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# Little Red Herrings — Biases, Oxen, and Being Gored

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

In politics, as in most things in life, it depends on whose ox is being gored, and that going often is colored by our biases. The going may not even fall along party lines. If the matter isn't about you, about your interests, or about someone who you are interested in, you are as likely to dismiss it as you do the sunrise.

This point was recently driven home to me by a fake news story about the Super Bowl Champions visiting the White House. It ran a non-story, a story that did not happen by focusing on those who were not going to the White House rather than on those who did. In the end, they got it wrong, making it seem that there was a protest vote against the President when, like almost every year since this silly event has been going on, there were about the same number who show up every year. The last time the Patriots were there, 36 appeared with **Obama**; this year, 34 appeared with **Trump**. No news here.

But the story sparked a point in my mind about biases. If I'm a Republican, I cannot let a Democrat look good. Likewise, if I'm a Democrat, I cannot allow anything good to pass about a Republican, and especially *this* Republican. For those of us in the business of ferreting out the truth for folks, or at the very least, truthful information, this becomes critically important to avoid. It isn't so much that fake news has emerged; the fact of the matter is that this is the first year people have begun to pay attention to it, but, alas, only in a party line, biased way.

As librarians, we cannot afford to take sides. We have to remain as neutral as is humanly possible while at work, as partisan as we want to be after hours. A trend is mounting, however,

among some librarians, mainly but not exclusively younger ones. They believe that now is the time to draw a line in the sand, to take a stand, to unseat this President; and that is not only a really bad idea in general regardless of who is in power, but also a terrible idea for the profession. Although he did not always follow his own advice, **Francis Bacon** is pertinent here: "if a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."

Not to compare small things with great, but a book that recently came out, drove home this point to me even more. **Clara Bingham's** *Witness to the Revolution: Radicals, Resisters, Vets, Hippies, and the Year America Lost Its Mind and Found Its Soul* (Random House, 2016) is a collection of hundreds of interviews with sixties revolutionaries. It's a movement I know a little about since I lived through a good part of it. While the peace movement was bustling right along and gaining tremendous momentum, a combination of biases within the movement, and an undisciplined view that it had to be all or nothing, blew up that missile as soon as it began gaining altitude.

For example, women involved in the peace movement soon discovered, as the movement gained musculature, that they were important as ... only women who got coffee, ran errands, and took dictation. Of course, the free love aspect also proved advantageous ... to men, who could walk away when they pleased. Women, on the other hand, were stuck raising children, or having abortions, alone. Add to this the

all-or-nothing attitude of the Weathermen, and disaster loomed. Once they blew up Sterling Hall (aka, Army Math Research Center) on the campus of the University of Wisconsin, killing a married graduate student and father of three children, **Robert Fassnacht**, the movement tanked, and quickly. Most movement members saw it coming; some got out, others did not. It's not a stretch to say that internal biases killed everything.

I see the small but vocal group of librarians wanting to "do something" making a similar mistake on a smaller scale culturally, but a potentially more massive one professionally. Professions that are typically apolitical should remain that way.

It serves no one to draw a line in the sand because more often than not that alienates that part of membership on the "wrong" side of that line. Our membership needs to remember that in whatever library we work, we serve everyone: Democrats, Republicans, the far right, the far left, the alt-right, the alt-left, Libertarians and Independents. Assigning ourselves to one side or the other will only force the snubbed side to make a decision against us. If my patrons know I am decidedly and very publicly left wing and fiercely anti-**Trump**, how can they ever trust anything I say about him, his presidency, or the right in general, even (and especially) when I speak truthfully?

It's helpful to remember that our funding comes without partisan colors. It remains green from whoever has the will to fund us. In tough times that are sure to become tougher still, this may well be the most important thing about which we can remind each other. 🌱



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submissions, and statements that are available on the **AAP** website, that all staff members need to get such jobs done is a telephone, a computer, and an Internet connection. **PSP** also oversees important surveys, including roundups of journal publishing, which involve extensive reporting from publishers. Again, you don't need a suite of offices in Manhattan to get these jobs done either, although you do have to continually keep on top of busy staffers at publishing houses to obtain extensive data.

What also concerns me, as someone with years of history with **PSP**, is the continued functioning of the valuable workshops, the **PROSE** awards program, and the annual conference (with over 250 attendees this year). The workshops are to be held in publishers' conference rooms. Which sounds fine until some staff member complains about the un-

availability of a conference room when an important book author team or several journal editorial board members are in town. Moving **PROSE**, which has blossomed in recent years under the leadership of **John Jenkins** and with **PSP** staffer **Kate Kolendo's** organizational skills, presents other potential problems. There are well over 500 entries annually, most of them books, which have to be logged in and then boxed up and sent out to judges. It takes a great deal of coordination to put on the annual conference and make it as successful as it's been for so long. (I've reported on the conference for many years.) I wonder how easily all that's going to be handled in the future.

I've been told that the New York office expenses were not sustainable, and I'm sure that **AAP** leadership can justify the closing in financial terms. When I hear that, I think about **Andy Neilly's** comment about publishers' dues-paying reluctance, at least back in the day. To be sure, **AAP** has accomplished a great deal in the past nearly half century, particularly with

anti-censorship, copyright, and educational efforts. But it did appear to me, in the days when I was running **AAP** committees, that the movie industry, with smaller annual revenues, I believed, had a more visible and powerful trade organization.

I understand what **AAP's** top priorities should be. I agree with the answer recently retired **AAP** president **Tom Allen** gave to a question that alluded to them in his *Publishers Weekly* "exit interview": copyright and intellectual property protections. But also important to **AAP's** — and the publishing industry's — survival are the long-standing educational, informational, and promotional activities that **PSP**, arguably **AAP's** staunchest division, has carried out so successfully. And yes, camaraderie is also an essential ingredient. I hope these activities and spirit aren't allowed to wither away, much less diminish. After all, isn't a knowledgeable, informed, and collegial workforce a bulwark against an industry's destruction? 🌱