

Intellectual Freedom in a Democratic Society

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Abstract

"All for the people; and all by the people.
Nothing about the people without the people.
That is democracy."

*Lajos Kossuth, 1802-1894, Governor of Hungary, Independence Fight,
1848-49*

This speech presents the library's role in a democracy – the provision of information for those who have a need to develop civic habits, and wish to organize civil, civic discussions in their communities (cities, countries, academic institutions and work places), as well as in their homes and neighborhoods.

Democracy is not about utopia, but about the hope of women and men to live freely as individuals in a society that holds the promise of liberty and justice for all.

The hard work of democracy is worth the effort because it is about choosing our own future, about knowing and developing ourselves as individuals and social creatures – about integrating responsibility for ourselves and others into the fabric of our everyday lives.

Democracy is, after all, about human dignity, about making the most of our unique human capabilities for dreaming and doing, and about understanding the inextricable link between our own well-being and the common good.

The presenter sees the library not only as a center of learning, a place to develop the intellectual and creative capacities of tomorrow's leaders, but also as a model of a civil society, marked by freedom and responsibility, respect for diversity, a striving for justice and equality, a passion for human dignity and an abiding commitment to the common goal.

At a time in our history when civic engagement and culture offer democracies vibrant solutions where revolutions and politics have failed, libraries encourage the liberating potential of dialogue. At stake is the idea that libraries foster and advance knowledge through civic engagement, and that civic engagement can forge democratic consensus. These comments are addressed to all those who wish to advance the cause of democracy through civic participation

What is Intellectual Freedom?

Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored. Intellectual freedom

encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas.

Why is Intellectual Freedom important in a Democracy?

Intellectual freedom is the basis for democratic systems. We expect people to be self-governors. But to do so responsibly, citizenry must be well-informed. Libraries provide the ideas and information, in a variety of formats, to allow people to inform themselves.

Why is Intellectual Freedom and Freedom of Expression and the Lack of Censorship important for Librarians and all Information Professionals?

Librarians significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, librarians are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. Librarians have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.

The intertwining of intellectual freedom and democracy with libraries and librarianship reflects a commitment to the future – to a renewal of the spirit of community, to a redefinition of community to include the collections, services and progress of libraries from the local to the global, and for libraries to educate people to act as citizens who can enjoy the rights and assume the responsibilities for shaping the future.

Intellectual freedom is freedom of the mind, and as such, it is both a personal liberty and a prerequisite for all freedoms leading to action. Moreover, intellectual freedom forms the bulwark of a constitutional republic. It is an essential part of government by the people. The right to vote is alone not sufficient to give citizens effective control of official actions and policies. Citizens must also be able to take part in the formation of public opinion by engaging in vigorous and wide-ranging debate on controversial matters. Censorship can only stifle this debate, thus weakening government by the people.

Lajos Kossuth, 1802-1894, Governor of Hungary, Independence Fight, 1848-49, said it best:

"All for the people; and all by the people.
Nothing about the people without the people.
That is democracy."

Intellectual freedom is the rallying cry of those who struggle for democracy worldwide. The metaphorical circle of intellectual freedom

has expanded to global proportions over the past two decades with the advent of potent new communications technologies and the growing international recognition of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 of which declares the right of all people to freedom of expression. As the free flow of information transcends national boundaries, it becomes increasingly clear that prohibitions on freedom of expression in one country will inhibit the freedom of those in many other countries around the world. In an age of multi-national media corporations, international computer links, and global telecommunications, we can no longer think simply in local terms. Promoting and defending intellectual freedom requires "thinking globally, and acting locally."

Intellectual freedom is the keystone for librarianship in a democracy. Safeguarding the right of free expression and risk-taking inquiry is the basis for information exchange and librarianship. Intellectual freedom is bound to an implicit social compact which recognizes that its maintenance serves important public purposes and provides great benefits to society; the ultimate justification for intellectual freedom rests on the bedrock of its social utility. Additionally, intellectual freedom strengthens library stability by enhancing librarians' loyalty and encourages innovative librarianship by retaining and rewarding the most able people.

Intellectual freedom in a democracy can exist only where two essential conditions are met: first, that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate; and second, that society makes an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access to information and ideas, regardless of the communication medium used, the content of the work, and the viewpoints of both the author and receiver of information. Freedom to express oneself through a chosen mode of communication becomes virtually meaningless if access to that information is not protected. Intellectual freedom implies a circle, and that circle is broken if either freedom of expression or access to ideas is stifled. Remember what I quoted from Lajos Kossuth: Democracy means government by the people. Through elected officials – from a president down to a local city councilman – democratic systems enable the voice of the majority of voters to weigh heavily in political and legislative decisions.

But, the success of democracy depends on more than respect for the majority's will. To truly represent all constituents fairly, government must protect the rights of the people in a minority. I submit that wherever the real power in government lies, there is danger of oppression.

In constitutional democracies – a system where the majority of people rule within the boundaries of a constitution – it is the constitution that gives those in the majority a great deal of power, *but prevents* the majority from denying basic rights to those in the minority.

These basic rights I refer to as civil freedoms. These civil freedoms or civil liberties are a basic set of rights all people have simply by virtue of their being human. They include freedom to life, freedom of expression and intellectual freedom. These freedoms – these rights – are vitally important to a free and democratic society, to libraries and librarianship and must never be subject to government intrusion.

Freedom of expression is an inalienable human right and the foundation for self-government. Freedom of expression encompasses the freedom of speech and the corollary right to receive information. These rights extend to minors as well as adults. Libraries and librarians exist to facilitate the exercise of these rights by selecting, producing, providing access to, identifying, retrieving, organizing, providing instruction in the use of, and preserving recorded expression, regardless of the format or technology.

Libraries, whether they are public or special, academic or school, are a cornerstone of the communities they serve and are essential to the preservation of rights. Libraries provide the ideas, resources, and information imperative for education, work, recreation, and self-government.

Intellectual freedom policies of society contribute to excellence in librarianship. Intellectual freedom ensures that considerations of librarianship will be the basis for library information decisions.

Now more than ever, librarians need to be mindful of the special role libraries play as centers for uninhibited intellectual inquiry. Librarians have taken upon themselves the responsibility to provide, through their institutions, all points of view on all questions and

issues of our time, and to make these ideas and opinions available to anyone who needs or wants them, regardless of age, background, or views.

Intellectual freedom cannot bring itself into existence. Librarians must apply the principles of intellectual freedom to activities undertaken daily – materials selection, reference service, reevaluation, protection of confidential patron information, and most importantly, collection building. It is in acquisition and its product, the collection, that intellectual freedom must be reflected.

The role of the library cannot be filled by any other societal institution. Newspapers provide information, but it is perforce abridged and can reflect the prejudices of an editor or publisher. Schools educate, but according to a program designed to fit the many; one attends school under

conditions devised and imposed by administrators and educators. *It is in the library*, and in the library alone, that self-directed learning, to the limits of one's abilities and to the limits of what is known, can take place.

No one – least of all the librarian – should underestimate the importance of this role. If its significance has been overlooked by many, including librarians, perhaps it is because some librarians have been neither vigorous in the application of these principles nor imaginative in the provision of library services. With the application of the principles of intellectual freedom, with vision and imagination, librarians can – and do – measure up to their unique task.

Librarians' work rarely brings headlines, and other professions may be said to possess more glamour. For downright importance and significance, however, what goes on in every library across the world is pretty fundamental to the improvement of society; it is here that people study ideas, obtain information, receive better understanding, and, in short, equip themselves to be better citizens and better persons. In libraries, and as a result of librarians' efforts, citizens become better citizens, and society becomes a better society.

The library – public, college and school – is the only institution in society today specifically designed to give people the facts on which to base intelligent decisions. All people of good will must see that libraries grow and improve and reach more and more into the minds of men, for what happens there may well determine the success, perhaps even the survival, of our way of life.