Introduction

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Since the adoption of the Library’s Bill of Rights by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1939, but more especially since its strengthening as the Library Bill of Rights (LBR) in 1948, librarians have come to accept the concept of intellectual freedom as central to the profession. But this acceptance came gradually, as librarians confronted challenges to their professional autonomy in book selection and collection building and as they responded to changes in the social, political, and economic environment.

In addressing the ALA conference in 1940, newly appointed Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish told librarians that they lacked professional status because they had no consensus on the “social end which librarianship exists to serve” (1940, p. 385). Referring to the worldwide rise of fascism in the 1930s, MacLeish called librarians to become guardians of the values of democracy, to examine how their role facilitated the idea of a government in which an informed electorate makes decisions. He described how he saw that social purpose: “To subject the record of experience to intelligent control so that all parts of the record shall be somewhere deposited; to bring to the servicing of that record the greatest learning and the most responsible intelligence the country can provide; to make available the relevant parts of that record to those who have need of it at the time they have need of it and in a form responsive to their needs” (p. 422). This social role, MacLeish believed, would give librarians a function as noble as that of doctors, lawyers, or ministers (predominantly male professions all)—using their expertise in the service of freedom. It is easy to make the connections between librarians’ growing adherence to a belief in intellectual freedom, even when honored more in the breach than in the observance, with their struggle for professional legitimacy and status (Robbins, 1996.)

An earlier Library Trends issue on the LBR (W. Wiegand, 1996) pointed
out that that ever-evolving document has no structural authority, no legally enforceable status—and in fact is a mishmash of philosophical precepts only partially supported by the First Amendment and its jurisprudence (S. Wiegand, 1996). By 2014 it has, however, accrued considerable normative authority or the power of common belief—at least for most librarians, if not for those who would challenge the LBR. In fact, one could argue that the LBR, and librarians’ defense of it, has won admirers—or strong detractors—from members of the public who might not have thought much about librarians before. A Danziger cartoon of June 5, 2002, for example, shows a stern librarian refusing to answer the threatening tactics of a gaggle of FBI agents following the passage of the 2001 USAPATRIOT Act. The image contrasts sharply with a similar cartoon of April 1949, in which a teacher cowers at her desk as members of a Subversive Activities Committee challenge: “You Read Books, Eh?” (Herblock, 1949).

For better or for worse, then, librarians’ professional identity is defined at least in part—and a large part—by their avowed commitment to the principles of intellectual freedom as articulated in the Library Bill of Rights and other documents, such as the Statement on Labeling, found in the ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Manual (8th ed., 2010). Evelyn Geller (1984) has written the prehistory, and Louise Robbins (1996) has written the early history of the LBR. Toni Samek (2001) has documented the period of upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many others have written microhistories or case studies or have dealt with some aspect of intellectual history in librarianship. Fortunately for readers of this volume and for the profession of librarianship, there is more to be written, new voices to be heard, and new perspectives to be applied.

The authors of the essays in this collection are some of those voices. Three of the essays were first submitted in response to a call for papers by the Library History Round Table of the ALA for the 2012 annual conference on “Intellectual Freedom and Libraries in America and Abroad: Historical Perspectives.” Following the conference, additional essays were solicited, and the authors of the first and last essays in this collection responded.

Emily Knox, whose “Intellectual Freedom and the Agnostic–Postmodernist View of Reading Effects” sets the stage for the other essays, follows a lineage of writing about reading in librarianship that began in the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago with such luminaries as Douglas Waples and Bernard Berelson, who authored books with titles like What Reading Does to People: A Summary of Evidence on the Social Effects of Reading and a Statement of Problems for Research (1940). Knox has seized on one of the problems of research that has lurked just below the surface waiting iceberg-like to crash into librarianship’s ideology: Just why do librarians think people should be able to decide for themselves what to
read? Why do librarians decline to police the reading of children? And why do challengers take exception to this position and accuse librarians and publishers of corrupting children? (2013). As the librarians and publishers who authored the 1953 Freedom to Read Statement so clearly said, “We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours” (Robbins, 1996, p. 192).

Knox posits that librarians’ commitment to intellectual freedom is born not just of the ideology of librarianship but of a particular agnostic view of the effects of reading, of the effects of exposure to new knowledge. While most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American librarians subscribed to a traditional view of reading effects—a bad book will yield bad outcomes and a good book the reverse—as times changed, librarians’ views changed, until they were willing to take the risks implied in the Freedom to Read statement. The “fiction question” was settled in part by the insistence of readers, by circulation figures. But recent years have seen the development of reader-response criticism and theories of social construction that undercut any notion that the effects of reading are predictable so that whether a book is “good” or “bad” depends less on the words on the page or the background of the author and more on the reader’s prior experience and modes of sense-making. Support for intellectual freedom comes today, Knox says, from this agnostic position on reading effects. It is also what places librarians and their intellectual freedom ideology at odds with challengers. Knox’s explication is useful in reading the subsequent essays in this volume, as one can see the changes in attitude toward materials in collections change as the times (and the underlying understanding of reading effects) change.

Eric Novotny’s article, “From Inferno to Freedom: Censorship in the Chicago Public Library, 1910–1936,” deals with the earliest period treated chronologically in this volume and the development of an early intellectual freedom statement. He turns to local contexts, including political controversies, to flesh out a microhistory of the Chicago Public Library’s (CPL) 1936 intellectual freedom statement. Along the way he details the CPL’s method of dealing with controversial materials while under the leadership of two directors: Henry Legler and Carl Roden. The two men represent the changing attitudes toward collections that Knox describes.

Legler saw the role of the librarian as moral guardian charged with keeping “mental poison” out of the hands of the burgeoning urban population. He grew the library system, increasing access, but set up a Book Inferno to receive and segregate “questionable books,” including light novels, a common practice, although not one generally advertised as Legler did. Roden was more liberal in approach and tended to purchase more
of the “edgy” books that were now accepted as quality literature, if they were sold by reputable publishers. While Roden’s position agreeing to remove pro-German books during World War I was comparable to that of other American librarians, he found himself derided as “spineless” when he acquiesced in a 1927 mayoral candidate’s call to segregate materials having to do with Britain. His position was made worse by the fact that he was president of the ALA at the time. Media support for the library was strong, and the CPL Library Board endorsed ALA’s Reading with a Purpose pamphlets and defended readers’ right to many shades of opinion. Although at times Roden quietly removed or segregated books that were challenged, he likely remembered the public’s strong reaction to the 1927 events, and in 1936 the CPL embraced an intellectual freedom statement three years earlier than did ALA.

It appears clear that, at least in part, the CPL’s intellectual freedom statement grew out of adult education efforts, such as the Reading with a Purpose pamphlets. And vacillation on whether potentially controversial materials should be removed from shelves afflicted even a well-established director of a big city library and the president of ALA. It is also clear from Novotny’s research, as well as that of many others, that local politics together with changes in literary tastes and national and world events influenced both actions to censor and actions opposing censorship. In his “Reexamining the Origins of the Adoption of the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights,” Doug Campbell takes these things into consideration as he makes it his task to refute two ideas: that librarians were lukewarm to the concept of intellectual freedom prior to the passage of the 1939 Library’s Bill of Rights; and that the precipitating event leading to its passage was attacks on John Steinbeck’s 1939 *Grapes of Wrath.*

Campbell could, no doubt, have included the 1936 Chicago intellectual freedom statement as evidence of librarians’ pre-1939 interest in the concept, but he limited himself deliberately to material published between 1929 and 1939 in the *Bulletin of the American Library Association* in order to document that members of the professional association during those years were indeed “alert” to the issue. Evelyn Geller, in her *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries* (1984), called the ALA Bulletin the journal least interested in issues of censorship and intellectual freedom. If Campbell could find a growing interest in intellectual freedom issues in the *ALA Bulletin*, he felt he could substantiate that the commitment to intellectual freedom was not brand new in 1939.

Campbell points to ALA’s reaction to an act of Congress—the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which in 1930 prohibited the importation of certain offensive or subversive materials—as one strong indication that problems of censorship were on librarians’ minds. Speakers at conferences urging librarians to side with patrons on the fiction issue and to assert freedom to read all kinds of books in the face of growing fascism also revealed librar-
ians’ commitment, he says. Equality of service to African-Americans was raised dramatically by the experience of ALA when it met in segregated Richmond, Virginia in 1936.

While the ALA did not respond to requests to make a statement about the 1933 book burnings in Germany, in other venues ALA officers asserted the importance of libraries’ making material on all sides of issues available to the public. A number of active women, from Jennie Flexner to Ruth Robi, urged greater commitment to intellectual freedom, and the Staff Organizations Round Table took a more assertive stand than did the ALA Council or the Executive Board. But in the 1938 National Plan for Public Libraries, about a year before the April 1939 publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, ALA began to articulate a stronger stance on access to all, presentation of all points of view, and the duty to supply controversial materials. When ALA did adopt the Library’s Bill of Rights in June 1939, it was presented by Ernestine Rose, chairman of the Adult Education Board, of which Forrest Spaulding, director of the Des Moines Public Library, was a member. Des Moines had in November 1938 adopted the document that was the model for the ALA’s resolution.

ALA Secretary Carl Milam noted that the ALA might need in the future to take a more active stand opposing censorship, and it soon did so, spurred now by reaction to *The Grapes of Wrath*. In December 1939, the ALA Council appointed a special committee under Spaulding that would evolve, by 1940, into the Committee on Intellectual Freedom to Safeguard the Rights of Library Users to Freedom of Inquiry. Campbell supports his assertion, shared by Robbins (1996, pp. 12–13), that the banning of Steinbeck’s controversial book by a number of libraries was not the main motive behind the LBR—though it motivated the formation of the committee—citing Milam’s statement that “tolerance of minorities and impartiality in selection of materials and service to the public” drove the adoption.

It should be noted that the development of the agnostic view of reading effects is clearly a subtext of Campbell’s article. It is in venues of readers’ advisory professional discussions and book selection round tables that speakers are quick to remind listeners that library users must be free to read and make up their own minds, a value also asserted by defenders of ALA’s Reading with a Purpose pamphlets in the Chicago Public Library. These venues also suggest the importance of the embrace of the concept of intellectual freedom to professional identity. These themes emerge in a different way in Joyce Latham’s contribution, “Heat, Humility and Hubris: The Conundrum of the Fiske Report.”

Latham re-evaluates Marjorie Fiske’s oft-cited *Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California* (1959) from a gendered perspective. “The Fiske report,” as it is familiarly known, is famous for its conclusion that most school and public librarians engage in self-
censorship, while paying lip service to intellectual freedom. Both the research and the forum for interpretation of the report featured generally highly regarded sociologists. Latham critiques both methods and conclusions. She points out that nearly all the librarians surveyed were women, as was true of school and public librarians in general. The researchers therefore concluded that librarians tended to self-censorship because they were women, measuring the respondents against a standard of the male “heroic public servant.” Drawing on the literature of public administration, Latham says this standard of professional behavior conforms “to male behavior but not female behavior.”

Fiske explored whether respondents used a book selection rubric of quality or demand—revealing perhaps whether they followed a traditional or agnostic view of reading effects—and found that curiously most of those who practiced self-censorship followed a demand philosophy. The forum that announced the results of the research posited that the increase in challenges to print materials resulted not only from “the intensity of censors” but also the “humble acquiescence” of librarians and administrators. Only one presenter made reference to the status of women librarians and their lack of ability to participate in the political life of the community in the same way that men administrators and librarians could, as Oliver Garceau had pointed out in _The Public Library in the Political Process_ (1950), his contribution to the Public Library Inquiry. The eminent sociologist Talcott Parsons attributed the discrepancy between librarians’ “restrictive” selection behavior or self-censorship and the lack of public pressure to restrict materials to a kind of “compulsive conformity” and _anomie_, a kind of free-floating anxiety, on the part of public and school—mostly female—librarians. Parsons, like many within the profession, seemed to feel that the answer to the profession’s problems was to recruit more men. No one discussed either the disadvantages women faced in contrast to men or the systemic underrepresentation of and opportunities for women in professional education or associations, including the ALA. (It is interesting, though perhaps not significant, to note that the Chicago Public Library’s “censors” were both high profile men [Novotny]. Women are heard more loudly than men speaking up for the need for intellectual freedom in Campbell’s account in this volume.)

Librarians did not hail the publication of the Fiske report, according to Latham, or make it a best seller. Some women librarians plainly did not identify with the timid censors depicted there. Latham asserts that, rather than strengthening the profession, the Fiske report, by failing to examine the critical issue of the librarian’s authority in the public sector and by identifying the gender of librarians as the critical variable in censorship, in fact undermined the importance of the public library and the profession.

Librarians’ identity as defenders of intellectual freedom has developed
along with their changing attitudes toward reading effects and their assertion of professional autonomy, both of which are rooted in social, political, and cultural changes and the profession’s response to challenges to intellectual freedom on the local or state as well as national and world level. As the preceding essays show, it is hard to separate the concept of intellectual freedom in libraries from librarians’ grasp of their professional autonomy and jurisdiction of book selection and collection building. As the Fiske report failed adequately to acknowledge, it is difficult to defend one’s jurisdiction in book selection if there is no professional apparatus standing behind one and providing aid if one is challenged. Even at the time of the Fiske report in 1959, two decades after the 1939 Library’s Bill of Rights and more than a decade after the passage of the strengthened LBR, ALA did not or could not take effective action in support of librarians who were threatened with job loss for their intellectual freedom stances. Men could and did call on colleagues in prestigious positions to help in their defense, such as Librarian of Congress Luther Evans bringing support to Xenophon Smith in Peoria, IL (Robbins, 2000, p. 104). Women such as Bartlesville, OK, Public Library’s Ruth Brown got no such support when it was clear that she would lose her job if she did not remove a number of so-called “subversive” materials (Robbins, 2000). Without meaningful support, the largely female contingent of public (and school) librarians was left to fend for themselves.

Leaving their colleagues to fend for themselves was not an acceptable option for many activist librarians of the 1960s and early 1970s. Noriko Asato concludes this collection of essays by focusing her discussion on ALA’s support—or lack thereof—of librarians in her discussion of “Librarians’ Free Speech: The Challenge of Librarians’ Own Intellectual Freedom to the American Library Association, 1946–2007.” ALA had had great difficulty dealing with tenure as early as Philip Keeney’s firing from Montana State University in 1939 (McReynolds & Robbins, 2009, p. 40–52) and with the requirement that librarians sign loyalty oaths or undergo loyalty checks in 1948–1951 (Robbins, 1996, p. 40–50).

Asato looks at three kinds of cases: librarians who lost their jobs for upholding users’ intellectual freedom; librarians who exercised their own free speech rights outside the workplace and were fired; and librarians who lost their jobs over their exercise of speech as employees in the workplace. She examines the forces—mostly young librarians and library school students—who agitated for a more effective support system for librarians in each of these kinds of situations. While eventually the Office for Intellectual Freedom and Freedom to Read Foundation became at least partially the support system librarians had sought, ALA grappled with the complications of responding to a wide variety of situations in which librarians’ own intellectual freedom—not the rights of library users
or challenges to library materials—was the focus, and appeared to realize its own limitations.

The boundaries of ALA’s commitment to support librarians were drawn around their defense of their professional autonomy in book selection and collection building. As librarians moved from a traditional to an agnostic view of reading effects, as Knox shows us, they became advocates of intellectual freedom. And as Novotny’s essay on the Chicago Public Library shows, they slowly came to be more open to a variety of materials, defending the right of users to form their own opinions. Campbell broadens this argument to look at the “prehistory” of the LBR and shows that not only in Chicago, women and men were aware of issues of censorship and intellectual freedom, promoted discussion of controversial issues, and asserted their professional autonomy in building collections of all kinds of materials. He supports Robbins’s view that the LBR grew out of the adult education community within libraries, not in response to the banning of one book. Latham points out that a gendered view of the Fiske report leads to a new take on this celebrated study of book selection and censorship; no longer can readers take at face value the assertion that timid women librarians are the most important variable leading to self-censorship in libraries. Issues around professional support in particular were neglected in the Fiske report, Latham asserts. Asato takes up that theme and carries it into yet another dimension, the financial as well as legal and moral support of librarians acting in defense of intellectual freedom both in the job and in their personal lives. This slim volume adds substantially to our knowledge of the evolution of intellectual freedom in libraries, a cardinal principle of the profession.

REFERENCES


