

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

Meeting rooms, intellectual freedom, and responsible spaces

A revision of the American Library Association's "[Meeting Rooms: An interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights](#)" has generated an intense amount of criticism and discussion. The main topic of contention is the inclusion of "hate speech" and "hate groups" as specific examples of groups that cannot be summarily barred from using library meeting rooms. Some have objected to the choice of language in the revision and the method in which the document was drafted, while others are questioning whether it is possible to simultaneously allow all speech (including "hate speech") while also making the library a welcoming and safe place for all users. The ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee is working on revising the new meeting room interpretation, and have set up a [google form for receiving comments](#).

This is not just a library issue. Universities and local governments have been grappling with these same questions as they respond to groups demanding use of academic or public spaces to hold events with speech that is, if not hate speech, at the very least offensive to many. The question of how to reconcile and defend both the values of free speech and social justice is one that is not going to be settled soon, and it is one that the library world has already been grappling with for some time (for background on such library debate, see the books [Which side are you on?](#) by Elaine Harger and [A history of ALA policy on intellectual freedom](#)). It is an important discussion, and there are no easy answers.

What should libraries do right now?

While this discussion is happening, librarians still need to deal with the practical matter of keeping their libraries open and serving their community and patrons. Whether or not a library permits or denies use of a meeting room to a "hate group," there is potential for outrage and protest by those upset with the outcome, and for discomfort and fear by those who simply want to borrow a book or make use of a library service. So what can we do? The same way that we prepare for book challenges, we can prepare for challenges about activities conducted or prohibited on library property by having solid policies that library staff can use.

There are some documents which can help as you write or review your library's meeting room and behavior policies. Despite the controversy surrounding it, the ALA's "[Meeting rooms: an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights](#)" still includes information to consider. Also worth reviewing is the ALA "[Guidelines for development of policies and procedures regarding user behavior and library usage](#)." It is a

challenge to write library policies that balance free speech considerations with safety considerations, while being respectful of all library patrons and legally sound. More important than getting it perfectly right is that the policies be created with careful thought and with participation by stakeholders and members of the community.

The ALA's [Access to Library Resources and Services](#) webpage states that “equity extends beyond equality—fairness and universal access—to deliberate and intentional efforts to create service delivery models that will make sure that community members have the resources they need.” At the 2017 Annual Conference, a [resolution was passed on “Libraries as Responsible Spaces” \(CD# 44.2, Word doc\)](#) which “urges libraries to embrace the mantle of responsible spaces by adopting and enforcing user behavior policies that protect patrons and staff from harassment while maintaining our historic support for the freedom of speech.” Hopefully there will be future guidance from ALA or elsewhere in the profession which digs deeper into how this can be done well.

It is not easy to provide a space that is truly and freely open to the public, in an intellectual sense as well as a physical one, but it is work we must do if we believe in the value of libraries as public institutions. You need not do this work alone: the Oregon Library Association, the OLA Intellectual Freedom Committee, and your colleagues around the state are all there to support you.

Ross Betzer

Chair - Oregon Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee
Librarian, Local Resources & Cataloging - Multnomah County Library