

# Intellectual freedom takes the bus: What do pro-Palestine ads on TransLink have to do with BC librarians?

By Justin Unrau and David C. Waddell.

In October 2013, BCLA wrote a letter to TransLink in support of the Metro Vancouver transit company's decision to run controversial political advertisements on its buses and in a Vancouver SkyTrain station. In this brief article we look at why this was an important intellectual freedom issue for librarians. Though it was not about book banning or other things we traditionally guard against happening within library walls, it is still at the heart of what libraries stand for in our communities.

## Background

This past August, ads with four maps showing progressively dwindling amounts of green appeared on Translink buses (and one train station). The maps, created by the Palestine Awareness Coalition, show diminishing territory with a headline that reads "Disappearing Palestine." They became an intellectual freedom issue because they were depicting Israel/Palestine, and specific members of the community felt they were framing the political debate regarding that part of the world.

Groups also publicly challenged the ads as unsafe speech for our public spaces (JTA, 2013). Challengers of the ads suggested the ads must be taken down because they are dangerous and analogous to homophobic or sexist messages that would also need to be taken down for singling out a group of people to feel unsafe.

## BCLA's Letter:

After seeing a number of challenges to the ads in local media, BCLA sent an official letter to Translink, supporting them while they were being criticized. The letter, signed by our president Gwen Bird, included a citation of our intellectual freedom principles and a preamble detailing what BCLA is about. Below is an excerpt from the letter:

"We understand that TransLink has recently been criticized for displaying the "Disappearing Palestine" informational advertisements put together by a

political advocacy group. In accordance with the

## DISAPPEARING PALESTINE



5 million Palestinians are classified as refugees by the UN

This ad, created by the Palestine Awareness Coalition, appeared on Translink buses and in one Skytrain station. Image by Palestine Awareness Coalition (published with permission).

BCLA statement on Intellectual Freedom we would like to acknowledge and support Translink's decision to retain the advertisements. We thank TransLink for not bowing to criticism or pressures to remove the 'Disappearing Palestine' ads and for standing up for the principles of intellectual freedom. Libraries support intellectual freedom, and positions such as the one that Translink has taken because it encourages dialogue on important and often controversial issues. Intellectual freedom, we believe, is fundamental to a democratic society and we urge all groups selling advertising space to continue to allow space for a wide diversity of views."

## Relevance to BCLA

This issue of advertising around controversial political issues is something librarians need to be aware of if we take BCLA's statements on Intellectual Freedom seriously, especially the section stating that "[i]t is in the interest for libraries and librarians to make available the widest diversity of views and expression, including those which are unorthodox or unpopular with the majority" seriously. Marty Roth and the coalition behind the Disappearing Palestine ads has

said this is an awareness-raising campaign, so it probably behooves us to be aware of the issues, especially since the ads are going to be going to other cities in the future (Nursall, 2013).

BC librarians do not have to be interested in discussing the political debate itself, but the question of whether these ads represent unorthodox vs. dangerous views is important. The posters are showing maps and stats. There is very little text in the ad, no direct exhortations, nor is there a lot of context. The images provide a certain perspective on territorial boundaries within Palestine.

While these maps and stats are cherry-picking numbers and definitions, that's exactly what all advertising does. There have been many interpretations by journalists about the potentially hostile meaning of the ad's message and the responses to the various perspectives are an equally important part of the debate (Cooper & Ip, 2013; Kay 2013). If a court decides that something is hateful, then due process has been observed and repercussions will follow. However, neither journalists, librarians, nor single members of the community have the legal right to make that call. The mural version of the advertisement on display at the Vancouver City Centre SkyTrain station has reportedly been stolen three times, which Marty Roth says is evidence of a desire to "silence Palestinian history and present reality" (Palestine Awareness Coalition, 2013).

### What We Can Do

The message in these ads is obviously political. As librarians we must ensure that we defend the right to free speech when necessary, especially when it is political. That said, the broad array of people the BCLA represents within the communities we work prevents partisanship from being appropriate. However, whenever someone silences debate, this reduces the variety of opinions available to the broader community. Not speaking up about a censorship issue is actually like weighing in on a debate. By allowing one voice to tacitly fall off the radar, you are agreeing with the other side when you must allow both sides a chance to speak.

People are not going to find unbiased information while riding the bus. This is obvious, but is also a clear

opportunity for librarians to step in. In order to remain vigorous defenders of free expression, we must be prepared to speak up. BCLA has issued its letter to TransLink encouraging dialogue on important and controversial issues. As individual librarians and organizations we can also help. Let us be prepared to provide the context that does not fit on a poster. Wading into politics can make us nervous at times, but this must never hobble our willingness to respond.

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