



# Intellectual Freedom

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THE LIBRARIAN'S concern with intellectual freedom is a natural one, for the library, whatever else it may be or however specialized its function, is a link in the vast modern network of communication channels through which ideas are collected and passed on again from one individual to his contemporaries or to posterity. This function the library shares in varying degrees with the school and college, with radio and television, with the motion picture, with the newspaper and magazine press, and with the book publisher. Unlike many of these other agencies, it is usually supported, directly or indirectly, by public funds. It operates under legislation or a charter giving it peculiar immunities, such as tax exemption, and peculiar responsibilities, such as that of serving the interest of all the people in its own special way. While it is possible to conceive of a library dedicated to the dissemination of a single and restricted economic theory, such as the single tax, or a particular religion, such as Zoroastrianism, or an authoritarian concept of government, such as Soviet Communism, such a library could be in no sense "public" in a democratic society.

A society posited upon the principles embodied in the Bill of Rights demands and depends upon free institutions. In the realm of ideas, it leans heavily upon free communications. Where the people are sovereign, as in the United States, where the course of public policy reflects the will of these sovereign people, and where this majority will reflects the freely formulated will of each individual citizen, the public interest demands the unrestricted and uncensored flow of fact and opinion. That a fact may be ugly or an opinion unpopular cannot be allowed to serve as an excuse to bar it from the channels of communication. It has been pointed out that every breeder of roses, or of race horses, or of thinkers knows that progress springs from differences. For a democratic society to flourish, it must keep its communication channels open

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to differences. It is not in the public interest for American librarians to allow any individual or group with an authoritarian concept of truth to prescribe what ideas or opinions shall or shall not be represented in their collections. This is the essence of intellectual freedom to librarians in a democratic society.

Neither the metaphysic nor the ideology of democracy is an easy one, and the application of these principles to the practical operation of a library raises a host of problems. But this is not the place for a discussion of details of theory or of application; the literature of librarianship in recent years has examined and discussed a great many of these problems. Having glanced briefly at the reasons why intellectual freedom is an important issue to librarians in a democratic society, we must now turn to a consideration of just what the proper function of a library association is in maintaining intellectual freedom.

It should be noted of course that the concept of intellectual freedom as a professional responsibility of librarians is a relatively recent one. Indeed, such related abstractions as academic freedom and freedom of the press were not really formulated until the eighteenth century, even though they had earlier spokesmen in such men as Socrates, Galileo, and Milton. Thus although the nineteenth century was the seed time of the public library movement and the American Library Association was organized in 1876, there seems to have been no formal recognition of the responsibility of libraries in this sphere for more than fifty years after the founding of the A.L.A. The relative newness of the concept thus becomes an important factor to be considered in assessing the work of the library association in relation to intellectual freedom. We are dealing here not so much with the steps taken to implement a universally accepted principle as with the comparatively rapid evolution of a concept that is new in its applications, even though its roots lie deep in Western tradition. While political democracy has ancient Greek antecedents, its theory as well as its practice is still evolving through public debate and undergoing formulation through legislation and court review.

Thus any discussion by an individual of what ought to be the functions of a library association in relation to intellectual freedom has the status of individual opinion only. The A.L.A. is a voluntary organization, conceived along completely democratic lines. Its principles and policies are evolved through a representative assembly, the Council, and have only the authority that is inherent in the democratically determined will of a majority of its members. No one has authority to

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pronounce a dogma or lay down a party line which it is incumbent upon all members to follow.

In the light of the brevity of the history of library associations in this country and the even greater brevity of their concern with intellectual freedom, and in the light of the democratic, antiauthoritarian structure of library associations, what we are concerned with in this paper is the record neither of the public actions of an organization pursuant to a rigid and dogmatic code nor of its internal activities in disciplining and policing its own members in adherence to rules. Our subject rather is an observation of the activities of American library associations, under the leadership of the A.L.A., in formulating the concept of the intellectually free library, in promoting discussion and understanding of this concept among librarians, library trustees, and the public, and in responding to the recurring threats to intellectual freedom in an era marked by strong currents of anti-intellectualism.

The first official recognition by the A.L.A. of the existence of problems in the area of intellectual freedom was the appointment in 1939 of a Special Committee on Censorship. This committee drafted a "Library Bill of Rights" which was adopted by the A.L.A. Council in June of 1939 as an official policy statement of the association.<sup>1</sup> The Library Bill of Rights, amended in 1944<sup>2</sup> and revised and readopted in 1948,<sup>3</sup> remains the basic statement of principles, and its drafting and adoption has been probably the most effective single act of the A.L.A. in defining the librarian's professional responsibility for maintaining the right of the public to unobstructed channels of communication. Reprinted countless times in various forms and media, it has been adopted as a policy statement by state and regional library associations and by individual library boards and has been continually effective as a focal point for local opinion and a precedent for local action.

It is doubtful if the mere approval of a statement would have been effective had there not been continuing action by the association to implement the Library Bill of Rights. Thus in May 1940, upon the recommendation of the Special Committee on Censorship which had drafted the Library Bill of Rights, the A.L.A. Council created the Committee on Intellectual Freedom to Safeguard the Rights of Library Users to Freedom of Inquiry.<sup>4</sup> This committee remains to the present the principal agency of the A.L.A. in interpreting, promoting, and safeguarding the right of free inquiry.

Although its name has been shortened to the simple Committee on Intellectual Freedom, its principal concern has been that indicated by

the original title: to safeguard the rights of library users to freedom of inquiry, rather than to protect any rights peculiar to librarians themselves. The sole directive under which the committee was established was "To recommend such steps as may be necessary to safeguard the rights of library users in accordance with the Bill of Rights of the United States and the Library's Bill of Rights as adopted by the Council."<sup>5</sup>

Pursuant to this directive the committee has made various recommendations to the Council. Among these are the several changes in the Library Bill of Rights already mentioned and another, approved in 1951, making it clear that the Library Bill of Rights applies "to all materials and media of communication used or collected by libraries," such as films, which have increasingly been the subject of controversy in various communities.<sup>6</sup> Also in 1951 the Council adopted a strong statement prepared by the committee in opposition to the practice of "labelling" library materials, proposed from time to time as an alternative to the complete suppression of materials.<sup>7</sup>

That the Council has not been a mere rubber stamp, automatically accepting all proposals made by the committee, was indicated by a series of resolutions in 1948, 1949, and 1950. In 1948 the Council adopted, after considerable debate, a resolution condemning the use of loyalty investigations in libraries.<sup>8</sup> The following year, against the recommendations of the Committee on Intellectual Freedom and the Board on Personnel Administration, which has primary jurisdiction in matters affecting the tenure and employment of librarians, the Council reversed itself and rephrased this resolution to condemn only the abuse rather than the use of loyalty investigations.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in 1950 after the committee had pointed out that this change made the resolution almost meaningless, the Council passed a new resolution on loyalty programs, reconciling various differences of opinion within the association.<sup>10</sup>

Early in 1953, alarmed by increasing evidence of inroads into freedom of inquiry and communication, the committee joined the American Book Publishers Council in planning a small, off-the-record conference to consider the steps which might be taken to preserve the basic freedoms of the public in these areas. Held on May 2 and 3 at Rye, New York, the "Westchester Conference" was attended by leading librarians, publishers, representatives of related groups, and citizens reflecting the public interest. A statement entitled "The Freedom to Read," drafted by a small committee, was signed by individuals who had attended and others invited but unable to attend, was adopted by the A.L.A. Council and the American Book Publishers Council, and

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was released to the press.<sup>11</sup> In part because of the temper of the times it has received more widespread national and international publicity than any other action of the A.L.A. in the field of intellectual freedom. It was reprinted in full by a dozen newspapers and magazines, received editorial approval by many more and condemnation by a few, was endorsed by a number of other organizations, and led to the adoption of parallel statements by such groups as the American Bar Association and the National Education Association. The *New York Times* editorialized,

The librarians at Los Angeles produced and accepted in their manifesto a document that seems today to belong, civilian and unofficial though it is, with America's outstanding state papers. It belongs there because of the nobility and courage of its expression, because it rests on experience, because it grew out of knowledge, not out of emotion, because it came from individuals who have found out day by day, in ill-paid and obscure positions, what the thinking people of this country really want.<sup>12</sup>

While objective measurements are impossible, there can be little doubt that "The Freedom to Read" had a favorable effect upon public opinion at a critical time in publicizing and clarifying the position and the responsibilities of librarians and publishers.

This effect was undoubtedly strengthened by a letter from President Eisenhower to the president of A.L.A. made public at the Los Angeles Conference at which "The Freedom to Read" was adopted by the Council—a letter in which the President reaffirmed his belief that "The libraries of America are and must ever remain the homes of free, inquiring minds" and reiterated the condemnation of the "book-burners" made in his Dartmouth speech.<sup>13</sup>

At the same meeting the Council adopted a strong protest against the attacks upon the U.S. Information Libraries, presented by the A.L.A. International Relations Board.<sup>14</sup> In earlier conversations between the chairman of the board and the chairman of the Intellectual Freedom Committee it had been agreed that the government's overseas library policy was the special concern of the International Relations Board rather than the committee, since it concerned foreign policy rather than the right of American citizens to free inquiry.

It is obvious that these policy decisions and statements made by the A.L.A. did not spring full-grown into being. Behind them lay an active schedule of conferences and correspondence carried on by the Committee on Intellectual Freedom. In carrying out its assigned function

the Committee has found it essential down through the years to act first of all as a clearinghouse for factual information about any threats to library freedom. Its members, scattered across the country and in Canada, have been alert to report on incidents, and all librarians have been urged repeatedly to bring to the attention of the committee local situations which merit attention. The various state and local library associations have been stimulated to form committees on intellectual freedom, to report to the A.L.A. committee, to stimulate regional discussion of the principles involved, and to act more effectively in local situations. It has been the policy of the committee to intervene locally only when requested by the local librarian or library association. In general it has been found that active interference in local affairs was less effective than the substantial moral force of the national association's policy statements when used by local groups. In nearly every controversy the Library Bill of Rights or the Freedom to Read statement have been used effectively by local groups in mobilizing public opinion. In many more instances open controversy has been avoided because library boards and citizens' groups have discussed one or both of these statements as policy and have thus been prepared in advance to take a firm stand on the basic principles of intellectual freedom.

While collecting information, acting as a clearinghouse, and attempting to assess the attitudes of the A.L.A. members and formulate this collective attitude into democratically conceived national policy, the committee has attempted to stimulate discussion and understanding of the problems through frequent reports to the A.L.A. Council and membership, through speeches to library and citizens' groups, through articles in the *A.L.A. Bulletin* and other professional journals, and through special meetings held in conjunction with library conferences. In recent years the committee has distributed the mimeographed "Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom" for the purpose of keeping librarians and related groups informed.

Perhaps the most effective of the special meetings have been two two-day institutes held just prior to the A.L.A. annual conferences at New York and Los Angeles in 1952 and 1953.<sup>15</sup> These institutes provided forums at which difficulties in the application of principles could be discussed and differences of opinion could be resolved. Both resulted in very large areas of general agreement (Lest some outsider should think that there has been within the A.L.A. a slavish conformity, it should be recorded that there have been from time to time sharp and explosive differences of opinion on the application of accepted general principles. It is a tribute to the stability of democratic processes to

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report that means were found in each instance to compromise these differences without sacrifice of principle.)

It should be noted that although within the past fifteen years the democratic way of life has been threatened by two vast international conspiracies, Fascist and Communist, and while the association has been particularly alert to discover any attempt on the part of these conspiracies to infiltrate its membership or influence its policies, there has never been any serious threat from these sources. The most formidable organized attempts to limit the freedom of the citizen to read what he wants seem to have had their origin in native super-patriotic or religious groups with a narrow or coercive concept of Americanism.

It would be neither discrete nor illuminating for a former chairman of the A.L.A. Committee on Intellectual Freedom to attempt any evaluation of the success of the association's activities in defense of the freedom to read. Such an appraisal should come from a pen less partisan and more skilled in the analysis of intangibles. A few generalizations can be made safely, however.

There are a number of things which the association has not done in this field. It has not attempted a large-scale continuing program of molding public opinion. It has not attempted systematically to influence federal legislation in the area of intellectual freedom. It has not set up machinery to bring prompt and effective legal counsel to libraries and librarians under attack. All of these things have been discussed by committees, but the necessary financial resources have been unavailable. (It should perhaps be noted here that lack of funds has been the most formidable obstacle faced by the Committee on Intellectual Freedom. In recent years some assistance from the A.L.A. Executive Board and from foundation grants has enabled it to plan its projects somewhat more freely.)

On the other hand, the A.L.A. through its officers, boards, and committees, has led the way to several positive achievements in the past fifteen years. Perhaps the most important is that it has evolved from the consciences of individual librarians a general concept of the librarian's professional responsibility for the freedom to read, not as dogma but as a living principle. It has gained widespread acceptance of this concept, not only among librarians, but among library trustees and substantial segments of the general public. It has stimulated the application of these general principles to specific problems as they have arisen. Although in our time there have occurred hundreds of attacks upon the freedom to read in libraries, these incidents have been resolved without sacrifice of principle in all but a tiny handful of cases;

although local action has been the deciding factor in each instance, in the background of nearly every one the moral effect of A.L.A. principles has been apparent. Finally, it has developed powerful allies among individuals and groups, and it has assumed the leadership in protecting freedom of inquiry proper to an association of 20,000 librarians unselfishly dedicated to the democratic use of books by the American people.

An editorial which appeared in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* on the occasion of the 73rd Annual Conference of the A.L.A. may serve as a summary:

The strength that lies in knowledge is a subject the nation's librarians are well fitted to explore. The public libraries, especially, have done yeoman service in the cause of making knowledge widely available.

The librarians have done more than this. Through their association they have fought with courage and devotion for the great principle of freedom to read. Their stand has done much to hamper the movement toward censorship and thought control in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

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