

# A Shifting Landscape for Intellectual Freedom

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# 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.”  
(American Library Association, 2007)

# Intellectual Freedom Position Statement (CFLA)

“The Canadian Federation of Library Associations

- supports and promotes the universal principles of intellectual freedom as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which include the interlocking freedoms to hold opinions and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.
- affirms that all persons in Canada have a fundamental right, subject only to the Constitution and the law, to have access to the full range of knowledge, imagination, ideas, and opinion, and to express their thoughts publicly. *Only the courts may abridge free expression rights in Canada.*”

# What is censorship?

“Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous.... Censors pressure public institutions, like libraries, to suppress and remove from public access information they judge inappropriate or dangerous, so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up their own minds about it.” (American Library Association, 2007)

# Public libraries and IF

- In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, selection of library materials in the US and Canada favoured the dominant ideology and culture and “a paternalistic best books approach”. (Samek, 2001)
- In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, strong pressure was exerted by politicians on libraries in the US and Canada not to hold any materials sympathetic to communism. (Book and Periodical Council, n.d.)
- Starting in the 1960s, there was increasing recognition that all voices in the communities served were not represented in library collections. Libraries consciously added materials from independent publishers and alternate presses with the intent to represent a broad range of voices and views including those considered controversial.
- In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are increasing calls to suppress speech deemed harmful to vulnerable groups by removing materials from collections and de-platforming speakers.

# Academic libraries and IF

## **What is academic freedom?**

Academic freedom is the freedom to teach and conduct research in an academic environment. Academic freedom is fundamental to the mandate of universities to pursue truth, educate students and disseminate knowledge and understanding.

## **Why is academic freedom important to Canada?**

Academic freedom does not exist for its own sake, but rather for important social purposes. Academic freedom is essential to the role of universities in a democratic society. Universities are committed to the pursuit of truth and its communication to others, including students and the broader community. To do this, faculty must be free to take intellectual risks and tackle controversial subjects in their teaching, research and scholarship.

(Statement on Academic Freedom, Universities Canada)

# School libraries and IF

- From *School Library Programs, Teacher-librarians And Effective Teaching And Learning*:  
“Schools need to be teaching students *how* to learn, how to ask their own questions, find their own information, construct their own meaning from that information, and apply that meaning to new situations.” (BCTLA, Draft, 2020)
- “ It's firmly our position that books ought not be censored in any way, but rather that the opportunity to discover and read diverse authors should be expanded in schools, so that you can illuminate and interrogate the older texts by reading the newer texts that reflect other viewpoints, diversity of points, that reflect the views and ideas of BIPOC authors in particular,” said [OIF director Deborah Caldwell-Stone]. (Yorio, 2021)

# The crossroads

One view:

“Public libraries must protect the right of people to be mistaken....To continue honouring their commitment to intellectual freedom in the face of outrage over unpopular speakers, public libraries must err on the side of a plurality of ideas and perspectives, on the side of more voices and greater access.” (Schrader, 2019)



## And another view

“Today’s left movements are thinking hard about the complex factors that shape the relationship between speech and social justice. Far from unconcerned with freedom of speech, they are determined to exercise these freedoms to further their cause. They are naming the power relations in which speech is embedded, and thereby liberating more speech. They are also asking important questions about how to better protect the people who laws have traditionally left behind.”

(Park, 2021)

# Social responsibility & Intellectual Freedom

## Early beginnings in the USA

- In 1968, members of a fledgling group of librarians “...were unwilling to separate their politics from their work, most wanted the library profession to take a stand on social issues...” They argued that “a purist moral stance on intellectual freedom [meant that] the library served mainstream social sectors, not the whole community.” They wanted to see “the library as an active agent for change.”
- The Roundtable on Social Responsibilities of Libraries was approved after much heated discussion at the 1968 ALA conference and remains active today.

(Samek, 2001)

# BCLA – Intellectual Freedom & Social Responsibility

**The BCLA Values Statement includes the following:**

- **Inclusion & Diversity**  
BCLA promotes inclusive and equitable libraries, collections and communities.
- **Intellectual Freedom**  
BCLA upholds the right to seek, receive, hold and disseminate information from all points of view.
- **Social Responsibility**  
BCLA promotes the social good by advocating for policies and resources that support individual and institutional members in addressing barriers in their communities.
- **Intellectual & Ethical Integrity**  
BCLA supports the development of individual perspectives on critical issues and believes that open and transparent dialogue is essential to the development of relevant services.

# BCLA – Intellectual Freedom & Social Responsibility

At the 2020 BCLA AGM, the following resolution was passed:

*Be it resolved that:*

BCLA will send letters on behalf of the membership to politicians to call on provincial and federal governments to engage in study and consultation with the intent to use the full breadth of mechanisms available to government to reduce discrimination and hate towards equity-seeking groups in Canada.

*From the rationale:*

Public libraries are expected to act in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. VPL recognizes that the public, and members of the library community, have raised the concern that the current legal framework that governs its public meeting room rentals inadequately protects the human rights and dignity of trans, gender diverse and Two Spirit people, as well as other equity-seeking groups.

# CFLA Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion

- The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB) believes that a diverse and pluralistic society is central to our country's identity. Libraries have a responsibility to contribute to a culture that recognizes diversity and fosters social inclusion.
- Libraries strive to deliver inclusive service. Canada's libraries recognize and energetically affirm the dignity of those they serve, regardless of heritage, education, beliefs, race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or mental capabilities, or income.
- Libraries understand that an acceptance of differences can place individual and collective values in conflict. Libraries are committed to tolerance and understanding. Libraries act to ensure that people can enjoy services free from any attempt by others to impose values, customs or beliefs.

# Intellectual freedom and social responsibility

## *Divergent views*

“A tenacious commitment to freedom of expression is one of the best traditions of the democratic left. But the contemporary left—a big part of it, at any rate—has embraced the belief that unwelcome ideas and works of art cause harm, and that the proper responses to such harms are calls for retraction and apology, rather than refutation (in the case of political ideas) and more powerful art (in the case of aesthetic productions).” (Morton, 2021)

“...it is naïve for liberals to ignore the way the right has weaponized a narrative about a ‘woke’ left that opposes free speech—a tactic aimed at silencing the growing voice of social movements. For anyone who truly believes that free speech is important to a democratic society, it should be energizing and encouraging to watch the conversation about free speech itself open up. A plurality of diverse voices with new ideas are working to build a world that comes closer to the ideal of free expression for all.” (Park, 2021)

# Challenges 2019-2021

- 48 challenges were reported between September 2019 to September 2021.
- 45 are related to materials. Only one title was not retained.
- 3 challenges were about programs or displays – 2 drag queen story times and a Read Woke campaign display
- All of the challenges were initiated at public libraries except one in a prison library.

# Challenges 2019-2021

Top three themes were:

- 2019

1. LGBTQIA2S+ / Racism (tied)
2. Age inappropriate
3. Promotes hatred

- 2020-21

1. Sex & sexuality
2. LGBTQIA2S+ / Age inappropriate / Creator of work (tied)
3. Racism / Promotes hatred / Violence (tied)



# Challenge examples in 2019-21:

***Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*** by Susan Kuklin

Three challenges were reported. Concerns were expressed about discussions of sexual activity involving teens. Complainants felt the book promoted child abuse and pedophilia without an appropriate discussion of the illegal and immoral nature of “sex with kids.”

***Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*** by Abigail Shrier

Eight challenges were reported. All of the challenges regarded what the complainants identified as transphobic content in the book that could be harmful for members of the trans community. One complainant stated that the work is based on a highly contested, largely discredited 2018 article and could be used to invalidate the identities of trans people, especially children, which will exacerbate the incidence of suicide among trans teens, and violence against the trans community.

# Other examples of challenges in 2019-21:

***The Poison Jungle*** by Tui Sutherland

This children's book has an LGBTQIA2S+ protagonist. A parent recommended moving the item to the young adult section or adding a caution sticker.

***The Satanic Bible*** by Anton Szandor LaVey

An incarcerated individual requested the book. The prison chaplain services refused to provide this book, as they deemed it "hate speech," which falls under material eligible for censorship in the Correctional Service of Canada's commissioner's directives.

***Sex is a Funny Word*** by Corey Silverberg and Fiona Smith

A parent submitted a form asking for the book's removal. The parent's 7-year-old son found the book in the children's section and was disgusted by it. The parent felt that the book was "poison for young mind[s]."

# Platforming and de-platforming

A film booking at the Ottawa Public Library by “ACT! for Canada,” of an anti-Islamist documentary “Killing Europe” was cancelled on the grounds the movie was likely to promote hatred. This prompted the sponsors to apply for a judicial review. An Ontario court has since ruled that the library was within its rights to cancel the private screening. (Blair, 2019)

# Platforming and de-platforming

- A near cancellation of a Drag Queen Storytime at Okanagan Regional Library, called a “controversial and potentially very divisive story time program” by the CEO who worried that the library “may reposition [itself] away from being an accepted, middle of the road, non-controversial (neutral) and safe environment for children’s programming in the minds of many.”
- Challenges were made to a planned evening with Bob Joseph, author of *21 Things You May Not Know about the Indian Act*, because of his ties to the resource industry.
- Rentals of library meeting rooms at Vancouver Public Library and Toronto Public Library by Feminist Current’s Meghan Murphy whose “trans-critical” views are seen as transphobic.

# Platforming and de-platforming : Feminist Current bookings

## *Divergent views:*

“Murphy’s critics are right that we live in a transphobic society in which transgendered people are marginalized. But censoring offensive expression, attractive as it may seem, is not a road to equality or an end to marginalization, nor does censorship ever lead to equality.”  
(Turk, 2019)

“Trans people and allies have made clear that we expect public libraries to take stronger stances against transphobia. Knowing that library patrons care about libraries being trans inclusive and will advocate for this has been deeply reassuring...” (Jones et al, 2019)

# Platforming: Feminist Current bookings

Other responses from the wider community:

- “To blame any respected learning centres for providing forums for democratic expression verges on censorship – a word we queer folk are all too familiar with...” (Letter to the editor, Vancouver Sun, Herman, 2019)
- “Public institutions should not be hosting events or renting space where speakers promote hate against any group of people protected under the BC Human Rights Code. Public libraries, like public schools, must be safe inclusive spaces for all - including trans youth and adults.” (A post from BC Teacher’s Federation on VPL’s Twitter feed, 2019)

# Workplace freedom of speech

Library staff taking principled stands on issues over the past century have been subject to demotion, dismissal and in some cases legal action for decades.

- In 1950, Ruth W. Brown, a librarian in Bartlesville, Oklahoma was dismissed due to accusations of circulating subversive materials.
- In 1999, Sanford Berman, a librarian at the Hennepin County Library, was reprimanded and demoted after sending a memo to three superiors critical of the library's cataloguing practices. He resigned.

# Workplace freedom of speech

- The responsibility of employers, librarians and information workers at all levels to strive for a work environment that actively encourages full, frank and respectful discussion and engagement at all levels;
- The value of full, frank and respectful discussion in the working environment in the creation and implementation of policies, strategic plans, mission and value statements, approaches to offering services, collections, and similar matters that define the organizational culture;
- The responsibility of employers, librarians and other information workers to facilitate the creation of mechanisms that allow confidential discussions of activities that may be covered by the “whistle-blower” provisions of the CFLA *Code of Ethics*.

(CFLA IFC, 2021)



# Where do we go from here?

“The thorny question remains unanswered of which exact speech acts we recognize as oppressive and worthy of shutting down. The answer cannot be that any speech a person or group finds oppressive should be seen as an oppressive speech act...”

“These decisions will necessarily involve contestation and disagreement; they require listening to communities on the frontlines of liberation struggles and being aware that it is not simply a matter of opinion or feelings as to which groups are or are not oppressed.”

(Leonard, 2021)

# What we hear from BCLA members:

## Reluctance to express opposing viewpoints

- “[My library wants] to change library board policy regarding IF. They want to be able to have a legal footing to promote only the IF they deem palatable. (In my opinion you either have IF or you don't)...I am very passionate about not allowing ideologues [to] take over Canadian institutions and laws. I find the results to date to be extremely divisive...We can not even dialogue at work because [their] position on the topic has been made clear...”
- “I can’t believe how easily Canadians are offended. Racism is all around us, but I believe there is always a discussion there and a teachable moment to be had when dealing with racist materials.”  
*An Indigenous immigrant and person of colour*

What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd):

## Inconsistency between professional values & actions

- “... [I] am on the fence about these kinds of \*initiatives, because I see the value in different (and opposing) arguments. ... Could you explain to me your stance on this...or if libraries, as a whole, have an official stance on this? What I learned in library school seems to be very different from these kinds of initiatives and I'm curious if this is an "ideal world vs real world" phenomenon or if things are just really changing and LIT curriculum isn't caught up.”

\*Coxson, Doug. Books deemed 'harmful to staff and students' are being removed from region's public school libraries. Cambridge Today. Oct. 26, 2021. <https://www.cambridgetoday.ca/local-news/books-deemed-harmful-to-staff-and-students-are-being-removed-from-regions-public-school-libraries-4551859>

## What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd): Legal parameters around hate speech and literature

- “...in much of the discourse [around trans issues]... legal definitions are often used as a rationale for not addressing what is more of a moral/ethical issue. Regarding the question of whether to collect such books, my view is that trans folks are the experts on their own experiences, and if they say it benefits them more not to have this book on the shelves, then I believe them.”
- “One of the problems is that they also describe groups like Meghan Murphy as hate groups and groups that incite violence.... there is a hard line in Canada for prosecution around hate speech and that there is activism right now in the library community that this legal bar is too high. I [read] the transcript of the Meghan Murphy talk at Vancouver Public Library... Murphy's speech was just controversial speech, not hate speech.”

## What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd): Information professionals vs. moral authorities

- “Recently, a student... assumed our library would not subscribe to sources that presented conservative views, that because we are a college in a politically progressive province that we would be controlling access to contrary opinions. ...the student [was provided with] a mini-history of libraries and Intellectual Freedom. ...this story and my concern for all students has led me to add a 'disclaimer' to all of my instructional sessions that ‘we are here to help, not tell you what to think or how to think.’ “

# What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd): Recent focus on trans issues

- “I strongly disagree that titles that are hurtful or harmful to other [than trans] identifiable groups are not widely available at most libraries; and generally unchallenged. Have we questioned or removed every title with racist, sexist, ablist or xenophobic ideas? Every album with homophobic lyrics? Would any of us want to work in a library that did so? If we allow the silencing of voices and ideas *we do not like* we are paving the way for authoritarianism.”
- “The conversations about intellectual freedom recently often arise in defense of transphobic materials. There are other intellectual freedom issues I am much more interested in that rarely get brought up for discussion. I’m sure I’m not alone.”

# What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd):

## Access to primary sources

- “Do we need to have read a book to argue against the ideas it contains? Can we not gain that knowledge from other people who have? ...It’s not silencing when the views are available through plenty of other sources...”
- “If a student asked me your first question my response would be a resounding **yes**, a good researcher does not assume the secondary sources are unbiased or selective in their use of a source. That is sound professional practice.”

# What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd):

## Freedom to read

- “Apart from some of the hard sciences, I don’t think there is much that can be categorically true/false. Every single person has their own unique combination of thoughts, feelings, past experience, priorities etc. that influence how they perceive everything they encounter. No two people will interpret the same thing the same way, which leads to a wonderfully diverse world.”
- “It is patronizing to suggest any group of potential readers, need our protection from ideas.”



# What we hear from BCLA members (cont'd):

## Value of diverse viewpoints

- “When everything is sanitized we get complacent...especially because eventually those who follow us no longer make the connection to the content. I mean, there are reasons we don't remove "to kill a mockingbird " from the library (for example), and we need to follow this reasoning when we discuss literature/movies/media, drawing quotes from these works, ESPECIALLY if it makes us uncomfortable.”
- “I am grateful to live in a part of the world where people are free to form their own opinions and express them. While the free and open exchange of ideas in a democracy can often be infuriating, messy and painful, I think this allows a culture to grow and increase the number of perspectives that can be heard, ultimately leading to better understanding and a more compassionate and tolerant society.

# Questions around IF

- What do “harm”, “safe” or “safe space” mean in a library IF context? Should libraries be “safe” spaces? Safe for who? Who decides what is safe, and where does responsibility lie in preventing harm?
- Should IF be applied differently to collections vs. events or meeting room usage?
- What are rights vs. privileges?
- Should libraries formulate and adopt an extra-legal interpretation of hate speech?
- Are social justice and intellectual freedom compatible? Can they work together or are they in opposition to each other?
- What is the relationship between the beliefs of individual library staff members and the policies and practices of that library?
- Do we serve communities or members of communities? Is our focus on meeting individual needs or meeting group needs? How can we do both? How are group needs articulated?
- How does BCLA's Statement on Intellectual Freedom align with national, international and other provincial intellectual freedom statements?
- How can we explain IF to patrons?

# BCLA IFC: Next steps

- General meeting and forthcoming discussions
- BCLA member survey

# Statements in support of intellectual freedom

1. [BCLA Values Statement](#). British Columbia Library Association, 2019
2. IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2019. (Downloadable pdf)
3. [Library Bill of Rights](#). American Library Association, last amended 2019.
4. [Position on Third Party Use of Publicly Funded Library Meetings Rooms and Facilities](#). Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2019.
5. [School Library Programs, Teacher-librarians And Effective Teaching And Learning](#). British Columbia Teacher Librarians Association, 2020
6. [Statement on Academic Freedom](#). Universities Canada, 2011.
7. [Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries](#). Canadian Federation of Library Associations, last amended 2015.

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6. Mahboob, Tahiat. [How a B.C. library's Drag Queen Story Hour turned into a nationwide fight for intellectual freedom](#), CBC, November 7, 2020.
7. Morton, Brian. "[A Modest Exercise in Freedom](#)", Dissent, Summer 2021.
8. Park, K-Sue. "[Whose Free Speech?](#)," Dissent, Summer 2021.
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11. Turk, James. "[Social Justice Requires Intellectual Freedom - Why the Toronto Public Library Should Refuse to Deplatform Meghan Murphy](#)", Centre for Free Expression. October 17, 2019.
12. Yorio, Kara. "[George Tops Most Challenged List for Third Year in a Row](#)", School Library Journal. April 5, 2021

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