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ABSTRACT

Many of the most challenged books, year after year, feature voices from diverse communities (including those of women, racial or ethnic minorities, and LGBT people). Intellectual freedom protects these voices and protects our right to hear these voices. This essay discusses the definition of intellectual freedom, why diverse perspectives are important, and how intellectual freedom can bolster diverse voices. In turn, this can improve our relationships with one another, increasing empathy and respect, which can be reflected in numerous ways and is particularly important in a divisive political climate.

Intellectual freedom is commonly seen as a core value of librarianship in the United States (and is, in fact, formally included as one by the American Library Association [ALA]). Sometimes its meaning and application are assumed rather than made explicit. In this essay, intellectual freedom is clearly defined and articulated, then discussed in relation to diverse books. This discussion illuminates the importance of intellectual freedom not just for libraries but also for our democracy as a whole, especially when politics are divisive.

Defining Intellectual Freedom

Perhaps the most commonly used definition comes from the ALA, which defines "intellectual freedom" as "the rights of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment" (ALA 2017c, par. 1). Elsewhere, ALA explains that "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 2017d, par. 1; see also Oltmann 2016b). Both scholars and practitioners reiterate the foundational, core nature of intellectual freedom (Gorman 2000; Harkovitch, Hirst, and Loomis 2003; Knox 2011; Morrissey 2012; Oltmann 2016a, 2016b). In addition, research has shown that librarians rely on these conceptions of intellectual freedom in their daily work (Knox 2014; Oltmann 2016a).

The principle of intellectual freedom for patrons is elaborated and strengthened in the Library Bill of Rights and the accompanying official "Interpretations" and in the Code of Ethics and other related statements (Wiegand 1996; Cohen and Minow 2006; Dresang 2006). Within the library environment, intellectual freedom is most commonly associated with freedom in reading: the right to seek out and read whatever one desires. However, intellectual freedom also extends to viewing, listening to, and using library materials in other ways. This can be seen in the Library Bill of Rights. The first, second, and fifth precepts in particular are relevant:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. . . .

V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views. (ALA 2017f, par. 2–3, 6).

According to these fundamental principles of librarianship, there should be no ideological test for acquisitions, and anyone should be able to view, read, or use anything in the library. These principles apply not only to books but to all library materials.

Both the Library Bill of Rights and the definitions of intellectual freedom are expansive, meant to address various possible situations, concerns, and challenges. For example, people may wonder if children have intellectual freedom rights. This is clearly articulated in the second precept, quoted above, which explicitly includes age as a factor that should not be taken into consideration.

The ALA extends the applicability of the Library Bill of Rights (and, by implication, the definition of intellectual freedom) through its Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights (ALA 2017e). These 26 statements explain how the Library Bill of Rights applies to diverse issues, such as meeting rooms, rating systems, privacy, academic libraries, expurgation, and diversity. The interpretations provide explicit guidance as to how to enact intellectual freedom in libraries.

Intellectual freedom is often raised to counter censorship (or is positioned as the opposite of censorship). The ALA (2017d) defines "censorship" as "the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups, or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous" (par. 3). If censorship is the suppression of ideas, then intellectual freedom is the expression and protection of ideas. According to the ALA, "Censorship occurs when expressive materials, like books, magazines, films and videos, or works of art, are removed or kept

from public access" (ALA 2017d, par. 4). By contrast, intellectual freedom ensures access to these expressive materials. It is worth noting that intellectual freedom does not imply endorsement of all ideas contained in a library—rather, the focus is on access to the ideas.

This is why libraries generally oppose challenges to library materials—that is, the inclusion of certain items in the library (see Zimmer and McCleer 2014 for a detailed description of a recent challenge). Challengers typically want an item removed from a library. Since 1990, the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) of the ALA has collected data, voluntarily submitted by libraries, about book challenges.[1] Between 2001 and 2015 (the latest year for which data are available), an average of 423 books were challenged per year. According to the OIF, many challenged books are children's books, young adult books, and classics (ALA 2017b).

Book Challenges and Diversity

Across all years (and within the various categories), diverse books are frequently challenged. Here, "diverse books" are those with diverse characters or with plots driven by diversity. As the OIF describes, this includes "non-white main and/or secondary characters; LGBT main and/or secondary characters; disabled main and/or secondary characters; issues about race or racism; LGBT issues; issues about religion, which encompass in this situation the Holocaust and terrorism; issues about disability and/or mental illness; non-Western settings, in which the West is North America and Europe" (ALA 2017a, par. 4). Author Malinda Lo (2014) has also examined this issue, and she described diverse books as those "by and about people of color, LGBT people, and/or disabled people" (par. 7). Although these are imperfect conceptions of what constitutes diverse books, these definitions provide useful starting points for discussion about diversity in books.

Preliminary data indicate that diverse books are disproportionately challenged in libraries. To examine this claim, we need three pieces of data: the percentages of the US population, of US books (or authors), and of challenged books that are categorized as diverse. These percentages are difficult to obtain. To simplify these calculations, we will focus on racial and ethnic minorities. In 2015, non-Hispanic white persons constituted approximately 61.6% of the total US population (US Census Bureau, n.d.), meaning that 38.4% of the US population could be categorized as racial or ethnic minority (including Hispanic).

There are no extant data about the percentage of books in the United States written by nonwhite authors (or, more broadly, the percentage of books that qualify as diverse). However, several indications suggest the number of authors of color is low. Author Roxanne Gay (2012) examined book reviews in *The New York Times* in 2011 and found that 88% of the reviewed books were written by white authors. A speculative fiction magazine, *Fireside Fiction*, examined

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1. At this time, the OIF collects information about book challenges only, not about challenges to other types of materials.

the ratio of published short stories written by African American authors and found that only 1.96% of stories published in 2015 were by African American authors (White 2016). The non-profit group VIDA: Women in Literary Arts conducts an annual survey that examines gender imbalance in literary journals and periodicals (and has begun tracking race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and ability). Although VIDA (2012) does not provide aggregated data, it has reported gender imbalances for the past several years.

There are also some data for authors of children's and young adult books. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) began documenting the number of African American authors of youth books in 1985 and later expanded to include books by and about people of color. The percentage of children's books by authors of color or about people of color was between 7% and 12% from 1994 through 2013 (Ehrlich 2015). This rose to 14% in 2014, 15% in 2015, and 22% in 2016 (CCBC 2017). The data from 2016 are encouraging, but it is worth remembering that the nonwhite population of the United States is 38.4%, and 50.2% of children under age 5 are people of color (Wazwaz 2015). Viewed through the prism of actual population statistics, the proportion of authors of color is still much lower than it should be. Taken together, these data strongly suggest that people of color are disproportionately represented in authorship, with numbers lower than in the overall population.

Finally, we turn to the number of challenged books that are considered diverse—or, for our analysis here, the number written by authors of color. The OIF has compiled lists of the 100 most challenged books for the decades 1990–1999 and 2000–2009. Lo has examined these lists in detail. She reported, for example, that 84 different authors appeared on the 2000–2009 list, of whom 19% were nonwhite (Lo 2014). As she notes, "The *New York Times* and CCBC data are not directly comparable to the percentage of authors of color on the banned/challenged books list. However, I do think it's interesting to see that almost twice as many authors of color appear on the banned/challenged books list as were reviewed in the *New York Times*" (par. 19).

In each decade's list of challenged books, the number of diverse books is high: 43 diverse books in the 1990s and 44 in the 2000s.[2] Again, we lack data about the total number of diverse authors, but it seems likely that the overall number is lower than 43% of all authors. If so, then the number of challenged diverse books is disproportionate to the number of diverse authors. As Sandra Hughes-Hassell (2013) noted, "Clearly the books published for children and young adults do not reflect the world youth inhabit and the lives they live" (213).

2. These counts are likely conservative. When Malinda Lo examined this issue, she counted 52 diverse books on the 1990s list. This also demonstrates that the determination of "diverse book" can be somewhat ambiguous.

Why Diverse Library Resources Matter

Diversity in books matters for several reasons, as articulated in the literature. Most scholarship focuses on children and teens in this context, but diversity in reading material arguably benefits adults as well.

Diverse library materials act as both windows and mirrors (Bishop 1990; Glazier and Seo 2005; Smolkin and Young 2011). As mirrors, diverse library materials allow people from diverse communities to see themselves reflected in what they are reading. For example, LGBT youth often suffer from isolation and uncertainty about their sexuality and their acceptance by friends and family; reading about teens with similar experiences can provide support and encouragement. This creates opportunities for individuals to reflect on their own experiences and often to gain more self-awareness and understanding. It allows individuals to see themselves as part of the world they inhabit.

As a window, diverse literature allows readers to gain insight into the experiences of others. White individuals, for instance, may learn about the perspectives and situations of people of color, increasing understanding and empathy. Those who are not members of multicultural or marginalized groups can benefit, as diverse books help them "understand and respect differences and diversity" (Loh 2006, 46). Jaime Campbell Naidoo (2014) emphasizes that multicultural resources provide "the opportunity to learn how to function in a culturally pluralistic world" (6).

The Association for Library Service to Children's white paper about the importance of diversity notes that positive representations of diversity are important because they:

- Provide positive role models for culturally diverse children;
- Introduce children to characters with similar experiences and emotions;
- Convey the richness and beauty of the diverse cultures in the United States;
- Reinforce a distinct cultural identity;
- Promote multilingual and literacy development;
- Inspire learning of other cultures and general cultural knowledge;
- Facilitate acceptance of cultures different from one's own; and
- Foster global connections. (Naidoo 2014, 6)

These goals are echoed and expanded elsewhere. For example, Virginia Loh (2006) notes that children of color "need role models and positive representations, which may increase self-esteem and self-development" (46). Diverse books can help teens and others identify with their own cultures and develop "an appreciation for the diversity that occurs both within and across racial and cultural groups" (Hughes-Hassell 2013, 214). Furthermore, it can "also encourage and empower" diverse people to "take action in their own lives and in the world around them" (217).

Intellectual Freedom Advances Diverse Perspectives

Intellectual freedom, as a principle and a mind-set, creates space for many voices to be present. This happens in two ways. First, intellectual freedom acts as a bulwark against challenges, which, as we have seen, disproportionately affect diverse books. Intellectual freedom is a core value of librarianship, functioning as the bedrock of how and why librarians provide access to so much information, in so many formats, to so many people. When any library material is challenged, librarians turn to the principle of intellectual freedom to guide their decision making. Intellectual freedom provides a strong foundation from which to refute challenges to library material inclusion and to preserve access to many resources.

Recall that the ALA defines intellectual freedom as "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction" (ALA 2017d, par. 1). This serves as a mandate to have a wide range of views present, bringing us to the second way that intellectual freedom bolsters diversity: as a principle, it encourages (perhaps even requires) the presence of diverse perspectives and voices. Intellectual freedom, with its insistence that all voices be available, implies that diverse books should be part of library resources. If one does not have certain diverse viewpoints present, is intellectual freedom really being upheld?

Many libraries use *The New York Times* books reviews to aid in their selection processes, but by doing so, they are likely overlooking many books written by nonwhite authors that simply are not being reviewed there (Gay 2012). From this perspective, intellectual freedom calls for more thorough and thoughtful selection processes, going beyond the staid and traditional *New York Times.* Perhaps blogs or other types of media written by nonwhite authors should be consulted. Additional work must be undertaken to ensure that diverse viewpoints are present. Intellectual freedom is the basis for such work.

Intellectual Freedom, Diversity, and Democracy

Having diverse perspectives represented in one's library can help fulfill the ideal of intellectual freedom, but it does something further. A diverse collection includes varied ideas and perspectives, often introducing people to new perspectives and ideas they have not encountered previously. Research indicates that reading literary fiction, in particular, can increase empathy toward other people, including those not like us (Stetka 2014; Oatley 2016). New ideas open new possibilities for people. For example, a book with a disabled protagonist may enable readers to better understand the situations faced by persons with disability—leading, in turn, to more empathy and respect.

Operating from a position of increased empathy and respect can influence people's decisions in their daily lives and in larger arenas, such as the voting booth. A person may reflect on what he or she has learned through reading diverse materials and act on this reflection. A person may make different suppositions about individuals of different races (including seeing them,

perhaps for the first time, as individuals rather than as stereotyped monoliths). A person may engage in constructive dialogue with others, reaching across categories of diversity to connect, share, and learn. A person may be spurred to vote differently, taking into account the diverse perspectives he or she has encountered. Reading about the struggles of those in a lower socio-economic class, for example, may lead to voting for changes that would ease, not increase, their burdens. This could mean voting for policies that lower tax rates, that improve government housing, that are not punitive with respect to welfare, that provide job-training assistance, and so on. Developing empathy and respect for others allows people to see beyond their own experiences and knowledge.

Such empathy and respect may be particularly important in the current political climate. The 2016 presidential campaign was marked by divisive rhetoric, fostering an us-versus-them mentality. Emily Mills (2017) argued that "Trump is doing that now with several groups of people, all 'others' that good, God-fearing white Americans are supposed to now fear and loathe and blame for all of their problems" (par. 6). This stance, "othering" those who are different, is only possible when one has not known those others. One way of knowing is through reading and learning about diverse perspectives—although reading alone should not be the end of learning but rather a scaffold to further learning and interaction.

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