



Evidence Summary

Walking a Fine Line: How Norwegian Public Library Staff Navigate Activism and Neutrality in Their Settings

A Review of:

Solum, E. E. B. D. (2025). Negotiating neutrality and activism in Norwegian public libraries: the case of environmental sustainability. *Journal of Documentation*, 81(1), 107-124.

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Abstract

Objective – To explore the idea of public library staff's environmental activism in Norway and determine how they view library neutrality when considering the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Design – Qualitative study design using semi-structured interviews.

Setting – Four public libraries in Norway: The Northern and central-Eastern regions (2), and Oslo (2).

Subjects – 30 Librarians and non-librarians from the Norwegian public library sector, with a range of 1-38 years of employment in the library system.

Methods – The researcher recruited participants from the chosen library locations, conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, and analyzed data by library location using deductive-inductive methods. They also conducted field visits to each library and reviewed internal documents.

Main Results – The data revealed that the library’s support of the SDGs is context-dependant, and that negotiating between advocacy and neutrality may occur through library initiatives that are not outwardly political. Interview participants described their thoughts surrounding library neutrality during event-planning, with some feeling that demonstrating a stance on climate issues could reignite negative biases about public libraries. Other participants felt that if events are hosted, skeptical voices should be welcomed to offer balanced discussion. The data suggested that neutrality and activism are impacted by professional competencies, as librarians who are hired to support sustainability initiatives may lead efforts that are later adopted by other professionals and organizations.

Conclusion – Norwegian public library staff are aware that environmental activism is important and are determining how best to address the UN’s SDGs while also welcoming patrons with various views.

Commentary

The discussion surrounding library neutrality has been ongoing for some time, with prominent organizations asking if neutrality in libraries is possible, and how it can reasonably be achieved (“Are Libraries Neutral”, 2018). In addition, the literature demonstrates an existing interest in how Norwegian public libraries act as democratic institutions and considers how neutrality manifests in these spaces (Koizumi & Larsen, 2023). This study by Solum (2025) adds to this conversation using qualitative methods and is thus reviewed using the qualitative study review form by Letts et al. (2007).

In reviewing this study, the evidence offered by Solum (2025) presents several interesting strengths. It offers an enlightening introduction that sets the stage for this work through explanation of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and how these goals have been implicated in librarianship. Additionally, it clearly outlines three main research questions and explores this work through theoretical frameworks such as “Mouffean conflict theory against Habermasian public sphere theory” (p. 108). The literature review itself covers relevant themes and guides the reader towards an understanding of how neutrality and activism have manifested in libraries to date. Regarding the methods, the author offers extensive detail regarding their study participants and setting and used appropriate data collection techniques supplemented by other methods to ensure triangulation. Data analysis used suitable processes and was presented thematically (and by library location) in a way the reader can easily interpret.

While this study has its strengths, there are also limitations worth noting. The author used purposeful selection to solicit participants by location, but gave no information on methods used to actually recruit these individuals, and it is not clear where and how the semi-structured interviews took place. While the findings are grouped by themes that reflect the study’s main research questions, an interview protocol is not provided so it is unclear if the stated findings relate to the actual interview questions used. Regarding data analysis, the approach was appropriate, yet the article could have provided more detail surrounding the procedures done at this stage. In addition, there is no mention of potential biases introduced by the lone researcher who conducted the study, and given that this topic is political in nature, the article could have benefited from an author’s statement of positionality.

The author acknowledges that this work’s transferability is limited due to its specific context. Yet, these findings still provide readers across library settings a chance to understand how other professionals reconcile their own activism with their mandate to create spaces for all. As the climate crisis continues to impact the geopolitical landscape, this study offers a sense of camaraderie for current staff who must navigate library system mandates alongside personal/professional values.

Furthermore, it provides up-and-coming library professionals with encouragement to use their positions for the greater good, regardless of what issues impact society as their careers progress.

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