

# **LIS neutrality: A qualitative analysis of public librarian concepts and expectations of political neutrality in Glasgow's public library service.**

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## **Abstract**

With the recent shifting to the right of global politics, public libraries have found themselves in the crossfire of heated debate regarding their role in social justice, freedom of knowledge and perhaps most challenging, neutrality. This research sets out to develop an understanding of the positions of public library staff and users regarding political neutrality within public libraries. The research explores key literature and methodological approaches concerning neutrality in public libraries, how it is implemented and its consequences. The current literature examines library neutrality, including its relation to social justice and library collections. A volume of theoretical research and debate on neutrality within library and information services currently exists, however at present only small samples of empirical studies have been conducted. This study will refine and build on this research by exclusively exploring political neutrality. An interpretivist inductive philosophical underpinning, incorporating qualitative research and thematic analysis is adopted by the current research, ensuring a deep understanding of overall positions in relation to existing library policies. The study focuses its research on the specific geographical area of Glasgow and the public libraries within the Glasgow council area. The diverse political and ethnic composition of the city's population was key in this decision to ensure a broad cross-section of public librarians within the research cohort. The study's findings contribute to the discourse on overall neutrality in public library services and offer both libraries and policy makers an insight into the relationship between library staff and existing policy and expectations regarding political neutrality within public library services.

## **Keywords**

Libraries, political neutrality, neutrality, social justice, LIS education, equity of access

## **1 Introduction**

This section introduces the topic of political neutrality in public libraries through an extensive literature review with reference to previous studies in related areas. The section considers specific details of the topic to be investigated by outlining the aims and objectives of the study along with a brief background on the area of study. The rationale for the research to be conducted is delineated and gaps in the literature which the current study endeavours to plug are outlined.

### **1.2 Aims & Objectives**

#### **1.2.1 Aims**

The aim of this research is to add to the existing literature and develop an understanding of the positions of public librarians on political neutrality within public libraries.

#### **1.2.2 Objectives**

- To attain greater insight into public librarians' positions on different types of neutrality across a spectrum of public libraries and how they align with policy positions.
- To develop an understanding of whether librarians' positions on political neutrality differ

from those on other forms of neutrality .

- To develop an understanding of what public librarians understand neutrality within LIS to be, with a particular focus on political neutrality.
- To understand the relationship between public librarians' personal positions on political neutrality against professional ethical codes on political neutrality within public libraries.

### 1.3 Rationale for research

The rationale for this research project to be conducted is to develop an understanding of public librarian positions on political neutrality within a public library context. The complexity of neutrality (Scott and Saunders, 2020) and defining its meaning within a public library service context (Cheshire and Stout, 2020; Eckert, 2016; Jensen, 2008) along with correlating librarian beliefs with policy stances on neutrality make this research worthwhile. Despite a large body of research into related concepts such as censorship within LIS (Macdonald and Birdi, 2020; Moody, 2004), there is a lack of empirical research, particularly from the position of librarians, on political neutrality. This research chooses to take a refined look at political neutrality, instead of a blanket term encompassing myriad aspects of neutrality. Other considerations for neutrality including; gender, race, scientific, are felt to merit their own research.

### 1.4 Background

#### 1.4.1 The State of Play

Public libraries are intrinsically linked to the concept of democracy (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022; Eckerdal, 2017; Byrne, 1999) and this relationship runs deep in both a historical and political sense in the Western world. Tax funded public libraries deliver services which aid and contribute to a democratic society, educating the community they serve and providing much needed services (Summers and Buchanan, 2018; Pateman, 2011) often beyond their remit, despite the continued economic restraints imposed upon them by the government *du jour* (McCahill, Birdi and Jones, 2020). The link between public libraries and democracy is clearly laid out in national and professional policy. Both the American Library Association (ALA) and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) lean heavily on liberal democratic ideals in their values and ethics policies, intertwining the profession with a clear political mandate. However, in today's turbulent political landscape, the very concept of democracy has been brought into question with debates abound regarding what modern democracy is and exactly what it stands for. With the global shift to the right of local and national governments in the United States and across Europe, the importance of libraries' civic role in politically polemic times has become more prevalent and yet more complex than ever before.

Habul (cited in Eckerdal 2017), brings attention to governments exhibiting anti-democratic behaviour such as a local council representative in Ludvika, Sweden also holding a leading position with *Nodiska motståndsrörelsen*, an openly neo-Nazi movement and the UK government's controversial redefining of extremism (HM Government, 2024) which could disproportionately exclude Muslim community groups from government funding are only a few examples of a drift away from democratic ideals across Europe. As the tug of war between polemic political ideals increases in potency, this paper aims to identify public libraries' position and role within evidently changing communities and whether this external change will see a drastic shift in how we, the public, perceive libraries and their unique role within society.

#### 1.4.2 Neutrality

Library and information service (LIS) neutrality has until now mostly been analysed through the polemic lens of neutral vs non-neutral approaches. This has led to heated, if mostly philosophical debate on the topic from two opposing positions. Proponents of library neutrality argue that it is a professional strength, guarding against censorship and promotes political freedom (Macdonald and Birdi, 2020). The myth of neutrality is argued by Jensen (2008) who posits that claiming to be neutral is in of itself a political choice.

He argues that “a claim to neutrality means simply that one isn’t taking a position on that distribution of power and its consequences, which is a passive acceptance of the existing distribution” (Jensen, 2008 p.30). The current research perceives the debate to be more nuanced than staunch anti or pro positioning and acknowledges that there can be a duality and convergence of neutral and non-neutral positions within the public library remit.

### **1.4.3 Public libraries**

“Bad libraries only build collections. Good libraries build services [sic]. Great libraries build communities,” (Lankes, 2012). Flinn (2011 p. 6) suggests that the term community is “itself a fluid and ambiguous one, lacking in clear definition and employed in many different contexts.” However, the relationship between libraries and their communities is fundamental to how they are structured, perceived and funded. Libraries are places where values such as diversity, equity and inclusiveness compete with values of neutrality, anti-censorship and freedom of speech (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022). Given the broad communities that libraries serve, this balancing act can naturally lead to conflict within both library and community.

The legitimacy that public libraries hold within their communities is at a crossroads, Kann-Rasmussen et al. (2023) question whether neutrality is library's legitimacy and if activism is a threat to this legitimacy, or rather a search for new legitimacy? This research aims to discuss whether this legitimacy stems from neutrality or activism within its practitioners and/or its guiding policies.

The opening section has outlined the main principles of the investigation, introducing the fundamental areas of study and rationale behind the research. The following section gives a detailed review of the relevant literature surrounding the debate on neutrality, political neutrality, ethics and values all through the lens of public libraries. The methodology section ventures to articulate the underpinning philosophical approach to the research while presenting the reasoning behind both the data collection and analysis choices of the current study. The research cohort and the limitations of the present study are also articulated. The study's findings and discussion linking to the literature are presented before conclusions from the study are drawn.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The literature review explores the concepts of neutrality through a range of unique lenses and creates a platform for the proposed research study. Firstly, neutrality as a concept and its meaning are discussed. Secondly, neutrality within a public library context is examined along with ethics and values within LIS. Finally, political neutrality, its relevance and implications within public library services are dissected, coupled with the adjoining theme of social justice. Following on from this extensive review, gaps in the literature are identified for the proposed study, underpinning its value. The purpose of this literature review is to extend the researcher's knowledge in the field by determining the current understanding of the research topic and as a result, develop the aims and objectives in line with this understanding.

#### **2.1.1 Neutrality**

Neutrality can be defined as not taking a stance on a range of issues, as Johnson (2016) posits, neutrality means not having a position or not taking a side. In a political sense, a neutral state deals impartially with its members and their commitments (Jones, 1989). Despite this clarification, neutrality in LIS remains a taxing concept to capture. This has led to a fierce academic debate over the virtues of neutrality when placed into social contexts, with the two camps generally being pro- and anti-neutrality. The current study takes a more nuanced position on the debate surrounding political neutrality and neutrality in general within a public library context. This approach allows for a coalescence of seemingly polarised approaches

towards neutrality (Macdonald and Birdi, 2020), in particular on issues surrounding social justice.

### **2.1.2 Library neutrality**

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2012 p. 4) code of ethics states, “librarians and other information workers are strictly committed to neutrality and an unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service.” Are public libraries therefore considered bastions of neutrality across the spectrum of political and social issues that they are, by their very nature, a part of? This question is addressed in the current studies’ second objective, which seeks to develop an understanding of whether librarians’ positions on political neutrality differ from those on other forms of neutrality. Eckert (2016 p. 12) posits that “librarians have never been neutral, and it’s disingenuous to suggest otherwise,” citing that even the use of the Dewey Decimal System is rooted in “deeply racist, misogynistic beliefs, with a fundamentally Judeo-Christian worldview.” The American Library Association (ALA) offers guidance to libraries listing “democracy, access, diversity, social responsibility, and the public good” among its core values (American Library Association, n.d. [a]), however the debate over social responsibility and neutrality continues to pose problematic questions.

Scott and Saunders (2020 p. 153) posit that the term “neutrality” appears to be used for, or related with, “everything from not taking a side on a controversial issue to the objective provision of information and a position of defending intellectual freedom and freedom of speech,” whereas Kann-Rasmussen (2022) refers to legal actions taken against librarians who impede the lending of anti-immigration literature to patrons, in studies by Helgason alongside Sundeen and Blomgren. She highlights a “field of tension between new interpretations of values of social justice and traditional values of free access to information,” (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022 p. 41). This example shows that when libraries do take a stance on a political matter it can often be confronted with resistance by patrons, librarians and politicians alike. This tension is acknowledged in the current research as an understanding of public librarians positions on political neutrality from a personal and professional position is developed.

To what extent then, should public librarians involve themselves in political issues within the community? The debate surrounding this issue is acknowledged within the current research's third objective which seeks to develop an understanding of what public librarians understand neutrality within LIS to be, with a particular focus on political neutrality. Hart (2016) posits that as public servants, remaining politically impartial is a must for public librarians, whereas Shocky (2016) argues that the promotion of neutrality based on an interpretation of the ALA’s Code of Ethics serves to work against the social justice advocacy potential of libraries and librarians. This is a valid consideration when we reflect on the educational institutions disseminating these practices to future librarians. Accredited ALA or CILIP programs are by design tasked with implementing the core values of librarianship as these governing bodies define them. As it stands, intellectual freedom looms large in both codes of practice, a firmly pro-neutrality-based concept, leaving little space for learning objectives based around advocacy and social responsibility. In this case Shocky (2016) points out that neutrality through the form of intellectual freedom does not equate to social justice. Jaeger et al. (2015) reiterate this idea, arguing that LIS programs fail to address the issues of diversity and inclusion, leaving students unprepared to serve as culturally competent information professionals.

Jaeger and Franklin (2007) posit the concept of a “virtuous circle” in LIS education programs as an antidote, promoting an inclusive practice leading to a greater diversity of people drawn to the profession as a whole. The IFLA code of ethics also states that, “librarians...distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties. They do not advance private interests or personal beliefs at the expense of neutrality,” (IFLA, 2012 p. 4). Moody’s (2004 p. 177) seminal study found that “only 28% of participants...found their personal beliefs to be at odds with their professional role with regard to the handling of controversial materials.” However, other literature argues that the debate over personal and professional neutrality can be rendered irrelevant when seen as a flexible pro-tanto concept (Macdonald, 2022). Macdonald (2022)

posits that as public libraries were born out of liberal concepts, the heterogeneous ideas of liberal neutrality can also be applied to LIS neutrality. Macdonald (2022) theorises that neutrality can be broken down into two distinct concepts; personal neutrality and institutional neutrality. While staunch anti-neutrality supporters like Wenzler (2019) may condemn librarians who don't use their positions to reduce social injustice, Macdonald and Birdi's (2020) more nuanced stance proposes that we should accept justifications for the divergence of institutional and personal neutrality. The current study looks to further the work done by Moody (2004) and Macdonald (2022) by further understanding public librarians' distinctions between and conceptions of personal and professional neutrality from a political perspective.

Gorman in Foderaro (2023) posits that by polarising values they become absolute and turn into ideologies, conversely, librarianship needs to construct a common ground of shared values. Rawls in Macdonald (2022 p. 590) further argues this principle suggesting that libraries should "maintain impartiality between 'comprehensive moral doctrines' and different ways of life." This would allow libraries a more fluid approach to neutrality and "jettison a commitment to neutrality to promote specific causes such as, perhaps, anti-racist or socially progressive movements," (Macdonald, 2022 p. 590). Budd (2015) posits that alongside places for citizens to turn to for facts, opinions regarding local, national and world events, libraries allow for deliberation and reflection on the part of the patron. Libraries being as they are, democratic institutions, Eckerdal (2017) suggests allowing conflict, as a part of the wider democratic society, a place within libraries. Mouffe (2013) posits the concept of an agonistic approach stating that an agonistic conflict, being as it is, a conflict between two adversaries and not an antagonistic conflict between two enemies is the very condition of a vibrant democracy.

Codes of ethics created by governing bodies such as ALA and CILIP have been criticised for their roots in white colonialist heritage, by promoting and insisting on neutrality within their institutions, they help to maintain a hegemonic status quo under the guise of intellectual freedom by encouraging librarians to "vanish as an individual person" (Foskett 1962 p. 10). This neoliberal hegemony (Mouffe, 2005) has aided in creating a democratic deficit and a lack of open questioning of liberal-democratic institutions such as libraries. This in turn has caused a conflict in the LIS sphere between proponents of neutrality based intellectual freedom and advocacy equalitarianism, with Mouffe (2005) naming this tension the democratic paradox. However, when democracy is interpreted agonistically, Eckerdal (2017) posits that libraries can serve as important places for producing counter-hegemonies and enabling equality. Hansson (2010) indicates the level of responsibility this would place on libraries along with librarians, as an agonistic pluralism interpretation of democracy within LIS would no longer result in places of neutrality and kindness, but rather one of political activity and pro-action. The library would therefore become a forum for competing struggles of ideas and political position. The debate on personal versus institutional neutrality is addressed in the current study's objectives which aim to further understand the relationship between librarians personal positions on political neutrality and institutional practices.

### **2.1.3 Ethics & Values**

Unlike many other public services, librarianship is guided, not solely by stringent legalities, but by an often seemingly higher good of ethical and value based guidelines which dominate the public library discussion. Both the ALA and CILIP have extensive ethical codes of conduct and value laden professional standards, but do these principles aid the librarian or only serve to muddy the waters and cause less clarity for both the librarian and governing body expectations? This debate is addressed in the first objective of the current study, which endeavours to attain a greater insight into public librarians' positions on different types of neutrality across a spectrum of public libraries and how they align with policy positions.

Adams (1998) posits a philosophical definition of ethics as meaning a thoughtfully made choice, implying that the choice may still be good or bad and emphasising that there is no value placed on the particular choice made. It does not imply that an ethical person is good or an unethical person is bad as modern parlance may lead us to believe. Dole et al. (2000 p. 285) cite Allan's (1993) definition of values as

“generalised abstract ideas held by human individuals or groups about what is desirable, proper, good or bad,” marking a clear distinction between the two concepts. Jaeger et al. (2015 p. 155) set forth how both concepts relate to librarianship, stating “ethics is a consideration of what actions might support those values,” postulating that values may be either professional or personal citing inclusion, justice and equity as values and anti-oppressive, diversity encouraging actions as ethical.

Given the inherent importance placed on value based professional standards, it may come as a surprise that there is no clearly established hierarchy of professional values within the librarianship profession (Symons and Stoffle, 1998). Despite this, professional neutrality is consistently cited by academics and professionals alike (Dole et al., 2000) as a core professional value for librarians. This conceptual value sits within Koehler and Pemberton’s ethical provisions for librarianship (cited in Dole et al., 2000 p. 286) in stating that librarians must “support the needs and interests of the profession... insofar as they do not conflict with professional obligations, be sensitive and responsive to social responsibilities appropriate to the profession.” However, as we have seen, social responsibility is often at odds and conflictive with intellectual freedom within the profession and the reality of external forces, such as politics, must be considered (Budd, 2006).

Cheshire and Stout (2020) contest that the contradictions between the ALA Code of Ethics and the reality of daily decision making by librarians are evidently clear. They cite Principle VII of the ALA code of ethics; “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,” (American Library Association, n.d. [b]). Yet, in contrast to this ethical principle, the list of librarianship failing neutrality is seemingly endless, examples include myriad judgement calls made daily regarding restricting access to information, from collection development decisions, limiting patron access based on age and web filters being just some examples given (Cheshire and Stout, 2020).

Building on this debate, the current research endeavours to analyse these professional ethics and values in terms of political neutrality and whether or not an alignment of political neutrality or bias with professional ethics and values can exist.

#### **2.1.4 Political neutrality**

The debate surrounding political neutrality within public libraries raises conflicts that go to the very core of librarianship. By choosing a neutral stance on political issues, are libraries maintaining the status quo and helping to ensure existing power structures remain in place? This debate is addressed in the fourth objective of the current study, which endeavours to understand the relationship between public librarians’ personal positions on political neutrality against professional ethical codes on political neutrality within public libraries.

Lankes (2008 p. 238) posits that every institution carries its own political bias and suggests making these biases known to patrons as a solution and that it is only “by grounding a field’s ethics and principles in the ultimate goal of service, that librarians avoid separation from the community, and promotion of their ethics over that of the communities.” The current research looks to build on Lankes (2008) idea of political transparency in public libraries by providing empirical evidence to understand if it is a viable solution or would further isolate the library from parts of the community it serves, proving more divisive than unifying.

Keeping politics out of the public library domain is also contentious given a library's role in social engagement within its community. Wenzler (2019 p. 15) contests that perhaps the problem lies with the institution itself, suggesting that if librarians are asked to leave their moral values outside every time they go to work, the issue sits at a higher institutional level. He asks, “Why should librarians restrict their

social advocacy precisely in the arena where their training and expertise give them the greatest social influence?” Jensen (2008 p. 31) adds to this argument by suggesting that, “the appropriate question isn’t ‘are you political?’ but instead should be ‘can you defend the conclusions you reach?’” By understanding to what extent the current research cohort of library professionals feel they are required to leave their political morality at the door or not and whether they are encouraged to engage in political discourse with patrons, the study aims to contribute a deeper understanding of public librarians experiences on political neutrality

Research by Moody (2004 p. 175) showed that all of the respondents to her study on library neutrality felt that public libraries should “cater for public interest in contemporary issues without promoting or suppressing particular beliefs and ideas.” This aligns to the current study’s third objective to develop an understanding of what public librarians understand neutrality within LIS to be, with a particular focus on political neutrality. This complex and intertwined nature is further debated by Good (2008) who posits morality and self-interest as dual motives for librarian’s involvement in political issues. The conflict evoked by funding and political neutrality sits large in the debate, with Foderaro (2023 p. 1403) noting that political neutrality may “allow for a library’s survival, but causes a substantial limitation of their freedom and values.” This relates to the present study, which attempts to explore library staffs’ stance on the balance between political interest in terms of public library funding, and their freedom to act as activists for social justice, even in the event of a conflict of interest with the current regime.

Moody (2004 p. 177) offers that political issues are by their very nature of interest to the public and advocates that “both sides of the political debate should be offered, as opposed to neither of them.” She posits that it is the librarians themselves who must understand, “that free access to information is the cornerstone not only of the public library, but of a democratic society,” and being “familiar with their own biases,” is pivotal to offering a fair and balanced service to patrons (Moody, 2004 p. 180).

However, if as Horton (1990) implies, the democratic system demands that we are neutral, then playing by the rules that were formed in liberal constructs and adhering to political neutrality inevitably fails to confront issues of social justice as it “encourages people to seek individualistic solutions to systematic problems that can be resolved only through collective action,” (Wenzler, 2019 p. 30). A further radical critique by Nina de Jesus (2014) posits that, “librarians who assert that their institutions are politically neutral thus legitimise the violent oppression of indigenous people perpetuated by capitalism.” Building on de Jesus’ work, the current study aims to attain greater insight into the relationship between public librarians’ positions on neutrality and policy position.

### **2.1.5 Social justice**

Public library use in the UK has been on a steady decline, highlighted by research carried out to show that between 2001 and 2011, the percentage of population who were library users fell from 56% to 39.7% during this time (Department of Culture Media and Sport, 2011). This fall in usership is in line with the increase of income inequality seen in the UK during the same period (Pateman, 2011). Vincent and Pateman (2006) posit that in light of the recent shifting political agendas in increasingly diverse communities, the role of the community library must be reassessed once more.

Communitarian values such as social inclusion, while highlighted as core values of public libraries, are obstructed by the current post-industrialist capitalist political system (Byrne, 1999). Despite this, library services navigating a changing political landscape is nothing new, from a community driven approach in the 1980’s, to a consumer driven one in the 1990’s, the institutions of LIS now face a distinct shift to the right of the political spectrum, highlighted in the recent European Parliamentary elections in 2024. It is this most recent change that library institutions are now faced with and whether or not the core values of librarianship can still prevail given their oftentimes conflicting nature (Buschman, 2012). This shift poses the profession a fundamental question of whether or not it chooses to make a clear, non-neutral stand,

even if in turn, it risks alienating those not in agreement with a more advocacy led service. In contrast, many scholars believe that a neutrality-led approach risks having the same effect by diluting the service in an attempt to please everybody, to the extent that it appeals to nobody (Buschman and Warner, 2016).

Pateman and Vincent (2010) advocate for libraries to involve themselves more in issues of social justice and equality highlighting an active, political role in empathising with, fighting in solidarity with and supporting the local community. Bourdieu in Summers and Buchanan (2018) extends this to the power of cultural capital and how balancing the inequalities of this dovetails with both public libraries' purpose and practice. Summers and Buchanan (2018) explore the role of public libraries as cultural hubs in disadvantaged communities. They argue that among the cultural aspects that libraries can interact with their communities includes politics, however, that in many disadvantaged communities, the topic of politics is considered high brow thus maintaining a social barrier between these communities and interactions with politics. They posit that by maintaining political neutrality it excludes those who are not aligned to affluent backgrounds and as a result the social capital in disadvantaged areas is diminished. Regarding social justice issues, the present research leans to an advocacy perspective, however, due to the dichotomous nature of the debate, the current study endeavours to discover if public librarians views align strongly with either a neutral or advocacy stance. By remaining politically neutral, librarians negate their role as cultural intermediaries (Summers and Buchanan, 2018) and fail to enable and encourage the development of active participation in cultural activities, including politics, within their communities. This in turn can only lead to an ever-increasing divide in cultural capital, and accelerate the growing disenfranchisement, particularly in young voters, in disadvantaged areas therefore aiding in maintaining the political status quo which grows this divide.

Berninghausen (n.d.) proposes a replacement of the Library Bill of Rights concept of librarianship with a social responsibility concept. The overarching sticking point with such a radical departure from the current model is, they propose, whether or not the advantages of free access to all information for every person in society outweighs the disadvantages seen in an advocacy centred model. Given that public libraries are in a constant state of having to justify funding from political bodies, it may seem counterintuitive to argue for an advocacy approach, however, Berninghausen (n.d.) suggests that the two models can be complementary by understanding that either accessibility on all points of view or to primarily focus on the service function of libraries by serving the needs and interests of identifiable users, may be paramount at any particular time. This suggests that the two don't seem incompatible, but rather complementary.

The current study aims to understand deeper the relationship between advocacy and intellectual freedom approaches to librarianship by aiming to understand the relationships between librarians personal beliefs and professional ethical values as laid out in the fourth objective.

## **2.2 Gaps in research**

The study identifies a lack of nuanced understanding towards the dual implementation of both neutral and non-neutral political standards within LIS in the relevant literature. The research therefore aims to build on previous works by Pateman and Vincent (2010) and Scott and Saunders (2020) in developing a refined understanding of LIS neutrality through a political lens.

Furthermore, the research identifies a lack of literature surrounding the current debate from a UK perspective. Building on previous research by Jensen (2008) and Moody (2004), the study attempts to understand librarians' positions on personal beliefs against professional expectations regarding political neutrality from a UK research cohort's standpoint.

Finally, a lack of evidence related to hierarchical importance placed on differing forms of neutrality within public library service is recognised by the research. The study endeavours to build on the arguments put forward by Summers and Buchanan (2018) in seeking to develop an understanding of what public librarians



understand neutrality within LIS to be and whether political neutrality holds a significantly greater importance than other forms of neutrality for public librarians.

### **3 Methodology**

In this section, the choices and rationale for research design will be highlighted and justified looking at philosophical approaches to the research, including reasons for rejecting certain types of research design. As it is imperative to ensure the research design aligns cohesively with the research aims, objectives and research question (Ackerly and True, 2013), this section will endeavour to recall the aims of this research as set out in previous sections.

#### **3.1 Philosophy**

“The research onion” helps the researcher identify and correlate the research methodology ensuring a cohesively sound approach as it aids the researcher in choosing suitable methods (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill and Bristow, 2015). Accordingly, the philosophy of this research had taken a pluralist approach, as it encompassed aspects of both positivism and interpretivism, considered an ideal approach given the Mixed Methods Approach initially implemented in the research design. However, as the approach changed due to a lower-than-expected return from the research cohort, the philosophy of this research has chosen an interpretivist inductive approach due to the collected data driving the overall desired outcome seen in the aims of the current research. Interpretive research is synonymous with qualitative data, therefore it is the belief of the researcher that the use of this approach will aid in underpinning a stronger understanding of the complex social phenomenon being observed.

The researcher rejected the use of a solo phenomenographic approach as used in Macdonald and Birdi’s 2020 study into the concepts of neutrality for this study. Due to the sensitivity of the subject area, the librarian respondents were not expected to be as forthcoming in one-to-one interviews as in questionnaires which offer more anonymity and a scope for larger research groups. In Scott and Saunders’ (2020) investigation into neutrality in public libraries, data was compiled using solo quantitative methods. The current study also chose to reject this approach as it is considered vital to understand librarians’ experiences and opinions on library neutrality in depth and in a more relaxed context where the respondents will feel more comfortable to express themselves.

It had been initially considered that the best method for this study was a mixed method quantitative and qualitative approach. The purposes of this approach according to Creswell (2012) are that it is complementary in obtaining mutual viewpoints about similar experiences or associations and its completeness in ensuring total representation of experiences or associations is attained. However, the current study changed approach when it became evident that the number of responses to the data collection phase could not justify a MMA approach. It was therefore considered that a qualitative approach was more desirable.

Denzin and Lincoln describe qualitative researchers as those who “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005 p. 3). This approach is also essential when a social group is studied and a need to acknowledge often unheard voices is pertinent. This is particularly relevant to the current study which aimed to give a platform to the views of librarians in public library services.

Qualitative research is that which is born out of a worldview and the use of a theoretical lens, as such, the current study used a qualitative approach to inquire into the meanings its research cohort ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell and Poth, 2016). In this case the current study chose to use public librarian views on political neutrality in public library services as the issue being examined. In line with qualitative methods, the current study collected its data from a natural setting, sensitive to the people and places under study (Creswell and Poth, 2016). The collected data was analysed in an inductive

approach to establish themes and patterns which in turn were used to present the voices of participants and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, extending the literature and signalling a call for action (Creswell and Poth, 2016). The application of the qualitative approach is justified for the research study as it is in line with the available data received from the research cohort.

### 3.2 Research cohort

The study focused its research on the public libraries that fall within the remit of Glasgow Council. This aimed to reach library staff respondents from thirty-three public libraries. The actions required permission from library management and was requested via email along with a request to participate for library staff.

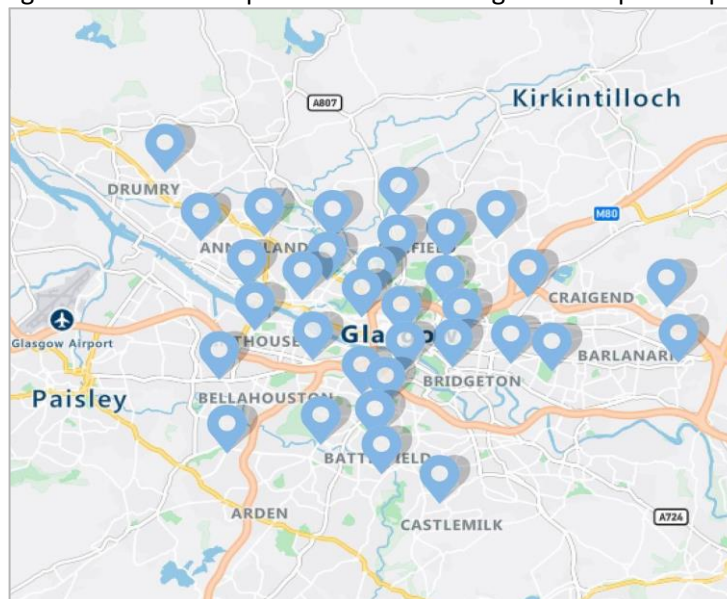


Fig.1: location of public libraries within Glasgow Council. (Glasgow Life, n.d.)

Glasgow was chosen for this study due to its political balance along with its ethnically diverse population. In the 2011 census (Scotland's Census, n.d.) 17.3% of the city's population identified themselves within an ethnic minority group. The political landscape within the city is not dominated by a single party, as the results of the 2022 local elections verify. These combined features made the cohort choice ideal for reaching a variety of socio-political positions among library staff.





	Scottish National Party		Councillors
		Total	37
		Change	-2
	Labour		Councillors
		Total	36
		Change	+5
	Green		Councillors
		Total	10
		Change	+3
	Conservative		Councillors
		Total	2
		Change	-6

Fig. 2: Glasgow Council election results, 2022. (BBC News, 2022)

### 3.3 Data collection

As the research had initially intended to use a mixed methods approach, two independent forms of data collection had been considered. Quantitative data would have been collected using questionnaires distributed to public librarians of varying positions within public libraries. Meanwhile it had been considered that the qualitative data be collected using semi structured interviews (SSI) with willing librarians taking part in the survey process from within the same geographical scope as above. Due to a lower-than-expected return from the survey requests, the current study deemed it appropriate to focus solely on a qualitative approach, employing the surveys as the primary source of qualitative data collection from the research cohort.

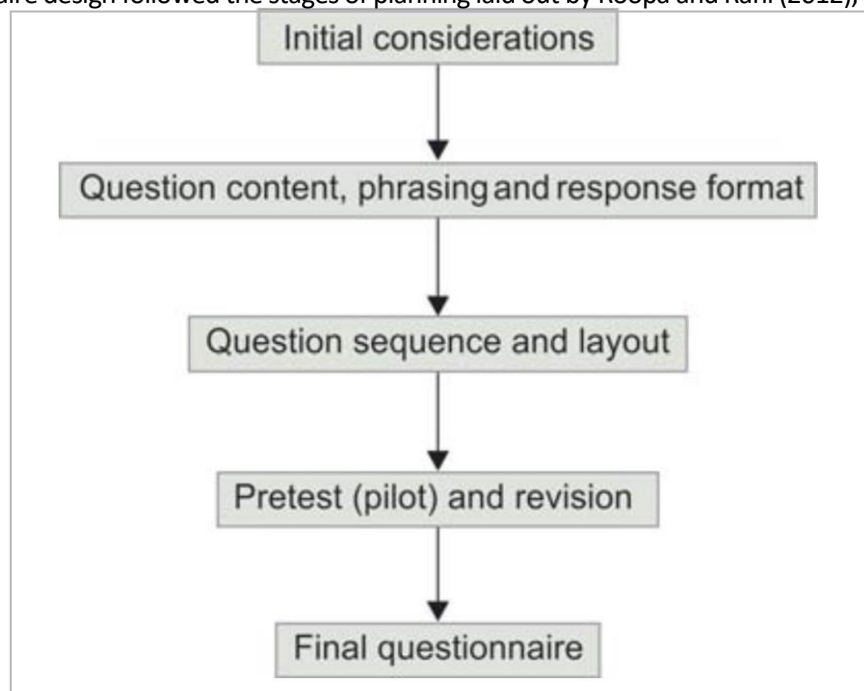
### 3.4 Question sequencing

As the current study had intended to use a MMA, the most appropriate sequence of questioning had been considered to be explanatory sequential. This research had intended to gather quantitative data first followed by qualitative data in order to enhance the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2012). The collected data from the quantitative research would have guided and aided the qualitative data collection process offering an insight into previously unconsidered lines of enquiry. This approach was later discarded when it became clear that the research would adopt a single method approach to data collection. The study instead focused on a deeper, qualitative analysis of the librarian surveys in order to achieve the aims set out by the research.

### 3.5 Qualitative data collection - survey

The research used purposive sampling which selects a specific group, in this case, public librarians in Glasgow, to take part. Despite the potential of purposive sampling limiting the external validity of the research (Andrade, 2021), for the homogeneous nature of the study's population it is deemed preferable over similar techniques such as convenience sampling, which in the case of this specific research, would not target a cohort of relevance to the study.

The questionnaire design followed the stages of planning laid out by Roopa and Rani (2012), seen below.



**Fig. 3: Stages of planning a questionnaire. Roopa and Rani (2012)**

Considering the question response format and sequencing, the research referred to Dillman (cited in

Bhattacharjee, 2012 pp. 75-76) who recommends several rules to creating ideal survey questions, from which the current research considered the following.

**Table 1: Survey question recommendations and implementation.**

Recommendation	Current research implementation
Questions should avoid the use of biased or value-laden words.	Respondents should not feel led to their responses by specific wording within the question and accordingly was avoided throughout the questioning in the research survey.
Questions should avoid being too general as they may not accurately represent the respondents' views.	The research endeavoured to use follow up questions, asking participants to explain their answers to add more depth to questions where further detail was deemed to be of benefit.
Questions should avoid being overly detailed so as to avoid participant fatigue or misunderstanding.	The research deemed the use of Likert scale questioning with a closed range of four options followed up by open ended explanatory responses to be appropriate.

Questions were ordered in an increasing scale of complexity and personal sensitivity, in order to ease the respondents into the process (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Roopa and Rani, 2012). They followed an outline of building a personal profile of the respondent, the participants' understanding of general neutrality and meaning, understanding of neutrality regarding politicised issues and finally, political neutrality. The open-ended questions at the end allow the respondents to give finer details on topics that are more complex, such as political neutrality and relations to their workplace and profession.

### **3.6 Pilot survey**

This study conducted dual pilot surveys prior to the distribution of the finalised survey. The first was conducted by a select number of staff members from Robert Gordon University. This aimed to ascertain any issues with wording, question order and ethical concerns. Following on from this, a second pilot survey was carried out with library patrons known to the researcher. The aim of this second pilot survey was to determine if questions were framed properly, receive a high percentage response rate and identify any questions that received substantial variations in responses. The research supervisor was informed of the proposed final survey format before distribution to potential research cohorts.

### **3.7 Questionnaire design & distribution**

The final questionnaire was designed using the JISC survey design website. This service allowed the research cohort to access the questionnaire directly through a web link without the need for individual surveys to be sent to every potential candidate. The link was sent in an email to the head of Glasgow Library Services, who in turn distributed the email to each individual library and staff members. Information regarding background on the research and researcher, the aims and objectives of the research, how confidentiality and anonymity would be respected were all attached to the cover email.

### **3.8 Questionnaire overview**

The questionnaire followed a specific flow, firstly building a profile of the participants through asking; age, gender, job title, work location, relevant qualifications and whether they are a member of a workers union. These short response questions were also designed to ease the participants into the survey through basic factual questions. The following questions focused on the target data, starting with ideas on work values which was adapted from the study into librarianship values by Dole et al. (2000) before moving into general ideas on neutrality and types of neutrality relevant to LIS, introducing the main topic of the target data. Following this, questions regarding the neutrality of hypothetical situations within LIS aimed to determine positions of neutrality on politicised concepts such as race and religion and subsequently about political neutrality and bias within a LIS setting. The next set of questions centred around librarians' interactions with patrons concerning various aspects of neutrality on politicised matters such as gender, race and class. The final pair of open-ended questions invite participants to give more open and broad answers on the examples of political neutrality within libraries themselves. Finally, participants were invited to add any further thoughts they wished to contribute on the subject area and were invited to participate in a follow-up interview regarding their responses by adding their email address if they wished to take part.

### **3.9 Limitations**

The study experienced several limitations with regard to the structure and distribution of the surveys. It was clear from the responses that the respondents were keen for various questions to give more context around the issues discussed or scope to answer outside the available options. This led to certain questions being left unanswered by some participants, but conversely led to some interesting justifications and explanations. One such example was highlighted by Respondent 1, who in response to Q15 stated:

I have not answered some as I don't feel they fit on the scale - an extremist group could result in patrons being intimidated and may be banned by the local council from using the space, a patron asking your political opinion is a personal matter not a library related one.

The research initially avoided this as it did not wish to influence the decision-making process of the respondents, however as it was a recurring theme noted by participants, it should be considered in future research.

The biggest issues faced by the research was the distribution of the surveys. Unfortunately, due to the surveys being distributed during the summer period, the research was affected negatively by key chains in the distribution process being absent for long periods. This had an adverse effect on the quantity of responses along with the timescale available to receive further responses.

### 3.10 Qualitative data collection - interviews

The aim of this qualitative data collection had been to explore librarians viewpoints and encounters concerning political neutrality within public libraries. To achieve this objective, it had been determined that semi-structured interviews would have been conducted with library staff from public libraries situated within the selected geographical area. The change in approach to the final research data collection was in part due to the lack of respondents willing to take part in the interview phase of data collection. The interview process was therefore deemed unviable as a data source and as such was not carried out or included in the final results of the study.

### 3.11 Data analysis methods

The current research had intended to use data analysis methods in keeping with the initial proposed MMA approach. However, due to the change in data collection methods, a thematic analysis approach was chosen to analyse the data collected from the surveys of public librarians. This method allowed the research to systematically identify, organise, and offer insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across the data set. This allowed the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Themes from the data collected “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set,” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). This research believes that through axial coding, conditions, actions/interactions and consequences can be identified and aid the researcher in explaining why a phenomenon occurs, under what conditions, and with what consequences (Bhattacharjee, 2012). From the responses, descriptive codes were assigned to recurring ideas expressed by the participants throughout the surveys. Following this process, axial coding took place to determine what relationships existed between the codes and if they could be correlated into key themes. Memos were taken consistently throughout the survey transcripts aiding in the result of meaningful data being derived from the process.

**Table 2: Example of response coding process**

Initial codes	Major Themes	Alphabetic code
discourage, welcome, intolerant, facilitate, social engagement, access	Equity of access	E
opinion, hateful, extreme, beliefs, open, neutral	Neutrality	N
trust, power, campaigning, ideology, transparent, moral	Political Neutrality	P

### 3.12 Outcomes

Once analysed, the results gave a clearer insight into the aims set out by the research by analysing the data through the following themes:

- Democratic equity of access
- Neutrality
- Neutrality on politicised issues.
- Political neutrality
- Personal political neutrality against institutional political neutrality

Public library policy was used as a further data set to understand the official position of the Glasgow public library system and whether or not the current study's data shows a manifestation of these policies in the perceptions of staff. This final data could prove vital for public libraries and governing bodies alike and can potentially be used in a top down review of how public libraries promote or dissuade acts of political neutrality or non-neutrality.

## 4 Findings & Discussion

The purpose of this section is to present the analysis of the responses from the research cohort through the study's returned surveys and also to provide a discussion around the key findings, using the relevant literature. A thematic approach was used to analyse the responses as highlighted in the methodology section. Through this analysis main themes were identified from the participants' replies in line with the aims and objectives of the study. The analysis process, described in the methodology section, is intended to identify and highlight current trends in attitudes towards the issues raised in the literature review and aims of this study, with responses allowing for recommendations to be posited in the study's conclusion.

### 4.1 Democratic equity of access

The role of the public library as a democratic institution within the community was highlighted throughout the literature review and was also evident in the responses from the study's research cohort. While debate within the literature centres around democratic systems insisting on neutrality within public librarianship (Horton, 1990) and the promotion of ethics founded in the liberalist roots of governing bodies such as ALA and CILIP maintaining a political status quo, activism has still flourished within certain quarters of the profession despite not aligning with these inherent systemic beliefs.

Despite this conflict, the values of librarianship highlighted by the research cohort responses suggest that liberal democratic principles such as access to information are still considered a foundation from which the profession grows. Respondent 4 felt that the library's role within the community very much aligns with such democratic principles:

Providing free services, either books, computer/internet access, or just a safe warm space to everyone who cannot find similar services elsewhere is vitally important and allows people the chance to enrich or forward their lives and current circumstances.

The respondent's view on provision of free services is aligned to the National Library of Scotland's Access Policy which states that "it is free to access collections at the point of use," (NLS, 2023 p. 5) underlining the importance of democratic equity of access.

While this focuses on self-improvement of the individual, respondent 5 underlined the importance of community led values within librarianship by suggesting the implementation of "something like needs based (or needs-led) services alongside community engagement." Pateman and Vincent (2010) also argue the importance of needs-based services and targeting resources towards those who need them most. This speaks to the wider topic of social justice when considering members of communities served by public libraries having equal opportunities to make the most of their lives and talents.

The above responses align strongly with the *public benefit* principle of CILIP's ethical framework (CILIP, n.d.). However, McCook (2001) identifies some of the difficulties raised when serving the community. Despite such policies reaffirming democracy at policy level as a core value within librarianship, citizen input and the librarian's connection to the community remain crucial. It follows that the study found equity of user access to provisions to be considered, almost universally by the research cohort, a fundamental value within librarianship.

In line with the first aim of this study, the research shows an overall trend towards a neutrality on equity of access. This can be seen through two separate lenses, the first concerning equity of access for library patrons themselves, and the second concerning freedom of access to information. Equity of patron access as a core library value is reflected in numerous responses to the current study's research. An overwhelming importance is placed on the diversity of patrons along with a progressive democratic outlook on the public libraries role within their community. We see this concept embodied in respondent 4's response to Q9, stating:

Welcoming of cultural diversity allows for everyone to access services regardless of their cultural background. It also fosters a safe space where people of different cultures share the same space, this encourages mixing, getting used to each other's differences, could encourage cultural integration within the wider community.

This highlights the relationship between the desired results of a non-biased equitable approach to public library access and the potential reflection of these values within the community they serve. Through non-discriminatory access to services, libraries challenge social norms which can orient beliefs, aspirations, and behaviour in line with the worldview of a specific group or community which often provides a barrier to building cultural capital (Summers and Buchanan, 2018). Chatman (2001) believes that by raising awareness of these social, educational and cultural norms, these fundamental barriers can be overcome for the greater social good.

Pateman and Vincent's (2010) argument for greater equality within LIS, extends to embracing equality, diversity and multiculturalism. Similarly, respondent 3 felt that inclusive positions on both social and race issues aligns with the overall position on equitable access:

The only position to take is one affirming inclusion, in keeping with the ethos that the library should be a space open and inclusive to everyone regardless of personal characteristics.

Q14 of the survey addressed neutrality in terms of patron access when participants were asked to consider the neutrality of the following politicised actions:

- Allowing access to library bathrooms including to openly transgender patrons.
- Permitting a non-citizen to become a library member.

Both actions received an equal response, with 83% of respondents believing these actions to be neutral and 17% feeling the actions are non-neutral. This reinforces the theme of libraries as democratic institutions, which place importance on cultural diversity, integration and equal access to free public spaces. The importance of inclusivity and equitable access is underlined by Proctor et al. cited in McCahill, Birdi and Jones (2020), where many public library users find that visiting the service helps them in overcoming loneliness and helping to avoid depression.

Equitable access to information was also considered a value of high importance within the research cohort. While free, equal access to information stems from the liberal democratic principles that governing bodies base their ethical guidelines upon, the issue of neutrality within the acquisition, distribution and expression of personal opinions about such information remains hotly debated. From the research responses, it is clear that access to information is considered a vital first step in determining the wider debate on neutrality, which is discussed further in the following section of this article.



Aligned with the concept of cultural capital, Cope (2010) illuminates the role that information literacy plays in creating citizens capable of applying learned information skills in their daily lives while developing an informed, reasoning public that is capable of participating in democratic societies. Simply permitting access is one thing, but supporting and aiding it are seen as vital actions in developing a rationale for this value. Respondent 6 underpins this by emphasising the role of the librarian in aiding the patron to understand the material, not solely having access to it:

I want libraries to improve access to opportunity. That should be underpinned by a wide range of material, and the ability to comprehend the material.

Respondent 1 reaffirms this belief of supporting the patron in understanding material, which stands in conflict to a libertarian approach of freedom of access to information, with non-neutrality led values seen when librarians themselves support and complement material with their own opinions:

It is important that we provide access to information and support literacy in its widest sense, not just being able to read for pleasure.

These responses highlight the importance placed on both access to information and an involvement on the part of the librarian to aid understanding, the latter of which, causing a negation of the neutral stance promoted throughout governing policy.

Conversely, the response offered by respondent 7 to the same question highlights the debate on neutrality:

I want to equip people to understand their own opinion and choices, and have the access to make informed opinions and choices.

Here, the respondent appears to suggest that it is the patron who should be the master of their own destiny, in forming their own, unguided opinions from the wealth of information available to them.

These opposing stances align with the wider debate within the literature which sees the professional preaching of unrestricted access to information juxtaposed with daily non-neutral judgement calls made by librarians regarding collection management, age restrictions and web filters (Cheshire and Stout, 2020). Cope (2010) argues further to the point of information literacy that the educator, or in this case the librarian, should not seek to indoctrinate students or patrons with their particular viewpoints.

## 4.2 Neutrality

In light of the unclear nature of neutrality within LIS as elucidated to in the literature review section, respondents to the current research accentuated the nature of this lack of clarity in their responses on the meaning of neutrality. From the research, it was found that a small majority of respondents saw neutrality through a Foscettian lens, emphasising an importance of objectivity in information provision. This aligns with the idea posited by Foscett insofar that the librarian should disappear as an individual during reference services (Foscett, 1962). By contrast, in Q10, no respondents saw *not taking sides on an issue or lacking bias* as apt descriptions of neutrality, suggesting that there is a space for librarians to take a non-neutral position. This hesitancy is reflected by McMenemy (2007), who underlines a key role for librarians' decision-making process as when to be passive in dealings with the public, and when to be active. Adding further to the sense of murkiness surrounding the term, respondent 2 suggested that all available options "play a part," and respondent 5 that "accepting all opinions and information," best described neutrality.

Furthermore, respondent 4 highlighted the overall ambiguity towards the concept, stating:

I'm not sure. I wouldn't consider it a priority or realistic. Though being objective and lacking bias are important (just not necessarily 'neutral').

The apparent ambiguity of the term seen both through the literature and initial responses from the current research, sits at odds with the apparent importance placed on the issue throughout librarianship governing bodies' codes of conduct and ethical practices. The IFLA guidelines state "neutrality results in the most balanced collection and the most balanced access to information achievable," (IFLA, 2012 p. 4). However, the ALA code of ethics framework calls on librarians to "confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces," (ALA, n.d. [b]). The stated aims from the ALA heavily imply taking a non-neutral stance on certain issues, yet further governing bodies such as CILIP place "impartiality" (CILIP, n.d.) within their ethical principles framework underpinning the IFLA's staunch stance in favour of neutrality of service.

The present study posits that it is as a result of a lack of clarity from the top-down within LIS governance that has led to an apparent gap between public librarians' understanding of neutrality and at times unclear policy positions.

### **4.3 Neutrality on politicised issues**

Despite the apparent conflicts within various codes of practice, the current study concurs that a general overall tendency towards neutrality within LIS practice is observed throughout policy documents. The current study set out to develop an understanding of whether public librarians hold a notably different position regarding political neutrality within LIS when positioned alongside neutrality towards other politicised issues.

Mathiesen (2015) posits the question of whether public libraries should exclude certain kinds of content if it promotes values, such as racism, that the state rejects? The role of the librarian would then face a conflict between the technocratic gatekeeper and neutral identity proposed in much of the neoliberal influenced literature, against a more activist, progressive and civic role identified in literature such as Rawls, (cited in Mathiesen, 2015), whose concept of the social bases of self-respect, posits that for communities to engage in such a dialogue requires more than knowing various facts about others—it requires tolerance, mutual respect, fairness, and civility. It follows that Cope (2010) describes the presentation of neutral content as fact to be in and of itself, a political decision. Conversely, Lor (2016) argues that the notion of library's collections and services being neutral and having "no religion, no politics, no morals" (Lor, 2016, p. 11) can be seen to be an impediment between information and those who need it.

When asked about the importance of maintaining neutrality on the politicised topics of race, gender, class, religion and politics, the current research shows a strong preference towards neutrality on all of the given topics, with little precedent given to the neutrality of a single issue. Responses promoting blanket neutrality were commonplace with respondent 2 and respondent 3 similarly stating "They are all important, impossible to rank," and "All are equally important for neutrality," respectively. Respondent 5 concurred, stating that, "I feel that these areas are all 1st importance."

Respondent 1 rejected class neutrality as important, but underlined the general leaning towards overall neutrality:

They can all be important and depending on the circumstances or project one may be ahead but on another project another may be the drive.

Of the respondents that did rank the topics, race, gender and class were given priority, with both respondents deeming religious and political neutrality as least important in their role as public librarians. Respondent 6 reflected on their decision, stating:

Politics and religion should be respected (to the extent that they respect others) but they are active choices and leave room for discussion.

The research suggests that this shows a willingness to engage with patrons on the issues of religion and politics in an advocacy manner. This may stem from having personal opinions on these topics and as such feel more at ease discussing and defending their own viewpoint.

Feeling comfortable taking a position on such topics with patrons was further discussed in Q16 and Q17 of the present study's survey. The study set out to develop an understanding of whether public librarians' positions on political neutrality differ from those on other forms of neutrality. However, it is the conclusion of the research that the topic on which librarians have a position on regarding neutrality isn't the driver behind the decision, but rather the individual librarians prior experience and knowledge of the particular topic. Respondents 4 and 5 both felt at ease taking positions on social issues with patrons and in their explanations, showed that rather than favouring overall neutrality in public libraries regarding social issues as a norm, the respondents expressed their comfort on this topic due to their backgrounds and experience.

I am reasonably well educated in social issues and have been involved in activism throughout my life both in work and community contexts. I also believe the public library is a part of the community and has a part to play in grass-roots social issues.

Respondent 5 expressed their experience with available resources as a motive for taking a position on social issues with ease:

I would feel more comfortable helping a patron if they had social issues as we have many resources to help with that. We have CAB, homelessness information, mental health information etc.

Furthermore, respondent 7 seemed to confirm this preference by indicating their comfort taking a position on scientific issues with patrons, due to their academic background.

I have a degree in Physics, and have previously held patents on scientific processes, and have had papers and talks published, so it is an area I am knowledgeable about.

To underline this idea, respondents felt uncomfortable taking positions on politicised issues for the same reasons, citing lack of experience or education on the topic and avoiding engagement feeling it is "not my place to say what someone should think or do,".

On the topic of race specifically, respondent 7 replied:

I've not experienced racism, or been discriminated against [sic] based on my race, so I don't think this is something that my opinion SHOULD carry any weight on.

Avoiding engagement on issues such as social justice due to a sense of inadequate experience or relation to the topic may actually harm the promotion of social justice values within a community based on racial lines. Stilwell et al. (2016, p. 95) emphasises this point, stating that "in conditions of social injustice traditional library neutrality is effectively an endorsement of the status quo."

While it is unreasonable to suggest that public librarians be extensively educated and experienced in all of the aforementioned politicised issues, the current research holds the belief that this issue speaks to a wider concern regarding education within LIS training itself. As discussed later in the conclusion, it is clear that a focus on how to engage with patrons on topics that may feel highly personal, subjective and nuanced is required and that this must come in the form of a top-down approach from governing bodies

through accredited LIS courses to librarians themselves. Arming public librarians with the confidence through knowledge and training to engage with all patrons on politicised topics, regardless of academic background or experience, should encourage the avoidance of taking a neutral stance, in particular on issues of social injustice, in order to benefit the community they serve. However, as highlighted by Shockey (2016), the current mandate for higher educational LIS accredited courses leaves little room in learning objectives and curricula for advocacy and social responsibility. He posits that while transmitting core librarianship values like neutrality-grounded intellectual freedom advanced by governing bodies including the ALA and CILIP, they negate the goals of an advocacy driven concept of librarianship.

#### **4.4 Political neutrality**

In order to obtain an understanding of what public librarians understand political neutrality within LIS to be, the current research offered respondents a range of hypothetical situations, focusing on purely political issues. The results show a clear tendency for the respondents to consider acts of advocacy as politically biased.

In keeping with the responses seen so far, the giving of personal opinions, this time regarding local election candidates (Q 15.3), was held to be an exclusively politically biased act. Respondent 1 contested that:

A patron asking your political opinion is a personal matter not a library related one. If asked for a personal opinion, that is what I am giving, not my opinion as a member of staff.

One potential area of conflict arose from the permitting of political parties to use library facilities. On the one hand, allowing political parties with extremist views to use meeting room facilities (Q 15.4) was considered by a high split majority of respondents to be a politically biased action. While on the other hand, using library facilities to hold a public debate between all local election candidates (Q 15.5) was considered politically neutral by almost the same split majority. That which can be considered undemocratic, in this case political parties with extremist views, appears to sit at odds with the underlying democratic principles of public libraries and perhaps gives context to the participants' reasoning.

However, while a public debate including all election candidates may also include those with extremist views, seeing this option as neutral, once again speaks to the tendency to favour a balanced approach to information provision by the research cohort, where one side must not be negated nor given precedence where possible, although it does highlight a point of conflict within this position. Furthermore, not holding materials promoting anti-immigration political policies (Q 15.2) was considered by most respondents to be somewhat politically biased, demonstrating the conflict between undemocratic positions (anti-immigration) and freedom of access to information.

The clearest indication of a tendency towards political neutrality in public libraries was provided by responses to the issue of providing educational or informational programmes before local or general elections within public libraries (Q18). Here the responses fell into two distinct categories; promotion of such a service to aid the public in voting practicalities (where, when, how, etc.) and rejection of such a service for party political promotion.

In favour of the civic act of citizen engagement in politics, respondent 1 suggested that:

If it was an informational programme on registering to vote, [then] yes. The programme for registering to vote affects [us] all.

This was reaffirmed by respondent 5 who stated:

The only thing I would suggest that might be helpful is a leaflet on what you need to do at a polling station for example how many crosses you need to do in your vote.

The concept was taken a step further by respondent 4 who indicated that:

I believe libraries could play a greater role in educating people on civic engagement and democracy.

The promotion of any kind of political bias was soundly rejected by the research cohort as a whole, providing the clearest indication yet of what public librarians understand as political neutrality within LIS. This position was underpinned by respondent 5:

No information on agenda by each party etc. I think this is not acceptable. It is nice to come into an environment where there isn't something being thrown in your face.

This was taken further by respondent 1 when considering how activist recruitment may be aided by such a programme.

If it was a political party wanting to recruit activists, no. The recruiting of activists may lead to offence for other patrons.

While not rejecting the idea of such programmes, respondent 6 succinctly agreed with the previous responses, saying "so long as they're not party political".

The responses give a clear indication that public librarians from within the research cohort understand political neutrality within LIS to be an avoidance of actions which may show favourable leanings to a political ideal, movement or party. Instead, in concurrence with the literature, focusing on its civic duties of providing election information (Bossaller, 2017), engaging citizens with the process of democracy and emphasising their position on promoting equitable access, intellectual freedom (Oltmann, 2017) and public services to their citizenship. While a great body of literature exists debating overall neutrality in public library services, there is limited debate over the specific neutrality shown by public librarians regarding politics and politically influenced topics. The current research findings on public librarians positions on political neutrality, aims to add a nuanced angle to the overall debate on neutrality within LIS.

## **4.5 Left at the door**

"It is important then to distinguish between the neutrality of libraries and the neutrality of librarians." (Bats, 2016 p. 138). As seen in the previous section, as part of their duty as public servants, the research participants aligned with Lionel Maurel (cited in Bats, 2016) in so much that neutrality should be strictly observed and there should be no voicing of political opinions. However, it must also be considered that public servants are citizens too and the obligation of neutrality which is (self) imposed within their workplace does not apply when not acting in that role. Lankes (2008) therefore argues that in order to continue being a trusted member of the community and broker of information, librarians must be up front and honest about prior ethical stances.

With this in mind, the final question asked research participants whether they felt their political beliefs should be 'left at the door' or whether they should be transparent with patrons regarding their political views. The question aimed to identify the relationship between public librarians' personal positions on political neutrality within LIS against those advocated by professional policy codes of ethics.

Responses which suggested transparency of political beliefs as acceptable in some capacity within their role as public librarians all displayed a similar caveat pointing towards the application of this when deemed in opposition to potentially non-democratic views. This was addressed by respondent 7:

I will be transparent on my political views if I think it might be relevant... Otherwise I tend not to vocalise any political views unless they cross over a moral threshold e.g. challenging back to [sic] a

patron who questioned the 'authenticity' of the Scottish people in a photography exhibition because of the colour of their skin.

While respondent 1 felt political beliefs should be left at the door, the idea of 'neutrality up to a point', was again displayed:

I am more likely to not react to views I disagree with - except where someone is displaying hateful or extreme beliefs - than challenge them while at work.

Conversely, respondent 6 felt politics was an issue that public librarians should be free to appropriately discuss with the public, while again repeating the same caveat, "so long as one's beliefs are not intolerant,".

Respondents 3 and 5 were more stringent proprietors of leaving personal political opinions 'at the door'. Respondent 3's concerns lay with the potential damage caused to trust and relationships between patron and librarian, should neutrality be negated:

Being open about personal political ideas to customers could be seen as abuse of a place of trust and power as a professional staff member and could discourage others from using the library space.

Respondent 5 underpinned this idea while underlining their belief of the library's role as a neutral space for patrons:

I think they should be left at the door because it is not my place to tell my opinion to customers about what they should do. This space is a neutral environment.

These positions align with Gibson et al. (2017) in highlighting the potential for tension, isolation and resentment within the workplace that discussing these topics may potentially cause. However, Knowles (2018) suggests that intellectual freedom in libraries can be achieved through active-neutrality which is defined by representing facts and other information without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions

The balancing of the two positions and understanding that perhaps both options can co-exist, was summarised by the response from respondent 4:

I don't think they can be "left at the door". However, I think it is best to avoid campaigning for a particular ideology when one's role is to administer and facilitate access to public space, information and resources. I think challenging opinions is natural and part of the job and social engagement. We should facilitate dialogue.

This outlook aligns with a more nuanced stance on political neutrality within public libraries, one which justifies the divergence between institutional and personal neutrality (Macdonald, 2020). The research previously cited Jensen's (2008) question at the heart of the debate which shouldn't be 'are you political', but rather 'can you defend the conclusion you reach?' The justification from the current research cohort clearly demonstrates that as long as democratic values are upheld, emphasising equity of access to both information and citizenry while rejecting any form of political party favouritism and views that promote hate or discrimination then perhaps a tentative non-neutral political engagement with patrons may be appropriate.

While this outcome may not align entirely with the policy on neutrality from a range of governing bodies, the continuing inconclusivity surrounding the wider debate on neutrality is summed up by Respondents 4 and 5. On the one hand, respondent 5 positions himself strongly towards a neutral service:

I feel we need to stay neutral and not get involved, the public need to make their own mind up and our space is safe for research and learning.

However, respondent 4's position differed:

I am not sure that neutrality is a useful concept in terms of public library services. I don't think the intention of the term is agreed upon. I think concepts such as increasing access and enfranchisement are more important and conversations around these issues can be stifled by the adherence to a principle of neutrality.

This contrasting position on the same issue serves to highlight the continuing conflict within the profession.

## **5 Conclusions**

### **5.1 Clarity of neutrality**

It is clear from both the literature review and the present research that there exists an unsatisfactory definition of the role of neutrality within the governing policy and less so when considering more nuanced angles such as political neutrality as in this research. The use of blanket term neutrality appears to be used in policy as an avoidance of the granular detail that the issue raises and as a result, debate on its implementation in public library services continues to wield unsatisfactory conclusions. This study aimed to further the current debate by addressing the aims set out at the start of the study. Through all of these aims it became clear to the current research that the minutiae of detail that governing policy would have to extend to in order to provide guidance on all forms of neutrality within LIS would be unreasonable and impractical as an expectation. Instead, this study suggests a clarification on the term neutrality and the implementation of a distinction between personal and institutional neutrality between librarians and patrons in an attempt to acknowledge the difficulties caused by ethically conflicting values that neutrality can presuppose.

### **5.2 Librarians and political neutrality**

While the research acknowledges that from the small sample size of data, hard conclusions cannot be drawn, it also considers political neutrality to be an area within the neutrality debate that merits further study. From the literature and data collected by the present research, it would suggest public librarians hold fast to an ideal of neutrality within LIS service. However, it is also noted within the literature and the current research that there exist areas within that service where principles of neutrality can act as a hindrance to providing a comprehensive service to their community.

The research acknowledges that while offering political opinion could be considered conflictive, it suggests that political neutrality within LIS can be considered from a more nuanced perspective. By offering patrons a measured 'open and honest' policy regarding librarians personal political perspectives, it will allow the public a more transparent form of engagement with both the information they seek and the library service as a whole. While the literature and data suggest that some librarians feel public libraries are not the place to engage in political debate, the research data also shows a willingness on the part of public librarians to engage with patrons on politicised issues. The rejection of political intolerance on issues such as race highlights a key area where non-neutral positioning is in keeping with the public library's democratic principles. By promoting political advocacy in the rejection of politics that conflict with the core values of public libraries, they can seek to expand engagement within their communities and widen the debate of political advocacy over neutrality.

The research found that public librarians' stance was mostly in keeping with policy positions on the general themes of neutrality. Librarians' positions on political neutrality did not radically differ from those on other forms of neutrality, with the research showing that non-neutral engagement rests more on the individual

librarians knowledge of and background in the particular subjects being discussed. However, there still appears to be a conflict between personal and institutional neutrality that this study suggests is likely to grow in correlation with the increasing polarisation of politics within the societies that public libraries operate.

The data shows that while there is a reluctance to engage with patrons through personal opinions on political matters, civic duties such as providing practical guidance on how to vote was considered part of the public library's duty of service. The research recommends that policies which completely reject all forms of political advocacy within LIS should be reconsidered, allowing for a duality of personal and institutional perspectives to operate within the governing guidelines.

### **5.3 Education**

A further recommendation that the research proposes, concerns education and training given to librarians through CILIP/ALA accredited MSc courses. As the role of the librarian shifts toward community engagement and civic responsibility, it is imperative that librarians are armed with specific training in the theories and practicalities of such positions. The research study highlights a need, not for librarians to be experts in a variety of fields, but rather, in how to engage with patrons on a personal level regarding often sensitive, politicised issues, particularly those regarding social justice.

The debate surrounding neutrality is dense, complex and this research feels that no satisfactory conclusion will be reached in the near future. Instead, what the present research found is that despite the conflicting views that neutrality provokes within LIS, certain democratic values such as inclusion and tolerance still hold strong within the profession. It also became clear through the research that librarians felt most comfortable engaging with patrons on topics in which they had prior knowledge or experience. With this in mind, the research suggests that MSc courses provide modules on topics such as 'activism in librarianship' and 'libraries and social justice' which would allow for a more flexible approach towards neutrality on a topic that seems to hold a general agreement from the current research cohort to be a cornerstone of the profession.

### **5.4 Scope for future research**

The study acknowledges its own limitations in regard to the locality of the research cohort and the relatively small sample size from which results are drawn. Despite this, the research builds on the existing literature on library neutrality in developing a deeper understanding of political neutrality through specifically a public librarian lens. Future research could look to develop a framework of neutrality built not around an all or nothing concept of neutrality, but rather a more nuanced approach, acknowledging the complexity of neutrality, in particular in relation to social justice issues.

### **5.5 Conclusion**

In light of these findings, public libraries can take steps in acknowledging the need for change regarding neutrality policy within the LIS profession. Public libraries must ensure that they remain as fundamental to community engagement in the future as they are presently and this may involve a radical rethinking on the blanket neutrality public librarians are expected to adhere to across all aspects of service.

The findings suggest that the public library still holds an important place and plays an important role within the community. While it must work to engage with non-users, it must also work closely with users who may feel alienated from the service, in particular those who feel a safe space is being eradicated by an institutional lack of willingness to take a position on issues such as politics, in particular on the extreme fringes, in relation to social justice. It is here where the evolution of long held ideals over neutrality within LIS to mirror a changing global political landscape may be most beneficial.

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