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# Librarians as Social Justice Advocates

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## ABSTRACT

Public libraries, traditionally seen as neutral spaces, are increasingly recognized as potential platforms for social justice. This literature review examines the role of librarians as social justice advocates, exploring their core values, the current state of American public libraries, and their engagement with issues like Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ rights, and literary justice. While librarianship values neutrality and equal access, it is argued that true social justice requires active engagement and advocacy. By addressing issues of information redlining, promoting diversity, and supporting marginalized communities, libraries can play a crucial role in creating a more equitable society.

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## INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are fundamental resources to many communities. Whether a library provides materials for entertainment or means to help one find employment, the work of libraries and librarians is ever changing the world we live in. Known for their political, social and economic neutrality, how do we see libraries addressing issues of social justice today? Is social justice even on their radar? It is my goal through this literature review for individual librarians and libraries to evaluate if their social justice initiatives are rooted in creating change or purely performative action. In this literature review, I will outline librarianship core values and establish the state of American public libraries. After that, I will define what advocacy and social justice look like in these institutions and highlight existing literature that discusses the topic of libraries as social justice advocates. Lastly, this paper will take an in-depth look at how libraries engage with topics such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ + folks, and literary justice.

## LIBRARIANSHIP VALUES

The Library Bill of Rights documents are the core ethics and values of public libraries. Additionally, it provides a foundation for other information professionals to build upon. To fully understand the role of librarianship through the lens of social justice it is important to have a clear understanding of what librarian's value within the profession. According to the American Library Association (ALA), the most important value to be upheld by library workers is the principle of neutrality. This is reflected by the inability to deny one based on "origin, age, background, or views" (Library Bill of Rights, 2022). The same principle is upheld when curating an institution's collection, in that no material should be excluded because one's personal morals or subscribed-to ideas. An equally important value of the ALA is to aid in overcoming barriers to information access through openly opposing censorship and fueling endeavors of free expression. Though the Library Bill of Rights has seven principles outlined, neutrality and equal access to resources are widely acknowledged as the most basic principles of librarianship. Neutrality was created to protect those who historically have been denied equal access to resources, information and rights. Yet, this is not always seen in practice. Libraries have actively and unknowingly engaged in information redlining, which "is the systemic denial of equitable access to information, information services and retrieval methods" (Hall, College of Education Fall Forum 2022). Information redlining has been kept in place to maintain systems of oppression.

Moreover, diversity and social responsibility are also upheld in the Library Bill of Rights. Diversity is understood as a "diverse collection [that] should not constrain content by and about a wide array of people and cultures to authentically reflect the variety of ideas, information, stories, and experience" (Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights, 2020) of our ever-growing community. Social responsibility, on the other hand, pushes libraries to understand the institutional impact they have as a collective aid in "solving the critical problem of society [or] support efforts to help inform and educate the people of the United States on this problem and to encourage them to examine the many views" (Core Values of Librarianship, 2020). This principle addresses the importance of libraries holding space for individuals so that they may challenge the status quo, empowered by the information provided to them by libraries. In

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this way, libraries are spaces of change. Since the “public library is a place of social interaction”, or spaces of change, the “nature of racism and changing racial mores” (Paul T. Jaeger, Ursula Gorham, 4) are reflected within the institution. Theoretically, if librarians were to actively channel social responsibility and diversity, social justice would be a value equally upheld by library associations.

## STATE OF LIBRARIES

The 2019 American Library Association “State of America’s Libraries: Special Report” reflects the impact that American public libraries have on communities nationwide. Most notably, we see that “public library works are joining racial justice leaders and library scholars who have long argued for ‘critical race discourse’ in library and education practices” (ALA State of Libraries 2022) ; however, while this visible push for advocacy and the patron population is increasingly “becoming more and more diverse the library workforce remain predominantly white and female” (ALA State of American Libraries 2019 ).

Despite the call for advocacy and education of critical race discourse and the push for diversity in the field, we are not seeing this idea being enacted properly. There is a disconnect between idea and practice. Furthermore, it is understood that “the lowest income in this country, the people who are at the 30 mark or lower in terms of income on average are the greatest users of library services” (Hall, College of Education Fall Forum 2022). Individuals of this economic bracket are frequent users of programs that “help Americans identify health insurance resources” and “programs that assist individuals to apply for jobs, create resumes and prepare for interviews” (ALA State of American Libraries 2019). Access to programming and resources help combat information poverty as well as multigenerational literacy issues (Hal, Tracie).

The American Library Association, “State of American Libraries 2022”, focused on the increase of book bans on material that featured topics of racial injustice, the LGBTQ+ community, and general stories about people of color. According to the report “book challengers try to ban materials they believe tell an unflattering version of our country’s history, they are resisting use from books that support equity, diversity and inoculation” (ALA State of American Libraries 2022, 4). The American Library Association tracked about 700 book challenges in the United States, most of which occurred in schools and public libraries. Book bans inherently go against libraries’ core values. Librarians and other information professionals are continuously open about contesting these issues of censorship and the public’s aversion to diverse materials in the library.

In regard to librarians and other library support staff, “20% of the American Library’s Association Spectrum scholarship (for people of color) left the LIS profession because of racial trauma in the workplace” (Mehra, 2021). Though there are many issues that American libraries try to address and disrupt, this statistic demonstrates there is a lack of internal reflection on issues of micro-aggressions, sexism and racism, that is rooted in the Anglo-American patriarchy. Lastly, the “2022 State of American Libraries” report, address, community access to broadband internet access saying “the FCC estimates that 19 million Americans lack broadband internet access, but the real number may be higher, and some librarians point out that social justice efforts must include advocacy and support for

communities” where there is a lack of reliable access to internet. In this increasingly digital age, we are seeing that the internet is the main access point for information collection for many individuals. In order to fully provide equal access to diverse information, it is critical to understand the challenges faced by libraries. In order to overcome these challenges public libraries should embrace social justice and advocacy.

## ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is defined as a “just social system [that] is to be contrasted with those systems that foster arbitrary suffering, exploitation, abuse, tyranny, oppression, prejudice, and discrimination,” (Jost & Kay, 2010). White supremacy is infused in many, if not all of our social and political institutions. Social justice seeks to dismantle such repressive systems by uplifting the needs and voices of traditionally marginalized peoples. The goal is that “ideally public libraries are repositories of information and defenders of democracy” (Aykanian et al., 2020, 2) in which “libraries could provide services that contribute to the strengthening of cultural identity and policies” (Aykanian et al., 2020,1) that counter issues of racism. Recently, both the International Federation of Library Associations and the American Library Association “emphasize[d] the need to equip new and experienced information professionals with comprehensive social justice training in order to bridge social inequities” and to fully serve the increasingly multicultural nation. However, many “argue that it is not the job of librarians to advocate for social justice, because of our professional obligation to be neutral brokers of information”; yet the very “justification of neutrality, however, is anything but neutral—LIS professionals value neutrality because they value such things as equality, justice and service” (Mathiesen, 2015, 204).

By leading with social justice in mind, “it reveals the discrepancies in many places between the ethical ideals actually held, and the social and economic conditions” (Mathiesen, 2015, 200). Unfortunately, the “highbrow view of archives and libraries [are] more alienating than inclusive of those who are unfamiliar with these institutions” (Paul T. Jaeger, Ursula Gorham. (n.d.), 344). It is understood that librarians and other information professions want to champion the idea of social justice and advocacy within the public space of the library. In order to put this in action, information professionals need to provide information indifferently and do more than increase the diverse representation in materials. Because of this, libraries have failed to truly embrace change.

## LGBTQ+

With the rising prevalence of book bans throughout the nation, a majority of the book bans and challenges have targeted material that represents the LGBTQ community. It is understood that “book-ban backers don’t want children to learn about the experiences of underrepresented group” (ALA State of Libraries 2022), which include persons of the LGBTQ + community. The removal of such material is harmful the LGBTQ community. Without authentic representation of the LGBTQ communities, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and continues the cycle of homelessness in LGBTQ youth. Regarding

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representative LGBTQ material in school libraries; librarians “have a unique opportunity to take inclusivity a step further” (Mehra, B. (Ed.). (2019) instead of practicing self-censorship.

There is also the opportunity for school librarians to become “an intergalactic part of a school wide anti-bias program” (Mehra, B. (Ed.). (2019). Through building a strong anti-bias community, school librarians can help build a foundation for school libraries to bridge connections to their public library institutions. In the public library world, the most impactful way for librarians to contribute to the LGBTQ community is for “the library to create partnerships with community organizations and individuals who are addressing LGBTQ homelessness” (The Critical Role of Libraries as Social Justice Spaces, 215). LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk to homelessness due to unsafe living conditions and family rejection. It is in libraries' best interest to not be the sole access point for justice. Libraries should help provide access to not only affirming materials, but also resources that address additional safe community resources for housing, health checkups and basic needs. Likewise, another powerful way that social justice work, is seen in libraries with the LGBTQ community is through “participatory justice” which may contribute to disruptive justice by providing more sources of relevant information for the community” (Vera & Speight, 2003, 208). The act of being invited in to participate in one’s community can be profoundly healing.

## BLACK LIVES MATTER

On May 25<sup>th</sup> 2000, the unjust murder of George Floyd reignited the ongoing social movement of Black Lives Matter. Nine days after Mr. Floyd’s death, the Association of Library and Information Science Education adopted the “ALISE Statement of George Floyd, in solidarity with those experiencing structural racism and condemned the ‘enduring violence directed at people of color,’” (Mehra, 2021 137-138). In addition to this statement in solidarity, ALISE linked their diversity and ethics policy to demonstrate how their values reflect the Black Lives Matter Social movement. It is important to note that while ALISE and other library associations issued statements on the topic of Black Lives Matter, “there is no reference to ALISE’s own struggle to overcome historical and contemporary racism beyond mere words of diversity (Croc Tears 137-138). In Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Renynold’s “Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You”, Kendi and Renynolds explains that there are assimilationist and anti-racist activist. Assimilationists are defined as individuals that believe in equality between races, but do not wish to disrupt systems of oppression. Being Anti-racist is “the work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic and social life” (Nation Education Association-Racial Justice in Education). The act of merely offering words during this social movement, demonstrates that the institution of American Libraries desires to keep the status quo; as Reynolds and Kendi would say libraries are assimilationist. Libraries amidst Black Lives Matter have “‘capitalized’ on the traumatic situation...without acknowledging their past predominate passivity and neutrality toward racism” (Mehra, 2021, 137). An institution that is committed to the anti-racist movement would seek a way to be change-makers in the information profession. The most prevalent short coming of American Libraries is the blatant lack of diversity in the workforce; “as of 2020, the Department for Professional Employees reported that approximately 83% of librarians in the U.S are white” (ALA State of Libraries 2022, 12). If

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the library profession is serious about radical inclusion they must become “single-minded about racism” (Stovall, Janet), having concrete goals which allows for action and accountability within historically oppressive institutions. Libraries and library associations who uphold the values of the Black Lives Matter movement in line with their own values must “take purposeful action to design services that overcome those barriers.” Action-based design is one way to truly uplift and empower the voices around us.

## LITERARY JUSTICE: PEOPLE OF COLOR & RURAL COMMUNITIES

An impactful and expansive field for justice is in the realm of literary justice. For this section I will focus on the impact of literary justice in both poor rural and communities of color. Literary justice addresses issues of literacy poverty, closing the digital divide gap and barriers to information access. Examples of these include providing broadband internet access and programming that assists with deciphering medical, tax and legal lingo. We also know that “there is a long history of information redlining— compulsory illiteracy is something we have seen through enslavement and in other culture” (Hall, College of Education Fall Forum 2022). The main goal of compulsory illiteracy is to prevent communities of color and poor communities from accessing up to date and vital information, to prevent social uprisings and simply the ability to comprehend information. We see this in both rural communities and communities of color? In the lack of reliable internet access and the decrease in library funding. Since the conception of public-wide use of the internet, “public libraries have been key internet-access and technology-training providers for their communities” (Real et al., 2014). With access to the internet, digital access coupled with digital literacy is crucial for those seeking employment, social security and everything from entertainment to education. In the DePaul University’s College of Education: Right to Literary forum, Executive director of the American Library Association, Tracie Hall explained that “information access is a social justice and public health issue”; she continues that “we’re seeing that access to information, one’s ability to read, one’s digital sophistication” (Hall, College of Education Fall Forum 2022), makes a difference in how quickly a community can and will rebuild after things like natural disasters and even the pandemic. Through seeking social justice through the lens of literary justice, librarians and other information professionals can address multigenerational literacy issues, empower second language learners, and work at closing the digital divide. Not only that, but by having access to the internet and adequate technology training for patrons is primary indicators of [a] libraries’ value to their communities. (Real et al., 2014). Access to information for underserved populations like rural communities and communities of color has the potential to empower change nationwide.

## CONCLUSION

In closing, though there are many ways in which librarians and libraries can improve when it comes to social justice and advocacy, representation in materials is a start. To fully live up to the American Library Association’s values, however, more single-minded action is needed. Social justice in libraries has the

potential to empower the lives of communities that have been traditionally excluded from this sphere both as patrons and employees. Only then can we all “enjoy the blend of living and loving in a community that empowers us to meet strangers without fear and extends to them the gift of openness and recognition” (Hooks, 2018). Our work is not done yet.

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