

Re-examining the Concept of Neutrality for Academic Librarians

Jeff Lilburn

In an article published in the last issue of *Feliciter*, Brian Campbell, citing the continuing concentration in the media and publishing industries, suggested that it is perhaps “time for librarians to re-examine their concept of neutrality and balance.” He asked whether collections and the information provided by libraries should merely reflect imbalances in the production and dissemination of information, or whether librarians should be “actively working to...rebalance the information available?”¹ In short, what Mr. Campbell asks can be summarized as follows: Can current library policies and practices be characterized as “neutral” if our collections simply reproduce the privileges already enjoyed by established and powerful media conglomerates in every other area of our society?

As librarians, we are dedicated to giving our students the research skills they need to become independent, lifelong learners. We show students where and how to access the information they need and teach them how to use information effectively. We explain the importance of consulting a wide variety of information sources and teach

students how to critically evaluate these sources. Should not our collections provide evidence that we apply these teachings ourselves by selecting titles from the broadest possible range of sources?

Conversely, if our library catalogues are becoming, as some have argued, more and more homogeneous and less representative of the totality of books and other materials published each year, are we not undermining our efforts to teach students to think critically about the information they use? How can we legitimately position ourselves as the champions of information literacy if, when selecting materials for our libraries, we do not actively strive to make marginalized or alternative voices as readily accessible as voices and perspectives already easily available through mainstream media and large chain bookstores?

Not particularly effective

According to several recent studies, libraries are not succeeding in making available sources of information that challenge or provide alternatives to the views expressed in mainstream publications. Rita Marinko and Kristin H. Gerhard, for example, examined holdings rates

of titles indexed by the *Alternative Press Index* and found that alternative press periodicals are not widely held in ARL libraries.² In a similar study, LaFond, Van Ullen and Irving, investigating whether subscription to electronic full-text databases improved access to non-mainstream periodical titles, found that none of the four full-text databases considered in their study offered a “particularly effective mechanism for expanding access to materials offering alternative points of view.”³ Although full-text databases devoted to newspapers and periodicals of the alternative and independent press do improve access to certain titles (*Alt-PressWatch*, for example), at present they serve more to emphasize the imbalances in other print and electronic collections than they do to compensate for these imbalances.

For those who may question the need to “rebalance” our library collections, Peter McDonald points to the corporate hegemony that is squelching “free expression in art, culture [and] information access” and argues that it is also having a major impact on librarianship. He contends that librarianship “suffers from th[e] same miasma of false ‘choice’ as does the rest of society” and offers as one

example the profession's acceptance of corporate-dominated information and a selection process that relies largely on "major, commercial book review journals" and publisher catalogues.⁴ A similar view is expressed by Byron Anderson, who argues that librarians, by relying on standard bibliographic tools that neglect the alternative press, "would be fortunate to be aware of even 10 percent of the publishers publishing today." Unless aggressively pursued, Anderson continues, the other 90 per cent remain obscure.⁵

author's lack of an established reputation or doubt the reliability of a press that does not have mainstream popularity or appeal. Or they may simply disregard a title because it could not be found in another library catalogue.

Building balanced collections

However, with the book publishing industry now dominated by just a few multinational conglomerates seemingly more interested in profit and cross-promotion than they are in contributing to the knowledge and

university presses become increasingly market-driven, independent presses, which are more likely to base decisions on topic or literary merit,⁸ may become the only source for content deemed too "risky" (where "risky" might just as easily refer to poor profit potential as it does to controversial or dissenting ideas).

Last year, librarians were rightly proud to learn that letters written by librarians to Michael Moore's publisher, who in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks decided not to release *Stupid White Men*, helped

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Reasons for this obscurity, in addition to those already mentioned above, can include criteria in collection development policies that discriminate against the alternative press, the small advertising budgets of small and alternative presses, and the lack of attention alternative press titles receive from reviewers.⁶ But just as important, perhaps, is the reluctance some librarians may feel about selecting titles that, they believe, do not belong in an academic library. They may question an

scholarship of a particular field, it would appear that small and independent publishers are, and will continue to be, critical in the building of broad and balanced collections that more accurately reflect the diversity of ideas. This is precisely the argument made by Robert McChesney, who observes that independent publishers are playing "an indispensable part in the overall system of providing content that is too risky for the giants to consider."⁷ Moreover, as publishing decisions at mainstream and

deliver the book to store (and library) shelves. Moore was obviously pleased by the action taken to rescue his book and called librarians "the most important public servant in a democracy."⁹ This story is, on the surface, impressive and inspiring. However, it does not highlight the work librarians do to defend those whose voices are in danger of being censored or silenced but, rather, is an isolated high-profile incident that did little to address the imbalances in our libraries.



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Michael Moore, through his books and films, brings to a wide audience an important perspective and a voice that helps to counter the accepted conventions and rhetoric of mainstream media. Yet, Moore is himself a highly recognizable media figure who has already succeeded in making his voice heard. What's more, Moore's book was already printed and ready to ship when the decision to delay its release was made. What about lesser-known authors whose books are cancelled in earlier stages of development? Or books that simply won't be accepted by publishers afraid to take a chance on an unpopular or controversial view?

Some of these authors will be lucky and find a small press that is willing to take a chance. But their books will probably not be widely advertised or reviewed. Don't we as librarians have a responsibility to find these books and make them available? As Freedom to Read week approaches, let's reaffirm our commitment to intellectual freedom by taking steps to rebalance our collections and to re-examine the implications of remaining "neutral."

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Notes

- ¹ Brian Campbell, "Media Concentration and the Role of Libraries in Promoting a Diversity of Voices," *Feliciter* 48:6, 2002, 275-277.
- ² Rita A. Marinko and Kristin H. Gerhard, "Representations of the Alternative Press in Academic Library Collections," *College & Research Libraries*, July 1998, 364-371.
- ³ Deborah LaFond, Mary K. Van Ullen and Richard D. Irving, "Diversity in Collection Development: Comparing Access Strategies to Alternative Press Periodicals," *College & Research Libraries*, March 2000, 136-144.
- ⁴ Peter McDonald, "Corporate Inroads & Librarianship: The Fight for the Soul of the Profession in the New Millennium," *Progressive Librarian* 12:13 (Spring/Summer 1997), www.libr.org/PL/12-13_McDonald.html; accessed November 14, 2002.
- ⁵ Byron Anderson, "The Other 90 Percent: What Your MLS Didn't Teach You," *Counterpoise* 3:3-4 (October 31, 1999), 11.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 26.
- ⁸ Charles Willet, "Alternative Libraries and Infoshops: The Struggle against Corporate and Government Indoctrination in American Schools and Universities, and in Daily Life," *Librarians at Liberty* 8:1&2 (December 31, 2000), 11.
- ⁹ Nora Rawlinson, "Librarians Enlisted in Copyright Battles," *Publishers Weekly*, June 24, 2002, p. 9.