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Recent Posts

[Info 200: Blog](#)

[Post 6](#)

[Info 200](#)

[Research](#)

[Paper Abstract](#)

[Info 200 Blog](#)

[Post #5:](#)

[Librarians and](#)

[Social](#)

[Movements](#)

[Info 200 Blog](#)

[Post #4: Article](#)

[Summary](#)

[Info 200: Blog](#)

[Post 3 –](#)

[Disrupting Life](#)

[In the Round](#)

Info 200 Blog Post #5: Librarians and Social Movements

Posted on [November 1, 2018](#) by [Jason Weekley](#)

Social movements are collective, coordinated actions that attempt to change the public sphere (Tufekci, 2017). Social movements have taken many forms; they include the Civil Rights Movement, the labor movement, the peace movement, and the environmental movement just to name a few. Recently, these movements are often known by their hashtags: #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, #NODAPL, #MeToo. The strategies, methods, and goals of social movements may vary from one movement to another, but their ultimate objective is to change society to be more reflective of their worldview. They are taking an activist role in transforming society.

Libraries, on the other hand, are often seen as neutral organizations and are not meant to be advocates. Article VII of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics

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Jason Weekley
on [Info 200: Blog Post 6](#)

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on [Info 200: Blog Post 6](#)

Michael Stephens on
[Info 200 Blog Post #5: Librarians and Social Movements](#)

Michael Stephens on
[Info 200 Blog Post #4: Article Summary](#)

Archives

[December 2018](#)

[November 2018](#)

[October 2018](#)

states, “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources” (ALA). Garnar (2018) claims that article VII has often been interpreted as meaning that information professionals should be neutral and should not take a stance on issues.

The neutrality of librarians, however, has not been shared by all in the profession. For instance, Radical Reference (RR) was formed in 2004 by a collective of progressive library workers and students who rejected the neutrality of librarianship (Morrone & Friedman, 2009). RR see librarians not only as professionals but also as citizens and members of a community who utilize their skills as librarians in evaluating resources to meet the social justice information needs of their community (Morrone & Friedman, 2009). Members of RR would disagree with Dresang (2006) who argues that social activism would “dictate the elimination (nonselection) of some resources” (178). The RR community does not seek to eliminate resources, but to highlight alternative resources that could be used by social movements.

At the 2018 ALA Midwinter meeting in Denver, the issue of library neutrality was debated by several prominent information professionals. Chris Bourg, director of libraries at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, summed up the activist position by stating, “If we believe that libraries have any role to play in supporting and promoting truth in our current post-truth culture, then our work is political and not neutral” (Carlton, 2018).

The activist/neutral role of libraries and librarians is an

September

2018

August 2018

Categories

Uncategorized

Meta

Register

Log in

Entries [RSS](#)

Comments

[RSS](#)

WordPress.org

ethical debate that will continue in the years to come. Many librarians, however, are realizing that taking a neutral position is doing a disservice to the communities that they serve and that taking a neutral stance is in actuality a political act. Therefore, these librarians believe that an ethical approach to librarianship is one that addresses social injustice directly and that by doing so, they can better serve their community.

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Summary

One thought on “Info 200 Blog Post #5: Librarians and Social Movements”



[Michael Stephens](#) says:

November 7, 2018 at 6:41 pm

You tap into an interesting an ongoing debate. When I was a reference librarian, we were often told to have no opinion on any issue local or national. These days, as you point out, it seems we must have definite opinions about information, misinformation, etc. Good sources for this post.

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