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Little Red Herrings-Biases, Oxen and Being Gored

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I
n politics, as in most things in life, it de-

pends on whose ox is being gored, and that
goring often is colored by our biases. The
goring 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 pos-
sible while at work, as partisan as we want to
be after hours. A trend is mounting, however,
among some librarians, mainly but not exclu-
sively 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 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 muscle, that they were important as
… only women who got coffee, ran errands,
and took dictation. Of course, the free love as-
pect 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 profession-
ally. Professions that are typically apolitical should remain that way.

It serves no one to draw a line in the sand be-
cause 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 every-
one: 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 pa-
trons 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.