

Intellectual Freedom Is Not Social Justice

The Symbolic Capital of Intellectual Freedom in ALA Accreditation and LIS Curricula

BRAVERMAN ESSAY 2015

The revocation of Steven Salaita's tenured professorship offer at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in August 2014 should give librarians great pause. After Salaita's criticism on Twitter of the Israel Defense Forces' actions in the Gaza Strip during the summer of 2014, former Chancellor Phyllis Wise informed Salaita just weeks before the beginning of his contract that his offer would not be forwarded to the University of Illinois' Board of Trustees for approval. Later evidence indicated that major university donors threatened to withhold support should Salaita's contract be honored (Jaschik, "The Emails on Salaita," "Out of a Job"). Many academic organizations have condemned the University's actions as a breach of academic freedom as outlined in the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, a document which is explicitly included in tenured and tenure-track contracts tendered by the University of Illinois (American Association of University Professors, "Statement," "Letter").

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Salaita is not a librarian. However, academic freedom bears great resemblance to American librarianship's core value of intellectual freedom, to such a point that the American Library Association (ALA) adapted the AAUP *Statement* for librarianship in 1946 (American Library Association, "Statement").¹ Mark Alfino characterizes academic freedom as a "form of intellectual freedom that attaches to particular professional roles (the teacher, professor, researcher, student)" (440). Salaita's professional work about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deeply rooted in social justice and political activism for the welfare of marginalized people. As Joan W. Scott argues, rescinding Salaita's contract on a "civility" claim—a discourse typically used by dominant forces to silence dissent—constitutes censorship of his teaching and scholarship due to his extramural (i.e. non-work) speech. Given the ALA's staunch anti-censorship rhetoric for information producers and users, one would assume bodies like the ALA, or faculties of ALA-accredited schools and institutions (including UIUC) would join other academic faculties in condemning the decision of the University of Illinois's leadership. This, by and large, has not been the case.

In December 2014, students of the University of Illinois's Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) hosted an open forum to discuss the Salaita controversy as it pertained to information professions.² During the discussion, GSLIS faculty member Dr. Emily Knox made a comment that hints at a longtime tension of American librarianship: "intellectual freedom and social justice are not the same thing" (Tilley; Knox, "Re: Questin"). This tension has existed at least since the formation of the ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) in 1968. SRRT faced fierce backlash from ALA members, best exemplified by then Intellectual Freedom Committee chairperson David K. Berninghausen's 1972 *Library Journal* missive "Antithesis in Librarianship: Social Responsibility vs. the *Library Bill of Rights*" and its book-length explication 3 years later (Samek, *Intellectual Freedom* 49-55, 127-129; Joyce 38, 41; Berninghausen, "Antithesis," *Flight*). Most recently this conflict manifested in the Office of Intellectual Freedom's 2015 Banned Books Week poster. The poster, which features a dark-skinned woman whose face is obscured by a book with a red circle and an eye slit under the phrase "Readstricted," appeared to many as signifying a niqāb and equating Islamic religious sartorial standards with censorship.³ After several petitions to the OIF to remove the poster from the ALA store and OIF's subsequent defense of the poster, Intellectual Freedom Round Table veteran Ellen Zyroff attacked members of SRRT, claiming that removal petitions and criticism of the OIF's decision amounted to another romp by the "Ministry of Silly Censorship," or the "SRRT Censor Squad" (American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom, "Response"; Zyroff). The most recent iteration of the ALA *Intellectual Freedom Manual* acknowledges this historic conflict; former Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) director Judith Krug and Candace D. Morgan rhetorically ask: "Can a library committed

to intellectual freedom and to providing materials that represent all points of view also support one point of view?" (13).

The examples above illustrate that the tension between ALA's conceptions of intellectual freedom and the social responsibility of librarianship is a serious and divisive issue that lies at the heart of librarianship's professional ethics, action, and justification. However, this tension is rarely introduced during the training of young professionals. This oversight occurs in part because of intellectual freedom's entrenched place among American librarianship's core values and the ALA's influence on library and information studies (LIS) education through the Office of Accreditation. To demonstrate the impact of intellectual freedom on LIS education, I will contextualize ALA's definition of intellectual freedom as a core value of American librarianship, explore how this understanding of intellectual freedom adheres to classically liberal notions of neutrality versus social and political advocacy, and link ALA's values to the stated goals and purposes of library school accreditation. To explain how ALA accreditation transmits values, I will draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital as a theoretical lens. I posit that there is a lack of focus on the social responsibilities of librarianship within LIS curricula, particularly with respect to empowering and fighting with those who work for social justice, due to the direct conflict between the activist focus of social justice and the rhetoric of neutrality underlying ALA's conception of intellectual freedom, which limits librarians' agency.

Neutrality and ALA's conception of intellectual freedom

The paradigm of intellectual freedom within which American librarianship operates today is a distinct and recent historical construction. It should be understood as a value informed by specific historical struggles that has led to its current interpretation as advanced by the ALA. The outcome of these struggles implies an assumption of commitment to professional neutrality, as will be discussed below.

Intellectual freedom has not always been a core value of American librarianship. Krug and Morgan characterize librarianship's attitude toward intellectual freedom as having "undergone continual change since the late nineteenth century" (12). Intellectual freedom's role as an ALA core value was first understood through the narrow lens of book censorship (Krug and Morgan 13). As Geller shows, librarians favored censorship, neutrality, and populism as guiding professional values in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (xvi). Freedom to read in this early context encompassed the right to morally educate the working class; early librarians viewed themselves as part of the state educational system, which was tasked with preparing students for productive citizenship (Geller 12; Knox, "View of Reading Effects" 15). Education in this

regime assumed that the outcome of engagement with a text is known or can be predicted, and that educators must lead students to morally good texts at the proper time in one's development (Knox, "View of Reading Effects" 15-17). Thus, censorship was inherent in one's duty as a professional librarian.

Resistance to censorship began to appear in the first decades of the 20th century; prominent librarians such as John Cotton Dana and Paul Paine began to raise the issue of censorship's detrimental effects on the intellectual life of the United States in the midst of World War I (Geller 109-116). However, outright ALA opposition to book censorship would not find traction until the 1930s (Krug and Morgan 14). Official responses of this era only permitted limited freedom guided by apolitical neutrality (Geller 128). Librarians of the next generation, including Berninghausen, drew upon these incidents to establish a "hydra-headed support system for intellectual freedom" over the next three decades (Robbins xiii). ALA ideology opposing censorship in the name of intellectual freedom was codified with the passage of the *Library Bill of Rights* and the *Code of Ethics* in 1939 (Robbins 13-14; Knox, "Supporting Intellectual Freedom" 8). Using these documents as a base and continuous threats to freedom such as McCarthyism as a catalyst, ALA leveraged the rhetoric of intellectual freedom to gain profession-wide support for financial and legal mechanisms to defend specific publications from censorship (Knox, "Supporting Intellectual Freedom" 13-14; Robbins 153).

Perhaps the most contentious legacy of intellectual freedom's development into a core value of the ALA is the still prevalent question of whether libraries and librarians should be concerned with advocacy or neutrality as a guiding principle. American librarians have been struggling with this question throughout the 20th century (Geller xix). Librarianship has historically claimed neutrality as a professional obligation (Samek, *Librarianship 7, Intellectual Freedom* 1-11). Nowhere is this more explicit than the standard set forth in the ALA's *Code of Ethics*: "We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties" (304). This ethical standard and the accompanying standard to uphold intellectual freedom principles work in conjunction to promote neutrality and oppose the social justice advocacy potential of libraries and librarians. Noriko Asato has demonstrated the selective and agnostic application of ALA's standards when applied to activist-focused librarians. Through its responses, the Association has consistently justified intellectual freedom for librarians only insofar as the concept allows librarians to provide neutral, unfettered access to library users (76).

Steven Joyce explains the faulty syllogistic assumptions at the heart of neutrality rhetoric, which undergird the arguments of Berninghausen in the 1970s and of Zyroff in 2015:

1. Those who hold intensely dogmatic beliefs are censorial;

2. Advocates of the new definition of social responsibility hold intensely dogmatic beliefs;
3. Advocates of the new definition of social responsibility are censorial and must, therefore, renounce the tenets of intellectual freedom (Joyce 42).

Robert Jensen further problematizes the neutrality claim—to earn professional recognition (i.e. symbolic capital, discussed below), professionals are expected to adhere to “neutrality” only insofar as their work does not question and actually reinforces the aims of the state, normalizing American exceptionalism and capitalism as common sense. This view of professionalism disallows the librarian’s social and political agency as a citizen (91-92). nina de jesus locates this discourse of neutrality-as-professionalism at an institutional level—libraries as institutions are founded on adherence to Enlightenment values (i.e. classical liberalism) and actively contribute to the continuance of the hegemonic settler colonial state. In this view, librarianship’s historical claim to neutrality is “a self-defeating one;” political neutrality is not only an impossible but also an actively harmful political position that limits librarians’ agency (de jesus). It is against this agency-removing, culturally damaging rhetoric of neutrality that Toni Samek proposes direct opposition, through advocacy, by libraries and librarians worldwide (*Librarianship* 8).

Whither social justice? Advocacy in American librarianship

Concern for social justice among segments of ALA membership has a long history, from the Junior Members’ Round Table of the 1930s through the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the 1970s to the progressive and critical librarianship of today (Samek, *Intellectual Freedom* 6-8; Joyce 38; Samek, *Librarianship*, 7). Some library historians trace this intellectual lineage as far back as the turn of the 20th century in the work of figures such as John Cotton Dana (Samek, “Internet AND Intention” 2). However, these movements historically constitute a fringe voice of American librarianship that has fought for broader legitimacy to affect change over a wide range of political issues both inside and outside of traditional governance structures like the ALA.

Toni Samek has shown how centering education and social responsibility can provide an infrastructure for progressive librarianship (*Librarianship* 47-180). Advocacy and commitment to social responsibility, formally recognized as a core value of the ALA in 2004, encompass the goals of social justice education (Samek, “Internet AND Intention” 13). Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins draw on Nieto and Bode’s excellent summation of social justice education outcomes, which states in part:

Social justice education should:

1. Challenge, confront, and disrupt ‘misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences’ (quoted in Gregory and Higgins 6).

Today the concern for social justice within librarianship literature manifests most visibly through the praxis of critical information literacy, which seeks “to dismantle the concept of library/librarian neutrality in relation to the context of information production, dissemination, and manipulation” (Gregory and Higgins 10). Critical information literacy is grounded in the educational praxis most notably formulated in Paulo Friere’s internationally renowned book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Still, despite its current visibility and focus on collaboration with progressive and radical education scholars, critical information literacy is only one part of Toni Samek’s proposed infrastructure of a progressive librarianship movement; the movement also centers human rights and welfare, global citizenship and democracy, and engagement in social and political movements among other concepts (“Internet AND Intention” 7-12).

Frameworks like Samek’s allow us to visualize a social justice-centered librarianship. However, progressive librarianship’s life as a large-scale movement in the United States struggles from an inability to create a broad measure of consensus on what work needs to be done, how that work can and should be done, and why that work is necessary. This lack of consensus creates a blind spot in LIS education, where the progressive librarianship movement has almost unilaterally failed to gain an official foothold.

Symbolic capital and ALA accreditation: How neutrality meets library school

Librarians’ education is highly influenced by the values of the ALA. Professional jobs in American librarianship commonly require an ALA-accredited degree for hire or advancement. Whatever prior life experience and knowledge library students bring to their coursework, their professional training is undergirded by the values transmitted through library school education. ALA accreditation calls for programs to develop their systematic planning and curriculum based on student learning objectives as outlined in the Office of Accreditation’s “Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies” (4). The first two learning objectives demonstrate that programs should be primarily concerned with addressing “[t]he essential character of the field of library and information studies; ... [t]he philosophy, principles, and ethics of the field” (Office of Accreditation, “Revised Standards” 4). Popular textbooks for use in courses covering the ethics of librarianship show a consensus about foregrounding intellectual

freedom as a primary responsibility in the training of young librarians (Knox, “Supporting Intellectual Freedom” 12). As demonstrated above, the ALA has a vested interest in maintaining and transmitting a neutrality-focused conception of intellectual freedom to library practitioners as part of the profession’s ethics. How these concepts become a basis for the assessment of library schools can be explained using Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital.

The importance of Bourdieu’s symbolic capital to research on intellectual freedom has been explained previously by Emily Knox and Lisa Hussey. In brief: symbolic systems shape perception of an objective reality through providing the means by which to construct an object and the means by which to signify that object’s meaning in social context. (Knox, “Supporting Intellectual Freedom” 9-10). Symbolic capital legitimizes existing economic, social, and cultural capital by granting and reinforcing systems of “objective” authority—e.g. social prestige, academic credentials, common sense. The intersection of symbolic, economic, social, and cultural capitals in the social world determines one’s relative power (Hussey 44-45). The accrual of symbolic capital is often a slow process. The American Library Association, notable for its complex structure and slow organizational mechanisms, has grown to represent the primary organizational voice of American librarianship to both professionals and laypeople (Samek, “Internet AND Intention” 5). The ALA exerts its social power over young professionals through the *de facto* requirement of library school coursework as terms for adequate employment through the mechanism of accreditation.

Knox identifies two of Bourdieu’s key mechanisms that support the accrual of symbolic capital in support of intellectual freedom: codification and institutionalization (“Supporting Intellectual Freedom” 8). Accreditation serves the dual purpose of both codifying and institutionalizing ALA values within the structure and assessment of library education. Institutionalization refers to the process of developing institutions whose foundations are coded with and made for the purpose of defending and transmitting values. Like the Office for Intellectual Freedom, the ALA maintains an Office for Accreditation (OA) whose responsibilities include coordinating accreditation activities for LIS programs under the authority of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. OA and its oversight body, the Committee on Accreditation (COA), comprise the primary institutions granted authority by the ALA to act independently in rendering accreditation programming and decisions for library school programs (“Accreditation”).

Alongside institutionalization, codification confers symbolic capital to a concept by embedding that concept into the moral and legal codes that underlie an institution. OA and COA conduct accreditation activities and render their decisions largely based on two formative documents: the “Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Science” and

“Accreditation Process, Policies, and Procedures (AP3).” As mentioned above, the Standards explicitly require that programs transmit the field’s essential character, philosophy, principles, and ethics through student learning objectives and, consequently, curriculum construction (Office of Accreditation, “Revised Standards” 4-5). This mandate leaves little, if any, room in learning objectives and curricula for advocacy and social responsibility. Programs are tasked with embedding and transmitting core values of librarianship, which includes the neutrality-grounded conception of intellectual freedom advanced by the ALA. This version of intellectual freedom is directly at odds with the mission and goals of an advocacy-focused conception of librarianship.

Conclusion

The ALA wields great symbolic capital within library and information studies education through the mechanism of accreditation. Professional library employment requires an accredited degree and schools that teach against the ALA’s conception of intellectual freedom risk censure from the Office of Accreditation. Graduates from schools that face accreditation censure suffer by way of limited employment opportunities. The economic and symbolic value of accredited institutions’ degrees would fall rapidly without graduate success stories, which bolster justification for the schools’ continued existence. The power relationship between the ALA and library schools underlies a trend in LIS education that privileges technocratic managerial theories and practices over the concern for human and social welfare present in progressive librarianship. The ALA is complicit in furthering this trend by maintaining an organizational commitment to embedding a neutrality-focused conception of intellectual freedom within LIS education. For the progressive librarianship movement to grow in the United States, the movement must gain a foothold in LIS education. Without continuing generations of young professionals who are cognizant of and sensitive to the human concerns and social responsibility of librarianship, the infrastructure of progressive librarianship in the U.S. will collapse. We can do better for our future.

NOTES

- 1 The statement was rescinded at the 1974 ALA Annual Meeting, according to the archived version of the 1946 document.
- 2 A Storify containing a record of the live Twitter coverage of the panel under the hashtag #uncivilLIS can be found at <https://storify.com/AnUncivilPhD/salaita-and-the-information-professions-1>.
- 3 The poster can be found on the ALA Store at <http://www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=11404> or by requesting item number 5220-1531.

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The Freedom Center for Social Justice has been working to create cultural shifts across the state of North Carolina, particularly as it relates to faith communities and inclusion for the LGBTQ community. We're excited to continue a partnership with Union Theological Seminary, in a shared mission of inclusion for the LGBTQ community and a call to action for religious communities to no longer cause harm through interpretations of holy text or other religious writing. There is a need in North Carolina to make a bold statement about intersectional justice; and the importance of restorative