

Research Paper: Intellectual Freedom

Jason Balistreri

School of Information, San José State University

INFO 266: Collection Management

Professor James Oliver

July 31, 2022

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Introduction

Today's librarians and Library and Information Science students are justifiably bombarded with the many positive ramifications of intellectual freedom (IF). Coming from such a librarian, that statement is not very neutral, a key guiding principle strongly supported in IF practices. Library workers are provided a vast amount of support materials from organizations like the American Library Association (ALA), that vehemently endorse the right to intellectual freedoms, like library workers providing biased free service to patrons. The above contradiction, one of advocacy vs. neutrality, is one of many struggles librarians face while attempting to be ethical information professionals. It is a complicated and expanding topic, especially with revolutionary new emerging technologies like social media apps. The changing IF landscapes for school librarians are dynamic and prompt monitoring. This paper aims to define IF, explore its foundation, and identify some current IF hotspots in the world of school librarians.

Attempting a Definition

The concept of intellectual freedom can be difficult to clearly pinpoint and encapsulate. It can be argued that some organizations take advantage of such ambiguity. Judith Krug claims that the American Library Association (ALA) has never limited itself by endorsing an official definition, instead it has "promoted a variety of principles aimed at fostering a favorable climate for intellectual freedom but without the limits imposed by a rigid definition. This approach has permitted a broad definition capable of meeting the needs of librarians as they arise" (Krug, 2017). Such calculated

measures may be justified when considering the difficult tasks that face said librarians when juggling the complexities of intellectual freedoms.

For the sake of discussion, let us defer to James LaRue's interpretation of intellectual freedom, the director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom. He explains that "in the information landscape, intellectual freedom is defined as the right to speak freely, receive or access the speech of others, and peaceably assemble, as well as the right to confidentiality and privacy" (LaRue, 2018). There are many nuances to the seemingly expanding area of intellectual freedom. Saponaro and Evans elaborated on the complexity by recommending a "convenient approach to thinking about the issues is to view IF as the overarching concept with other topics, such as ethics, access, privacy, and censorship, as different but linked issues" (2019).

Foundational Documents, Democracy, and Access

The rights to speak and assemble freely that LaRue described should sound familiar as he advocates that the rights granted within IF are deeply rooted in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Even though libraries are typically more known for shushing than speaking, libraries and IF welcome freedom of speech, thought, assembly, and to express different viewpoints. It is not a coincidence that Intellectual freedom's origin and significance dates back to our country's primary foundational documents, the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights, emphasized in the very first amendment. Krug corroborates LaRue's link to our democratic foundation by emphasizing "the belief that freedom of the mind is basic to the functioning and maintenance of democracy in the United States" (2017). The ALA's own Freedom to

Read Statement powerfully declares such benefits to democratic society, especially in hard times, by declaring “freedom has given the United States the elasticity to endure strain. Freedom keeps open the path of novel and creative solutions, and enables change to come by choice. Every silencing of a heresy, every enforcement of an orthodoxy, diminishes the toughness and resilience of our society and leaves it less able to deal with controversy and difference” (ALA, 2020a). Many would argue that the United States is currently facing unprecedented challenges over the last few years and such resiliency provided by intellectual freedoms are needed now more than ever.

Even though these freedoms originated with the founding of the United States, such support for intellectual freedom was not always prevalent. Krug ironically notes that in 1908, ALA President Arthur Bostwick called for librarians to be censors of literature, and to resist the popularity of improper books that taught how to sin (2017). As backwards as that sounds, such tones can resonate with school librarians today as they are told on one hand to provide free access to all sorts of books in the name of intellectual freedom, but simultaneously obligated to select titles that are appropriate for their school-aged students. Surely, there is a line of decency that needs to be established by school librarians and that may fluctuate based on the grade levels of the students they serve.

There is a need to analyze the context of the times in which today’s modern intellectual freedom was established. The tumultuous era of the late 1930’s and World War II set the scene. In 1940, Forrest Spaulding, member of ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee, observed that “indications in many parts of the world point to growing intolerance, suppression of free speech, and censorship affecting the rights of minorities

and individuals” (Horn & Robbins, 1998). In response to such oppressive times and increasing challenges domestically to works such as John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, Spaulding and his ALA colleagues drafted and adopted the first “Library Bill of Rights” in 1939 (LaRue, 2018).

In the eyes of the ALA and its loose definition of intellectual freedom, the Library Bill of Rights are fluid and have adjusted. Since being adopted in 1939, they have been amended many times, often coinciding during periods of great social upheaval. Currently, there are seven tenets of the Library Bill of Rights. Most people knowingly associate intellectual freedom with resistance to censorship, which is outlined in tenet III. Shannon Oltmann simplifies that IF is “most commonly associated with the freedom to read whatever one desires” (Oltmann, 2017). These can be seen in tenets I, II, and V:

- 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.
- III. A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, *age*, background, or views (ALA, 2020c).

To highlight a connection between these listed intellectual freedoms and collection management, Oltmann declares that “according to these fundamental principles of librarianship, there should be no ideological test of acquisitions, and anyone should be able to view, read, or use anything in the library” (2017). These are essential guidelines to free access of information, which is significantly more important to school libraries, especially those in low-income areas. Shanna Miles, an urban school librarian, noted that “many of her students, who range from 14 to 21, don't have access to public libraries because they or their parents don't have a car or can't reach public transportation. They also might not have Internet access at home” (Jacobson, 2016). If desired items are not selected for these school libraries, students may never have access to them. As such, Saponaro and Evans give the title of “gatekeepers” to (school) librarians with the amount of access they control. “Selection is about choices. What we elect to add, or not to add, to our collections has an impact upon our users’ access to information as well as on their freedom to explore ideas, topics, and even recreational enjoyment without restrictions” (2019).

Another one of the foundational IF documents assists in deciphering the seven Library Bill of Right principles. Self proclaimed to be “unambiguous statements of the basic principles that should govern the services of all libraries” (ALA, 2020c), circumstances may call for an elaboration. This takes the form of the ALA’s Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights, extending the applicability of the guidelines to situations requiring further support, such as IF

ramifications of new emerging technology (ALA, 2020b). These are especially helpful to school librarians that often operate independently, and extensively with minors, a key focus of the interpretations. Following the political traditions of its parent document, the interpretations also reinforce essential democratic principles through its expansion on *Universal Right to Free Expression*, and *Politics in American Libraries* that proclaim no limiting qualifiers for viewpoint nor political standing, which is essential to our self-governance (ALA, 2020b). Intellectual freedom is more than infamous censorship, but Andrea Jamison argues the vital role of a school librarian is to “create an environment that encourages responsible inquiry and exploration and one that reinforces the principles of a democratic society” (2020).

Social Good

When analyzing the many democratic precepts and context of the foundational era, there seems to be an inherently political goal to ALA’s Intellectual Freedom. Given that the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights and Code of Ethics was adopted to combat the rise and practices of totalitarianism and fascism of the 1930s, and the ALA’s Freedom to Read Statement was drafted during the paranoia of Second Red Scare of the 1950s, it can be assumed that there are political agendas behind the canon of intellectual freedom. Sides are taken and usually for the cause of democracy and social good, which can be up for interpretation itself. However, taking a stance and fighting for social good is clearly outlined in the ALA’s Code of Ethics, “we affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to

advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces” (2021). School library collections, programs, and services should attempt to aspire to such admirable goals, most do, which can be problematic through the lens of IF.

Diversity

The above ethical code is an ambitious attempt for libraries to advocate for the public good well beyond their walls and out into the world, especially in regards to advocating for diversity. The Library Bill of Rights and its Interpretations also emphasize this highlighted goal with specific elaborations on Diverse Collections, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (2020b). Shannon Oltmann speaks extensively on the benefits of diverse collections in her article *Creating Space at the Table: Intellectual Freedom Can Bolster Diverse Voices*. She explains the inclusive ideas of library collections providing mirrors to underrepresented groups, and windows to other people and cultures to build empathy and “opportunity to learn how to function in a culturally pluralistic world” (2017) . Developing a school library collection with diverse books should be a key focus for selectors while practicing intellectual freedom for their students. Thus, Oltmann declares that “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?” (2017). Going back to urban school librarian Shanna Miles and her point of low-income students only having access to school libraries, “if (diverse books) cannot be found in your collection, it simply does not exist. Would you have your LGBTQ

students believe they do not exist” (Jacobson, 2016)? Intellectual freedom answers both of the above questions by declaring a need for diverse books, so increasingly diverse students can see themselves, and their peers, in the mirrors and windows of books that they read.

Advocacy vs. Neutrality

Intellectual Freedom, through its many founding documents and interpretations, has taken a stance and advocated for causes such as democracy, social justice, inclusiveness, and other efforts primarily through free access to diverse materials with all points of views. Oltmann likes to play it safe and notes that “intellectual freedom does not imply endorsement of all ideas contained in a library—rather, the focus is on access to the ideas” (2017). However, libraries and librarians definitely choose a side on many issues. Probably most people may view these campaigns as positive and warranted, but they cause a contradiction with other principles of IF, and possibly school and outside government policies. The ALA Code of Ethics #7 stresses the need to “distinguish our personal convictions and professional duties and not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation” (ALA, 2021). The Freedom to Read Statement echoes these sentiments for librarians to remain on the sidelines and stay neutral. Item #2 declares librarians should not seek to foster education by imposing patterns of their own thought, but “(students) should have the freedom to read and consider a broader range of ideas than those that may be held by any single librarian...it is wrong that what one can read should be confined to what another thinks proper” (2020a). Can a librarian offer an opinion while still practicing the principles of intellectual freedom? These complicated issues of “neutrality versus advocacy” can be a slippery slope. Krug poses that “in essence, the question is, can libraries, as institutions, advocate social or political causes and still maintain their image as providers of views representing all sides of all questions” (2017)? The history of ALA advocacy is well laid out as the organization advocated for disarmament after WWI, called for an end to the Vietnam

War, and endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment (Krug, 2017). Additionally, Krug posits that if a library chooses to create a display of books on peace, to maintain neutrality and provide multiple points of view, does the librarian also have to create a display advocating for war?.

Those that opposed the APA's endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment argued that library users " have a right to expect the library to furnish them with uncensored information on both sides of this and all other issues. Adoption of advocacy positions...cannot help but strike a blow at the public's confidence in the fair-mindedness and even-headedness of librarians (Krug, 2017).

Conclusion

There are many more areas of intellectual freedom to explore in relation to school libraries and collection development. Given time, further exploration of the double-edged sword of supporting opposing viewpoints and how that leads to book challenges would be worthwhile. As would studying the impact of diversity on additional book challenges and subsequent preventative self-censorship from school librarians. Also deserving would be the supposed equal rights of minors, who are entitled to intellectual freedoms, but are limited in areas of privacy, decency, and age-appropriateness. A fitting conclusion for IF influence on school libraries is the ALA Interpretation of Access to Resources and Services in the School Library. "The school library plays a unique role in promoting intellectual freedom. It serves as a point of voluntary access to information and ideas and as a *learning laboratory* for students as they acquire critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed in a pluralistic society. Although the educational level and program of the school necessarily shapes the resources and services of a school library, the principles of the Library Bill of Rights apply equally to all libraries, including school libraries" (2020b). The *learning laboratories* of school libraries are definitely unique in regards to the challenges IF poses for librarians and collection management workers. The above guideline does well to point out how local school factors, policies, and decision-makers

will influence the library and its ability to practice intellectual freedom. It's up to librarians to know that the above foundational IF documents of the ALA are just suggested guidelines, not frameworks, and librarians must work with their local school stakeholders, and use their knowledge of their students, and their own better judgment to carry out the principles of intellectual freedom to the best of their abilities.

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