

With great power comes great responsibility: The issue of neutrality in librarianship

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As librarians living in middle class Australia we knowingly hold automatic privilege. We are educated, postgraduate degree holders and possess the power (aka knowledge and skills) to access and use information as we see fit. However, as the ubiquitous Spider-Man phrase goes, *with great power comes great responsibility*¹. As Lockman (2015) suggests, given our privilege and skills, librarians have a responsibility to act as allies and fight against discrimination faced by our patrons.

For many generations, librarians have strived to take the virtuous path of putting aside their personal views in favour of neutrality - making available a varied range of viewpoints and ideas to their patrons (Lewis 2010). However, 'somewhere in neutrality lays the negation of moral responsibility' (Good 2006, p. 26). Libraries have a duty to not merely present both sides of an issue but act with moral and intellectual consequence, address the issues at hand and use our privilege to better serve our diverse communities. We need to embrace our power and uphold our professional values of equity, intellectual freedom, and democracy.

In 2013, following the murder of 17 year old Trayvon Martin in the United States, an online platform entitled #BlackLivesMatter was developed to tackle the racism prevalent in American society (Garza 2014). Various other campaigns were launched in response, including a #Libraries4BlackLives call to action. This movement of librarians argues that modern librarians should not pride themselves on being neutral. Instead 'to fulfil our mission and uphold library values then we must be advocates *against* marginalization and inequity, and *for* justice and equity' (Sonnie 2016). By taking a stance on the issue of racism in their society, the libraries pledging support to #Libraries4BlackLives actively positioned themselves as anti-racist. Thus making the library a relevant player in the community, while offering much needed support to patrons during difficult times.

This model of library action and abandonment of neutrality also holds relevance in Australia. The issue of same sex marriage and the upcoming Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey is causing much heated debate in our society and distress to the LGBTQIA+² community. Silence on marriage equality from the library profession undermines our values. How can we claim to serve our communities fairly and equally if we remain neutral, and thereby complicit, in the denial of basic human rights to some? How can we claim to welcome LGBTQIA+ folks in libraries if we're not willing to pledge our public support for their human rights? It is time that we activate our spidey senses and embrace our power, put on our rainbow capes and pledge support.

#LibrariansForMarriageEquality.

¹ The origins of this phrase are thought to be from statements made by British and American political figures in the late 1800s and early 1900s. However, the common known phrase is a product of 20th century popular culture. It is widely attributed to the character Uncle Ben (the uncle of Peter Parker, aka Spider-Man) who from 1962, featured in the Spider-Man comic book series authored by Stan Lee. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Ben for further information.

² An umbrella term that is used to refer to the community as a whole and which includes (lesbian gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexuality). The "+" symbol stands for all of the other sexualities, sexes, and genders that aren't included in the acronym. See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-07/sexuality-gender-glossary-definitions/7287572> for further information.

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