

Image:
Shankar S. [flickr]



Public Libraries, City Planning, and Pluralism: Redefining Library Neutrality

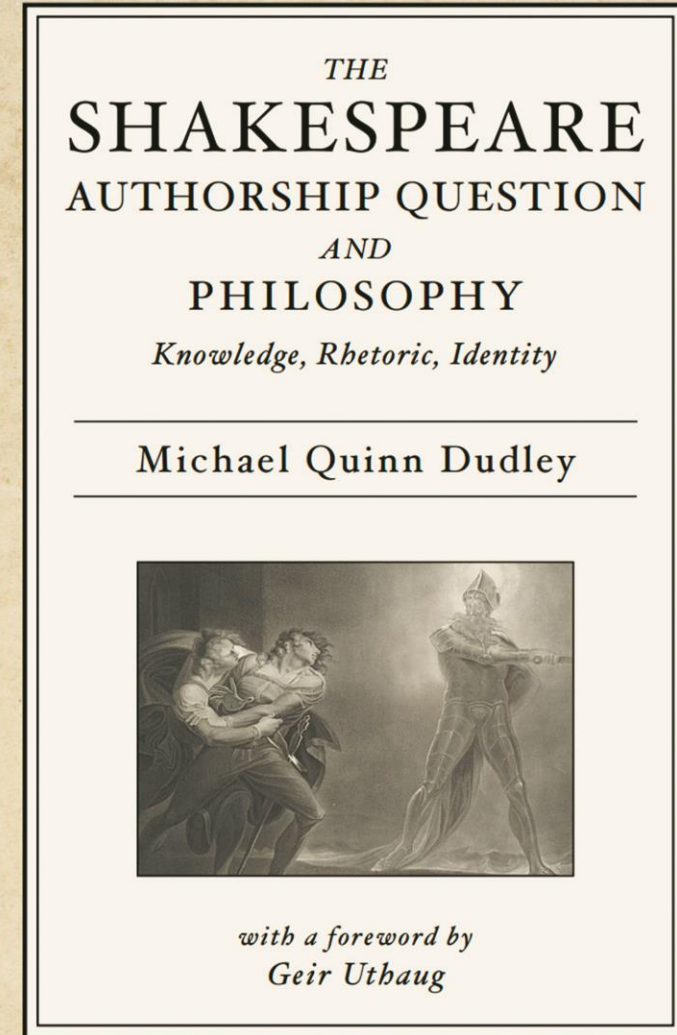
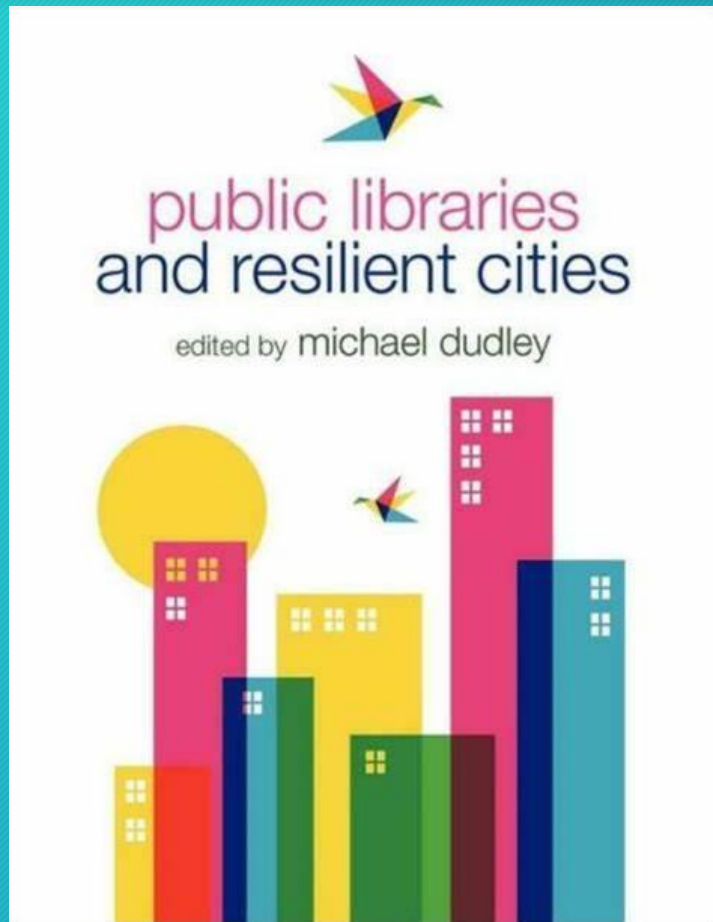
Michael Dudley,
MLIS, MCP
University of Winnipeg

Ex Libris
Association,
May 27th, 2025

About Me

- Edmonton Public Library, 1989-1994 (five service points)
- MLIS, University of Alberta 1993
- Calgary Public Library, 1994-1998 (three service points)
- Masters degree, City Planning, University of Manitoba 2001
- University of Winnipeg, Institute of Urban Studies 2001-2012
- University of Winnipeg Library, 2012-
 - Accessibility, International and Extended Services Librarian (“outreach”)

Publications



**INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM
& PRIVACY** Office for Intellectual Freedom, an office
of the American Library Association

Michael Quinn Dudley, John Wright

Social Justice and Intellectual Freedom

Vol. 7 no. 3 (2022)

Outline

- Ethical contexts for library workers in Canada
- The question of/controversy over library neutrality
- “Wicked problems”, the public interest, and social license
- Book and speaker controversies as librarianship’s “wicked problem”
- External theoretical perspectives on IF/LN: political science and city planning
- “Multidimensional Library Neutrality”

Why City Planning and Librarianship?

- Both are civic-minded place-based professions addressing needs of multiple constituencies;
- Both concerned with managing information and in knowledge production;
- Both are ancient functions but as modern professions date from progressive era of urban reforms in the 19th Century;
- Both originated in aspirations to social engineering;
- Starting in 1960s, both engaged criticism of respective myths: “heroic” planner/“library faith”; claims to expertise.



G. Willow Wilson @gwillow.me · 2mo

First: if it's "easier" to write relatable villains than relatable 'good guys,' that means something and should be considered as an independent question. *Why* have villains become so popular in recent decades? Because they reflect people's lived experiences within a broken system.

💬 15

↻ 369

♡ 2K

...



G. Willow Wilson @gwillow.me · 2mo

First: if it's "easier" to write relatable villains than relatable 'good guys,' that means something and should be considered as an independent question. *Why* have villains become so popular in recent decades? Because they reflect people's lived experiences within a broken system.

💬 15

↻ 369

❤️ 2K

...



G. Willow Wilson @gwillow.me · 2mo

Conversely, why have 'good guys' become so cringe, so unrelatable, so one-note? Bc 'good guys' are historically portrayed as rule-followers. Law-abiders. Both-sides-ers. For the last few decades, that means that the 'good guys' end up defending the same broken system *that produces the villains.*

💬 40

↻ 421

❤️ 2.3K

...



G. Willow Wilson @gwillow.me · 2mo

If you want to write heroes in the year 2025, you have to decide what they stand for, and then stand for it. The mealy-mouthed, offend-no-one approach no longer works. People respond to the Walter Whites bc you can put truth in their mouths. So put truth in the mouths of the good guys.

💬 41

↻ 797

♡ 3.6K





G. Willow Wilson @gwillow.me · 2mo

If you want to write heroes in the year 2025, you have to decide what they stand for, and then stand for it. The mealy-mouthed, offend-no-one approach no longer works. People respond to the Walter Whites bc you can put truth in their mouths. So put truth in the mouths of the good guys.

💬 41

↻ 797

♡ 3.6K



G. Willow Wilson @gwillow.me · 2mo

This is easier said than done, btw, because the default position in US culture is still that a hero is someone who doesn't offend anybody, who isn't political, and whose ideals are conveniently abstract. No one thanks you for writing a hero with opinions. Ask me how I know.

💬 41

↻ 202

♡ 2K



Ethical Contexts

CFLA-FCAB Code of Ethics (2012/2018)

5. Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills

- Librarians and other information workers are strictly committed to neutrality and an unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service. **Neutrality results in the most balanced collection** and the most balanced access to information achievable.
- Librarians and other information workers **distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties**. They **do not advance private interests or personal beliefs** at the expense of neutrality.
- Librarians and other information workers have the right to free speech in the workplace **provided it does not infringe the principle of neutrality towards users**.

ALA's Code of Ethics

- We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.
- 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.

CFLA vs. ALA: Some Observations

- Both urge workers to distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties
- Both speak of responsibilities to society

But...

- CFLA includes word *neutrality*; ALA does not
- ALA includes phrase *intellectual freedom*; CFLA does not
 - CFLA has separate *Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries*, referring to IF as a “universal principle.”

ALA Code of Ethics (#9 added 2021)

9. We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; 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.



Neutrality as a concept exists in the profession as a discourse, rather than something actually codified.

ALA's Code of Ethic #9 openly exhorts library workers to be social and political activists.

Questioning Neutrality

- Debate over David Berninghausen's 1972 argument that commitments to "social responsibility" exceed our professional scope.
- Ann Sparanese (2008): "Should librarianship become involved in the great issues of the day, or remain a profession aloof in the abstract world that thinks of intellectual freedom in the most idealized, purist (sic) fashion?"
- Anita Brooks Kirkland (2021): Neutrality is a "radical act"
- ALA (2021): "Neutrality has upheld and supported white supremacy and fascism."

QUESTIONING LIBRARY NEUTRALITY

ESSAYS FROM PROGRESSIVE LIBRARIAN
EDITED BY ALISON LEWIS



Related but Distinct Concepts

Freedom of Speech/Expression:

From *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*:
"the rights of communicators to send and receive messages and actions that inhibit those rights."

Intellectual Freedom:

From the *Encyclopedia of Communication and Information* [Vol. 2.]: "A climate of intellectual freedom is one where any individual may express any belief or opinion regardless of the viewpoint or belief of any other individual, organization, or governmental entity."

Neutrality and Intellectual Freedom



Intellectual freedom is exercised by the individual library user while...



neutrality is the stance adopted by the library as a government-funded institution *to facilitate that freedom*, to the extent desired by that individual.

“Wicked Problems”, the Public Interest, and Social License

Wicked Problems

(Rittel & Webber 1972)

- Resist simple formulations -- has no single cause
- Are symptoms of other problems - e.g., homelessness
- No “stopping rule” - can never say they’re resolved
- Every intervention counts - changes underlying conditions
- Every problem is unique
- Answers not a matter of true or false, but better or worse
- Planner has no 'right to be wrong'
- A “plurality of objectives held by pluralities of politics makes it impossible to pursue unitary aims” (160).

The “Public Good” vs. Public Interest

(Harper & Stein 2006; Sandercock 1998)

- Difficult to address “wicked” problems to everyone’s satisfaction
 - Each community constituency will have its own aspirations and values
- No unitary “public good,” but there is a public *interest* in maintaining democratic processes
- Planners’ [librarians’] obligations to multiple publics - a heterogeneous public.

Social License

(Margeson 2023).

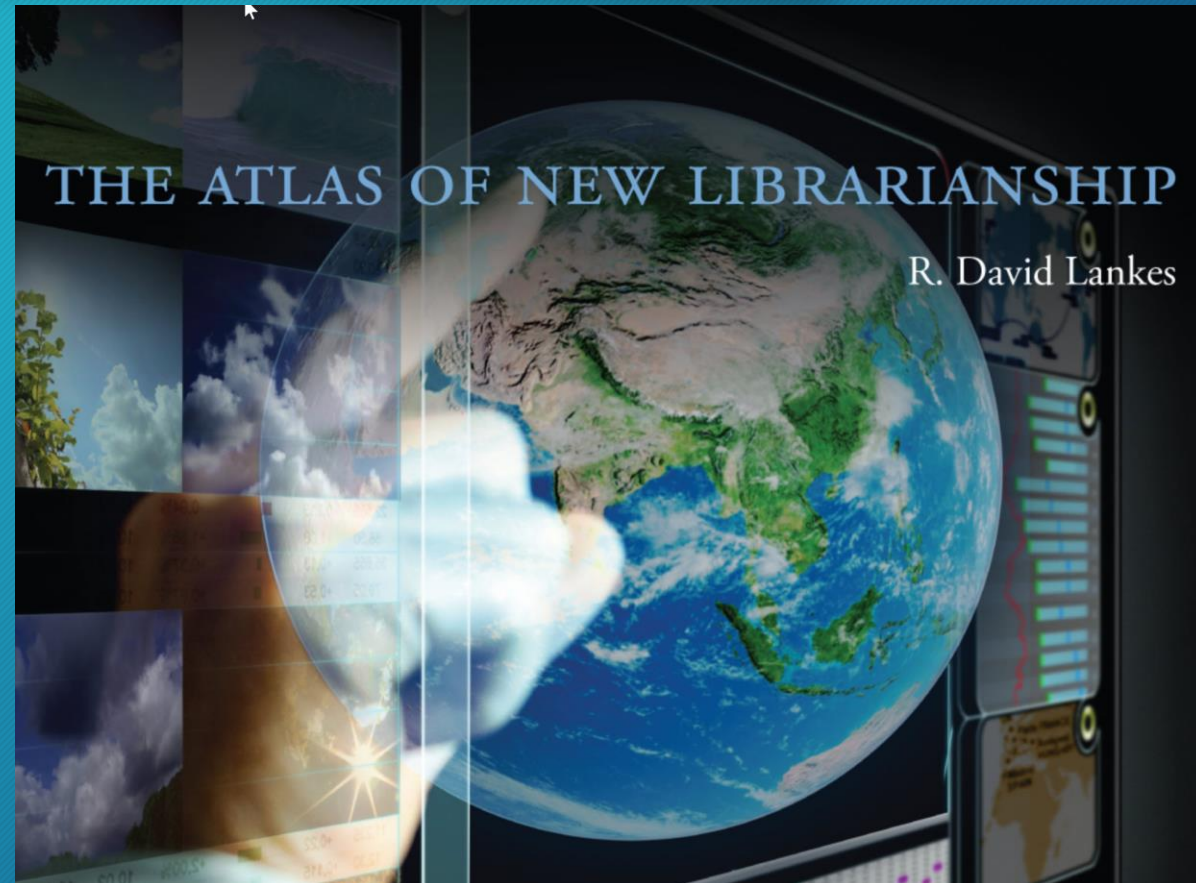
...“an informal contract between public or private organizations or the government that begins with **public acceptance** and must be sustained based on **communities’ trust** in the legitimacy, credibility, effectiveness, and fairness” of that institution and its activities.

Librarianship and planning both operate within the bounds of their respective “social licenses”—the scopes of which are quite different

The Rhetoric of Intervention in LIS

(Lankes 2011)

- Librarians taking the lead on “improv[ing] society through action”
- “Change the community and society for the better;” to “bring about change;”
- Teaching librarians “how to plot and scheme, cajole and convince. How to map power and gain power to put behind a vision...”
- “Library school should be [] a caldron and training ground for activists and radicals.”



A Wicked Problem: Public Libraries and the Culture War

Image: DeepAI Image Generator





Image: Stephen Melkisetian [flickr]

Controversial Events

Ideological shift: Prior to 2022, majority of challenges from progressive left (e.g., *Irreversible Damage*); now leaning more conservative.

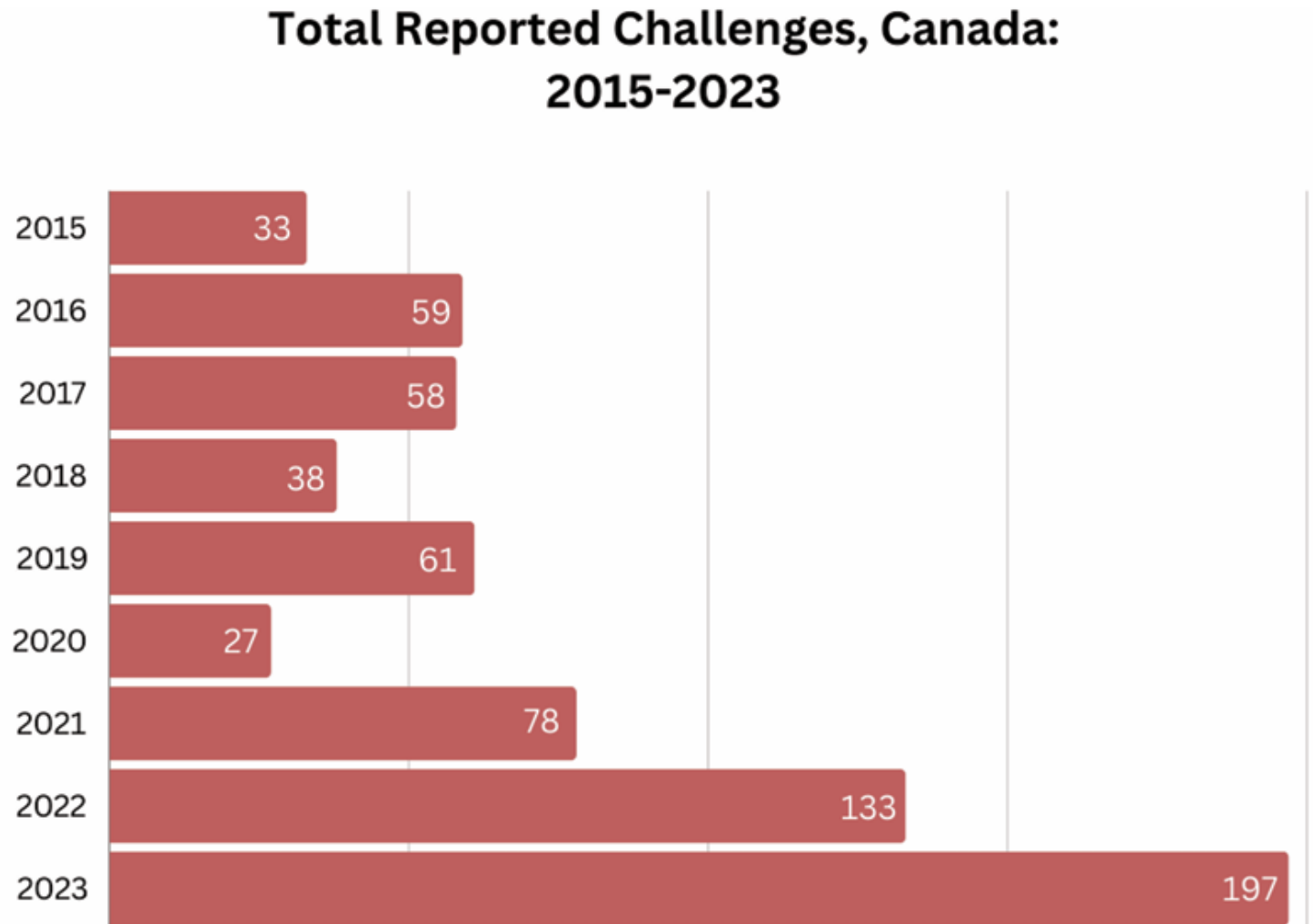


Figure 2: Total reported challenges to library resources in Canada, 2015-2023

Nyby, M. J., & Ellis, R. H. (2024). A Confluence of Trends in Library Censorship. *The Political Librarian*, 7(2).

Challenges in US Libraries - ALA OIF

- *The 2024 data...shows that the majority of book censorship attempts are now originating from organized movements. Pressure groups ...initiated **72% of demands to censor books in school and public libraries**. Parents only accounted for 16% of demands to censor books, while 5% of challenges were brought by individual library users.*
- *ALA recorded **attempts to remove 2,452 unique titles in 2024**, which significantly exceeds the average of 273 unique titles that were challenged annually during 2001–2020.*



- More organized campaigns -- Influence of reactionary movements in U.S.
- Increase in *rate* of challenges but a large *decrease* in unique titles.
- List of titles in Canada mirroring those challenged in U.S.

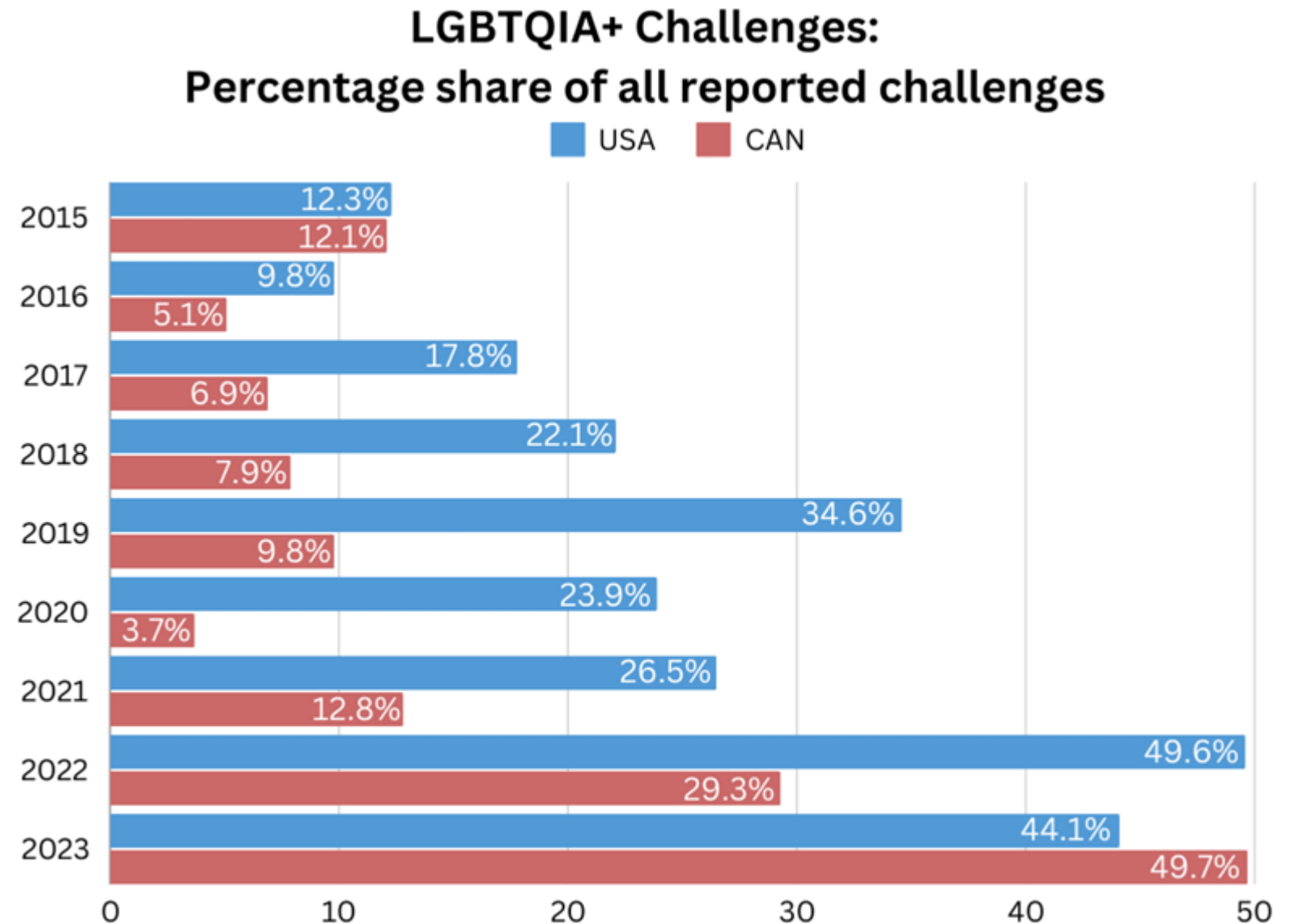


Figure 4: Comparison of incidence rates of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources.

Nyby, M. J., & Ellis, R. H. (2024). A Confluence of Trends in Library Censorship. *The Political Librarian*, 7(2).

Is Library Neutrality an “Abstract Ideal”?

As a Natural Right (Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, 1791)

Natural rights are those which appertain to men in right of his existence. Of this kind are all the intellectual rights, or rights of the mind...



Photo: Matt Brown, Thomas Paine Statue [flickr] [CC BY 2.0 Creative Commons License](#).

As a Civil Right (Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, 1791)

[civil rights are the aggregate of those] natural rights...which becomes defective in the individual in point of power...



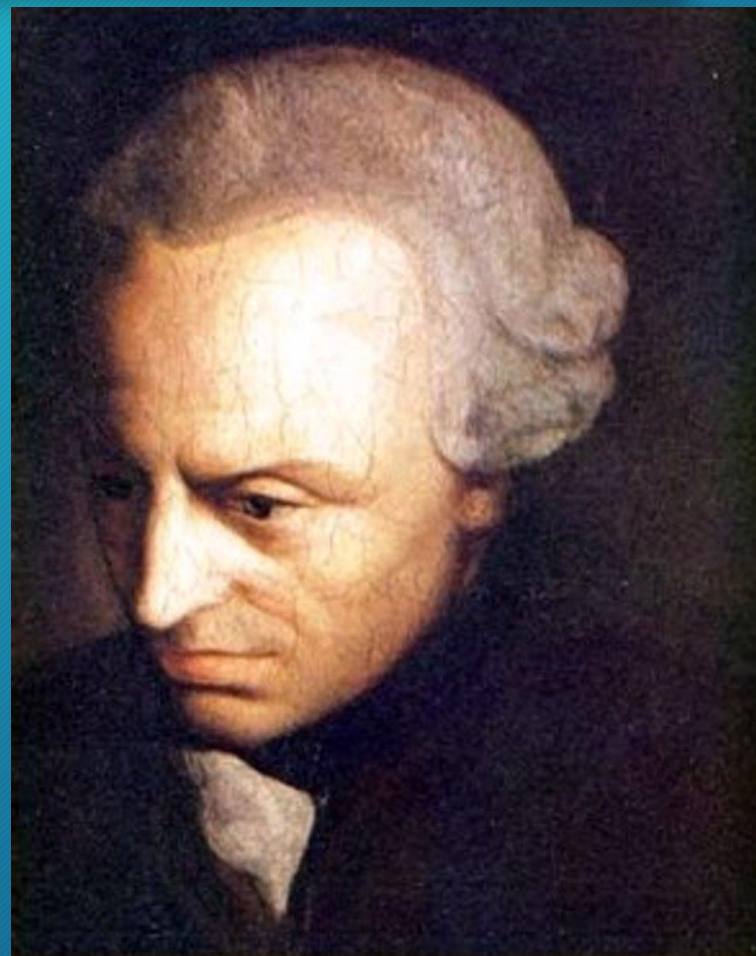
Photo: Matt Brown, Thomas Paine Statue [flickr] [CC BY 2.0 Creative Commons License](#).

Ethical: Kant's "Categorical Imperative"

Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)

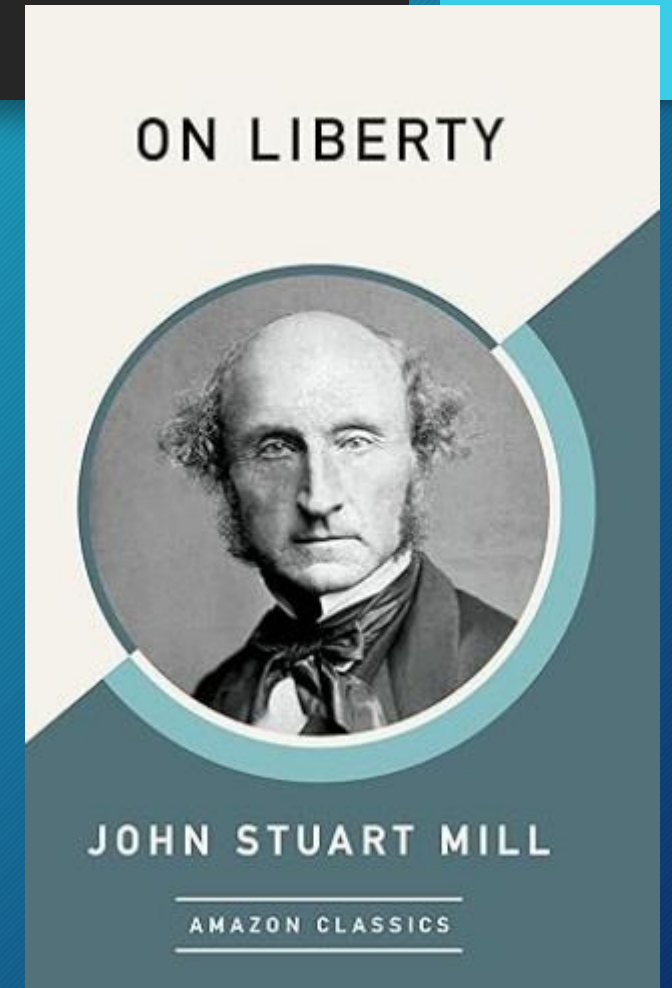
Treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.

Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.



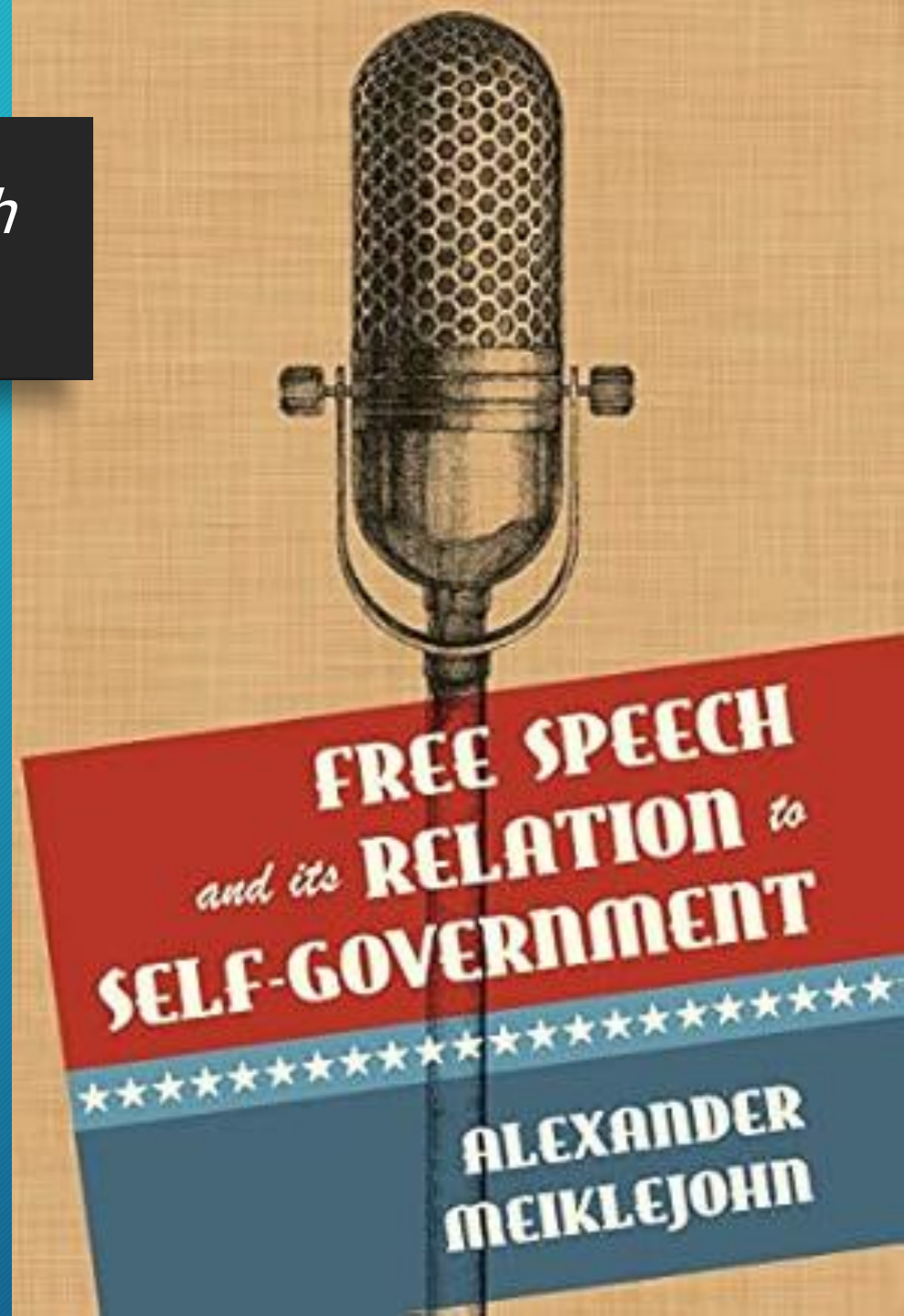
Instrumental: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

1. Suppression of a true idea “deprive[s] humanity of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth.”
2. Suppression of a false idea causes humanity to lose “the clearer perception...of truth produced by its collision with error.”
3. Minority opinions are “needed to supply the remainder of the truth of which the received doctrine embodies only a part.”
4. If ideas are not challenged (if free debate is prevented), true claims tend to weaken.



Democratic: Alexander Meiklejohn, *Free Speech and its Relation to Self-Government* (1948)

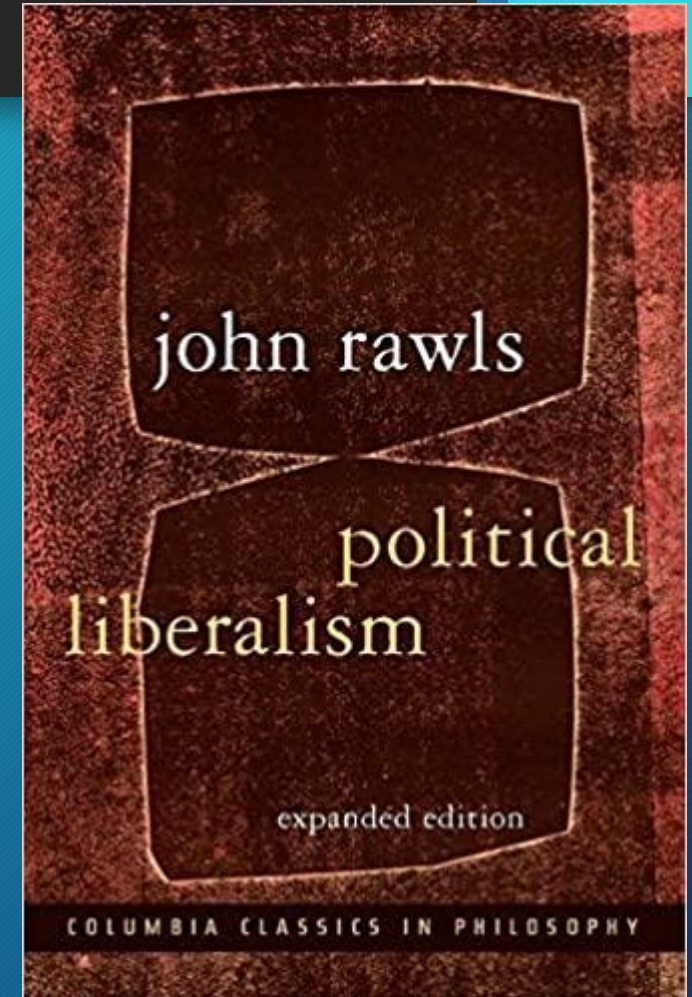
- Value of First Amendment for self-governance, an informed citizenry - the “Electoral Branch” of government
- Primarily concerned with political ideas, rather than on the unfettered right of people to talk
- Emphasized the importance of free speech to the hearer/reader, rather than the speaker/writer



Conflict Resolution: Political Liberalism

(Rawls 1993)

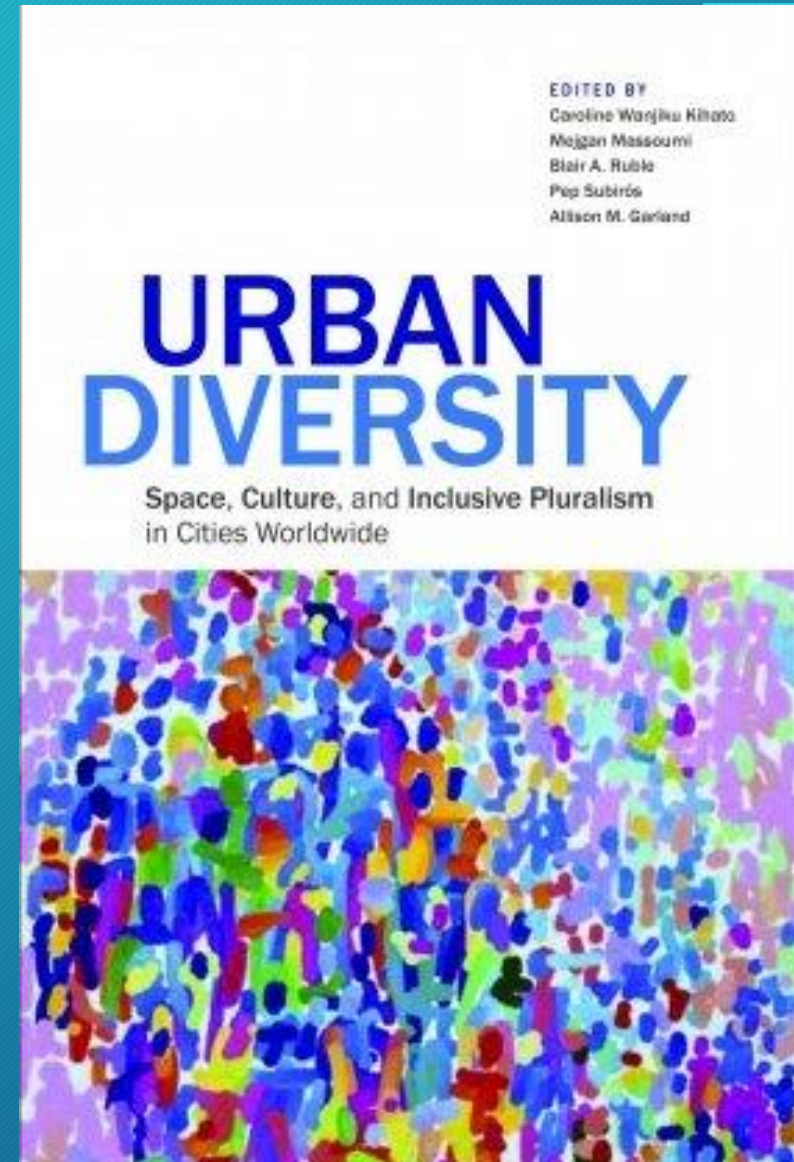
- There are many different “conceptions of the good” / “Comprehensive doctrines” in a multicultural society...
- No single “comprehensive doctrine” should be imposed on a liberal democratic society (e.g., Establishment Clause in U.S. Constitution)
- Instead, politically liberal societies emphasize “thin” theories of *process*: individual liberty, freedom of conscience, speech, expression, etc.



To Summarize...

- 1.) We are all born with the Natural Right to intellectual freedom (Paine) as a “negative liberty” (Berlin), but this may only be fulfilled as..
- 2.) a Civil Right (*or “positive liberty”*) (Paine/Berlin) to access the public library, whose employees are....
- 3.) ethically committed to viewing library users as autonomous agents (or ends) unto themselves (Kant) and in a neutral fashion granting users the ability to...
- 4.) discern truth from falsehood by being exposed to as wide a range of viewpoints as possible (*intellectual freedom*) (Mill), and thus be better able to...
- 5.) contribute to public decision-making and democratic governance (Meiklejohn) including...
- 6.) resolving conflict through respect for procedural liberalism and the rights of others to their own beliefs (Rawls).

Context for Library Neutrality

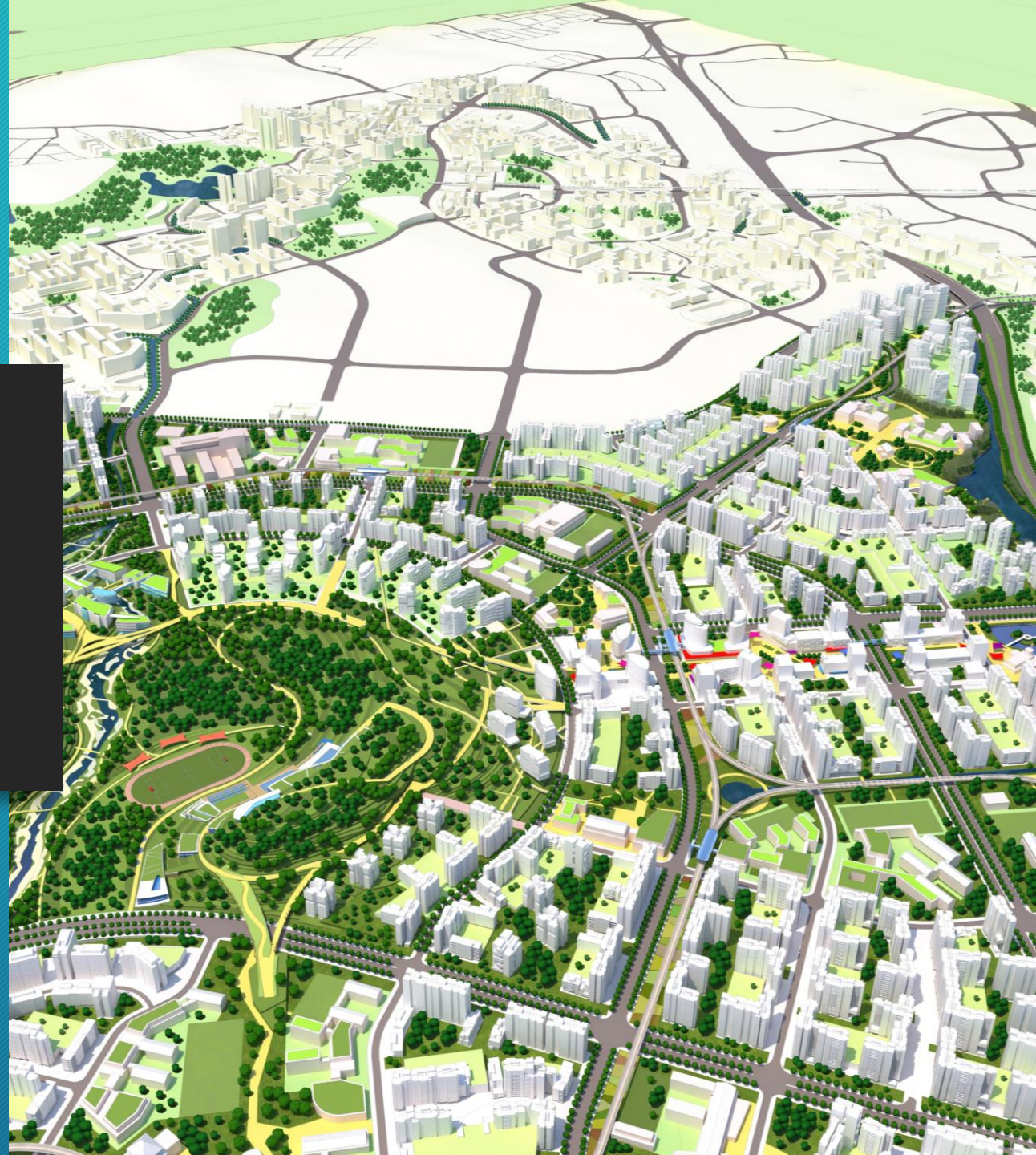


Pluralism

(Ravitch 1990)

- *Difference* within the context of *universalism*:
 - The freedom to hold a wide range of beliefs and social/cultural practices, but within the context of a shared polity (e.g., “we’re all Canadians”)
 - Similar to Rawlsian “political liberalism” - working to create a shared culture in which we can all get along and solve problems democratically

Perspective: City Planning



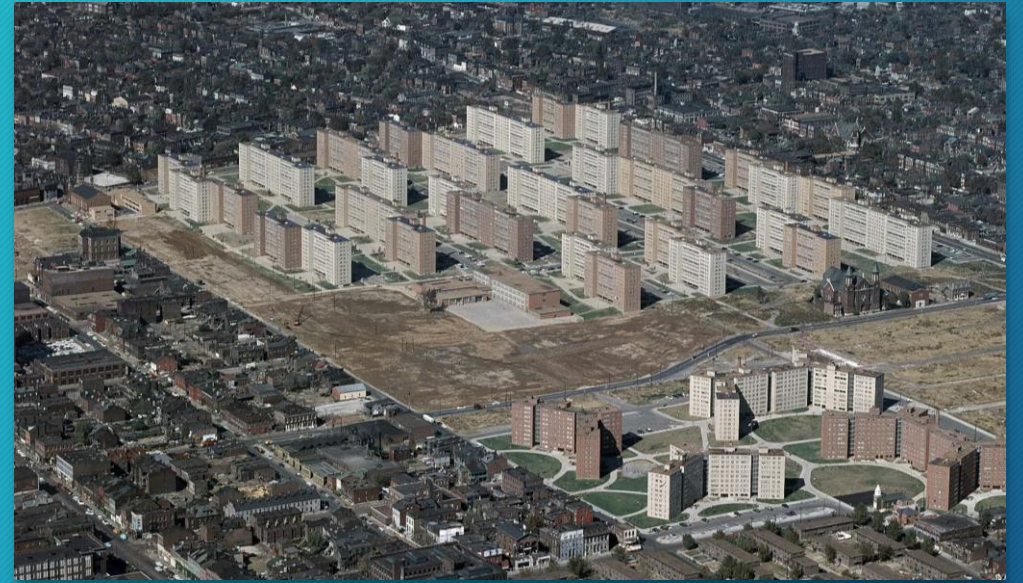
What Do Different City Planning Models Reveal About Practitioner Neutrality?

Modern Planning movements (1945 -)

- Rational Comprehensive Planning Model (RCPM) (1945+) (*“planning for”*)
- Advocacy Planning (1965+) (*“planning with”*)
- Radical Planning (1973+) (*“planning by”*)
- Collaborative/transactional Planning (1993+) (*“planning together”*)

Rational Comprehensive Planning (1945+) (Planning *for*...)

- All problems can be solved scientifically
- Only facts matter
- All knowledge is empirical
- Complete knowledge is possible
- Citizen input not sought, would interfere with planner's vision
- Values irrelevant



Value Neutrality 1 (VN 1)

(Rational Comprehensive Planning)

- Values play no role in process;
- The practitioner is purely objective and separate from the object of study;
- only positivist, empirical facts matter;
- Practitioner's own values will have no bearing on the analysis at hand.

Advocacy Planning (1965+)

(Planning *with*...)

- Planning process viewed as legal venue
- ...which depends on informed, active citizens
- Activist stance -- planner abandons formal neutrality, represents plurality of interests, ties values to those of clients
- Awareness that the processes involved in planning commissions will not always be neutral



Radical Planning (1973+)

(Planning *by...*)

- Impatience with even-handedness of Advocacy, unable to sufficiently advance social justice
- Community is the planner, the planner is the “hired gun”
- Community’s values are the planner’s values

INSURGENCIES: ESSAYS IN PLANNING THEORY

JOHN FRIEDMANN



RTPI

mediation of space · making of place



Critiques of Radical Planning

The planner should ideally not be “an advocate of the interests or positions of one particular community or group. Rather, the planner seeks to democratize the planning process, to open it up to everyone, to make information freely available, to encourage all voices to speak” (p. 146)

Otherwise, there is the risk of being absorbed by community's goals, and the planner (or librarian) unable to mediate community conflict

Dialogical Planning in a Fragmented Society

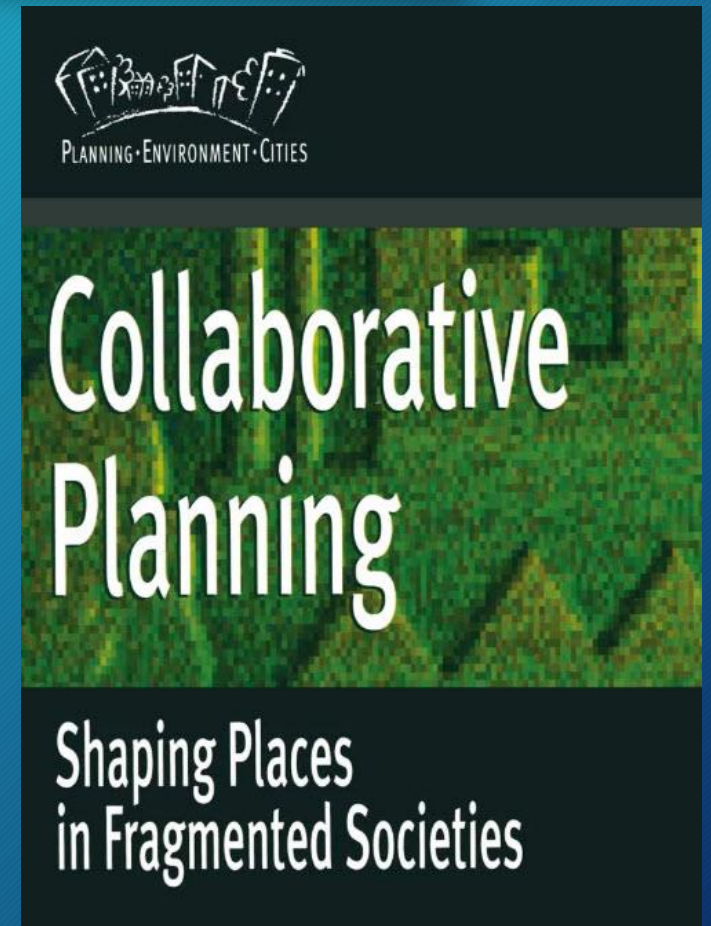
- Critically Liberal
- Pragmatic
- Incremental

THOMAS L. HARPER
STANLEY M. STEIN

Collaborative/Transactional Planning (1993+)

(Planning *together*...)

- Planner as facilitator
- “Making sense together while living differently” (Forester 1989, 118)
- Planner doesn’t impose personal values, but mediates competing interests
- Seeks consensus: Future *seeking*, rather than future *defining*
- Emphasizes process over outcomes
- Values omnipresent



Value Neutrality 2 (VN2)

(Collaborative/Transactional Planning)

Beliefs:

- All processes in the public domain are value-laden;
- The practitioner is not value-neutral;
- Decisions related to information to be included and excluded based on values;
- Stakeholders all represent a plurality of value systems;
- Public institutions should not adopt or impose a single ideological lens
- The practitioner's values (or those of one stakeholder group) should not be imposed on other stakeholders.

Neutrality...

- Regarding what?
- Towards whom?
- In what way?
- To what end?

Neutrality...

- Regarding what? (Values)
- Towards whom? (Stakeholders)
- In what way? (Processes)
- To what end? (Goals)

Multidimensional Model of Neutrality

(Dudley & Wright 2022; after Emran 2015)

- Four interrelated dimensions:
 - **Values:** not imposing one's values (or those of any stakeholder group) on library users (to exercise their intellectual freedom);
 - **Stakeholders:** providing all stakeholders equal opportunity to access collections and services, (recognizing that not all start from the same position of advantage or capacity);
 - **Processes:** applying transparent policies fairly for those stakeholders; and
 - **Goals:** allowing users the autonomy (i.e., intellectual freedom) to use library resources to pursue their own goals.

Clarifying Value Neutrality

Huge difference between:

- *presumption* that the institution and practitioner are value-free (VN1- Rational Comprehensive) and
- *ethical recognition* that the institution is value-laden *and a commitment* that one's own values should not be imposed on stakeholders (VN2 - Collaborative/Transactional)

Most criticism in LIS mistakes the latter for the former

Modes of Planning and Neutrality

	Value Neutrality	Stakeholder Neutrality	Process Neutrality	Goal Neutrality
Rational Planning	Yes - VN1	No (N/A)	No	No
Advocacy Planning	No	No	Yes	No
Radical Planning	<i>Ideally</i> VN 2; often No	No	No	No
Collaborative Planning	Yes - VN2	Yes	Yes	Yes

Towards “Dialogical Librarianship”?

Dialogical Planning in a Fragmented Society

- Critically Liberal
- Pragmatic
- Incremental

**THOMAS L. HARPER
STANLEY M. STEIN**

Dialogical Librarianship

- **Critically liberal**
 - Centrality of the autonomous individual *but* within the context of community
 - Awareness of structural inequalities, the need to empower some stakeholders
- **Procedurally Liberal**
 - Eschewing imposing “comprehensive doctrines”
- **Dialogic**
 - Ethical dialogue premised on mutual stakeholder relationships and trust

Dialogical Planning in a Fragmented Society

- Critically Liberal
- Pragmatic
- Incremental

THOMAS L. HARPER
STANLEY M. STEIN

Dialogical Librarianship

- **Pragmatic**
 - Focus on what works, rather than models or theories
 - Make use elements of theories that prove useful in specific contexts
- **Incremental**
 - “The only possible justification for planning in a postmodern society is an incremental one. The alternative paths to change—coercion and conversion—are not legitimate” (145)

Dialogical Planning in a Fragmented Society

- Critically Liberal
- Pragmatic
- Incremental

THOMAS L. HARPER
STANLEY M. STEIN

Applying 4D Neutrality Model to ALA Code of Ethics #9

Rewriting the ALA Code of Ethics #9

We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and **dismantle systemic and individual biases**; 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.

Rewriting the ALA Code of Ethics #9

We affirm the inherent dignity and *autonomy* of all library users (**Stakeholder Neutrality**), and each user's *right to access the collections* and services of the library for their own purposes (**Goal Neutrality**). We work to recognize and *dismantle potential barriers to access [which are created by “wicked” social problems—(Critical Liberalism)]* that may be experienced by members in our communities as a result of their experiences of socioeconomic status, race, sex, ability etc. We work to advance structures and processes that *strengthen our profession and our institutions' abilities* to provide all with opportunity for knowledge, education, participation and dialogue (**Process Neutrality**), through advocacy, instruction, collaboration, services and equitable allocation of resources and spaces (**Value Neutrality 2**).

Conclusion

Library neutrality is not an abstract
ideal but premised in foundational
political science thought



Library neutrality as a value is not an
assertion *about what exists*

It is a commitment to an *ethical
process* consistent with *politically
liberal* democracy.

“Dialogical Librarianship”

Would:

- Recognize the “wickedness” of socio-political problems (Critical Liberalism)
- Recognize professional boundaries and competencies
- Recognize the limits of our social license
- Affirm the process over the outcome - be “future seeking” (Political/Procedural Liberalism)

“Dialogical Librarianship”

Be:

- Pluralist, inclusive of diversity of views and “comprehensive doctrines”
- Facilitative, communicative, transparent and welcoming
- Incrementalist, iterative
- Oriented to long-term solutions by maintaining/preserving robust institutions/community resource, rather than responding to short-term goals or single-issue crises

Thank you!
Questions? Comments?
Please contact us:

m.dudley@uwinnipeg.ca

Sources and Further Reading

Berlin, I., Hardy, H., & Harris, I. (2002). *Liberty : incorporating four essays on liberty*. Oxford University Press.

Berninghausen, D. (1972). Antithesis in Librarianship: Social Responsibility vs. The Library Bill of Rights. *Library journal*.

Dudley, M. Q., & Wright, J. (2023). The Role of Multidimensional Library Neutrality in Advancing Social Justice: Adapting Theoretical Foundations from Political Science to Library Planning. *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy*, 7(3), 13-24.

Emran, Shahram Ahmadi Nasab. (2015). The Four-principle formulation of common morality is at the core of bioethics mediation method. *Medicine, Health Care and Ethical Issues European Journal*, 18(3), 371–377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-014-9612-7>

Forester, J. (1989). *Planning in the face of power*. University of California Press.

Friedmann, J. (1987). *Planning in the public domain: From knowledge to action*. Princeton University Press.

Gardner, G. J. (2022). Intellectual freedom and alternative priorities in library and information science research: a longitudinal study. *Ifla Journal*, (20220111). <https://doi.org/10.1177/03400352211061176>

Gerolami, N. (2020). No faith in the library: challenging secularism and neutrality in librarianship. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 43(2), 172–188.

Sources and Further Reading

Harper, T. & Stein, S. (2006). Dialogical planning in a fragmented society: Critically liberal, pragmatic, incremental. CUPR/Transaction.

Healy, P. (1997). Collaborative planning : shaping places in fragmented societies. UBC Press.

Kant, I., Wood, A. W., & Schneewind, J. B. (2002). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*. Yale University Press.

Kirkland, Anita Brooks. (2021). “[*Library Neutrality as Radical Practice*](#)” *Canadian School Libraries Journal* November 8th 2021. Meiklejohn, A. (1948). *Free speech and its relation to self-government* ([1st ed.]). Harper.

Lankes, R. D. (2019). *The Atlas of New Librarianship*. The MIT Press.

Margeson, Keahna. “Social License, What is it and why does it matter?” *OpenThink*. Dalhousie University June 2nd 2023.

Mill, J. S. (2011). On liberty. Andrews UK. Sparanese, A. (2008). Activist librarianship: Heritage or heresy. *Questioning library neutrality: Essays from progressive librarian*, 67(82), 67-82.

Nyby, M. J., & Ellis, R. H. (2024). A Confluence of Trends in Library Censorship. *The Political Librarian*, 7(2).

Paine, T. (2017). Rights of Man. In Academic Search Complete. Great Neck Publishing.

Ravitch, D. (1990). Multiculturalism: E pluribus plures. *The American Scholar*, 59(3), 337-354.

Sources and Further Reading

Rawls, J. (1993). *Political liberalism* (Ser. The John Dewey essays in philosophy, no. 4). Columbia University Press.

Sandercock, L. (1998). *Towards cosmopolis: Planning for multicultural cities*. Wiley.

Wenzler, J. (2019). Neutrality and its discontents: an essay on the ethics of librarianship. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 19(1), 55–78.