

Intellectual Freedom: Moving Beyond Freedom From...to Freedom To...

By Barbara K. Stripling

The concept of freedom is often associated with the absence of restrictions on that freedom, such as **freedom from** tyranny or social injustice. Indeed, intellectual freedom is most often related to **freedom from** censorship, the invasion of privacy, Internet filtering, and the lack of access to information and ideas. Librarians have accepted responsibility for leading the fight against restrictions on intellectual freedom. In the 21st century, however, **freedom from** is only half the battle for intellectual freedom. The other half is the freedom to construct opinions and conclusions that are supported by sound evidence and balanced consideration of multiple perspectives. Much of the responsibility for “**freedom to**” must shift from librarians to individuals who are seeking information. Individuals must accept responsibility to pursue information and ideas in a way that overcomes the funneling and filtering of the digital environment and brings exposure to a variety of points of view. This **social responsibility** in the access and use of information has become integral to the concept of intellectual freedom.

Freedom From . . .

The library profession accepts responsibility for leading the educational, political, and legal efforts to maintain freedom from censorship, inequitable access, filtering, and, increasingly, threats to privacy. Rapid changes in the information world as well as political and legal pressures demand constant diligence. The American Library Association (ALA), its divisional intellectual freedom committees, and state library associations provide the essential foundation for national alertness and advocacy, influence over legislative agendas, challenges in court, and the development of local policies to implement the principles outlined in the *Library Bill of Rights* and its interpretations.

Individual librarians cannot afford to be complacent by assuming that these professional associations are “handling” intellectual freedom issues, however, because the challenges to that freedom often occur in their own local communities, influenced by the communities’ constantly changing information and social environments. Ideally, librarians, library boards, trustees, school districts and communities have adopted policies and procedures that forestall local intellectual freedom challenges. Even with locally adopted policies on collection development, challenged materials, patron privacy, and confidentiality, changes in technology and information access as well as in laws and regulations frequently require additional policy guidelines or new implementation decisions.

For example, libraries that decide to use RFID have intellectual freedom and privacy issues to consider as they integrate the new system. Collection development policies must be updated to incorporate consideration of electronic material. School librarians may find that school bandwidth issues restrict live access to online materials in nonprint formats, and they may have to develop procedures to capture that content for limited use within copyright guidelines. School librarians may also encounter unexpected electronic access issues if the school district adopts a new filtering software program with pre-set filtering parameters.

Maintaining a level of library service that provides intellectual freedom **from** the challenges of censorship, violation of confidentiality or privacy, over-filtering, and restricted access is a responsibility that librarians should not take lightly. The most troublesome restrictions are those that are invisible to patrons – for instance, patrons do not know when access to a legitimate site with health information for gay teenagers is blocked unless they are aware that the site even exists, a clear example of invisible censorship. Patrons cannot see when their personally identifiable information is captured in the background by a software program, an example of violation of privacy. Librarians themselves may not realize when their policies or procedures put intellectual freedom at risk. A controversy over the display and self-checkout of patron-hold materials arose within the past year because some librarians realized that the patron’s name was put on the outside of the book and placed on a public shelf for pickup, clearly a violation of the right of every individual to seek information in privacy. Even librarians who consider themselves strong advocates of intellectual freedom were surprised that the procedures within their own libraries did not protect their patrons’ rights to privacy.

Freedom To . . .

The library world has undergone a shift in focus during the last number of years from library-centered to user-centered services. Library advocacy efforts, for example, are being transformed into community-based initiatives that may start with national design but are translated to meet local needs and priorities. The emphasis on users or patrons provokes a discussion about our patrons’ goals and reasons for using (or not using) our library services.

The intellectual-freedom question for librarians in user-centered libraries should be: “What must our libraries give patrons the **freedom to do**?” Patrons’ goals are generally much

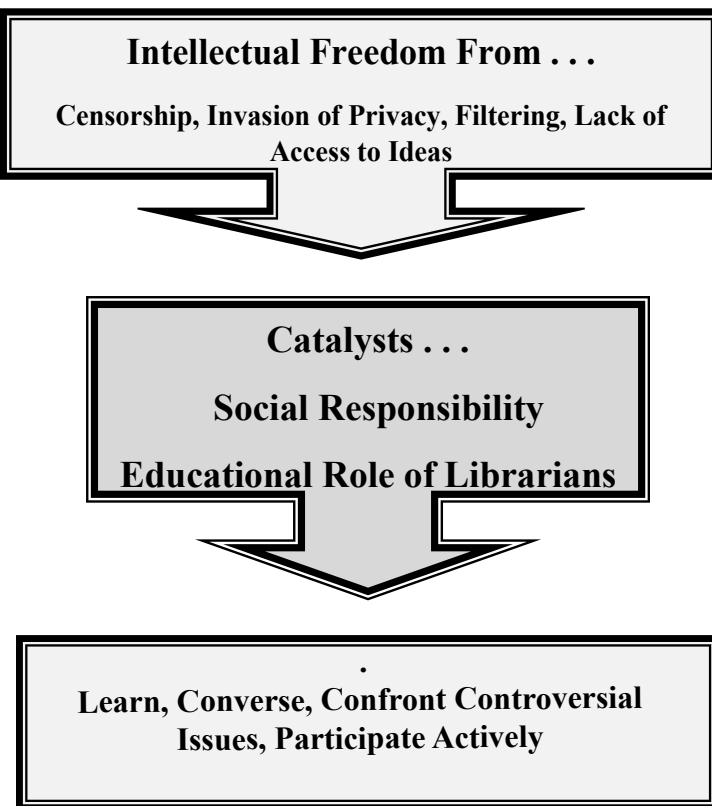
higher than simply accessing information. Intellectual freedom incorporates the **freedom to learn** by discovering new ideas; the **freedom to converse** with others, both face-to-face and virtually; the **freedom to confront controversial issues** by seeking information from multiple perspectives and points of view; and the **freedom to participate actively** in a safe and supportive environment.

Some characteristics of the electronic environment demand that librarians assume the educator role and make the “freedom to do” a shared responsibility between themselves and their patrons. The filter-bubble phenomenon identified by Eli Pariser (Pariser, 2011) is an invisible form of censorship built into search engines like Google.com and Amazon.com in which search results and ads are tailored according to past searches and geographical location. If, for example, a patron searches for “energy” from a computer in one location (city is auto-detected in Google), and then manually switches the location to another city, the search results and ads change accordingly. Although harder to detect, the same type of filtering occurs as a result of the search terms entered on previous searches. If a user searches for green energy sources consistently, then the filter-bubble characteristic of the search engine would prioritize green energy sites in the search results for “energy.” This phenomenon has major implications for both the freedom to explore ideas and the freedom to seek multiple perspectives on controversial issues. If a patron does not know that his search results are being filtered, then he can easily be fooled into thinking he has accessed a balance of accurate and varied perspectives. Librarians must educate their patrons about this skewing of the search results and teach their patrons strategies to overcome the resulting bias.

A second aspect of the digital environment that requires librarians to educate their patrons and shift some of the intellectual freedom responsibilities to them is the interactivity available through social tools. Although social tools make it much more possible for librarians to create a participatory library culture, they also facilitate the publishing of inaccurate, inflammatory, and poor quality information. As a result, some of the collection development responsibility previously held by librarians must now be assumed by the patrons themselves. Some school districts ban the use of online social tools at school and some are starting to prohibit any online communication directly between teachers and students. School librarians are left with the dilemma of fostering the freedom to participate actively in a safe and supportive online environment without access to that very environment for teaching responsible use.

Social Responsibility

The catalysts for moving beyond **freedom from** to **freedom to** are social responsibility and the educational role of librarians.



If library patrons are going to be intellectually free, then librarians must teach them, either explicitly or through scaffolding and modeling, to be socially responsible in the access and use of information. Librarians in all types of libraries are educators in some sense of the word. In public and special libraries, teaching may occur one-on-one as librarians are helping individual users find information. Teaching may also be built in to navigation aids and explanatory documents prepared by librarians for self-guided searching, such as database guides and pathfinders. Explicit teaching is obviously a primary role for school librarians, and, in fact, the teaching of social responsibility is reflected in the national standards of the American Association of School Librarians (AASC), *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*, where learners are expected to “. . . participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society” (American, 2007).

Five areas of responsibility should be taught to students to enable them to exercise their **freedom to** seek and use information in a socially responsible way:

- Evaluating information
- Active searching for multiple perspectives
- Constructing one’s own ideas, opinions, and conclusions based on evidence
- Responsibly interacting with others
- Monitoring one’s own online publishing and behavior

Evaluating Information

Much of the responsibility for evaluating resources and information has shifted from librarians to users, especially in the online environment. School librarians use fake websites, websites that are obviously biased or inaccurate, Wikipedia, and authoritative websites to guide students through the process of evaluation based on accuracy, credibility, authority, currency, and point of view. Students discover how to draw clues from the web address, “Contact” and “About” pages, documentation and citations, comparison of information with other sources, and even links from and to the site. Students also find out quickly that the “author” or “publisher” of many websites is unknown and that, even if the producer of the website is listed, the producer’s authority and credibility may be hard to determine.

Active Searching for Multiple Perspectives

The most difficult aspect of evaluating online information for most students is determining point of view and the validity of evidence offered to support that perspective. In the online environment, the first problem is that students often do not encounter balanced overview information first (or maybe ever) in the search process. Consequently, they do not have a broad perspective on all sides of an issue as they begin their investigations. With little or no knowledge of the multiple facets to their topics, students will follow a serendipitous research path that takes them to a website with one perspective that links to other websites that support the same point of view.

On the library shelves, librarians can provoke consideration of multiple points of view by purchasing materials that provide accurate and comprehensive information on all sides to an issue. Since these books are shelved next to each other, students who encounter one point of view are likely to encounter others. In the online environment, such linkage is obviously not possible. Websites rarely provide information on all sides to an issue and websites with opposing viewpoints may not even surface in the top results of a search.

Unless students are taught to take responsibility for seeking alternative perspectives, they will follow the natural path of looking at the top sites listed in their search results and ignoring the bias or limited point of view represented by those sites. Librarians must help students develop specific strategies for developing search terms that elicit opposing viewpoints, for thinking of antonyms as well as synonyms to broaden their searches, for capturing and following up on any clues about different perspectives, and for questioning and evaluating the information that they do find to determine the limitations of the point of view presented.

Constructing One’s Own Ideas, Opinions, and Conclusions Based on Evidence

Perhaps the most important responsibility that librarians can impart to students is to construct their own ideas, opinions, and conclusions based on the information they find. By processing the information mentally and drawing conclusions, students will have converted information to knowledge and understanding and will have achieved a high level of intellectual freedom. Too often students restrain their own thinking by simply copying information they find without engaging in forming their own understandings.

Teaching students to construct ideas is difficult. Librarians must teach their users to use thinking skills like comparison, analysis, synthesis, pattern-finding, and organization in order to engage in thoughtful creation of their own ideas. Students may resist the extra work required, but a combination of provocative and supportive questioning by the librarian may help them move to deeper levels of understanding.

Responsibly Interacting with Others

Students are drawn to interactive communication with their friends through multiple social tools. Librarians can help students thrive in the online environment by teaching them to interact responsibly; treating others with respect, maintaining their own privacy and the privacy of others, understanding the code switching required to use online communication effectively for both personal and academic reasons, and helping them learn to maintain focus instead of simply flitting from one conversation or tool to another.

Librarians must actively teach socially responsible behavior in the online environment through lessons and experiences in both safety and responsibility. School districts may develop digital citizenship curriculums to guide the development of this social responsibility. The following is a brief overview of the digital citizenship curriculum framed by the New York City School Library System:

(See page 11.)

Grade	Responsibility	Safety
1	Respecting yourself and others	Only talk to people you know
2	Respecting your own privacy	Cybersafety (real friends vs. digital friends)
3	Respecting the privacy of others	Safe Searching - staying in a kid friendly zone and what to do when things go wrong
4	Digital communication tools and netiquette/respectful collaboration	Safe navigation and keeping your computer safe (don't click here - avoiding viruses)
5	Intellectual property/plagiarism	Protecting own privacy (digital footprint, creating strong passwords, logging off your accounts, thoughtful uploading "think before you post!")
6	Evaluation of online information	Cyberbullying - social networking
7	Fair use/respecting the digital privacy of yourself and others	Cyberbullying and responsibility for self
8	E-mail etiquette Social networking	Cyberbullying and responsibility to others
9	Plagiarism	Use of technology tools - viruses, phishing Digital footprint: creating a "professional" online identity
10	Intellectual property and fair use (using diverse formats)	Digital footprint: Cyber slander
11	Multiple points of view	Digital footprint: Going viral, "Think before you post!"
12	Social networking for college and career Plagiarism Multiple points of view	Digital footprint: Credit card, financial information

Digital Citizenship Curriculum Framework – New York City School Library System

Monitoring One's Own Online Publishing and Behavior

The ease with which anyone can post and publish information to the web is empowering but it also necessitates the teaching of self-monitoring. Students may develop the impression that, if they publish their writing on the web, through a blog or posting on a social network site, then they have authority and expertise. They may also develop the mindset that, if they write it and their writing appears online, then it is true. The mental habits that ensue from such thinking are actually antithetical to intellectual freedom because they involve no evaluation of information, no recognition of alternative viewpoints, limited sensitivity to responses of others, and conclusions and opinions offered with little supporting evidence.

By building self-assessment into every online experience, even those experiences in which students use professional databases and websites, librarians can help students develop the ability to monitor their own online behavior and assess

their own online publishing. Intellectual freedom in the online environment carries with it the responsibility to behave ethically and respectfully at all times.

Moving Users Beyond *Freedom From* to *Freedom To*

Librarians have accepted the mission to empower library patrons to be effective users of information and ideas. An essential component of that mission is to create an environment that protects and promotes the intellectual freedom of everyone engaged with the library and of the community as a whole.

The responsibility for protecting the **freedom from** censorship, lack of privacy, filtering, and lack of access is most often fulfilled by professional library associations at the state and national levels and by individual librarians at the local level who maintain vigilance and develop local policies that guarantee intellectual freedom for every community member.

Promoting the **freedom to** learn, converse with others online, confront controversial issues, and participate actively in the online environment falls within the realm of both librarians and individual users. By teaching social responsibility, librarians can both provoke and support their users behavior in ways that guarantee their intellectual freedom to construct their own ideas. By sharing responsibility for intellectual freedom with their patrons, librarians strengthen the foundation of intellectual freedom for our society as a whole.

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