

The Freedom to Read

By Kent Oliver

As a document stating the premises behind librarians' and publishers' position on censorship and access to information there is nothing more inspiring than "The Freedom to Read." The original document was developed in 1953 during the Westchester Conference of the American Library Association and the American Book Publishers Council, which would later morph into the Association of American Publishers. It is a dynamic statement that elicits the central concept around intellectual freedom that motivated many to become librarians: to provide and protect access to information without restriction. Presenting this document to audiences of librarians and the general public in the United States during a new century reveals the continual flux of intellectual freedom and our profession. "The Freedom to Read" was written during the height of McCarthyism and is a statement of opposition to our government's violation of the First and Fourth Amendments as well as public censorship. Audiences and readers unfamiliar with its origin often assume that, due to the content, it is a more recent document addressing the temper of our country since the events of 9/11.

Most librarians join the profession with a limited understanding of intellectual freedom and its principles. They are probably even less aware of their crucial role in defending the First Amendment. The American Library Association (ALA) is emphatic that intellectual freedom is a core value of our profession. The ALA's Core Values, developed and presented by the second Core Values Task Force and adopted by ALA Council in 2004, states that librarians will uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and opposes censorship. The question arises in real life situations if librarians are truly committed or simply acknowledging concepts? Does current practice and policy in libraries skirt the issue of adhering to intellectual freedom?

A case in point is the recent trend in libraries to customer self-checkout and self-service hold pick-up. This change allows for good customer service and efficient use of staff but potentially creates a confidentiality violation for library users. Privacy is an important corollary of the right to read. Without thoughtful service implementation and a basic understanding of customer privacy rights, evolving library automation practices can place customer privacy in jeopardy. Awareness is the key to moving intellectual freedom forward as change occurs. The arrival of what appears to be a true e-Book era in libraries presents new privacy concerns. The sharing of library customer data with

third party vendors is complicated and controlled through contractual agreement. Previously, libraries exercised primary control over customer data dictating by whom, how and why it was accessed and disseminated. In addition, State laws govern how and why this data may be accessed, obtained or used in the courts. Access to and use of library customer personal information by a third party for commercial use and potential government access presents a dilemma for librarians.

"The Freedom to Read" statement anticipated society's forces conspiring to control what we read and write. Articles 4, 5 and 6 are quite explicit in dealing with different forms of censorship. One of those, labeling, is often misunderstood in the library environment today. Not only should librarians avoid internal labeling practices which create obstacles to accessing materials, but they must guard against unbalanced external review systems and processing tools. Organizations reviewing and rating materials with a political and moral agenda make this difficult.

Librarians using book review resources, especially in the youth area, should be aware of a resource's authority to review as well as the potential motives behind the reviews. Is the mission of the source to review the quality of writing or to comment on the content's "appropriateness" according to artificial or less obvious political standards? It is certainly appropriate that we set boundaries or restrictions for our own reading or as parents for our children. What is not appropriate is when limits are set, overtly or covertly, by individuals or organizations for readers and parents who are attempting to exercise their First Amendment Rights.

Librarians, publishers, booksellers and attorneys have joined together in the Freedom to Read Foundation in defense of books and reading. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees all individuals the right to express their ideas without governmental interference, and to read and listen to the ideas of others. As Supreme Court Justice William Brennan said in the 1989 United States flag burning decision, *Texas vs. Johnson*, "If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable."

The Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) was established to promote and defend this right; to foster libraries and institutions wherein every individual's First Amendment freedoms are fulfilled; and to support the right of libraries to include in their collections and make available any work which they may legally acquire. The Foundation stands in opposition to the chilling impact of censorship on authors and publishers. As the litigating arm of ALA and the book industry, the FTRF often defends the First Amendment in our courts.

FTRF's defense of librarians sometimes takes it to what would seem faraway places. In 2011 FTRF was part of a U.S. Supreme Court victory in the case of *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association et. al.* This decision overturned a California law which banned the sale of violent video games to minors. The importance for librarians and publishers was voiced in the Court's majority opinion that video games constitute a form of First Amendment protected speech, just like books, plays and movies. The details of this case and most cases involving the defense of the First Amendment can have significant impact on the rights librarians exercise for their patrons.

The final paragraph of "The Freedom to Read" statement should be required reading for all library and information students. This eloquent statement is capable of standing alone in addressing our fear and asserting our strength as the profession defends intellectual freedom:

We state these propositions neither lightly nor as easy generalizations. We here stake out a lofty claim for the value of the written word. We do so because we believe that it is possessed of enormous variety and usefulness, worthy of cherishing and keeping free. We realize that the application of these propositions may mean the dissemination of ideas and manners of expression that are repugnant to many persons. We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours.

Librarians remain the gatekeepers of knowledge as they have been for centuries. That knowledge is on the bookshelves, in library community forums, on the Internet and in databases. Intellectual freedom is that core professional value that helps us understand how crucial it is that the gates remain wide open for everyone's freedom to read.

Resources:

American Library Association et al. (2004). *Freedom to Read Statement*. Revised. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/offices/oif/statementspols/ftirstatement/freedomreadstatement>.

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