

Revisiting the ideal of neutrality

Introduction

The idea of a neutral library and a neutral librarian is appealing. Without influencing or judging, the librarian trusts the citizens' judgement and steps away from their own personal opinions in order to serve and guide the users. The notion of neutrality as an ideal has been the dominating position among both librarians and Library and Information Science-researchers. Advocates for the principle of neutrality claim that the idea of neutrality is both an expression of representative democracy and respect for the individual's rights and that neutrality is an active choice (Blomgreen & Sundeen, 2020; Tewell, 2018). One can argue that it is by adhering to this principle, the library has gained its credibility and trustworthiness. Other parts of LIS-research have questioned the idea of neutrality; in the representation of materials on the shelves, in the categorization and the role of the librarian (Drabinski 2013, Mathiesen & Fallis 2008, Iversen 2008). According to this more activist part of the LIS-field, insisting on neutrality contributes to the reproduction of oppressive structures that historically has been dominating society. They claim that it is necessary to reject the idea of neutrality to serve the whole community.

This paper presents an analysis conducted in my master's thesis (Bollerup, 2021). The analysis examines how progressive library staff justify their activist-work in Danish public libraries and how this affects the individual employee's work and relationship to colleagues and managers. Based on the presented analysis the paper discusses the field of tension between neutrality and activism and offers suggestions on how to reconcile different perspectives in order to create a library that can serve every member of its community.

Danish public libraries – a brief history

The public libraries in Denmark have undergone a change throughout history. Inspired by the public libraries in America, public libraries became well-established institutions in many cities in Denmark in the beginning of the twentieth century. The primary role of the librarian was to educate the reader on good literature and the view on the librarian was generally paternalistic (Dahlkild, 2011). In 1920, the first library-law was adopted and the library's purpose was ascertained: the library was to spread knowledge and common information (Jochumsen, 2017). The *book* in particular was conceived as the best way to achieve this purpose and especially non-fiction and educative literature (*dannelseslitteratur*) were highlighted. The strong focus on *material* was maintained throughout the 1930's and 1940's and new libraries were built all around Denmark. Following the youth rebellion in the last half of the 1960's a group of young librarians began challenging the library's view of general education and unilateral focus on books and other material. They wanted variation in the material on the shelves and a wider quality concept. At the same time, there was a greater focus on diversity in the Danish cultural policy, which led the libraries to face the users and involve them in the library-work. During the 1970's the library field gained an increasing liberal orientation and the library began to shift focus from the material to the relationship between library and society. This paradigm shift meant that the library's role was widely discussed and debated: What role was the library to play in society? Young librarians wanted a shift from the library's overall focus on making material available and instead take part in

the struggle for social justice in society. During the 1980's and 1990's the debate between traditionalist and progressive librarians died out due to the economic crisis, budget cuts and rationalization, but the debate on the library's role in society is still a highly relevant question, especially in the light of current debates: the Black Lives Matter-movement, Climate-change, LGBTQ+-rights, just to name a few examples. New voices want the library to take part in current debates and use the library's platform and status as a respected and reliable institution to draw attention to political agendas, and they argue that this requires more than just providing readily available material for users (Hvenegaard & Jochumsen, 2006). Other voices insist on the more traditional view of the library as a neutral institution and look to the *ideal of neutrality* as a way of welcoming the *whole* community. This clash between different perspectives or fields of tension is the main focus in my master's thesis (Bollerup, 2021) and the starting point of the analysis. The following section presents the most important points from the analysis.

Analysis: the librarian on the soapbox

In my master's thesis *The librarian on the soapbox – between activism and neutrality* (Bollerup, 2021) the overall research question asks: how does progressive library staff justify their work for social change in and through Danish public libraries? This overall research question seeks an understanding of how library staff strive towards an active and progressive library, and *why* they work towards this goal, despite lack of support and understanding from colleagues and leaders. The analysis is based on five interviews with five progressive individuals from different libraries across Denmark. The informants have been selected based on their work on the library as a space for social justice and their activist approach to library their institutions. Some informants take part in different networks within the library, such as a LGBT-network or a network working with the 17 UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development. Other informants work with different small NGOs in their local community in different projects, such as co-organizing a local Pride-week or hosting events like a 'Gin & Gender' in their local library. The theoretical framework used to analyse the interview-data is a combination of institutional theory (Scott 2014, Larsen 2014, 2016) and the 'Orders of Worth'-framework (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006, Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). The analysis works with an open definition of activism and therefore theory on activism and activist work is also applied throughout the analysis.

When asked if they consider their work in the library as activism, all informants define themselves as activists. Even though they all define themselves as activists, the way the informants carry out their work is different. Harreby (2011) distinguishes between six different activist roles: *the radical activist*, *the conformational activist*, *the creative activist*, *the professional activist*, *the occasional activist* and *the everyday maker*. Three of these roles can be identified in the way the informants describe their work and point of view on activism: *the professional activist*, *the occasional activist* and *the everyday maker*. In the following, the three roles will be explained by examples from the interviews.

The professional activist

Some of the informants take on the role of the professional activist. This role works strategically with a given cause, within or outside an organization. This role seeks to be taken seriously and

respected as a competent participant in the political world, and uses lobbying as a work-tool. An informant describes his approach to work:

“We agreed that our strategy in some way should involve the 17 UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development, and it had to be a part of our strategy, or else we couldn’t implement it. And I provoked them with that point from the start, because in the library world you are often met with a ‘we shall just facilitate it’-mind set” (Informant X).

The role of the professional activist can be identified in the way the informant is working strategically with the library’s overall strategy and the way the informant is challenging colleagues to move beyond the classical facilitating mind set. The informant is pushing political agendas but is using the ‘correct’ ways to do so - through the library’s official strategy. Other examples from the interviews are the creation of networks between local libraries, such as a LGBTQ-network or a Climate-network.

The occasional activist

Other informants’ descriptions of their work can be related to the occasional activist. This role is characterized by a logic of numbers, trying to influence politicians and the public to notice how many people a given cause can unite. This type of activist is typically motivated by the social aspect of activism, such as participating in a protest. An informant answers the question on why she is working with an activist approach:

“It [LGBTQ-community] is so unfamiliar here. And I think it is wrong that it is so. And when it is not a focus everywhere it is especially a library task. We must support the many but also the few and we must support the minority, no matter which one” (Informant U).

This example illustrates how the occasional activist is motivated by a wish to support the representation of a minority and less by her own personal experience. When the informant initiates LGBTQ-activities at the library it is therefore motivated by wanting to focus on LGBTQ-rights and LGBTQ-persons in the community.

The everyday maker

The third role that can be identified in the interviews is the everyday maker. This role is characterized by a do-it-yourself mindset through local projects. An informant describes her approach to activism:

“You cannot just sit and wait on the local municipality to arrange something or that they will come and fix the hole. No! If you can fix the hole without breaking the law or asking for money, you go out and fill the hole with sand. Fix it yourself” (Informant W).

The informant is solution-oriented and associates activism with an independent drive. The everyday maker is motivated by the opportunity to do something for the local community and local projects and is not only interested in politics. The everyday maker will engage in projects that will have a direct effect on the everyday life of the people in the community.

Justification

The Orders of Worth-framework is a theory on justification. According to Boltanski & Thévenot (2006), people can refer to six different worlds when they are involved in a conflict. Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) seeks to build a framework that with a set of theoretical instruments and methods can be used to analyse 'the critical operations that people carry out' (s. 25) when they want to show their disagreement without using violence. The question of justification is about the distribution of *grandeur* between the people in the conflict. In total Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) construct six different worlds: The inspired world, the domestic world, the world of fame, the civic world, the market world and the industrial world. The 'Orders of worth'-framework is later expanded with a seventh world by Boltanski & Chiapello (2007): The project world. The following section will elaborate on the main world the informants refer to in their work: the civic world. Across the interviews the informants justify their actions with reference to the civic world, when asked *why* they work as activists. An informant describes the library's role in society:

"The free and equal access to information and cultural activities. The educational aspect - that everyone, regardless of background, sexuality, ethnicity has the same opportunity and access to a whole world of knowledge" (Informant Y).

Other informants use words like *diversity* and *community* when describing the library's role and the term *for all* is specifically mentioned by all informants. The civic world is characterized by the masses and the collective, a focus on solidarity and community and one can achieve *grandeur* by representing a common cause. When the informants justify their activist work they do it out of a wish to represent the people in their community, to create a library that really is *for all*. When the informants are met with a lack of support and understanding from their colleagues on *why* the library should focus on LGBTQ-rights or racism for example, it is because the informants fail to achieve *grandeur*. They justify their activist work by wanting to represent a common cause (referring to the civic world) but the group of people and the cause they try to represent (LGBTQ-individuals for example) is invisible to their colleagues, since the colleagues already think of the library as a place *for all*. Even though the informants justify their work as for the community at large (the civic world), it is conceived as a personal agenda by their colleagues, and the informants do not achieve *grandeur*.

A way to achieve *grandeur* is by entering a *compromise*. According to Boltanski & Thévenot (2006), people can enter a *compromise*, when logics of two colliding worlds exist peacefully in a situation. In the interviews the informants describe how they can succeed with their activist agenda by linking it to a general interest in the society (the world of fame) or in a collaboration with a NGO or institution outside the library in order to gain legitimacy (the project world). Examples of compromises described in the interviews is linking a popular TV-series to an education programme designed by the library, about the same theme as in the TV-series: identity and sexuality. Another example is a collaboration between a library and a NGO that works with climate and climate change, where the library co-organized a series of activities and lectures together with the NGO. In that way, the informants achieve *grandeur* because they justify their activist agenda by referring to principles and logics that the library supports: Relevance to the

local community (world of fame) and gaining legitimacy by collaborating with relevant partners (the project world).

Institutional theory

The final section will elaborate on the findings in the analysis using institutional theory.

Institutional theory is applied in order to get an understanding of the library as a public institution and the norms and values that characterize the library and the librarians.

According to Scott (2014), institutions comprise regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that provide stability and meaning to the life in an institution. Scott (2014) uses 'the three pillars' of institutions to analyse and understand a given institution. The regulative pillar refers to laws and restrictions an institution is subject to, the normative pillar refers to values and norms that is maintained by social interactions in an institution and the cultural-cognitive pillar refers to individual's actions as a result of a shared world view. Every pillar is equally important and even though one pillar can dominate, the three pillars work in combination. Since the focus of the analysis is the norms, values and worldviews of library staff, the following section will elaborate on the normative and the cultural-cognitive pillar.

The normative pillar

Within this pillar is the term *logic of appropriateness* that can be used to analyse the decision-making within this pillar. Decisions are based on a question of what is appropriate for me to do, in this given situation? (Scott, 2014). Across the interviews, the informants describe their colleagues' logic of appropriateness when the informants are trying to engage the library and the librarians in new projects. Overall the library-colleagues' is affected by wanting a library space that reflects tidiness and correctness. The primary task is the lending service and to guide the users and to mediate books to the users. The roots of this logic of appropriateness can be traced back to the historical role of guiding the user to the right material without influencing them religiously or politically (Skouvig, 2006). This logic of appropriateness described by the informants, contrasts with the logic of activism, and activist work in the library is not seen as the appropriate thing to do.

The cultural-cognitive pillar

This pillar is associated with profession, and according to Scott (2014) the pillar is preserved by the fact that actors in the same field understands the world in the same way, due to their education and professionalism. This means that librarians share the same interest, because they work together, participate in the same meetings, networks, union, etc. that shape their view on the world. Three out of five informants are not educated as librarians but have different educational backgrounds and this difference is clearly seen in that they do not share the same perspectives as their librarian colleagues. Their activist agenda does not adjust to common librarian understanding of the world and the informants feel 'crazy' or 'clueless', according to Scott (2014). On an institutional scale this can be seen when the library hiring like-minded librarians that share the same understanding and perspective, making it difficult to bring in new ideas and goals.

Summary

All five informants think of themselves as activists but use different approaches and tools to succeed with their individual activist agenda. Through the analysis it is clear that a field of tension exists between the informants and their colleagues - between library activists and library traditionalists. The informants and their colleagues do not share the same visions and perspectives on the library's role and the informants fail to gain understanding and grandeur, because of different worlds colliding. By finding *compromises* as described by Boltanski & Thévenot, the activist agenda finds its place, and the informants gain grandeur. Through these compromises both the activist's agenda and the library's role in the activist work is legitimized. Based on the analysis with both the Orders of worth-framework and institutional theory, it is clear that the informant's activist work is tied to the institutional context of the library and the institutionalized values, norms and cultural beliefs are forcing the informants to navigate between the role of an employee and an activist. The conflicts between activists and traditionalists occur in the field of tension between activism and neutrality, and the informant's activist roles contrast with the library's historical narrative as a neutral institution. Overall one can argue that the informant's activist agenda fundamentally is about the relationship between the library's institutional identity and activism: what role shall and may a legitimate public library play in society?

Discussion

Over time, the library's original paternalistic vision has been replaced with a principle of neutrality. It is no longer the librarians responsibility to define *the good book* but instead to provide a wide range of material for the user to choose from (Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Jochumsen, 2006). The librarian must remain neutral and not let one's personal taste or attitude stand in the way of the user's free access to information. Discussion concerning neutrality and the library takes place both in the LIS-research and in the libraries and is affected by relevant debates in the media, for example racism, gender, sexuality, climate and so forth.

The informants' activist agendas stand in contrast to the guiding principle of neutrality that their colleagues lean on. Similarly, parts of the LIS-research claim that the librarian's most important job is the ability to step to the back and maintain impartiality in order to ensure that the user is presented with multiple choices before selecting (Mathiesen & Fallis, 2008). According to Blomgren & Sundeen (2020) the principle of neutrality is a manifestation of a representative democracy and respect for the individual's rights. One can argue that it is through this principle the libraries and librarians have gained reliability, a value that is emphasized in the general discussion of Danish libraries. In 2020, librarians were voted as the 5th most reliable professional group in Denmark (Lerche, 2020). The Danish library law even states that the public library's purpose is to promote education and enlightenment through material that is selected based on criteria of quality and not "the religious, moral or political point of views in the material" (§2, Law of Library work, 2013). Others find this view on neutrality impossible. Insisting on taking a neutral stand can, according to critics, result in the library reproducing dominating structures and viewpoints (Mathiesen & Fallis, 2008, Drabinski, 2013). Iverson (2008) describes the paradox in wanting an objective and neutral library, when the selection of materials on the library shelves is based on the librarians personal opinion of what quality is.

The principle of neutrality can also be seen as an active choice. Based on a survey study, Tewell (2018) describes how advocates of the principle of neutrality find the critical and activist librarianship unprofessional. A respondent says:

“It’s not our role to promote social change or empower learners to identify and act upon oppressive power structures; our learners *may* do that with what they learn from us about information literacy and critical thinking, but in our roles as academic librarians in publicly funded institutions we are not to direct them to any specific ends except to learn information literacy concepts” (s. 27).

In the response, the respondent is taking the *role* as a librarian into account, and how working for social change in society *is not* a part of this role. When librarians abandon the objective and neutral role and instead are seen as *private individuals* they lose grandeur in the civic world “since the civic bond is defined precisely as one that liberates from relations of personal dependence” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, s. 252). Taking an active stand can therefore be seen as the direct opposite to the civic world. According to Blomgreen & Sundeen (2020) activist notions of the librarian profession contrasts to the professional understanding of a librarian's role. The professional ideal type of a librarian is based on values shaped internally in the profession, while the activist librarians generally are motivated by external reasons: ideological, political and moral ideas that shape the librarians actions. Blomgreen & Sundeen (2020) therefore point out that activism is unprofessional and that activism does not correspond to a librarian's 'logic of appropriateness'. The activist librarian therefore does not serve the community. The discussion of the ideal of neutrality is connected to the question of information freedom, a basic condition in the library. When progressive and activist voices challenge the library's current practice, such as questioning the books on the shelves or the way the material is categorised, it can quickly become a question about the users freedom of information and the role of the librarian. In that way, the discussion on neutrality becomes a discussion of either or, and extreme examples, where activist agendas are understood as an attack on the freedom of information and the users' free choice.

Even though there are different opinions regarding neutrality and advocates and opponents generally disagree, there is an underlying common goal behind the discussion: A library for *all*. Both advocates and opponents repeatedly return to this underlying goal when asked to justify their view on the ideal of neutrality. Both sides aim for a library that welcomes all members of society, but have different approaches on how to get there. Advocates see the principle of neutrality as a *tool*, opponents see the principle as an obstacle. When discussing the role of libraries in society we tend to get stuck with the question of neutrality: to be, or not to be neutral. The discussion of whether it is possible or impossible to take a neutral position is therefore not a productive discussion. Mathiesen (2015) writes that advocates for the principle of neutrality appreciate the question of neutrality by virtue of the fact that they appreciate values like equality and justice, and Mathiesen argues that the question of neutrality should focus on *when* the principle of neutrality actually serves values like equality and justice. The principle of neutrality serves values of equality and justice when a librarian yields the same service to a user the librarian disagrees with. Contrary, the principle of neutrality does not serve values of equality and justice when the library and the librarian amplifies the expulsion of marginalized sections of the

population, both through materials and guidance. To have a constructive and productive discussion of the library's role in society, that does not derail by extreme examples or become a question of either or, we must remember the common intention of a library for all. The discussion of the library's role in society should not be a question of whether or not the library can or should take a neutral stand, but instead a question of values. What values do we want our library to represent? And what does it take to create a library that signals those values - what changes will we need to make? If new activist ideas are supported by traditional values within the principle of neutrality, library staff can work together in a strong compromise. In that way, activism and neutrality can secure and strengthen the library's position as a relevant and reliable institution in society.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an analysis and discussion of the principle of neutrality in Danish public libraries and how progressive librarians work to engage the library in activist agendas. The paper concludes that both activists and traditionalists justify their work and visions for the library with the same argument: a library that is welcoming *for all*. Both advocates and opponents of the principle of neutrality share the same goal, but have different approaches on how to get there, and the principle of neutrality plays an important role for both sides: It is seen as a strong tool by some, a restrictive obstacle by others.

The importance in the discussion of the library's future role is, however, not in the discussion of whether or not the library must or can take a neutral stand. The importance lies in the question of values, and what values we want our libraries to reflect. We need to discuss what we mean when we say we want a library *for all*, and we need to discuss if our current library practice acts those values out. Instead of rejecting the principle of neutrality completely and remaining in the discussion of to be, or not to be neutral, let us revisit the principle of neutrality and take away the embedded values we *do* want for our libraries and let the historical and traditional values be the foundation for new progressive and activist agendas and visions to be built on.

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