

LIS 550 - ASSIGNMENT 4

Freedom of Speech and Information Control

Gabor Por – December 2, 2007 – <http://pgabor.com>

Public libraries have a long history of being champions of intellectual freedom. In order to maintain this valuable tradition we do not plan to remove any books challenged by legislators or patrons from our libraries. We offer this paper to the Oklahoma House to influence their thinking on the issue of connecting funding to removing books.

Our libraries' guiding principle is the American Library Association's Bill of Rights. Without quoting it in its full length--which would be educational—let us just emphasize its first article, "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves." The point of having public libraries, often free of charge, available to everyone, including minors, is to ensure that the "freedom to read" concept goes beyond being a slogan. By "valuable" tradition we did not mean to suggest that the tradition is valuable as a self-preservation tool for libraries. Rather, it is valuable to the members of the communities we serve.

The protection of freedom to read is particularly important in the case of challenged books. We consider it a harmful, paternalistic view when the institutions or government dictate what patrons can and cannot read. As members of ALA we also follow the ALA's Code of Ethics. Its seventh article states "We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions." We believe that this principle could serve others as well, for example representatives. The aim of our institution includes providing a forum for information and ideas. We recognize that the Oklahoma House has different aims. Its home page states, "The actions we take here in the capital city have a direct effect on Oklahomans and their quality of life." (<http://www.okhouse.gov/>) Presumably, the legislators wish to bring positive change to all Oklahomans not just some of them. Similarly, our libraries serve the whole community, not just some of them.

The person advocating limiting children's access to homosexuality-themed books in the National Coalition Against Censorship article estimated that 88 percent of Oklahomans and 80 percent or more of the people in Oklahoma County would support such a decision. Assuming that these figures are right (an assumption which is not based on research) we can conclude that 80-88 percent of the people do not wish that their own children would have access to this kind of material. We fully support their choice. We encourage parents to help selecting what their children's readings. Active participation in the child's

activities, including going along with and supervising them in the library, can help facilitate their development. We ask, however, all parents to recognize that society places children with their parents, not their librarians. We, the librarians, are happy to help them and provide reader advisory service to recommend books that would be aligned with their value system. We, however, do not have the right to decide what is suitable for any child. Parents possess this privilege. Furthermore, we cannot take responsibility for supervising them on an ongoing basis. That is a parental role.

On the other hand we categorically deny that the aforementioned segment of the population has any right to restrict what the other 12-20 percent can or cannot read. Such actions would violate the Constitution's first Amendment and the sixth article of our Code of Ethics "We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, our code of ethics."

We understand that these groups are frustrated, however, we ask them not to consider the library the adversary. We are the memory, not the enemy, of the community. In order to live up to this role, the selection policies in our libraries needs to be as inclusive as possible. We seek materials to provide a broad range of viewpoints. By requesting to reverse the policies and be exclusive of certain subject matters we would limit a significant section of our patron base's freedom of speech. That we cannot do.

We consider exclusive selection policies as a restriction on freedom of speech provided by the constitution. Every adult has autonomy to select their beliefs and views. The minor developing into an adult needs to be exposed to beliefs and views to practice this autonomy. Parents have the right and responsibility to influence the developing person's choices, but librarians do not. Our responsibility is to comply with laws, such as not providing access to child pornography for anybody. Homosexuality, unlike child pornography is not illegal; we cannot limit it, or literature covering it. Even the 1996 Communication Decency Act referred only to "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy or indecent" materials. This particular challenged book and the vast majority of children books, independently from their subject matter do not contain any kind of text or picture of this nature. We quoted this law, while acknowledging that it lacks clear definition of the term mentioned.

Freedom of speech also relates to exposing social problems. This very debate we are having shows that there is a social problem. The problem is the tension between people with different worldviews on sexual orientation and how it should (or not) be communicated to the people in their formative years. Limiting access would be the equivalent of sweeping the issue under the rug. It would only amplify the tension and would not provide long-term solution, while would squelch some people's rights.

Please consider the arguments listed in this paper in favor of not polarizing the situation by giving a choice of cutting the budget or practicing censorship.