's classic *Theories of the State* (1987) to help synthesize and resolve these contestable issues of the meaning and practice of the state into an operational framework. These authors posit that the *mode* of the state is more analytically important than the *form* of the state in understanding how a state operates . The analytical value is that it elides theoretical constructs to focus on how particular states are understood to operate, rather than whether the state meets specific Marxist, neo-liberal, authoritarian, corporatist, liberal-democratic definitions, or any of the other many labels and lenses through which we view the underlying power and structural dynamics of "the state". By extension the framework applies to the operation of any state agency: so in our case, the lofty term 'the state' is applied to mean libraries, notably those run at municipal and state/provincial levels.[4]

According to Dunleavy and O'Leary these various types of states – regardless of their ideological foundations – operate as *ciphers, guardians,* or *partisans.* Briefly:

- *Cipher states* are those where the state itself evinces little self-interest in policy outcomes. One can think of the state as an arena in which policy

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[3] We acknowledge here some damage done by brevity to the nuances of the following theoretical descriptions.

[4] Public libraries in the North American federal countries are funded and governed by a mix of municipal and state (US) or provincial (Canada) legislation, ultimately at the mercy of the state/provincial tier. In other unitary states such as the UK, ultimate policy authority may reside with the national government.

choices are made on a case-by-case basis, or a weathervane which moves according to the political winds. Compared to social forces, the state is relatively weak, and may be perceived as not having its own interests. Neutrality is expressed in absence, or as mechanistic approach to problem-resolution

- *Guardian states* are those with a strong sense of institutional force as a 'balancer' serving the public interest. The state (and its officials) may have a personal sense of their role to balance social forces and counter what it sees as instability or crises, but position themselves as neutral – that is, ensuring the integrity and proper functioning of the political system and its institutional mandate – thereby serving the interests of the system itself. The guardian state is seen as an actor in a society of competing actors and/or structures. Effective guardian states have a strong sense of identity and see policy-making to require equally strong state capabilities to balance competing interests in society.

- *Partisan states*, as the name implies, hold a partisan interest in their own favour. The state's interests, or those of individuals or actors within the state machinery predominate. Public interest is secondary to serving state/actors' interests. Partisan states see the need for a strong, perhaps dominant state to resolve intractable problems. Neutrality is absent, or equated to silent assent. (Dunleavy & O'Leary 1987, 327-334).

It is a given that in liberal-democratic countries, the population tends to view electoral politics as a cipher-state, a political arena in which politics happens. This is a pluralist view of the state, where citizens and interests tell the state agencies what policy outcomes they want, mainly via an indirect process of elections to appoint political leadership to direct said agencies (ministries, departments, government corporations, etc.). Policy outcomes shift according to elections, with issue interest groups often applying pressure or persuasion via public (or private) communication. This is the arena in which the public situates government institutions, including the public library.

The library is, after all, a public agency (and place) providing demanded services for taxes rendered. The margins of debate usually focus on two issues: costs, or how much can society afford (and/or to what extent should a public agency 'distort' the market by providing information for free); and information content, what constitutes the bounds of acceptable information (e.g., debates over controversial books and speakers).

However, libraries and librarians see their role differently than does the public: as a profession and as a class of agency(ies), libraries and librarians have officially adopted what amounts to a guardian-state role. This is essentially a Weberian understanding of a state agency: a professional organization(s) run according to

professional competencies to provide efficient, rational and optimal outcomes based on expertise (Freidson, 1999). The Weberian competencies themselves come from education, expertise, self-governance, and technical knowledge of a certain intellectual kind (Saks, 2016)

The astute reader will immediately see the tension between democratic direction and oversight of public institutions (like the public library) on the part of citizenry, versus the internal professional standards defined and monitored by professional bodies (like the American Library Association). Less evident is the considerable tension *within* professions on these same issues, as expressed via: professional goals and standards; responsiveness to democratic participation and oversight; democratic outcomes; educational outcomes; and, normative values. Because most professions – such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, pharmacists, et al. – focus entirely on the "profession", they are usually unversed and undertheorized in the state and society frameworks required to operationalize their practice, or how to discuss and synthesize such issues into the profession. Librarianship as a profession is no different (for example, see ALA 2019a).

All libraries are bound by the legal framework of the states in which they operate. One would expect national (and sub-national) variances on interpretation of the public good and public policy, i.e., political-cultural, and legal frameworks on such things as the parameters of speech and the public domain.[5] In Canada, for example, compared to the United States, one doesn't see specific mention of First Amendment rights or on Fair Use in copyright, but rather references to what constitutes "hate speech" – an allowable qualifier of expression under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – and limits on Fair Dealing related to copyrighted materials.

This deference to constitutional legality is clearly expressed in, for example, library policies on programs and space, where there are narrower discussions on legal obligations, and of conflict – on how, for example, to manage space legally and to shut down conflict using other definitions of content or behaviour that can be applied equally without challenging the informational content of the speech (Minow & Lipinski 2002, 234). In other words, one can enforce decorum, but, in the interest of neutrality, not views. From the ALA very little is said on space as a *public* institutional space: Article VI of the *Library Bill of Rights* aside, public space management is instead discussed instrumentally in terms of what parts of the library constitute public space, as opposed to non-public (staff and operational)

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[5] Nonetheless, across the established liberal democracies, one sees numerous iterations of library professions and libraries generally following similar and equate-able national positions to that of the ALA on their respective stewardship and democratic roles with the state and society. And to be clear: we the authors see all the above values and interests as important and valuable, things libraries need to cleave to in order to fulfill their role in the interests of a democratic society.

space, or issues of freedom of information related to a library's legal/constitutional requirements i.e., what meets the tests of a legal challenge (ALA 2019b).

There is, in other words, a strange silence on a clear, principled, and epistemologically grounded statement on how and why one manages public space in the public interest *as state agency.* The problem of this absence becomes clear once we compare different understandings on the part of stakeholders regarding of the mode of the state. This represents in our view a significant and scarcely-recognized potential for conflict between the library and its community based on this misunderstanding of whom and what the library is serving – people as individuals versus an impersonal, professionally determined 'public interest.'

This silence – indeed, vacuum – also provides temptation for the profession to take a lead role in defining for itself the goals and outcomes of service, notwithstanding how it is historically and institutionally embedded in society: professional and organizational "mission creep" if you will. Thanks largely to advocacy from within the profession, libraries and librarianship have gone far from their early roots of promoting "good books" that promoted acculturation to understand more fully the differences in power and structure that create barriers to accessing government and social resources fairly and seamlessly. Yet, the definition of terms such as equality and equity remain highly contestable, and the effectiveness of such outcomes are equally contested.

Arguments over value-laden terms such as equity, equality, rights, and democracy are expected by both the cipher- and guardian-state modes. They anticipate these challenges and the difficult means required to work through such contestation as played out through public governance of library systems via boards and other elected representatives. But within the library profession there are those who wish to take a more *partisan-state mode* to resolve specific issues quickly by bypassing process. In short, there is a belief on the part of many library professionals that, for interests of (quick) justice to specific groups, neutrality is to be set aside in favor of a partisan-state mode.

Yet, in public policy, as in democracy, process is at least as important as the outcomes to maintain stability, legitimacy, and ultimately public trust in public institutions, all of which are necessary conditions for maintaining democracy. Library management needs an understanding of process and a set of concepts and principles behind it that reflect public policy and what we mean by the "public interest." In sum, we propose that libraries need a "guardian" statement concerning the public interest as equally developed and as powerful as its principles on information content management and freedom of expression. We propose that the source of such a statement may be found in the literature of urban planning theory.

Planning Theory

The aim of planning wrote John Friedmann (1987) is to "link scientific and technical knowledge to actions in the public domain," which would include both "processes of societal guidance" and "processes of social transformation" (38). In order to make these linkages, the planner must first engage in problem formulation by asking, what is the nature of the problem or challenge facing society in which the planner may be able to ethically and effectively intervene? This task is inherently complicated by the recognition that social problems related to the urban environment are inherently "wicked" because both causes (and solutions) are difficult to isolate: each problem is unique, may be symptoms of other problems, and the outcomes of any attempt on the part of a professional to address them are simply not foreseeable and inevitably have an effect on members of the public, such that there is no way to determine if they are ever finally "solved" (Rittel & Webber 1972).

It is therefore essential that planners establish, articulate and demonstrate the justification for planning in terms of promoting the public interest or the public good.

Rational Comprehensive Planning and its Critics

Such justification was assumed as given in planning's Rational Comprehensive Model (RCM) first set out by American economist and political scientist Herbert Simon in his classic 1945 book, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization* in which he distinguished between the *facts* of science used in administration (i.e., planning) and the *values* inherent in politics (Simon 1945/1976). In the RCM model, all relevant planning knowledge is empirical, and the planner's approach to knowledge is entirely positivist, while expertise is vested in the planner, who acts in an objective, neutral manner on behalf of the public for the public good. Dominant in planning practice and discourse throughout the postwar era, RCM has been heavily critiqued for its view of the public good, which is based on an undifferentiated conception of the public, with no attention paid to diverse needs arising from gender, race, ethnicity or class (Sandercock 1998). Furthermore, because of the centrality of the planner's expertise, the opinions, goals, needs and aspirations community members are of secondary consideration, if at all (Mäntysalo 2005).

Incrementalism and Advocacy Planning

In the face of growing public distrust of urban planners as a result of the excesses of urban renewal decried in Jane Jacobs in her classic work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961/1992), many postwar theorists moved to reject top-down monothetic solutions applied universally, and instead proposed alternative planning models. These emphasized incrementalism over massive all-at-once development (Lindblom 1959), and greater attention to working with residents on resolving community problems rather than imposing solutions from without. This

necessitated a break with any notion that the planner's work was neutral and value-free, and that they could approach planning problems in a detached, objective manner. An early such model was Paul Davidoff's advocacy planning (1968), which envisioned a planning process that would work more like the legal system in which plans would be adjudicated before planning commissions, thereby giving residents from many different backgrounds a voice in matters that affected them. Abandoning their value neutrality, planners would advocate on behalf of a plurality of resident interests, explicitly tying residents' values with their own.[6]

Radical Planning

The incrementalism inherent in Advocacy planning prompted theorists beginning in the early 1970s to promote more radical alternatives to effect swifter structural social and political changes, and rejected Advocacy's even-handed pluralism in favour of redressing inequities faced by marginalized populations (Reese 2018). In this mode, "the community is the planner, and the professional is the hired gun, the technician…and cannot impose his/her values on the community" (Sandercock 1999, para. 10).[7]

Far from RCM's planning *for* citizens, and the planning *with* practiced by Advocacy planners, Radical Planning becomes planning *by* the community itself, with the planner as its agent. For John Friedmann, however, no matter how committed a radical planner may be to a given community's "project of emancipation" they must not be "absorbed by it" or they can run the risk of undermining their own ability to mediate community conflict. Harper and Stein (2006) concur, agreeing that the planner should ideally not be "an advocate of the interests or positions of one particular community or group. Rather, the planner seeks to democratize the planning process, to open it up to everyone, to make information freely available, to encourage all voices to speak" (Harper & Stein 146). This is the goal of Collaborative Planning.

Communicative/Collaborative Planning

Taking as its foundations Jurgen Habermas' notions of communicative rationality (1987), planning based in communicative action (also referred to as Collaborative planning) replaced the "self-conscious autonomous individual [with] a notion of reason as inter-subjective mutual understanding arrived at by particular people in particular times and place" (Healey 1992, 150). The communicative turn in planning envisions groups of people "making sense together while living differently" (Forester 1989, 118), resulting in a distinct form of planning. As such, views on the part of individuals holding diverse interests and expectations regarding their

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[6] There was also in public libraries a contemporary equivalent: advocacy librarianship, in which the librarian would not just refer patrons to other sources of information but take a more proactive role in assisting them in navigating these external services or bureaucracies (Owens & Braverman 1974).
[7] Note that this is very much the essence of the cipher state model: the planner has no interest of their own but responds to the policy demands of stakeholders.

community and future will develop these through social interaction, which policymakers need to take into account (Healey 1997, 29).

Accordingly, communicative planning is not *future defining* but rather *future seeking* (158); as regards the *goals* of each planning processes, the planner is neutral. The planner must recognize the interests of diverse stakeholders – some of whom may be otherwise marginalized by the political process – and create a structure through which these interests can be balanced and consensus hopefully obtained (Forester 1989; Healey 1997).

Planners Negotiating Difference Through Incrementalism

This brief review demonstrates that planners have struggled to fully and definitively articulate how different modes of planning may support the public interest. More specifically, we can see that planning shares with librarianship considerable tensions and ambiguities where neutrality is concerned – tensions which are result of the "wickedness" of planning problems (Rittel & Webber 1972) as well as the complexity involved in identifying and negotiating what is in the public interest. This is because each constituency in a given community will have its own aspirations; as Rawls (1982) put it, there are "many conflicting and incommensurable conceptions of the good" (in Campbell & Marshall 2002, 178), meaning that any attempt to assume a single "public good" will disguise or erase multiple diverse interests. This is why "[t]he only possible justification for planning in a postmodern democratic society is an incremental one. The alternative paths to change – coercion and conversion – are not legitimate" (Harper & Stein 2006, 145).

Accordingly, Harper and Stein are adamant in the fundamental importance of retaining core professional values, regardless of the exigency, not only as a matter of principle but because to fail to do so will lead to actual failure in the project of bringing about change:

> A practical crisis (such as an environmental crisis or the disintegration of urban society) may suggest the need for radical political change, but it does not necessarily imply the need for a radical methodological and philosophical break with tradition…If radical approaches to planning require a rejection of our fundamental moral notions and much of our underlying liberal democratic consensus, they will not be able to engage in a dialogue with other views that still accept the basic liberal democratic consensus. This leads in the direction of coercive intervention (182).

We also reject radical approaches, and for these reasons. Instead, with a view to locating our profession's role in navigating conflict between stakeholders in the community, let us now turn to applying these models, principles and values from urban planning to librarianship and the debate over neutrality and intellectual freedom.

4. Discussion

We now consider neutrality in professional contexts according to multiple dimensions: neutrality *regarding what, towards whom, in what way* and *for what end*. In the literature of conflict mediation, these dimensions are referred to as *value neutrality, stakeholder neutrality, process neutrality* and *goal* neutrality (Emran 2015). Based on the foregoing literature review, we define these dimensions accordingly:

- **Value neutrality:** We distinguish two interpretations of this principle: Value Neutrality 1 (VN 1) is the presumption on the part of the practitioner that one is purely objective and separate from the object of study; that only positivist, empirical facts matter with no reference to any value system or ideology held by any party; and that one's own values will have no bearing on the analysis at hand. Value Neutrality 2 (VN2) by contrast refers to the reflexive awareness on the part of the practitioner that one's values should not be imposed on stakeholders and so an ethical practice is put in place to prevent this from happening.
- **Stakeholder neutrality:** The extent to which all interested stakeholders are treated equally by the practitioner, who expresses neither negative bias or favouritism towards them.
- **Process neutrality:** Ensuring that the forum provided for the sharing of information, ideas and argument functions in a transparent and equitable manner, i.e., gives full access to the same information and provides all stakeholders with the same opportunity to participate in decision-making.
- **Goal neutrality:** Allowing the stakeholders in a given process to "make sense together" and establish their desired planning goal, rather than imposing or steering participants to the practitioner's preferred conclusion.

To illustrate, let us consider these forms of neutrality manifest in different modes of urban planning:

Table 1: Dimensions of Neutrality in Different Modes of Planning

	Value Neutrality	Stakeholder Neutrality	Process Neutrality	Goal Neutrality
Rational Planning	Yes – **VN1**	No	No	No
Advocacy Planning	No	No	Yes	No
Radical Planning	Yes (Ideally) **VN 2**	No	No	No
Communicative/ Collaborative Planning	Yes – **VN2**	Yes	Yes	Yes

We can see from these very different modes of planning practice that "neutrality" does not mean one single thing but may be expressed and realized in several ways within the same profession. The Rational planner may see themselves and their work as value neutral (VN1), but they are explicitly not neutral towards stakeholders, whom – to the extent that they are considered at all – are but an undifferentiated "public" on whose behalf they are acting. Nor does such planning espouse either process or goal neutrality, for it is at every stage directed by the planner to achieve specific outcomes deemed to be in the public interest. Viewed in this way, this form of planning most identified with "neutrality" is revealed to espouse only one dimension (and version) of it. Advocacy planners, by contrast, openly reject both versions of value neutrality, but recognize and embrace their own values and tie these to those of residents and their shared goals; yet they do defer to the neutrality of planning processes managed by planning commissions to adjudicate plans fairly. Radical planners should ideally adopt the second form of neutrality (VN2) and are warned not to so completely adopt the values of the community in the effort to achieve their specific ends that they cannot mediate conflict.

Finally, Communicative/Collaborative planners embrace practitioner neutrality throughout the planning process. Like radical planners, they also adopt VN2 in respect to their own values, striving not to impose them on stakeholders. Planners work fairly with stakeholders in "making sense together," establishing the parameters of informed dialogue and debate, the goals of which are not predetermined but negotiated democratically by those stakeholders. Even though practitioners of this form of planning may say that they reject neutrality (e.g., Healey 1992), in the end they can be seen to embrace it (VN2) in all its dimensions.

For the librarian, we suggest that Communicative/Collaborative planning offers the most salient model of neutrality:

Table 2: Dimensions of Neutrality in Communicative Librarianship[8]

	Value Neutrality	Stakeholder Neutrality		Process Neutrality	Goal Neutrality
Librarianship	Yes – VN2	Yes re: access to materials	No re: services	Yes	Yes

In this conception, the librarian is aware of their own values but does not (as per the ALA *Library Bill of Rights*) allow them to unduly influence collection development or public programming, cognizant that these are not universally shared among their community of users (VN2). The librarian further strives to be

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[8] This appellation is tentative; unfortunately for our purposes, the term "collaborative librarianship" already exists in the literature in reference to other models.

neutral towards *materials* to be used by stakeholders, that is, the informational containers through which ideas are to be made available, but *not to the ideas themselves*. Nothing in this ethic would imagine librarians as technocrats with no professional agency, or insensible to truth claims. The librarian is fully aware of the need to discern between ideas that are evidence-based and those that aren't, with the former (like evolutionary biology) being well-represented in the collection while the latter (like "intelligent design") are represented only to the degree that users may be informed of their basic ideas, evidentiary status (or lack thereof), and social context, thus strengthening (as John Stuart Mill argued) our knowledge of what is true (Mill 2011).

The librarian is also neutral regarding their community of stakeholders *as a whole*, all of whom are equally welcome to participate and engage with library content and public speakers, from which members of the public are free to draw their own meaning and achieve their own goals, either singularly or collectively. At the same time, as regards library services to members of the public *as individuals*, librarians are not neutral but instead empathetically recognize their users all have particular needs.

Where public controversies are concerned – towards which diverse community stakeholders maintain contending interests – the librarian again maintains public neutrality. The *processes* by which community stakeholders exchange views on these debates – commonly through public events, speeches, meetings and presentations – must not be constrained or distorted by the views of the librarian. It is in the public interest that these matters be provided a public forum; to refuse to allow the library to provide this forum to legal speech acts would be an abdication of responsibility. Finally – and most significantly – the *goals* for which users are accessing materials or attending public lectures are left up to them; in this the librarian needs to remain neutral, respecting the autonomy, agency and aspirations of the user and their communities.

Neutrality in this conception is not passivity on the part of the librarian but rather requires agentive action and decision-making (Knowles 2018). It empowers library users, as opposed to infantilizing them by "protecting" them from ideas (or actions) which the librarian may personally reject. It is not however an absolute standard – no collection will ever be perfectly balanced or contain "all" points of view – but is rather a normative aspiration.

Neither is it "moral relativism" or an "ethical regime whose standards are defined by transient events" as some critics would have it (Good 1993, 144). The four dimensions of Communicative Librarianship's neutrality – value neutrality(VN2), stakeholder, process and goal neutrality – allow libraries to respond constructively and thoughtfully to transient events, and not be swept up in them, which is precisely to what an abandonment of these principles would lead. Take away

librarianship's commitments to these dimensions of neutrality and our profession forsakes its primary means of engaging with, contesting, and integrating new ideas.

Here we come to the crux of our argument: It makes all the difference in the world if a profession assumes one of the two versions of neutrality, either that of the purely objective expert who doesn't consider the possibility that their own judgements are value-laden and biased (here referred to as VN1), as opposed to situated, reflexive practitioners who are aware of their own values and choose for ethical and political reasons not to impose them on others (VN2). This, then, is the fundamental error in the extant debate over library neutrality: that virtually all critics have mistaken the second form – which is deeply principled and ethical – for the first, which is simply arrogant presumption.

Far from representing an *absence* of ideology, multidimensional library neutrality acknowledges that values are present in every aspect of librarianship and as a consequence *aspires to minimize* the impacts of these on the intellectual freedom, choices and agency of individuals.

From a political science perspective, it is critical that libraries remain committed to continuing the virtuous circle of democracy. How libraries are embedded into the overall fabric of public institutions is a large part of their function, and more importantly, the basis of their political support – after all, regardless of the state of local economies and regimes of taxation, public support for libraries remains high. As Gardner (2022) points out, providing services in a neutral manner "is what librarians are *required* to do and how they are *required* to act as recipients and stewards of taxpayer funding" (13, emphasis in the original). "Going rogue" by forsaking long-standing and publicly-declared values could render libraries unable to fulfil their task and vulnerable to criticism, to say nothing of a loss of public and political support, and potentially a loss of funding. For all library patrons – including and especially those who are marginalised and discriminated against – this would be a disaster.

With this in mind then, let us now attempt to re-write the ALA Code of Ethics clause #9 quoted above. Under a commitment to the four dimensions of library neutrality and the practices of Communicative Librarianship, just a few small changes in wording and intent that scale back the commitments to those within the scope and competencies of librarianship result in very different implications for the relationship between the library and its users:

> We affirm the inherent dignity and *autonomy* of all library users (**Stakeholder Neutrality**), and each user's *right to access the collections* and services of the library for their own purposes (**Goal Neutrality**). We work to recognize and *dismantle potential barriers to access* [**which are created by "wicked" social problems]** that may be experienced by members in our communities as a result of their experiences of socioeconomic status, race,

sex, ability etc. We work to advance structures and processes that *strengthen our profession and our institutions' abilities* to provide all with opportunity for knowledge, education, participation and dialogue (**Process Neutrality**), through advocacy, instruction, collaboration, services and *equitable resource allocation* to collections *representing multiple points of view,* and spaces *devoted to free inquiry and encounters with difference* (**Value Neutrality 2**).

This revised ethic – a "guardian statement" if you will – acknowledges the social responsibility of the library to do whatever it can to identify and eliminate barriers to access which may exist as a consequence of socio-economic forces, while respecting the user's agency and strengthening the institution's functioning to accomplish both.

In the diverse, multicultural "cosmopolis" (Sandercock 1998) of the 21st Century – comprised as it is of individuals embedded within diverse communities and representing hundreds of cultures from around the globe – such a stance becomes the only ethically justifiable one for a publicly-funded institution. Assuming or imposing on that society a monolithic value system (however righteous one personally believes it to be) is insupportable. To articulate and effect such a vision, a virtue ethic approach is insufficient (Burgess 2016).

The assertion on the part of the library profession to be representing the public good can only be justified and legitimate to the extent that it permits and facilitates heterogeneity and the expression of competing claims on the part of multiple publics. Claims of anticipated harm on behalf of one constituency arising from future speech acts must be weighed against the possibility that the interests or rights of another – potentially marginalized – constituency may be materially harmed or abridged if the ideas in question are *not* expressed.

This view on the value of free speech is reflected in philosopher and educator Alexander Meiklejohn's conception of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in terms of Americans' right to self-governance: it enables individuals to make informed choices as part of what he conceived of as the "Electoral Branch" of government, being a fundamental element of American democracy. What is notable for our purposes is that Meiklejohn placed a primacy on the *political ideas* needing sharing, rather than simply on the unfettered *right of people to talk*, emphasizing instead the importance of free speech to the hearer, rather than the speaker (Meiklejohn 1948).

This is why library neutrality is actually essential to the ongoing processes associated with social justice efforts: it provides the means by which all stakeholders may participate in the library, and from which all may benefit.

5. Conclusion: Librarianship and Socially Just Processes

The relevance of urban planning models to the present debate in librarianship should be clear: principled professional neutrality regarding values, stakeholders, processes and goals is essential to the institutional project of ensuring and preserving democratic processes of governance that facilitate intellectual freedom. Abandoning core professional values, justified *pour pouvoir* by declaring some urgent crisis can only serve to disable the profession's ability to contribute to democratic processes, and instead risks illiberal ends. Instead, we urge librarians to consider emulating the goals of planning in creating the conditions for deliberative, democratic dialogue with the intention of negotiating differences and bringing about incremental changes that are consensually-arrived at through a governance of place specific to each local context.

In this article, we suggested that historic and current tensions between intellectual freedom and social justice goals have persisted because LIS on its own has not provided a sufficient theoretical foundation for neutrality as a professional value, nor even adequately defined it. Therefore, we proposed that a new professional praxis adapted from urban planning theory and premised on foundations borrowed from political science could provide librarianship with a revitalized, grounded and multidimensional understanding of library neutrality that would be commensurate with these challenges.

With these insights and stances undergirding librarianship, the traditional core professional values of neutrality, intellectual freedom and freedom of speech are no longer possible to be viewed as isolated and operationalized unto themselves. Nor should they be abandoned lightly: the destabilizing polarization in American society and the rise of authoritarian governments and far-Right groups around the world profoundly underscore the need for strong and resilient *liberal* institutions.

There is an inherent public interest at stake in permitting the encounters with difference that public libraries can facilitate. Thus committed to engendering dialogical democratic processes, this guardian mode of librarianship does not seek to impose a monothetic political agenda on users and society as a whole, and will reject radical, revolutionary interventions in society as both illiberal and illegitimate while maintaining a commitment to supporting socially just processes. It is not, after all, the role of librarians to directly fix society's problems; rather we are committed to providing and nurturing a public institution that can enable societies to identify their problems and seek socially just solutions.

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