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# An Annotated Bibliography on Bias in Library Services and Collections

Denise George
*Georgia State University*, denisegeorge@gsu.edu

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**By Denise Dimsdale**

**Introduction**

Twenty-first century advances in technology and a greater awareness of globalization and diversity create new questions about bias, ethics, and access. Users and librarians are interacting in different ways as virtual environments create new means of communication and access.

Navigating such virtual tools can produce situations where biases may influence service and resources. Technological advances in search engines and collection development tools may produce situations where a librarian's access to resources is biased. Additionally, changes in economic, cultural, and political climates may lead the librarian to question advocacy and neutrality.

This bibliography of selected resources, published from 2004-2012, was selected to address these concerns and to serve as an updated extension of previously published bibliographies on similar topics. This bibliography is divided into five sections. The first three sections address bias as it relates to public services, technology, and collection development. The fourth section includes collections of editor selected articles. The fifth section includes two other bibliographies about bias.

**I. Bias in Public Services**

**Elturk, Ghada Kanafani. "Cultural Collisions and Bridging the Gap between 'Don't Stare' and Care." *New Library World* 109, no. 11-12 (2008): 574-583.**

As patronage becomes increasingly diverse, it is important for librarians to be multi-culturally competent in order to set aside biases and appropriately serve all patrons. Elturk, Outreach Librarian for Boulder Public Library, discusses personal experiences as an immigrant in the United States. She describes a variety of situations and includes scenarios about her experiences with diverse cultures within her library.

The described scenarios relate situations that may be applicable for librarians working in outreach, reference services, and many other situations in both public and academic libraries. Elturk's suggestions for competency revolve around understanding other cultures by experiencing them in person and by experiencing primary sources of writing and creative works. The author stresses the importance of listening to the perspectives of those within a culture rather than focusing on what others have to say about a culture that is not their own.

The mindset of accepting others and offering a safe place where people share their experiences is emphasized. Examples of how mainstream culture and language barriers may alienate some individuals are given, and suggestions about how to be more inclusive are offered.

**Lankes, R. David. "The Ethics of Participatory Librarianship*." Journal of Library Administration* 47, no. 3 (2008): 233-241.**

This article comments on the technology brief, "Participatory Networks: The Library as Conversation," commissioned by the Information Technology Policy Office of the American Library Association. Lankes begins by explaining conversation theory and knowledge

production in relation to social networking and the Internet. He shows how users' expectations to participate in these online environments exemplify user's expectations of participation within the virtual library and the brick and mortar. The concepts presented are applicable for creating a culture of participation amongst libraries and communities. Lankes uses individual examples of interactions such as virtual reference and user input in library catalogs. Lankes also explains how conversation and the participatory environment are fundamental to ethical settings. In particular, Lankes argues that all individuals and organizations have biases, and that the ethical thing to do is make these biases known.

Through admission of personal biases, librarians can create a participatory environment where conversation actively engages the individual and the community. The ethics of librarianship are grounded not only in the librarian profession but also within the community that a library serves. Lankes describes participation in the form of conversation as a negotiation between the librarian and the user, as well as, the library and the community.

**Shachaf, Pnina and Sarah Horowitz. "Are virtual reference services color blind?"** *Library & Information Science Research* **28, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 501-520.**

Pnina Shachaf is a faculty member in the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University. Sarah Horowitz, at the time of this publication, was a master of library science student at Indiana University (http://www.slis.indiana.edu/news/story.php?story_id=1381).

In this study, the authors examine whether virtual reference services via email are provided in an equitable manner in academic libraries. Twenty-three Association of Research Libraries

(ARL) members participated. Results were coded and evaluated based on the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) digital reference guidelines and the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) guidelines.

The study uses the patron's name to imply ethnicity in the reference query. There are five queries and six names associated with six email accounts used in the study.

Many aspects of customer service were considered including situations such as the number of answers to a request, the length of the answer, and the length of time that it took to answer the query.
The study concludes that Arabs and African Americans were discriminated against and that Caucasians received the best level of service. Suggestions for improved equality of service are given.

**Thompson, Samantha. "I Wouldn't Normally Ask This …: Or, Sensitive Questions and Why People Seem More Willing to Ask Them at a Virtual Reference Desk."** *The Reference Librarian* **51, no. 2 (2010): 171-174.**

Thompson, a reference librarian at the New York Public Library, relates her experience with assisting two reference queries where each patron asks a similar question of a sensitive nature. One patron asks the question in person, whereas the other patron asks the question using virtual reference via Second Life. The person seeking assistance in-person was nervous, and the person seeking assistance via virtual reference seemed much more comfortable.

Thompson suggests that these differences are due to actual or perceived biases of the real world and the idea of anonymity and acceptance in the virtual world. In discussing such situations with her colleagues, she goes on

to discover that sensitive questions are more common in Second Life than in the online chat environment.

**II. Bias in technology**

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**Dong, Peng, Marie Loh, and Adrian Mondry, "The 'impact factor' revisited."** *Biomedical Digital Libraries* **2 (January 2005): 7-8.**

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Dong, Loh, and Mondry, researchers at the Bioinformatics Institute, explain the benefits and limitations of the impact factor (IF) as it relates to scientific publications in this narrative review. The language is easy to understand and works well to inform the librarian who needs to use and understand such tools for collection development, readership recommendation or research. The article explains how the IF is calculated and explains factors that bias the calculation. Misunderstandings about IF and various uses of the tool are discussed. Explanations about improvements in IF calculations are included, and alternative assessment tools are suggested. The article concludes by examining the factors that professional groups should consider when using IF.

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**Granka, Laura A. "The Politics of Search: A Decade Retrospective."** *Information Society* **26, no. 5 (Oct-Dec 2010): 364-374.**

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Granka is a User Experience Researcher at Google and a PhD student in the Department of Communication at Stanford. In this article, Granka's writing style is accessible.

The information that she offers will be helpful for researchers and reference librarians who want to know more about how search engines retrieve and display information. Granka explains societal and political influences of

search engines using such topics as search engine bias, web ranking, and the continuous development of online searching.

One of the main themes throughout Granka's article is the idea of the democratized Internet versus the Internet as marketplace. Technology has a lot to do with this theme, and Granka discusses technological developments such as the search engine algorithm. She includes a lengthy explanation about how algorithms configure ranking using linguistics, popularity, user behavior, and other cues.

Granka concludes that future research needs to focus on the analysis of specific queries in order to determine source diversity within the context of the search.

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**Steichen, Ben, Helen Ashman and Vincent Wade. "A comparative survey of Personalised Information Retrieval and Adaptive Hypermedia techniques."** *Information Processing and Management* **48, no. 4 (2012) 698–724.**

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This rather technical and detailed article explains how web information retrieval systems are evolving into personalized systems. In personalized systems, search algorithms are biased in order to retrieve more relevant results. The author uses Amazon's recommender system as one example of a personalization. The focus of the article is in comparing PIR (Personalized Information Retrieval) and AH (Adaptive Hypermedia) systems. The article is included to inform librarians of the limitations and strengths of such systems. Librarians who are aware of the makeup of personalized search algorithms are more likely to find ways to compensate for limitations that may bias search results in a negative way. Though the article focuses on the benefits of personalization, section 6.3 discusses the challenges of such systems.

Some challenges include the realization that personalized systems may not retrieve opinions that contrast those of the user. Search results could be biased toward political or commercial incentives rather than user information needs. A user may also fail to question the guidance of the search engine.

**Storts-Brinks, Karyn. "Censorship Online." *Knowledge Quest* 39, no. 1 (September 2010): 22-28.**

Storts-Brinks, School Librarian, describes a lengthy struggle concerning the Internet filtering system at the Knox County school district in Tennessee.

While assisting students at the Fulton High School library with finding resources for essays, she noticed that some important resources were blocked. One of the resources that she mentions, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), was blocked even though the organization is endorsed by the National Education Association (NEA).

Furthermore, she noticed that any site that presented information about LGBT in a positive way was blocked, while sites that presented disapproval of LGBT issues were mostly available.

Storts-Brinks goes on to describe her long and frustrating struggle to ensure the availability of LGBT resources. Ultimately, this struggle resulted in the lawsuit, Franks v. Metropolitan Board of Public Education. The outcome resulted in the unblocking of the LGBT category.

**Segev, Elad. *Google and the Digital Divide: The Biases of Online Knowledge.* Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2009.**

This book will help researchers and reference librarians understand the nature of bias in search engines such as Google.

Segev, currently a lecturer at Tel Aviv University, expands many of the ideas in his previous article, "Search engines and power: A Politics of (mis-) information" and focuses on the dominant search engine, Google. He extrapolates on the way in which search engines work, specifically Google, and illustrates how Google exacerbates the digital divide and creates biases that may not be readily evident in search results.

Beginning with background information on the historical concept of knowledge as power, Segev relates various ways in which the organization and dissemination of information can create inequality. For instance, page ranking mechanisms define relevancy by popularity.

In this manner, the popular become more popular and the less popular become marginalized. This type of search strategy biases information results and does not meet the challenges of search engines to provide access to the deep web. Alternative search engines offer additional resources, but the deep web remains problematic.

Additionally other biases such as the English language and U.S. world views dominate the rest of the world's view through Google. This is most readily apparent in Google News, Google Earth, and Google Maps. Personal customization tools are also designed to limit access to results that are interesting to the individual user. However, this type of tool can also create results that widen the gap of the digital divide.

Chapter four, "Users and uses of Google's information", presents a two-year study that analyzes search queries in relation to the digital divide. The search query analysis includes three indicators: economic and political value, variety

of uses, and specificity of search. Correlations between information skills and search results are discussed.

The study finds that search skills and trends vary by country. Additionally, ideas about global economic and political influence, as well as ideas about commercialization and media trends are discussed.

The book ends with a discussion of the future of search engines. Segev emphasizes a need for better multi-media searching strategies. He concludes that the challenges of the deep web and target advertising are indications that the future of the digital divide will be more about individual customized search engines than other types of access.

### III. Bias in Collection Development

**Highby, Wendy. "The ethics of academic collection development in a politically contentious era."** *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services* **28, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 465-472.**

This article is especially helpful for those considering collection development issues that may be influenced by political situations.

Highby, Acquisition/Serials librarian, references the idea that the current political era in the U.S. as one where the country is divided almost equally between liberals and conservatives. She states that this division contributes to a contentious era which may affect academic freedom and influence collection development decisions. The State of Colorado House Bill 1315, introduced in January of 2004, is used as an example. While Highby upholds the concepts of neutrality, she uses this bill to illustrate how advocacy may be appropriate if it ensures academic freedom or is applicable to upholding professional ethics.

Highby offers suggestions to encourage the atmosphere of intellectual freedom by advocating teaching and training about ethics and knowledge production.

**Morrisey, Locke J. "Ethical Issues in Collection Development."** *Journal of Library Administration* **47, no. 3-4 (2008): 163-171.**

Morrisey, from Gleeson Library/Geschke Center-University of San Francisco, briefly discusses the first seven statements in the American Library Association's (ALA) code of ethics from a collection development standpoint.

He states that, along with the ALA Code of Ethics, every librarian needs to use the collection development manual from their library as a tool to assist in making appropriate and unbiased decisions.

He continues with a section entitled "beyond the code of ethics..." Here he states that it is optimal to have checks and balances within the library about decisions regarding collection development.

He also discusses difficult situations where working with vendors who offer perks can potentially create biased decision making.

**McMenemy, David. "Selection and censorship: Librarians and their collections."** *Library Review* **57, no. 5 (2008): 341-344.**

This editorial article was chosen because it provides an awareness of how current political situations, stock selection processes, and librarian controlled collection development relate to one another.

The article reflects on issues brought forth in

the report "Hate on the State" written in 2007 by the Centre for Social Cohesion. "Hate on the State" reports that the Tower Hamlets library in east London built an unbalanced collection of Islamic books that sways heavily toward the radical Islam perspective. Moreover, the article goes on to state that the ideas of radical Islam were then promoted by the library as such books were presented in featured display areas.

McMenemy counters the arguments presented in "Hate on the State" with a focus on guarding against censorship. Though he admits that it is regrettable the Tower Hamlets collection was not more balanced, his main focus is on the importance of using librarians to ensure this balance.

Most libraries in the UK use some sort of stock selection process. McMenemy questions this process as a probable cause of an imbalanced collection. He emphasizes the importance of librarians maintaining the responsibility of the selection process and advocates against outsourcing it to save money or time.

**Quinn, Brian. "Collection Development and the Psychology of Bias."** *The Library Quarterly* **82, no. 3 (2012): 277-304.**

The author begins by discussing approaches to the problem of bias in collection development. He shows examples of how, overall, the literature emphasizes dealing with bias from a philosophical perspective. This philosophical perspective includes adhering to a set of values or ethics.

However, Quinn explains that this focus in the literature is inadequate as it does little to address the more critical nature of the psychology of bias. A detailed explanation of the psychology of bias and its potential effect upon selectors ensues. Quinn clearly defines perspectives and terminology in an easy to read

and thought provoking way. This unique perspective in the literature will help librarians more fully understand and deal with aspects of bias that may be unconsciously affecting the selection process.

Quinn makes suggestions for ways that individual librarians may become aware of their biases. He also makes suggestions for how to deal with those biases once the librarian is aware of them.

Finally, Quinn offers ten solid suggestions at the group level for how libraries can create and encourage practices to keep biases in check.

**IV. Collections of selected articles about bias**

**Ingold, Cindy and Susan E. Searing. "Introduction: Gender Issues in Information Needs and Services."** *Library Trends* **56, no. 2 (2007): 299-565.**

This special journal issue provides an overall scope of how gender-related biases affect information and services in libraries. The editors chose materials reflective of the current environment.

Though a variety of topics are discussed, the main focus is the inequalities and needs of women. The issue provides an introduction and organizes twelve informative articles into four groups. The first group focuses on the roles of women. The first two articles are about meeting the information needs of adult women through programming and user studies. The third focuses on archiving the histories of women in underrepresented groups.

The second group is composed of three articles on gender and youth. There is a study on gender and computer usage for ages 4-8 and a separate study on the same subject for ages 14-17. In the final article of the group, the author discusses the history of how reading has

been promoted for children. The discovery that reading promotion was frequently based on gender role expectations led the author to conclude that equal promotion for boys and girls is needed despite society's gender role expectations.

The third group is about information resources for women. The first article is about women's health and gender-specific medicine. A timeline detailing the inclusion of women in medical research is included. Due to the long lead time of translating research into practice, the author states that librarians can play an important role in advocating for the dissemination of this type of information. The second article analyzes the databases Women's Studies International, Contemporary Women's Issues, and GenderWatch. This analysis is intended to assist libraries in making purchasing decisions. The third article discusses findings of a decade by decade analysis of 437 biographical reference works on female subjects.

The fourth and final group discusses information literacy, questions the neutrality of information, and offers suggestions for promoting the equality of information. The first article in this group discusses developing a college course where feminism and information literacy are brought into the classroom. The second article discusses how organized information can be biased and suggests alternatives to traditional Aristotelian logic. The final article offers suggestions for how library information science professionals can promote equality for sexual minorities.

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**Lewis, Alison.** *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian.* **Duluth: Library Juice Press, 2008**.

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This book contains a series of essays previously published in the journal *Progressive Librarian*. An introduction followed by ten articles is presented in chronological publication order from 1991 to Winter 2006/2007.

Most of the articles reflect on some aspect of the political nature of librarianship. The book often reiterates ways in which neutrality is impossible and often equates the ideology of neutrality with the attitude of indifference. Various subjects such as corporate influence, balanced collections, social responsibility, politics, activism, information criticism, and the meaning of neutrality are discussed.

Each article concludes with a list of works cited. For those who are interested in a variety of perspectives about the nature of bias in libraries, the entire book is worthy of reading. A few articles are highlighted below:

Acquisitions and collection development librarians may be especially interested in "Corporate Inroads and Librarianship". Concerns over ways in which corporate hegemony infiltrates itself into the library are discussed in this article. The author, Peter McDonald, explains that libraries increasingly subscribe to online databases that give up library ownership and transfer control over access to corporations. Additionally, he points out that acquisitions and many other aspects of librarianship are also being outsourced to corporations.

For those interested in social responsibility, the article, "A Few Gates Redux," by Steven Joyce, covers the history of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the ALA. The article begins with a reflection on the outrage of many librarians concerning the cover of the July/August 1992 edition of *American Libraries*. The photo depicted people standing behind a banner that read, "Gay and Lesbian Task Force American Library Association." Debates surrounding the idea of neutrality verses social responsibility are discussed.

Librarians teaching information literacy may be especially interested in John Doherty's essay,

"Toward Self- Reflection in Librarianship: What is Praxis?" Doherty defines praxis and describes its relevance for librarianship. He uses the reference interview to exemplify the need for librarians to be self-reflective. He also describes how his dissatisfaction with scavenger hunt assignments compelled him to create a student led learning environment. Doherty explains that librarians often rely on ineffective technical methods. An effective approach involves studying the outcomes of information literacy instruction on student learning and responding to those outcomes with critical analysis.

**V. Bibliographies**

**Osif, Bonnie. "Selection and Censorship."** *Library Administration and Managment* **19, no. 1 (2005): 42-46.**

As assistant engineering librarian at Pennsylvania University, Osif uses some compelling quotes to discuss the tensions that may exist when confronting ideas about selection and censorship. She provides a bibliographic essay that focuses on recently published material. Many resources are included in her essay. A few of the resources that she discusses are listed below:

- Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management by Peggy Johnson

- Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age by Paul S. Boyer
- Censorship by Gail Blasser Riley
- The Limits of Tolerance: Censorship and Intellectual Freedom in Public Libraries by Ann Curry
- Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools by Henry Reichman

**Steiner, Sarah. "Personal Bias in Library Collections and Services."** *University Library Faculty Publications* **(May 1, 2004), http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/univ_lib_facpub/18.**

Steiner, currently the Social Work, Honors College, and Virtual Services Librarian for Georgia State University, presents a brief annotated bibliography discussing many aspects of personal bias for the library profession. She includes the following topics: subject heading bias, self-censorship by school media specialists, bias in the reference interview, bias based on publishing firms, political bias, multicultural needs, bias and censorship in collection development, and bias in supposedly diverse collections.

*Denise Dimsdale is Education Librarian at Georgia State University, mmdimsdale@gsu.edu*