

July 2014

Intellectual Freedom, An Evolving and Enduring Value of Librarianship

Faye A. Chadwell
University of Oregon

Recommended Citation

Chadwell, F. A. (2014). Intellectual Freedom, An Evolving and Enduring Value of Librarianship. *OLA Quarterly*, 8(1), 18-23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1608>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Intellectual Freedom, An Evolving and Enduring Value of Librarianship

by *Faye A. Chadwell*
Head of Collection
Department,
University of Oregon

War. Our society's rhetoric may trivialize this emotionally packed word in the absence of the violence, aggression, hate, loss of life, and destruction typically associated with the realities of combat. The war on drugs. The war against poverty. The war on crime. The term seems inappropriate, even acknowledging how tackling major social issues requires intense resources and bravery. For many, President Bush's pre-invasion rhetorical use of "the war against terrorism" missed the mark by a "country mile."

Arguing about rhetoric in these times seems akin to arguing about the wetness of rain in Oregon. Let's focus attention instead on the effects of our government's activities to counter terrorism at home and abroad. These actions, including amassing military forces, passing legislation, issuing directives, reallocating resources, or marshaling moral, intellectual, and patriotic support, impinge upon us, our libraries, and the communities of users we serve. We must contemplate the consequences of what we may be asked to do.

Have the events and immediate aftermath of 9-11 changed us, our profession, our work environments, our universe? Unequivocally, yes.

Consider just the implications of the USA PATRIOT Act ("Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism" Act). With virtually no debate and no hearings in Congress, both Houses approved an act allowing law enforcement officials greater power for fighting domestic terrorism. When President Bush signed the PATRIOT Act into law on October 26, 2001, he authorized actions that have caused major concern for librarians and library associations regarding privacy and confidentiality of library records. For example, according to ALA legal counsel, the new law allows officers immediate access as soon as a search warrant is served, without providing the protection of a subpoena that formerly

would allow a library time to respond or contest the court's order.

Even prior to the PATRIOT Act, the temptation to abrogate patron's rights existed. One librarian in Florida recognized some suspected hijackers as possible library users. When she called to inform local law enforcement officials, she broke state law protecting the confidentiality of library patrons, not to mention a tenet of ALA's Code of Ethics: "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted."

In this post 9-11 climate of intolerance and suspicion, it becomes easier to ignore ethical standards when there is a difference of opinion. With statements somewhat reminiscent of "red-baiting" eras, fellow citizens, colleagues, and administrators have accused dozens of professors across the country of being "un-American" for speaking out against the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Stories like the FBI investigation of the small Art Car Museum of Houston, Texas are evocative of government intimidation during the McCarthy era. Since when can artwork protesting a former Texas governor's death row reputation be deemed a threat to that ex-governor and current President's well-being, or be equated with domestic terrorism?

In this atmosphere, even libraries cannot remain neutral. Consider the consequences of the Government Printing Office's order, based on a USGS request, that federal depositories destroy a CD-ROM survey on reservoirs and dams. This information could be used to endanger the public, but it could also be used to inform the public about the safety of nuclear reactors and chemical facilities in their neighborhoods. Library staff were consequently forced to choose between compliance with this order and their mission to provide greater public access to information.

It's ironic how the very actions put in place to make our world safer since the



horror of 9-11 have invoked more stress and fear, greater hysteria and paranoia. Most of us probably feel that enduring a little personal discomfort is the least sacrifice we can make during this time of “war.” Many citizens would agree with Washington, D.C. lawyer Thomas M. Susman, “I don’t mind relinquishing some rights to catch these people. Five thousand deaths in one blow does that to you.”

The word *sacrifice*, like *war*, is probably another term we Americans use too lightly. Indeed, there are all levels of sacrifice we might be called upon to make, as President Bush and others constantly remind us. In terms of economic sacrifice, wars have definitely altered librarians’ zealous mission to select and acquire relevant materials for our users, to organize and provide access to that material, and to offer assistance locating information. Because of necessary reallocations to foot the bill for military buildup, libraries have historically felt the drain on already limited resources, including personnel. In the conflicts from WWI to the Persian Gulf War, library personnel have enlisted in the armed forces, been drafted, or were called to reserve duty. Library workers who were pacifists and had the appropriate skills, like knowledge of a particular language, served in non-combat positions. A Library of Congress Bulletin reports that so many LC staff were recruited during WWII that the resulting personnel deficit led to cataloging backlogs that have taken more than forty years to clear.

Aside from dealing with budgetary woes as a result of our country’s participation in wars, librarians assumed additional responsibilities in order to support troops and demonstrate patriotism. During the Civil War soldiers on both sides found they had longer periods of inactivity than during peacetime. An unusually large, literate population, these soldiers opted to avail themselves of magazines, newspapers, and works of fiction offered via regimental libraries. These boxed libraries

helped lead to the establishment of formal military library service at nearly every U.S. military post by 1876. During WWI, the ALA War Service program, under the auspices of Librarian of Congress Henry Putnam, led the campaign, “Books for Sammies” (Sammie was the term for U.S. soldiers). The program solicited donations of more than 2.5 million volumes to ship to Europe before the Great War’s end. Similar programs sprang up during WWII, when ALA and the Library of Congress again combined forces to hold “Victory Book Drives” and collect volumes to ship to troops worldwide. In the Pacific Northwest, Portland’s public library and the Library Association of Portland both contributed to these efforts by delivering boxes of books to ships launched at Oregon shipyards.

Librarians and libraries undertook to prove their patriotism during the World Wars in other ways as well. Many librarians and library boards sought to distance themselves from a position of neutrality. The Wisconsin Library Commission even stated during WWI, “To be neutral now is to be disloyal.” As a result of the pressure, many book selectors elected not to add titles that might be listed on the Army Index, a list of 75 to 100 books prohibited in military training camps because of possibly seditious content. Librarians simply applied what library historians refer to as the “missionary function” of librarianship. Using their apparent aptitude for assessing local tastes, morals, and norms, the selectors applied local standards when judging books for selection or for circulation. If they did select a questionable title, they resorted to “discretionary circulation,” restricting access to those who really needed the resources (e.g., lawyers, medical practitioners, scholars). Some libraries even went so far as to pull dubious titles completely off their shelves.

None of this behavior on the part of librarians or libraries was out of step with contemporary actions. During WWI, the



press supposedly volunteered to censor itself. The passage of the First Espionage Act in 1917 established a legal context for censoring materials when it gave Postmaster General Albert S. Bursleson the authority to deny use of the mail for distributing banned or suspected seditious titles.

Portland's Public Library exemplifies a typical public library response during WWI. *Oregonian* accounts in June and July of 1919 report that board member W. F. Woodward urged the board to ban all foreign language papers as a "step toward Americanization," and contended that in light of past events it would be "wise policy" to ban serials not published "in the American language."

And what about librarians as eternal superheroes opposing ne'er-do-well censors? What about libraries serving as ancient bastions battling the book burners? The truth hurts, but the concept of intellectual freedom simply did not spring forth, Athena-like from the head of Zeus, as a fully-formulated principle of American librarianship. In fact, intellectual freedom as a significant principle of librarianship is a recently-evolved concept. Librarians were not exactly sacrificing intellectual freedom principles during WWI or WWII because these principles were not yet fully developed.

The evolution of the principle of intellectual freedom began with the rapid change in American society between 1892 and 1924. Our nation's demographics had expanded with every arrival at Ellis Island. Previously held attitudes were shifting; many people began questioning, even abandoning, traditional political, social, and religious beliefs and values. Different literary tastes, even salacious ones, were increasing as the public sought to read radical novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and risqué titles like D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and some librarians responded favorably by trying to broaden the selection of reading materials.

When our profession set out to formalize its beliefs, it often did so in

reaction to particular issues and events. ALA's first recorded protest against a banned book did not occur until 1934. The director of the Civilian Conservation Corps had prohibited the circulation of a pamphlet entitled *You and Machines* within the Corps' camps. ALA reacted by penning a letter of concern to FDR. It wasn't until the late 1930s that ALA took its first decisive position to oppose censorship. Although the story may be apocryphal, the cause is believed to be John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, which had become the center of a censorship storm in the United States. Many librarians rallied against the possible banning of Steinbeck's book, which was considered immoral or was objected to on the grounds of the novel's depiction of society. Our professional response to censorship culminated in ALA's adoption of the first Library's Bill of Rights in San Francisco on June 19, 1939, based on a policy of the Des Moines, Iowa Public Library. This declaration did not have the intended significant impact. Few library boards knew of its existence and even fewer adopted it.

ALA followed the adoption of the first Library's Bill of Rights by forming its first intellectual freedom committee in 1940: the Committee of Intellectual Freedom to Safeguard the Rights of Library Users to Freedom of Inquiry. However, it was not until 1948 and after WWII that ALA adopted what is presently known as the Library Bill of Rights, a document that emphasized the need to resist "all abridgment of the free access to ideas and full freedom of expression." During this same conference, the ALA Council responded to President Truman's loyalty oath program by issuing its "unqualified condemnation of the use of loyalty investigations in libraries." Unfortunately, lengthy and intense debate and disagreement later ensued about the exact wording of the resolution. When it was eventually reworded two years later, ALA did little or nothing to support or intervene on behalf of individual librarians.



University of N Texas Ad

In 1953, ALA issued a statement defining the profession's responsibility for making available the widest diversity of views and expressions, including those the majority might label unconventional or unpopular. This statement laid the foundation for the present-day "Freedom to Read" statement, and was created in response to intense censorship attempts and activities during the McCarthy era.

When ALA finally went on record to oppose the Vietnam War in 1971, its resolution focused on the economic impact, emphasizing how the "conflict in Southeast Asia has so distorted our national priorities as to reduce substantially the funds appropriated for educational purposes, including support for library services to the American people." Basing an anti-war protest on economic sacrifices when people are surrendering life and limb might be deemed, as *Library Journal* editor John Berry put it, "self-seeking and unpatriotic."

ALA had used virtually the same argument in regard to disarmament after World War I:

WHEREAS, The members of the American Library Association had full demonstration of the pain and pinch that belongs to war and the increased cost of all necessities, both personal and professional, caused thereby ... THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: That the American Library Association urge upon the President of the United States and Congress the initiative of a movement leading to a reduction of armament at the earliest possible moment ...

Having seen the slow development of the principle of intellectual freedom, why do we promulgate this professional myth of having always fought censorship? To deny a past that shames us? Suppress the truth because of a subconscious wish to improve our standing among other professions and toughen our reputation with the public? Probably. We are also incorporating the acts of individual librarians and library groups into our collective mythology. The

profession as an entity may become mired in what Frederick J. Stielow describes as "the stultifying social inertia wrought by decades of overly narrow professionalization and bureaucratization."

But there have been brave souls for whom inertia is anathema. They voiced unpopular and dissenting opinions, made significant sacrifices and often took the perilous high road. In a 1930 speech to the Washington, D.C. Literary Society, public librarian George Bowerman criticized the strong movement to censor materials. He argued that the public library is not "an institution for the inculcation of standardized ideas, and it is not afraid of new ideas, new art forms, new literature. It stands for free opinion and to that end it supplies material on both sides of every controversial question of human interest." In 1947, during the early part of the Cold War era, Julia Steiner, a staff member of the Los Angeles County Library System, along with two unions, sought an injunction to halt the right of supervisors to ask employees about their views, associations, or reading interests. Steiner's case became part of the first legal challenge to Truman's loyalty program that eventually went before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1971, the director of Bucknell University's Bertrand Library, Zoia Horn, was jailed for 20 days for contempt when she refused to testify about social gatherings and meetings that the U.S. government saw as part of a Harrisburg Eight conspiracy. The alleged conspiracy involved a plot to kidnap Henry Kissinger and to blow up heating tunnels beneath Washington. According to one account, "many saw the trial as a naked exercise of power. FBI agents had even gone into the stacks at Bertrand Library to see who had checked out books on explosives."


In response to the PATRIOT Act and other suspicious governmental maneuvers, critics might believe our profession will respond by descending into yet another bureaucratic hell of our own making. In our defense, we need to acknowledge that we represent a diversity of viewpoints and people—both from our users' vantage points



and from within our professional organizations. Any reactions on our part as a profession will have to reflect the need to honor that variety. Our precious diversity often makes it difficult to speak in one voice on all topics. We also need to concede that our profession in this country, conceived not long before the Civil War, does not rank among older, more established professions when we envision the entire span of human history. Our maturity and experience as a profession, and most importantly, the development of our professional ethics and principles, have been shaped by the context of the times, especially during and immediately following acts of war.

To our credit, our profession has already responded. Before the final passage of the PATRIOT Act, ALA, the Association of Research Libraries, the American Association of Law Libraries, and the Medical Library Association issued the "Library Community Statement on Pro-

posed Anti-Terrorism Measures," a statement outlining specific concerns about impending anti-terrorist legislation. At its Web site, ALA has begun providing assistance to libraries and librarians regarding the PATRIOT Act and its potential impact on library users. Finally, at our most recent midwinter meeting, ALA Council voted to reaffirm principles of intellectual freedom found in several important documents, the "Library Bill of Rights," "Libraries: An American Value," and the "Freedom to Read Statement."

As a result, we cannot employ our profession's often insidious bureaucracy or its splendid variety of voices as an excuse to take no action to oppose the abuse of the PATRIOT Act's intended legal use. Neither should we rest on the laurels of our profession's heroes. As individuals, we can choose to follow the example of Bowerman, Steiner, or Horn when the need to act arises and our conscience dictates. 

How to Write a Best Seller

Continued from page 5

of Plato and Aristotle, who copied them to keep them alive, and who later went out and taught the rest of Europe, were really only doing their small, individual work.

And while they knew it had importance in the eyes of their fellow monks—and in the eyes of God—they had no idea what importance or how far down the reaches of time it would extend.

And John Harrison, though highly aware of the importance of his invention, was at least initially concerned with winning the prize money being offered by the king. He did not know that his invention would enable his nation to create an empire that would—for better or worse—last for two centuries.

The point is that we don't know what our story is—often until it is long over—but we constantly, every moment of every day, have the opportunity to make it the best story possible.

Another type of book that I see selling well—and that I am happy to see selling well—is the book that looks back in history and tells us—reminds us again—of the accomplishments of people we think we already know—or of people we've never been exposed to.

These are as varied as Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition; or *The Professor and the Madman*, the story of how a murderer and certified lunatic helped compile the *Oxford English Dictionary*; or *The Founding Brothers*, the intertwining tale of seven men who gave our nation its start.

There is yet another book I want to mention ... *Shackleton's Way*, by Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell. ...

Sir Ernest Shackleton was an Antarctic explorer whose mission in 1914 began with abject failure when his ship with 28 men aboard became stranded, then crushed and

