Foucault, the “Facts,” and the Fiction of Neutrality: Neutrality in Librarianship and Peer Review

Heidi R. Johnson

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss neutrality within the contexts of librarianship in general and of peer review, which is of more concern to librarians who are developing expertise in the area of scholarly communication. To frame the analysis of neutrality, I first turn to Foucault’s theory on how bodies are disciplined and Latour and Woolgar’s theory on how scientific facts are constructed, which suggest that complete neutrality is never possible for human beings. Then I present the historical debate in library and information science that also suggests that neutrality in the context of library services is impossible. Moreover, neutrality as a goal is counterproductive, because it is opposed to the social justice orientation that is necessary to fulfill the overarching goal of librarianship: access to information for all people. Within the context of peer review, I suggest that neutrality may be an effective goal in terms of producing new knowledge, but that peer review, too, can never be completely neutral. Ultimately, neutrality may be helpful from a pragmatic standpoint but is problematic as an ethical principle and can never be possible completely. Examining neutrality within these two different contexts in librarianship helps to clarify the meanings and applications of neutrality as well as its limitations. The paper makes some recommendations for how to approach these understandings and applications.

Keywords: Foucault · Latour · neutrality · peer review · scholarly communication · science

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, je traite de la neutralité dans les contextes de la bibliothéconomie en général et de l’évaluation par les pairs, un contexte d’intérêt pour les bibliothécaires qui développent une expertise dans le domaine de la communication savante. Comme cadre d’analyse de la neutralité, je me réfère d’abord à la théorie de Foucault portant sur la façon dont les corps sont disciplinés ainsi qu’à la théorie de Latour et Woolgar portant sur la façon dont les faits scientifiques sont construits, ce qui suggère qu’une complète neutralité n’est jamais possible pour les êtres humains. Ensuite, je présente le débat historique en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l’information qui suggère également que la neutralité dans le contexte des services des bibliothèques est impossible. Par ailleurs, avoir la neutralité pour objectif est contre-productif, car celle-ci est contraire à l’orientation de justice

sociale nécessaire à l'atteinte de l'objectif fondamental que se fixe la bibliothéconomie : l'accès à l'information pour tous. Dans le contexte d'évaluation par les pairs, je suggère que la neutralité peut être un objectif efficace quant à la production de connaissances nouvelles, mais que cette évaluation par les pairs ne peut jamais être complètement neutre, elle non plus. Enfin, la neutralité peut être utile d'un point de vue pragmatique, mais elle pose problème en tant que principe éthique et ne peut jamais être complètement possible. Un examen de la neutralité dans ces deux contextes différents en bibliothéconomie aide à clarifier les significations et les applications de la neutralité ainsi que ses limites. L'article propose des recommandations sur la façon d'aborder ces interprétations et applications.

Mots-clés : Foucault · Latour · communication savante · évaluation par les pairs · neutralité · science

LIBRARY and information science (LIS) professionals have debated whether neutrality is really possible, and if so, whether librarians should adhere to neutrality as an ethical principle. In this paper, I begin by presenting Foucault's ideas on the discipline of bodies and Latour and Woolgar's theory of the construction of scientific facts, which show that human beings are always influenced by social factors and thus not free from bias. This suggests that neutrality is never completely possible. Then I introduce the LIS debate about neutrality, which presents an opposition between neutrality and social justice in library services. In the final section, I draw upon Foucault's and Latour and Woolgar's theories to discuss peer review, a process in which reviewers are expected to be neutral or impartial judges of manuscripts. Looking at a sample of literature about peer review, I ask the question: Can peer review be neutral, and if so, should it be neutral? This question is important for librarianship, because if neutrality is useful in certain contexts, then it should not be rejected wholesale.

To begin, important terms must be defined. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers many definitions of neutrality. The most relevant for this discussion is "the state or condition of not being on any side; absence of decided views, feeling, or expression; indifference; impartiality, dispassionateness." There is a second definition that is also relevant for librarianship: "an intermediate state or condition, not clearly one thing or another; a neutral position, middle ground." The phrase "not clearly one thing or another" is key, for it connotes that a neutral position is a vague or ill-defined position.

For my purposes in this paper, *neutrality* essentially means not having a position or not taking a side, or rather, not clearly or explicitly taking a side. Not favouring a particular side over any other can also imply that all sides are equally represented or favoured.

Closely related to neutrality, *impartiality* is defined, for the purposes outlined in this paper, as “the quality or character of being impartial; freedom from prejudice or bias; fairness.” While neutrality refers to not having a position, or being “in the middle,” impartiality refers to freedom from bias. A person who has no bias would presumably also not have a position, for occupying a particular position involves favouring a particular side—the definition of bias.

In order to fully understand the definition of impartiality, however, the word *impartial* must also be defined. Impartial is defined as “not partial; not favouring one party or side more than another; unprejudiced, unbiased, fair, just, equitable. (Of persons, their conduct, etc.).” The connection to neutrality is clearer here. Both words refer to the absence of favour for any particular side. In addition, impartial means *just* or *equitable*. Rather than having moral connotations, “just, equitable” in this definition presumably means appropriate, correct, or fair. Thus the definition of impartiality involves not only not having a position or favouring a side, but also being just and equitable, because one is treating all parties involved in the same way.

Neutrality and impartiality have been central to the profession of librarianship; they have formed the theoretical foundation for forbidding censorship and protecting patrons’ ability to choose the materials that they access. This becomes more apparent upon examining librarians’ ethical codes. Neutrality is explicitly addressed in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) *Code of Ethics* (2012) under heading 5, “Neutrality, personal integrity, and professional skills.” The IFLA *Code of Ethics* states:

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.

Thus, librarians’ international code of ethics focuses on how librarians must be neutral when providing services, especially when managing and building the collection and facilitating access to that collection.

In that same section, under heading 5, the IFLA *Code of Ethics* also states: “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.” Thus, one must not fulfill one’s private interests if it means providing services for which neutrality is compromised or that reflect bias. Censorship is one activity that violates the principle of neutrality; censorship is almost always carried out on the basis of one’s personal convictions, negatively affecting patrons’ freedoms and violating their rights.

The ALA *Library Bill of Rights* (1996) is explicit about such violations. The first tenet states: "I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation." Thus, judgments about authors or contributors should not affect collections decisions.

Similarly, neutrality is also reflected in the ALA *Library Bill of Rights*, where it states: "II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval." This is consistent with the principle of neutrality: not having or pushing a particular position but instead representing all points of view on current and historical issues.

Finally, neutrality is not named explicitly in the ALA *Code of Ethics* (2008), but it is referred to in the discussion of these same activities named above: collections and services. Part I states: "We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests." The lack of bias in response to patron requests reflects the principle of neutrality in the sense of not taking a position.

The sixth section also states: "We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions." Librarians are not to advance their own interests if doing so would have a negative impact on patrons or users, or on colleagues or the employing institutions. Finally, in the sixth line, we read: "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." So again, librarians may have personal convictions, but they should not let those interfere with their duties, which include representing their institutions and providing access to resources. This will be important later in the discussion of peer review, because it suggests that people may be able to compartmentalize, or set aside, their positions in order to be neutral in a specific, isolated case.

The Surety of Discipline and the Fallibility of "Facts"

As a central concept and an ethical principle within the field of librarianship, neutrality should be scrutinized for its consistency with other important tenets in the profession and any issues that might arise in its applications. Social theory, especially, can be used to reveal truths about concepts such as neutrality that apply within social contexts. One social theorist in particular, Michel Foucault, and a pair

of theorists, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, were selected for this examination of the principle of neutrality. Foucault was selected because his analysis of power and knowledge in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* sheds light on how human beings are bound up in power relations and how power produces knowledge. Bodies act by and through power, which shapes them, and this investment of the body by power is indeed political (1975/1977, pp. 24, 27).

Latour and Woolgar were selected specifically for their analysis of the construction of scientific facts, which are always affected by social factors. Latour and Woolgar suggest that all facts have histories that involve social factors. This supports the conclusion that human beings always have biases and thus are not neutral. Foucault, and Latour and Woolgar, bring to light important truths about the experiences and characteristics of human beings and their intersubjective, political, bodily situations that guarantee they will always have a position.

Foucault begins *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* with a history of the penal system in France. Foucault uses his analysis as a springboard for discussing how the body is shaped and disciplined in other arenas besides the prison, including the school, the hospital, and the military. This analysis is instructive for how all people, no matter how their occupation or situation in life is defined, are disciplined by forces at an intersubjective level, forces that affect both their bodies and their souls, which I interpret to be the conscious energies of people that determine their behaviour. Foucault writes,

The history of this “micro-physics” of the punitive power would then be a genealogy or an element in a genealogy of the modern “soul.” Rather than seeing this soul as the reactivated remnants of an ideology, one would see it as the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body. (p. 29)

Foucault shows how the history of punitive power informs, or serves as the genealogy of, the soul. The soul does not merely reflect the ideologies contained within the power that shapes it in a passive manner. Rather, the soul is an active source of power over the body, the “correlative” of a “certain technology of power” (p. 29). The soul, according to my interpretation of this passage, independently acts upon the body. Thus Foucault famously states that “the soul is the prison of the body” (p. 28). To word it differently, the history of the punitive power serves as an explanation, a “genealogy,” of the soul, and the body obeys the soul that has that history.

Foucault’s theory supports the view that neutrality is not completely possible. If people are all caught in a web of power relations, no one could ever be completely neutral because no one escapes the forces of power that discipline and shape them. Forces of power imply an imbalance between the disciplining forces and the disciplined, both of which would have positions, since power implies an interest, and

the disciplining forces shape the body in particular ways. This discipline also involves knowledge, an aspect of Foucault's theory that makes it especially applicable to the discourse on neutrality. Knowledge, which includes belief, is also implicated in power relations. Foucault writes that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (p. 27). So, for Foucault, all power involves knowledge, and all knowledge, power. Foucault's theory is consistent with common understandings of knowledge, since people's actions accord with their beliefs, and knowledge and power affect those actions. The knowledge that people acquire, produce, and share is fraught with or complicated by power, and power is not neutral, because it implies an imbalance and an interest. This theory fits well with an analysis of neutrality, because it suggests that no knowledge can be neutral, since it is bound up with power.

One important aspect of Foucault's theory is that all power is *interested*, by definition, and this also seems to be consistent with common understandings of power. Power is exercised for specific purposes and ends, and all humans experience desire and investment; they act according to their own self-interest or in the interest of people to whom they direct their loyalties. Finally, all knowledge is tied up with human interests and investments. Consequently, knowledge, including beliefs, could not be neutral.

In *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Latour and Woolgar conduct an "anthropology of science," basing their conclusions on Latour's two years of observation at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, pp. 11–12, 27). They attempt to shed light on the processes of science and the production of scientific knowledge, demystifying and demythologizing those processes by pointing out their commonalities with all other forms of knowledge production. Their study deepens the critique of neutrality and this claim about the impossibility of complete neutrality for human beings in general, as science generally claims to be neutral. Yet Latour and Woolgar point out that facts—ordered versions of reality—are no more free of social influences than are wrong beliefs. In the following passage, Latour and Woolgar provide an explanation of how versions of observations come to be considered fact, how tenuous this process is, and how there will always be other, alternative accounts that are equally plausible:

The observer has to base his analysis on shifting ground. He is faced with the task of producing an ordered version of observations and utterances when each of his readings of observations and utterances can be counterbalanced with an alternative. In principle, then, the task of producing an incorrigible version of the actions and behavior of the subjects of his study is hopeless. Nevertheless, we know that observers regularly produce such ordered versions for consumption by others. (p. 35)

For every fact, there are alternative explanations of reality that are just as plausible. If one holds to the belief that there is no ultimate truth or reality to be discovered but that knowledge consists of ordered accounts that could be otherwise, then it would be true that any account could have alternate explanations.

Socially mediated decision-making, or negotiations, are a part of the process of producing facts, just as they are a part of the process of producing other types of knowledge (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, pp. 157–158). Latour and Woolgar's claim that there is nothing separating scientific fact from other types of knowledge can be supported by the knowledge that scientists are still human beings and cannot escape from social influences any more than non-scientists can. So even science is not neutral if social factors play a role, just as other forms of knowledge production are not neutral.

Different factors play a role in which accounts become facts, and these factors could be considered as biases that steer fact production in particular directions. Once they have achieved their status as facts, facts are only “indisputable” and “static” because people view them and treat them in that manner. In reality, however, they are not uncovered or discovered but are constructed, like any other type of knowledge (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, p. 31).

In summary, the theories of Foucault and Latour and Woolgar support the claim that complete neutrality is never possible, as all human decisions are affected by power and knowledge, which are interested and, as ordered accounts of reality, are influenced by social factors. In the next section, I will present the LIS debate about neutrality and show how neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in the context of librarianship.

Neutrality vs. Social Responsibility: The LIS Debate

Librarians have debated whether neutrality in the context of librarianship is possible or desirable. In this section, I will explore the different positions that LIS professionals have taken on this issue, which focus especially on an opposition between neutrality and social justice or social responsibility.

Starting a historical debate in *Library Journal*, Berninghausen (1972) argued in favour of the principle of neutrality in librarianship and opposed the alternative, partisanship. He argued that interest in social and political issues would weaken the American Library Association and lead to librarians making decisions about “approved” library materials based on their own opinions concerning social and political issues (pp. 3676, 3680). According to this argument, neutrality is necessary

for the integrity of the profession, and any partisanship whatsoever, even in the name of social responsibility or social justice, is antithetical to this requisite neutrality.

Others have argued that, at best, the principle of neutrality does not reflect reality in the profession; librarianship has not been a neutral profession. Rosenzweig (1991/2008), for example, reminds us that

the very emergence of the library profession was intimately associated with ideologically informed efforts to place the whole development of the education and mass enlightenment under the aegis of elite business interests. These interests envisaged systems of rationalized schools and libraries as powerful instruments of social integration and control. (p. 5)

Librarianship itself had non-neutral origins, so the implication is that it would be disingenuous for librarians to claim neutrality as a foundational principle in their profession.

Yet others have argued both that neutrality is not possible and also that adhering to the principle of neutrality is an impediment to social justice. Operating under a position of so-called “neutrality,” they argue, actually masks a non-neutral position—acceptance of the status quo. For example, Jensen (2004) writes,

In the political and philosophical sense in which I use the term here, neutrality is impossible. In any situation, there exists a distribution of power. Overtly endorsing or contesting that distribution are, of course, political choices; such positions are not neutral. But to take no explicit position by claiming to be neutral is also a political choice, particularly when one is given the resources that make it easy to evaluate the consequences of that distribution of power and potentially affect its distribution. (p. 29)

In this view, neutrality is indeed a disingenuous position; it is actually a political position in disguise. Every situation is characterized by power relations, and to leave power relations alone is to tacitly endorse them. This is a political choice especially when a person would otherwise be capable of challenging that distribution of power.

Others have previously made the same point. Blanke (1989) argues,

There are those who, clinging to the idea that the library profession should be politically neutral, would contend that contributing to social projects is not an appropriate activity for librarians. However, without a clear and vital set of philosophical and political ideals acting as a guiding beacon, the library profession will not remain neutral, but will drift aimlessly with the currents of power and privilege. (p. 42)

Blanke’s argument is that librarians must have clearly articulated political and philosophical ideals or positions or else they will end up supporting power and privilege without purpose or direction. Additionally, Blanke argues that their actions must reflect a commitment to social justice; they must engage in political activity, namely, “serving the information needs of all segments of society” (p. 42). If

they do not have such political commitments, a “value vacuum” will result and the forces of power and privilege will fill that void (p. 40). This radical view of political commitment and political neutrality teaches that it is not enough to simply have a position or a commitment. If the library profession’s actions do not reflect that position, it is no better than neutrality and would also lead to inaction in the face of injustice.

Similarly, Buschman, Rosenzweig, and Harger (1994) assert that political commitment is actually vital for librarians—that it is part and parcel of their professional values. They state:

Ours is a profession broadly concerned with literacy, intellectual freedom, equity of access to information, and the preservation and dissemination of cultural production. With such values, how can we turn a blind eye to issues of civil rights, human dignity, and the social and economic conditions in which human culture develops (or regresses) and remain a responsible profession? (p. 576)

In contrast to the above quotation from Rosenzweig (1991/2008), in which he sees the history of librarianship through a more critical lens, Buschman, Rosenzweig, and Harger here point out the progressive values that have defined librarianship since its beginning and how these values necessitate political commitment to issues of social justice and human dignity and action.

What about those who argue that neutrality is both possible and necessary in the selection of materials, and that this is perfectly compatible with social responsibility? Wedgeworth (1973), in response to Berninghausen, writes:

The Berninghausen essay suggests that libraries should emphasize their custodial function by selecting as their first priority the accessibility of materials on all points of view. An alternative point of view would hold that the first priority should be to serve the information needs and interests of identifiable users, thus emphasizing the service function of libraries. Although one or the other may be paramount at any point in time, the two do not appear to be incompatible, but rather complementary. (p. 26)

Service to users, it is implied, requires a commitment to social justice, or partisanship, if partisanship results from serving or prioritizing identifiable user groups. Yet neutrality in the selection of materials does not necessarily hamper this commitment in the realm of service.

The historical debate in LIS suggests that an overarching position of neutrality—if it is interpreted as a middle position, even a weak position, with total freedom from bias—is inconsistent with a social justice orientation, which requires that librarians hold positions on issues that affect access for library users. While perhaps some degree of neutrality may be possible in particular situations, such as selection, I take the position in this paper that even in collection decisions, it would be undesirable to

hold to neutrality; it is important to have a social justice orientation first and foremost in every context within librarianship. A social justice orientation aligns with the overarching mission and purpose of libraries to make information freely available to all people, especially those most in need of that information. Neutrality sometimes conflicts with this mission, since this mission might require privileging marginalized groups for a time. A neutral position would perhaps forbid this and would allow for indifference.

Even if neutrality were possible in collection decisions, it would be inadvisable and even harmful. For if all materials should be equally accessible and none discriminated against in the selection process, then it could be deduced that all materials are equally worthy of attention as well. This implies a relativistic view of knowledge. In the introduction to the edited volume, *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*, Lewis (2008) argues that not all viewpoints should be considered “equally valid and deserving of equal amounts of shelf space and budget dollars” (p. 2). Neo-Nazi ideology and Holocaust denial are examples of “minority” viewpoints that should not be treated equally with historical studies of World War II or personal stories of Holocaust survivors (Lewis, 2008). This is not to advocate for censorship of such materials, and—while I will not delve into the finer points of the distinction between censorship and selection—my argument is that librarians are always making choices about what materials to make available to users. They need guidance in their selections, and a social justice orientation can provide that guidance. Neutrality, on the other hand, can allow for an indifferent stance that is committed to all content equally, no matter how unjust, fallacious, or hateful some of it may be.

Some might think that to abandon a commitment to neutrality is to subscribe to epistemological or moral relativism, because without neutrality there is an acknowledgement that everyone has a different position and all positions are equally valid. This second statement does not necessarily follow from the first, however. Depending upon one’s moral and epistemological beliefs, it is entirely conceivable—and really, more conceivable—for there to be right and wrong, or correct and incorrect, positions, even (and especially) given the belief that complete neutrality is impossible. Joseph Good (2008) makes precisely this point in his chapter, “The Hottest Place in Hell: The Crisis of Neutrality in Contemporary Librarianship.” He argues that neutrality is “the logical conclusion of moral relativism” (p. 144). So neutrality does not secure morality. It does the opposite; it leads to moral relativism, because to refuse to take a position and to acknowledge each position as equally valid suggests there is no more intrinsic worth or value in one argument over any other.

The literature reviewed, and the arguments contained here, suggest that there is an opposition between neutrality and social justice. They suggest that a neutral position means that one accepts current political and social realities that may be unjust, and that librarianship, by contrast, should reflect specific political commitments founded on the basic commitment to serve the information needs of specific user groups. Based on these arguments, I take the position that relying on neutrality, especially in the context of library services, is a mistake. Complete neutrality is a myth at best, a reflection of bad faith or even duplicity at worst; claiming complete neutrality is neither realistic nor ethical. In librarianship, it is more ethical to embrace one's positions and rely on them, which can lead to a stronger value system and more just actions. Jensen (2004) supports this position:

Any claim to such neutrality is illusory; there is no neutral ground on which to stand anywhere in the world. Rather than bemoan that fact, I believe we should embrace it and acknowledge that it is the source of intellectual, political, and moral struggle and progress. If we take seriously this claim, then all people, no matter what their position, would have to articulate and defend the values and assumptions on which their claims are made. The other option is intellectual stagnation and political decline. (p. 95)

The discovery that complete neutrality is a myth is something to be celebrated, because it means that people are required to own and articulate their positions. In library services, having a position and articulating that position are necessary for the sake of both transparency and social responsibility. Taking a stand that goes against the status quo and acting on that position is what allows for social and political progress.

To Appear Neutral: The Vetting of New Knowledge through Peer Review

Librarians are continually redefining their profession, and one such area of growth and development is scholarly communication. A trend in scholarly communication worth noting here is that libraries themselves are starting to become publishers (see Bonn & Furlough, 2015). As librarians develop expertise within the area of scholarly communication, and as libraries become publishers, one topic of importance is the practice of academic peer review.

Peer review has been a mainstay in academic publishing for over three hundred years (Weller, 1991, p. 95). It has been examined in depth in the literature of multiple disciplines for the possibility that it is a flawed process, that is, that reviewers exhibit various types of bias, and sometimes multiple converging biases, during the review process (see Zhao, Chi, & van den Heuvel, 2015). This section looks at a sample of literature from across disciplines but focuses on the natural sciences, in which there is a lot of literature on the topic. Librarians, as generalists, are concerned with scholarly communication and peer review as it occurs in all disciplines. However, I

focus on one area in particular, the natural sciences, in order to provide an analysis that is as internally consistent as possible, for there may be differences in peer review depending upon the particular discipline. I also focus on the sciences in order to provide an analysis that most closely aligns with Latour and Woolgar's project.

Bias is defined as the "violation of impartiality in the evaluation of a submission" (Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang, & Cronin, 2013, p. 4). Impartiality has a very specific definition in the context of peer review: "the ability for any reviewer to interpret and apply evaluative criteria in the same way in the assessment of a submission" (p. 4). Basically, impartiality means that one particular reviewer exhibits no biases throughout the review process that would prevent her from judging a manuscript in the same way as the next reviewer. This means not having a position, or not letting one's position on a particular issue affect one's judgment of another's position on that issue.

So how does this definition relate to the definitions of impartiality and neutrality outlined earlier, and how do we apply the critique of neutrality in librarianship to this different context? If having no position, or occupying the middle ground, is a uniform requirement for all reviewers—if all positions are the same—then the reviews of manuscripts would be the same. But if this "neutral" position is actually a political position, as has been shown through the LIS debate, and if a truly neutral position is actually impossible, because all human beings are subject to disciplining forces that are political and bias creeps in even in the creation of new knowledge, then complete neutrality in peer review would also be impossible. Differences among referees' reviews would be inevitable.

As Foucault shows, reviewers cannot escape from the realities of their disciplined bodies. As Latour and Woolgar show, reviewers cannot escape from the "intrusion of social factors" as they vet new knowledge (1986, p. 31). The intrusion of social factors would result in differing judgments, many of which could be considered equally valid and logical in spite of fundamental disagreement. Latour and Woolgar make the following observation:

An important feature of fact construction is the process whereby "social" factors disappear once a fact is established. . . . scientists themselves preferentially retain (or resurrect) the existence of "social" factors where things scientific are thought to have gone wrong. . . . however, there is at least a very real need for a symmetrical approach to the analysis of beliefs. (p. 23)

Scientists tend to blame "wrong beliefs" on social factors, but really social factors are implicated just as much in science that is successful in the construction of facts. Given Latour and Woolgar's claim that facts are not uncovered or discovered but are constructed, this argument makes sense (1986, pp. 23, 129). If this is the case, then the construction of new knowledge would be no different when it fails to become

“fact” than it would be when it does achieve the status of “fact.” If one accepts these arguments, then the process of constructing facts cannot be impartial or free of bias, any more than the process of constructing other types of knowledge can be so.

Indeed, in their analysis Latour and Woolgar refer to bias without specifically using this word. They state:

In the course of these exchanges beliefs are changed, statements are enhanced or discredited, and reputations and alliances between researchers are modified. For our present purposes, the most important characteristic of these kinds of exchange is that they are devoid of statements which are “objective” in the sense that they escape the influence of negotiation between participants. (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, pp. 157–158)

Latour and Woolgar rightly point out here that scientific communication always involves negotiation. Negotiation would be necessary only because different people have different biases, and this refers again to the definition of impartiality above—its meaning that all reviewers review the same manuscript in the same way. If that were true, then negotiation would not be necessary. From this claim of Latour and Woolgar, that there are no statements in science that escape negotiation, it can be deduced that complete impartiality—each reviewer judging the same as the next—is not possible. Scientific communication does not escape the limitations that come with being human, any more than any other form of communication does.

Foucault’s and Latour and Woolgar’s theories suggest that bias would be unavoidable in peer review. What other evidence is there that peer review is not a neutral process? What does the peer-review process involve, what are the standards, and does the process live up to those standards? To answer these questions, I turn to the literature about peer review. Some researchers believe that peer review is necessary and that it benefits scientific communication (see Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang, & Cronin, 2013, p. 10). Other evidence suggests, however, that there may be reason to question the effectiveness of peer review as well as the claims that researchers make about it. Discussing the process of peer review in *Editorial Peer Review: Its Strengths and Weaknesses*, Weller (2001) explains the criteria for judging manuscripts:

Ideally a reviewer approaches a manuscript with every intention of judging impartially and evaluating the manuscript solely on its merits. The only relevant factors for the reviewer are the quality and importance of the research; its design, methodology, analysis, discussion, and conclusions; and the logic of the thought process. (p. 207)

Notice that these criteria are seemingly objective. Peer reviewers base their judgments on “quality” and “importance” rather than on the content or substance of the article or monograph, or they judge the work on the soundness of the argument’s logic, not on whether they agree with the argument. But are reviewers really objective

and unbiased? Do they refrain from taking positions? To test whether reviewers are really objective, Weller posed the question,

If reviewers agree with a particular ideology, philosophy, or scientific technique presented in a manuscript, are they more likely to recommend the manuscript for acceptance than if they do not agree with the author's viewpoint? (2001, p. 223)

This type of bias, called confirmation bias, has been shown to occur through a number of studies (Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang, & Cronin, 2013, pp. 9–10). Weller (2001) examines just six studies, all of which used fabricated manuscripts designed to test this question of confirmation bias. The findings show that individuals tend to positively review manuscripts that agree with their viewpoints. Reviewers tend to make recommendations based on their own beliefs or viewpoints, rather than on the criteria outlined above (p. 224).

Abramowitz, Gomes, and Abramowitz (1975) found, in their study of psychologist reviewers, that reviewer agreement with the political thrust of an author's manuscript largely correlated with the outcomes of the review and whether the reviewer made a strong recommendation for or against publication (p. 195). Another interesting finding of this study was that referees', or reviewers', inferences were less subject to political bias when judgment bases were "domain specific," that is, when they related to specific aspects of the paper, such as the writing itself or the methodology of the study. The authors supposed that when these aspects are combined, such as in the overall judgment of the manuscript, there is more ambiguity and consequently a higher likelihood of value intrusion (Abramowitz, Gomes, & Abramowitz, 1975, p. 197). As there is less bias when reviewers judge specific aspects of a manuscript, this suggests that there can be degrees of bias; impartiality may be possible to a certain extent, even if complete impartiality is never possible.

Reviewers can also have biases that can prevent them from recognizing innovation or accepting for publication a paper that is innovative—a type of bias called conservatism (Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang, & Cronin, 2013, p. 9). Armstrong (1997) argues that this occurs because "findings that conflict with current beliefs are often judged to have defects" (p. 63). Armstrong defines innovation as "useful and important new findings that advance scientific knowledge" (p. 64). This seems to be a perfect example of neutrality getting in the way. If neutrality is equated with tacit acceptance of the status quo, then in science and peer review, neutrality, as well as impartiality—agreement with others—would be akin to endorsing the current scientific paradigm. This is precisely the point that Armstrong makes (pp. 63–64). In the end, it seems that the critique of neutrality and impartiality is especially applicable to concerns about conservatism, or alternately, innovation.

So yes, peer review has flaws, but what about the counter-arguments that point to the indispensability of peer review? While imperfect, peer review does have important purposes and seems likely to be at least moderately effective at fulfilling those purposes. Mario Biagioli (2002) writes: “Today it is said that peer review ensures the readers of the trustworthiness of the text in front of them, and assures taxpayers that their monies have been put to good use by scientists” (p. 17). Peer review tests the validity of evidence and research supporting the claims, and it ensures that members of the public who are supporting the research are supporting something that has value for society.

Indeed, Latour and Woolgar (1986) do not deny that science is a highly creative activity or that it is effective. They state, “We should emphasise, therefore, that we do not deny that science is a highly creative activity. It is just that the precise nature of this creativity is widely misunderstood” (p. 31). Science is effective in producing knowledge; Latour and Woolgar simply mean to cast doubt on the claims that scientists make about the nature and outcomes of that process. Latour and Woolgar never deny that scientists can agree or that scientific communication is effective. They simply describe the processes that it involves, processes that are effective in the construction of facts. It is scientists’ claims about the *nature* of those processes, including the construction of facts, that they refute, not that facts exist or that they are used for different purposes. Thus, from a pragmatic point of view, neutrality may be effective.

Furthermore, while it could never be possible completely, perhaps reviewers may be able to compartmentalize some of their biases in order to become more objective and more “alike” with other reviewers in their judgments. The language referred to in the ALA *Code of Ethics* (2008), cited in this paper’s introduction, suggests that it is possible to compartmentalize biases. Perhaps impartiality or neutrality in peer review is like a thought experiment that can never be perfect in practice, only in theory. After all, peer review has been found to be effective in producing judgments that are consistent with papers’ success upon publication (see Li & Agha, 2015). It is also generally agreed that peer review does improve the quality of papers (Armstrong, 1997, p. 63). I acknowledge therefore that neutrality or impartiality in peer review is important and indispensable in spite of its limitations.

In the final analysis, perhaps the principle of neutrality, or aspiring to not make judgments based on one’s own positions—and more specifically, impartiality understood as making the same judgments that any other reviewer would make—does make peer review more effective, except perhaps in the case of conservatism. Neutrality or impartiality, leading to similar judgments by different referees, is part and parcel of the process of negotiating and validating findings so that they

can become scientific facts—precisely the process that Latour and Woolgar study. Many referees may exhibit biases, but it could very well still be possible to move *closer* to the ideal of impartiality. Thus, from a pragmatic point of view, neutrality may be effective, especially when the review is of specific domains or aspects of the paper, such as the methodology. This research suggests, however, that neutrality as an ethical principle should be scrutinized, and exercised with care, and perhaps even that overall judgments about a paper's publishability should not be left to one reviewer. In any case, reviewers should be transparent with their own political and theoretical views and should work with publishers to ensure that their own biases do not determine the outcome of their judgments.

While impartiality may help peer review, it will never be completely realizable. This may actually have a positive side to it. The literature shows that political beliefs do play a role in decision-making about manuscripts. Since this is unavoidable, perhaps journal editors should also find a way to make people's subjective, political beliefs work for the benefit of the peer-review system, rather than simply fight against them. There are a few approaches that could be taken. Armstrong advocates for changing publishers' decisions from whether to publish papers to how to publish them, to encourage the publication of innovative findings (1997, p. 63). This is one way to counter the bias of conservatism.

Park, Peacey, and Munafó (2014) argue that subjectivity is good, that it counters what is known as “herding” in the scientific community—converging on an incorrect answer or being influenced by others—which may prevent science from being self-correcting (p. 93). Their findings test whether a “higher level of subjectivity in reviewer decisions will lead to more effective restraint of incorrect herding” (p. 94). They conclude that for reviewers, “it is important to put weight on their private signals, in order to be able to escape from herding” (p. 96). To insert a bit of irony here, if even authors publishing in *Nature* are cognizant of the positive outcomes of bias in peer review and suggest listening to one's own “private” opinions during the process, perhaps referees in other social science and humanities disciplines would do well to heed this advice that is based, after all, on science.

In conclusion, neutrality—or rather, impartiality—in peer review may be a noble cause in certain respects, but overall, neutrality is never really possible and is oftentimes counterproductive, depending upon the context. Relying on “neutrality” in librarianship, and oftentimes even in peer review, is a mistake, one we should take care to avoid lest we fool our patrons and students, readers and reviewers, into thinking the “neutral” position is the one Truth or that their level of comfort with the status quo is justified. The myth of complete neutrality reflects idealistic thinking at best, and bad faith or even duplicity at worst. It is unrealistic. Once we become

aware of this, we can embrace our positions and biases and rely on them, for they lend weight to our decisions and strength to our actions. I refer again to Jensen:

Any claim to such neutrality is illusory; there is no neutral ground on which to stand anywhere in the world. Rather than bemoan that fact, I believe we should embrace it and acknowledge that it is the source of intellectual, political, and moral struggle and progress. If we take seriously this claim, then all people, no matter what their position, would have to articulate and defend the values and assumptions on which their claims are made. The other option is intellectual stagnation and political decline. (2004, p. 95)

Neutrality is indeed a myth, and this is something that LIS professionals should acknowledge as well as embrace. This discovery means that it is both appropriate and necessary for LIS professionals to have a political position. Whether it be in collections and services or scholarly communication, it is crucial to have a position and to be able to articulate it, both for the sake of transparency and for the sake of social responsibility. Progress is possible only when one is willing to take a position that goes against the status quo and when those judging that position are similarly willing and able to stand for its merit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heidi R. Johnson is the Social Sciences Librarian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She received her MS in library and information science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an MA in political theory, postmodernism, and feminisms from the University of Illinois, Springfield.

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