

Analytical Reaction Paper #3 - Intellectual Freedom & The Information Profession
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I. Introduction

The concept of intellectual freedom is one that, while vital to the information profession, can prove difficult to define. The ALA has their working definition of intellectual freedom, which is a multi-pronged statement meant to blanket all areas of intellectual freedom: the freedom to read, speak, and find information freely. As defined by the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, intellectual freedom is:

"...the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored" (ALA 2016). While this definition may be vague, it is up to the individual librarians (or other information professionals) to be proactive and educated about the concept of intellectual freedom, and to defend it in the context of their workplace. Not all libraries serve the same type of information needs or patrons, therefore intellectual freedom challenges come in all forms. In a school library or public library setting, it may be a book challenge. In an academic library, there may be challenges to privacy policies. In any case, librarians must be cognizant of a few facts as they navigate the world of intellectual freedom and its challenges. Firstly, that libraries are shaped by institutions often beyond the control of the individual (State powers, financial powers, forces of racism, sexism, and other prejudices that have shaped State power, etc.) and secondly: that these institutions should not hold sway over what are essentially the fundamental rights of the information profession.

Currently, librarians are addressing intellectual freedom challenges in a myriad of ways - through public education, advocacy programming, and political action. All of these actions have been aided through the use of technology (social media and otherwise). Librarians who are proactive and progressive with a good grasp of history are those librarians who will put up the strongest fight against censorship forces.

II. History of the Information Profession & Intellectual Freedom

When we discuss the “changing roles of libraries”, we are often thinking of it in the 21st century context. However, it cannot be ignored that the information profession (speaking specifically of librarianship) has been changing for as long as it has been a profession. The history of librarianship is often fraught with very classist overtones - a paternalistic practice that dictated not intellectual freedom, but the very opposite.

In Rubin’s text, his exploration of historic North American librarianship illustrates this very well. Melvil Dewey, one of the names most closely associated with the practice of librarianship, subscribed to the idea that “a librarian’s duty is to provide the public with “better” books that could improve people” (Rubin 79). This is a form of censorship - to make qualifying judgements on what patrons want to read, rather than just providing them with the freedom to read whatever they’d like. The ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual elaborates on this idea further. It asserts, “... two myths can be dispelled: namely, that intellectual freedom in libraries is a tradition and that intellectual freedom has always been a major, if not the major, part of the foundation of library service in the United States...the attitude of librarians toward intellectual freedom has undergone continual change since the late nineteenth century...” (Krug & Morgan 12). So the ideas of evolving responsibilities of librarians, particularly when it comes to intellectual freedom, is not a particularly new one.

Intellectual freedom really became a chief concern of librarianship when the issue of censorship came into play. The definition of censorship, as we are about to discuss, changed throughout the 20th century, and with it came evolving attitudes about censorship. As the ALA explains, “The catalyst spurring librarians to take the initial steps toward intellectual freedom was the censorship of specific publications...one early incident came in 1924 when the Librarians’ Union reported that the Carnegie Libraries fostered a ‘system under which only books approved in a certain manner may be placed on Carnegie Library shelves and that amounts to

censorship” (ALA minutes, as quoted by Krug & Morgan 13). Demonstrated here we see very clearly the shift in attitude - from paternalizing to a realization that the practice of “approval” is actually a form of censorship. It was this shift in thinking that caused the ALA to really examine what censorship is (and largely, what threats to intellectual freedom are), and how librarians can fight it.

III. Defending Intellectual Freedom

Attacks against intellectual freedom takes many forms, but so do the methods that librarians take when defending that right. While the methods used can vary slightly in the context of the library (public, academic or school), they all have one fundamental thing in common: the assertion that intellectual freedom is a right protected by the First Amendment. Put more colorfully (and powerfully): “Intellectual freedom is freedom of the mind, and as such, it is both a personal liberty and a prerequisite for all freedoms leading to action. Moreover, intellectual freedom, protected by the guarantees of freedoms of speech and press in the First Amendment, forms the bulwark of our constitutional republic” (ALA xvii). To place the burden of protecting the foundation of a free republic on the shoulders of librarian is no small request, but one that many librarians do not take lightly. Therefore, deference to the Constitution is one such strategy that many librarians and other information professionals demonstrate while defending intellectual freedom. Being able to support (what is essentially) ideology with a firm understanding of the rights of every citizen of the country helps distill challenges, censorship attempts or other threats into a more manageable situation.

Which is not to say that defending intellectual freedom is always simple. While it is supported by constitutionally granted rights, challenges to intellectual freedom do not always take the forms of outright censorship or attempts to ban books. Often it can come in the form of an obstruction to access to information. Public libraries provide free access to the internet and reference sources as a means of supporting this particular aspect of intellectual freedom. In her

article “Intellectual Freedom and Libraries: Complexity and Change in the Twenty-First Century Digital Environment”, Eliz T. Dresang explains access thusly: “Access is one the profession’s core values and an important ally of intellectual freedom. The Internet has been recognized as an important source of information, and gaining access to it has been essential in reducing what has come to be known as the digital divide” (Dresang 179). Dresang demonstrates the role that the internet has played in access to information (a key component of intellectual freedom), yet goes on to explore that free access to ideas comes under threat much more often. Legislation and libraries’ commitment to intellectual freedom are often at odds with one another in the digital context. A specific example of this (that Dresang explores in her article) is the “Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) that “requires filtering of visual images that are ‘harmful to minors’ in order for libraries to receive federal funds...because of this, [many libraries] cannot adhere to the intellectual freedom values expressed in...their own professional code of ethics” (Dresang 180). These examples of the tension between ideology (and ethics) vs. real world concerns (budgeting, legislation, etc.) illustrate very clearly how Web access has impacted intellectual freedom. In some ways it has increased access, but it also comes with its own detractors and threats.

IV. Intellectual Freedom & Democracy

Access to information is crucial in a free-thinking democracy. In her article about the digital age, Dresang opens her article with the assertion that “Intellectual freedom is closely allied with the U.S. brand of democracy, which depends upon the rule of an informed citizenry that is able to deal with conflicting ideas and ultimately make wise choices” (Dresang 170). This statement is very telling - it is essentially saying that without an informed constituency, the government would not be capable of having dialogue or discourse about the “big” issues that face our government. An uninformed populace means an uninformed government. Put differently, “Intellectual freedom is based on a fundamental belief that the health of a democratic society is main-

tained and improved when ideas can be created and disseminated without governmental, political or social impediment” (Rubin 375). What Rubin is saying is that the act of political discourse is vital to the creation and maintenance of a democratic government - after all, a government that is free of discourse or exchange is essentially a dictatorship. Rubin does acknowledge that sometimes the dissemination of ideas or ideology can be damaging (Rubin uses *Mein Kampf* as an example), yet with free access to information, it is easier to find conflicting ideas to fascist or damaging narratives. In a democratic society where intellectual freedom is foremost, access to information is what will empower the people to act against powers of fascism, racism, sexism (all of the -isms that seek to marginalize people). Providing access to various points of view and various sources of information is a burden that information professionals must bear, and not take lightly.

V. Conclusion

Keeping this in mind - that providing access to information from many sources (and from many viewpoints) is essential to the discourse that shapes a democratic society, it is easy to see why librarians must provide materials from all perspectives. While some information may be wrong, we can often learn a lot of “wrong” information. What may at one time be considered “right” - (slavery, Jim Crow laws, transgender & LGBTQ legislation, etc.) may one day find themselves or itself on the wrong side of history. Librarians must maintain that balance in order to provide opportunities for discourse, and to provide a voice for those who may not have a voice at the time. Keeping unbiased access ensures that all voices can be heard - an important statement, and a way for librarians to keep their libraries thriving into the 21st century and beyond.

Works Cited

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