
Introduction: A Patient Labor

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I do not know whether it must be said that the critical task still entails faith in the Enlightenment: I continue to think that this task requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.
—Michel Foucault, 1984

This investigation of the West Bend (Wisconsin) Community Memorial Library controversy of 2009 is, most immediately, a case study of a library confronting organized challenge to its execution of its role in American culture. State and local statutes ensure the funding of public libraries with tax dollars and establish independent boards of trustees charged with oversight for the expenditure of such funds. In Wisconsin, Legislative Document Chapter 43 grants public library boards “exclusive charge, control and custody of all lands, buildings, money or other property” as well as authority to appoint the administration of the library. The library board may also cooperate with other agencies, including specifically the University of Wisconsin system, “to foster and encourage . . . the wider use of books and other resource, reference and educational materials upon scientific, historical, economic, literary, educational, and other useful subjects” (Chapter 43.58). These rights and privileges also establish the responsibility of the public library for intellectual and cultural enrichment of the service community, without any delineation of restrictions on that responsibility, ensuring that any boundaries of content, service populations, or types of materials are determined by the library itself.

The missions of public libraries emerge from the roots of American democracy, while those who drafted the Constitution that shaped that democracy were themselves influenced by the broad period of the European Enlightenment. The Age of Reason—as the Enlightenment is also known—decentered religion as a political structure and prioritized the values of freedom and equality. New political structures ostensibly drew their authority from the consent of those to be governed, and consent would be ideally

generated through rational debate. Democracies then required space for those debates to occur, which stimulated the emergence of the “public sphere.” The democratic foundations of freedom and equality required institutions of value, open and accessible to all, to support that space.

The concept of public sphere is, most broadly, that “space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 57). Libraries, through support of “broad social goals and values: an open and dynamic society, equalizing access to information, facility and ease of use” (Buschman, 2007), have emerged as one public-sphere institution committed to service to all. Throughout the twentieth century, librarians refined their developing commitment to their inclusive practice through a code of ethics and a collection of policies that advance best practices to support community service models. The principle of intellectual freedom is central to professional ethics and prioritized in the Library Bill of Rights.

This issue of *Library Trends* is a case study in intellectual freedom and the conflicts that so often surround it (Appendix I and Appendix II in this issue provide statements on the matter of intellectual freedom by the American Library Association). The case study is a research tool that can be used to advance a range of social inquiries, allowing investigators to study “how general social forces take shape and produce results in specific settings” (Walton, 2009, p. 122). Case-based research allows investigators to explore one event, institution, or organization from multiple angles. The particular focus encourages a detailed description that can expose multiple themes related to the case, enriching the analysis. West Bend Community Memorial Library (WBCML) was selected for this study because of the complexity of the events and their visibility. The availability of documents and digital exchanges generated by multiple participants related to the “materials challenges” and professional authority support a robust research process. This study investigates the strategies of conservative social agents in their attempts to recast the role of the public library as a negative element in advancing the public good.

But it is also a case study of the resistance to the expansion of the public sphere to include traditionally marginalized populations, such as GLBTQ populations. In her essay in this issue of *Library Trends*, Loretta Gaffney argues that, in the view of the challengers, “any GLTBQ content in YA literature was propaganda aimed at indoctrinating youth with the view that homosexuality was normal,” which violated their family values. As Michael Zimmer and Adriana McCleer indicate in their essay, the WBCML controversy was one in a string of social disruptions focused on school budgets, social climate, and education. Coalitions of conservative and religious groups aligned with social reactionaries to impact social progress toward open inquiry and inclusivity, anchored in a rhetoric of public stability.

This collection of essays provides context for understanding the challenges by situating them in the community of West Bend, exploring the

relationship of the West Bend challengers to their predecessors, analyzing the language employed by the challengers in reference to that employed by the library profession, theorizing the motivations and success of the library's grassroots supporters, and, finally, revisiting the policies currently in place intended to facilitate dialogue about library services among professionals and community stakeholders.

Zimmer and McCleer situate the West Bend (Wisconsin) controversy geographically, historically, and politically, providing the foundation for the rich descriptions of elements impacting the conflicts that follow. West Bend is a particular community in a particular state at a particular point in time. In grasping what is specific to West Bend, practitioners may come to understand not only why the events occurred in a small city in Wisconsin but also why such events could occur in other communities. The authors also provide context for the information challenge as one of many focused around the issue of recognizing GLBTQ youth as members of the West Bend community. Their description of the historical chain of events that generated such heated engagement focused on the library begins with the initial challenge to a web-based information resource developed by the Young Adult (YA) librarian for teenagers—a recommended reading list called “Out of the Closet,” originally posted in 2004. One of the new elements of the West Bend challenge controversy is this targeting of library-generated information for a particular service population for suppression. While the challenges did move on to incorporate particular titles and authors, this concern about a professionally developed reading guide to the best literature on a topic expands the frame of intellectual freedom challenges beyond the traditional library book and the intrusive Internet, and targets a local professional operating for the public good of her community.

As Gaffney argues, however, the conservative activists targeting the young adult titles they identified as inappropriate drew on traditional themes in the long history of intellectual freedom challenges in public libraries: the titles advanced propaganda that undercut traditional American values or promoted pornography, undercutting traditional family values. These two themes work like the blades of a pair of scissors, attempting to cut out provocations to mainstream American culture. Gaffney explains that the attempts of conservatives to reclaim young adults as children is designed to control teenagers' explorations of a world and the self they may be in that world. While the impetus to such control may be protective, young adults “are especially aware of the costs of censorship, and won't cooperate with attacks on their freedom to read and learn” (Gaffney, this issue, p. 736).

Emily Knox explains that the attempt to exercise social control requires an ability to exercise power. Her investigation of the contrasting definitions of the concept of “censorship” maps how the challengers shape the discourse to displace the professional concept of censorship that guides

library practice. The challengers refuse to accept the reproach associated with the label of “censor” by applying a narrowly constructed definition that reframes their own actions as actually good for the community, and the professional values as operational negatives. As Knox explains, the challengers draw their authority to express their position primarily from their position as taxpayers and their claim of a majority consensus.

While these perspectives may be valid, neither were completely true. Not all of the complainants were local residents, and the West Bend Activists For Free Speech actually collected more signatures on their petition in support of the library policy than did those who petitioned against it. However, the challengers also pursued particular strategies to enhance their power base: their use of open-records laws to expose communications among board members relative to the case, the use of traditional and digital media to rally supporters to attend library board meetings, and the filing of ethics violations against legal advisors all exploited social safeguards to buttress and maintain their mission. The use of intemperate rhetoric, by advocates of both positions, characterized the debate and challenged common assumptions about the ideal of the public sphere in American society.

Peterson squarely confronts the question of the public sphere and the possibility of rational debate in his description of the grassroots response to those he characterizes as conservative religious activists. He provides a rich description of the political environment in which the events took place, illuminating not only the political position of the public library in American society but also its vulnerability. Basing his philosophical discussion in the analysis of Jürgen Habermas, he argues, “In a nutshell, as the grounding assumptions of the public sphere undergo their historical transformations, institutions and, indeed, modes of sanctioned discourse adjust accordingly” (this issue, p. 753). Peterson’s explanation of the contrasting views of the public sphere, one grounded in the “Old” public sphere, and the other in the “New, transformed public sphere,” explains not only the conflict in West Bend but the challenge facing political discourse as a whole. His ambivalence about the viability of the grassroots effort reflects the contemporary lack of certainty about the viability of democracy and emphasizes the experimental nature of the social contract.

Peterson also draws attention to the library board of trustees, a critical element of public library legal structures and a target of the West Bend challengers. Unable to actually affect library policy, the conservative activists once again employed majoritarian political strategies and “mounted a well-organized publicity campaign to convince the West Bend city council to remove uncooperative library board members from office” (Peterson, this issue, p. 751). This campaign was successful, led by then Alderman Terry Vrana, who called for the removal of the board members based on their “ideology” (Bertin, Finan, Siems, & Platt, 2009). The requirement

that potential board appointments meet a political litmus test is not new; the fact that it was publicly stated *is* new and illuminates Peterson's concerns about the transformed ground of the public sphere.

Jean Preer also recognizes the significance of the board of trustees: "According to *Trustee Essentials: A Handbook for Wisconsin Public Library Trustees* . . . two of the main responsibilities of library trustees are formulating library policy and serving as advocates for the library in the community" (this issue, p. 760). These two pillars of accountability frame her research into and analysis of collection development plans, challenge procedures, and challenge forms of more than sixty Wisconsin public libraries. This move from the particular West Bend process to a state-wide data set illustrates what each policy has in common with the others, where variance occurs, and which are most supportive of an educational, as opposed to a defensive, process in the face of materials challenges. Preer further relates the challenge policies and documents to a larger advocacy role among library members within the community and recommends that "day-to-day, not just at times of controversy, public libraries must remind their users, taxpayers, local officials, businesses, and civic and religious groups of the values that animate library service" (p. 761). In short, every public library should be in active, engaged relationship with the community it serves.

A political experiment like democracy and its commitment to freedom allows for disruptive contest as a tumbling refinement of the public sphere, and, given the position of the public library relative to civil society, it is a natural site of conflict. However, the call for actual rational engagement on issues of concern in a pluralist society remains a discursive ideal that grounds individuals and communities in the pursuit of personal as well as collective freedom. We are effectively "laboring"—working toward, giving birth to—relationships that enable communal progress and individual exploration supported by institutions, organizations, and businesses that emerge within the American context.

For public librarians, the strategies for engaging these processes must extend beyond paper solutions to dynamic relationships, and the broader field of library and information science—state agencies, educators, professional associations—must recognize the unique status of librarians operating at the intersections of government, community, the individual, and civil society. Public libraries always have been, and always will be, about more than books and information. They are, as historians and cultural scholars have observed, institutions of "self-making"—for individuals and communities alike (Ditzion, 1948; Augst, 2007). The many variables that impact their viability relative to that role offer the possibility of broad areas of research not only within Library and Information Science but also the fields of political science, public administration, communications, sociology, education, and philosophy.

An archive of the documents and materials related to the West Bend Community Library challenge is available through the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Digital Commons, Library Challenge Archive, West Bend Community Memorial Library (Wisconsin), 2009, http://dc.uwm.edu/west_bend_library_challenge/. The collection was assembled and mounted by Jeremy Mauger and Michael Zimmer.

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