

Frequently Asked Questions and Commonly Used Phrases

Talking about Democracy and Free Expression in Public Libraries



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It is more important than ever we discuss the core values of librarianship as clearly as possible among ourselves and with the public. The library plays a tremendous role in preserving and protecting the free expression of ideas, something on which democratic governments depend. Free Expression means having access to the full range of knowledge, imagination, ideas, and opinions and being able to express one's thoughts openly and publicly.

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

In the United States, democracy is commonly thought of as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” words which were spoken by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address (reportedly adapted from [those spoken by Theodore Parker](#)).

Jim Turk, Director of the Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University calls democracy “an unending public discourse about what’s legitimate and what’s illegitimate, and that discourse depends on everyone having the freedom to speak and the right to access information.”

WHAT IS INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Intellectual Freedom is a core tenet of librarianship. [According to ALA’s Support for Intellectual Freedom statement](#), it is the right “to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment. . . it promotes access to information and guides the defense against censorship.”

Attempts to limit intellectual freedom are frequently targeted toward marginalized groups which are challenging majoritarian views. Constitutional protection for expressive freedom is a vital protection for them and why equity and intellectual freedom are mutually reinforcing principles.

When discussing intellectual freedom with the public, it is important to be clear, using phrases such as “everyone’s right to the free expression of ideas,” “anti-censorship,” “the right to say and read what you want.” Use language you feel makes the most sense to your audience but remember that intellectual freedom is broader than any of these phrases.

It is also important to know your own library’s policies related to intellectual freedom, including those on collection management, programs, displays and exhibits, community use of space, internet use, and social media.

WHAT IS HATE SPEECH? IS IT LEGAL?

According to the [United Nations Declaration of Human Rights](#), “hate speech refers to offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics (such as race, religion or gender) and that may threaten social peace.” The U.S. Supreme Court has consistently ruled that [hate speech is protected speech](#). Hate speech is [against the law in Canada](#) but Canadian courts have set a very high bar as to what constitutes illegal hate speech – describing it as expression that seeks “to abuse, denigrate or delegitimize [the target], to render them lawless, dangerous, unworthy or unacceptable in the eyes of the audience [and that] expression exposing vulnerable groups to detestation and vilification goes far beyond merely discrediting, humiliating or offending the victims.”

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BANNED AND A CHALLENGED BOOK?

Though sometimes used interchangeably, “ban” and “challenge” are not the same. A challenged book is one that a person or group has raised concerns about, questioning its place in the library. A banned book is one that has been removed from a library shelf due to public outcry or government policy.

ARE LIBRARIES NEUTRAL?

Libraries have historically been thought of as neutral spaces. [Some argue](#) libraries have never been neutral. Reference to “neutrality” has been a way of expressing that libraries’ decisions about the selection and availability of library materials and services are governed by professional considerations and not by political, moral and religious views. While the majority continues to promote the value of neutrality, others are now choosing to use the word “non-partisan” instead.

It is important to work with your administration and colleagues to understand the language you are using and to consider the following:

- **Bias and Perspective** - It is helpful to keep in mind the bias and perspective of sources when assessing what you are recommending to patrons. There are several charts that demonstrate media bias; [the League of Women Voters of Torrance](#) posts two on their website. Keep in mind that even these charts are developed by people and organizations with their own perspectives.
- **Reliable Information** - Reliable information is accurate, provable, vetted and research- and scientifically based that comes from trusted sources. Misinformation and disinformation both indicate wrong or false information, or information that is not reliable or provable. With people questioning traditional sources and the promulgation of fake news, it is increasingly important for us to check sources and teach others to do the same.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT LIBRARIES ARE COMMITTED TO FREE, OPEN, AND EQUITABLE ACCESS?

Libraries are free and open to the whole public; staff, materials and building use should all be viewed through an equity lens so no one is left out and all feel a sense of belonging. We provide ways for all individuals within our communities to access our materials and buildings without discrimination.

WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT PRIVACY?

Privacy is a universal human right. [The Library Bill of Rights](#), Article 7, says, “All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.” Library workers need to be trained to protect patron privacy. Provinces, states and localities might vary on this interpretation, so it is important to know your laws and the library’s policies.

In a world growing increasingly hostile to what we’ve taken for granted as democratic norms and library values, it is more critical than ever to understand, explain and promote as clearly as possible library values and our core ideals.

The **Urban Libraries Council** is an innovation and action tank of North America’s leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions for the 21st-century. We identify significant challenges facing today’s communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.