

Collection Development and Harmful Literature
February 2021

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



**Intellectual
Freedom
Committee**

Oregon Library Association

There has been a great deal of controversy recently concerning the book [Irreversible damage](#) by Abigail Shrier. To understand the controversy one only has to read the subtitle: *The transgender craze seducing our daughters*. One can find a quick overview of the book and links to reviews from various sources, both positive and critical, on its [Wikipedia page](#). The *Economist* and *The Times* of London named it a best book of the year. Jack Turban, a psychiatrist specializing in transgender mental health, writing in [Psychology Today](#), said the book was “full of misinformation” with the “potential to hurt transgender youth.”

Likely spurred by the significant attention the book has received in both conservative and progressive media, public libraries have received patron requests to purchase the book. This has been followed by patron challenges to have the book removed, based on the perceived potential harm to gender-questioning teens. This led at least one library staff member in an Oregon library to question how collection development policies could be written to preclude purchasing such potentially harmful books in the first place, even if requested by patrons.

This, of course, begs the question of whether collection development policies SHOULD be written to exclude purchasing books perceived to be potentially harmful. Longstanding ALA policy as stated in the [Library Bill of Rights](#) is that “Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation” (Article 1), and “Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (Article 2). The first half of each of those articles affirm that libraries should provide resources “...for the interest, information, and enlightenment of **all** people of the community the library serves” (emphasis added), and “...should provide materials and information presenting all points of view

on current and historical issues.” In other words, if the topic is current, and if members of your community are interested in the resource, the library has a certain obligation to acquire the resource. Both questions seem to be a clear ‘yes’ in this instance. The library’s or librarian’s personal views regarding the value - or potential harm - of the resource should not be a factor (see [Diverse collections: an interpretation of the library bill of rights](#) and the ALA [Code of ethics](#)). Indeed, some of those critical of this book’s content have in fact argued against proscribing or censoring it. [Jonathan Zimmerman, writing in the Chicago Tribune](#), makes the simple argument that “[w]hen censorship wins, minorities lose.” He believes that attempts to censor Shrier’s book will “backfire” and end up hurting the transgender community more than helping. One transgender librarian who was asked to comment on this book made a point of the value of keeping such “‘harmful’ texts available and build[ing] context around them.”

At the same time, there is a growing movement within librarianship (often, but not exclusively, grouped under the moniker “critical librarianship,” or [#critlib](#)) that is “...dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries....Recognizing that we all work under...a range of structural inequalities.” As some have argued (e.g. [Jennifer Ferretti](#) and [Eino Sierpe](#)), the “neutrality” espoused in ALA’s policies as noted above only works to maintain an unjust status quo. Typically this is stated in terms of a white supremacist status quo, but the argument could be equally applicable to any of the social justice issues present in our current climate, including the acceptance and representation of transgender folk. In this view, libraries do, in fact, have an obligation to proactively support and even protect marginalized communities, such as transgender folk. Intentionally NOT acquiring books such as *Irreversible damage*, despite community requests to do so, is seen as a positive step in dismantling “structural inequalities.” These writers would argue that libraries should not be giving tacit support to racist or transphobic views by acquiring those resources, even if community members are requesting them. Such works, in this view, can do actual harm to these marginalized communities, so for the sake of such communities should not be present in the library.

Predictably, such critical questioning of established core library values has met some pushback. Em Claire Knowles, for example, in a [2018 blog article](#), posits that “neutrality” is and should be “active,” not “passive,” and that such an understanding and practice of neutrality actually works for social justice, not against it. Whether this view is a doubling down on maintaining an inherently unjust status quo or an honest and nuanced attempt to chart a third path perhaps remains to be seen.

All of which informs, but perhaps does little to actually answer, our very practical question: Should collection development policies be written in such a way to exclude materials perceived

as harmful to marginalized communities? One very real consideration is that doing so in any way that targets specific viewpoints or theories is very likely to be found unconstitutional (private institutions have a bit more leeway here, but as a general principle adhering to First Amendment considerations is probably still ideal). A policy that is general enough to equally apply to any and all viewpoints, and thus could pass constitutional muster, likely leaves itself open to being applied in ways that were not initially intended. As Zimmerman points out, such attempts at censoring are nearly always co-opted by the dominant culture and used against the very minorities the policy was intended to protect. Giving some primacy of consideration to protecting free expression seems prudent.

Critically examining the role of neutrality in upholding unjust systems and finding ways to support and protect marginalized communities are important, even crucial conversations our profession must continue to wrestle with. Those conversations are ongoing, and in very real ways only beginning. Where the profession will eventually land on this intersection of core values is perhaps unclear at present. In the meantime, individual library policy makers will need to think carefully about how their policies can best support the vulnerable among us while still upholding our constitutional imperative to support the free expression of ideas.

(Special thanks to OLA's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Task Force for very helpful input on this Tuesday Topic).

Steve Silver

Intellectual Freedom Committee member