Activism vs. Intellectual Freedom

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What is Activism?

The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.
Activism & Libraries

Activism falls under the broad umbrella of Civic Engagement—a core value of modern libraries.

Protecting Intellectual Freedom allows all people to be civically engaged.
What is Intellectual Freedom?

Intellectual Freedom is your freedom to learn and think anytime and anyplace.
The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution
15 December 1791
Why is Intellectual Freedom Important?

Democracy and Freedom!
Intellectual Freedom and Libraries

ALA actively advocates and educates in defense of intellectual freedom—the rights of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Intellectual freedom is a core value of the library profession, and a basic right in our democratic society. A publicly supported library provides free, equitable, and confidential access to information for all people of its community.

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom
The Library Bill of Rights

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

VI. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.


Although the Articles of the Library Bill of Rights are unambiguous statements of basic principles that should govern the service of all libraries, questions do arise concerning application of these principles to specific library practices. See the documents designated by the Intellectual Freedom Committee as Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights.
Activism vs. Intellectual Freedom

Activism is possible because of rights guaranteed by the First Amendment.

So why do these two principles come into conflict?
Case Study 1: The Nazi in Your Library

Tyler is the junior political science major that reserves a large study room every Wednesday night from 5:00 to 7:00 for his study group. He always turns the key in on time and never bothers other patrons. This week, Tyler and his friends are meeting [in your meeting room] to plan for a road-trip to join an alt-right protest against the planned removal of a Confederate monument. [You’ve received notice from an ANTIFA group that they object to this meeting.]

What do you do?

Case Study 1: The Nazi in Your Library

Some thoughts from the moderators...

Tyler has the right of assembly and free speech. He is entitled to use public spaces (your library) to express these opinions and plan further expression. The library is dedicated to upholding those rights even if staff disagrees with the ideas he holds.

ANTIFA also has the right to express their views and assemble. Violence, however, is not tolerated in the library.

It is up to librarians to weigh the personal rights of one group against the personal safety of patrons in the library space.
Case Study 2: The Heckler’s Veto

Your library is hosting a discussion panel of experts on coal mining on public lands. A very vocal small group of protesters has made it difficult to hear the presenters. They are objecting to a weakening fossil fuel industry that affects their personal jobs.

What do you do?
Case Study 2: The Heckler’s Veto

Some thoughts from the moderators...

The heckler’s veto is when one loud dissenting voice shuts down a group or discussion. In this case, that small party of protesters is attempting to shut down a wider community discussion effectively denying the attendees right to learn and the presenters right to expression.

However, that small group does have a right to express their dissenting opinions. How does the library create a space for both voices? Is it at that particular presentation?
Case Study 3: Dr. Seuss is a Racist

The Children’s Department and KUED are partnering together on an event celebrating Dr. Seuss in March. A few librarians in other departments object to celebrating Dr. Seuss citing his racist works.

What do you do?
Case Study 3: Dr. Seuss is a Racist

Some thoughts from the moderators...

Can we judge literature of yesterday by the standards of today? No. But we can see if other materials meet the same literary goals without prejudice. At the very least, the complicated legacies of items or people should be acknowledged.

It’s important to assess the difference between having something in a collection and actively promoting it through programs and other library services. In this case, perhaps you use *The Sneetches* instead of *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*

Case Study 4: Confronting Bias in Patrons

After the initial launch of the Pride Collection, materials started disappearing from their section of the library. Over the course seven months, multiple items were "misplaced." We began finding materials in odd places--under shelves, behind other collections, stuffed behind cushions. It’s determined that a retirement aged man is deliberately hiding materials. He is unapologetic stating that he was raised in an environment where gay and lesbian lifestyle was not acceptable and that it was unfair to have a Pride collection without also promoting traditional family dynamics.

What do you do?

Case Study 4: Confronting Bias in Patrons

Some thoughts from the moderators…

When that man hides an item he denies others their intellectual freedom. He has the right to think as he does about traditional family structure, but he cannot make that choice for others.

How do you address his claim that it is unfair not to promote traditional families? Most materials the library owns feature heteronormative parenting. This is an implicit promotion of that family structure. Is that enough?
Case Study 5: #MeToo in Library Collections

With the boom of the #MeToo movement, victims have come forward naming popular children’s and young adult authors who have harmed them. After reading the accusations, parents and some librarians demand that the works of the accused be removed from library collections immediately.

What do you do?
Case Study 5: #MeToo in Library Collections

Some thoughts from the moderators...

Immediately removing works of problematic authors would go against the community’s intellectual freedom. Everyone has the individual choice whether or not to continue reading those works. Your role as the library is to offer those choices. See the first article of the Library Bill of Rights.

However, you are not obligated to promote these books in any way and it may be an opportunity for weeding—as long as you apply the same standards to all works. When a new work comes out by a problematic author, rely on your selection policy and reviews to decide if the title belongs in your collection.

Further Reading


Why are these books on this list?

All of these books have some sort of IF theme or controversy associated with them. Can you figure out why?

**1984** by George Orwell  FICTION Orwell
Portrays life in a future time when a totalitarian government watches over all citizens and directs all activities.

**American Heart** by Lauren Moriarty (publish date: January 30, 2018)
Imagine a United States in which registries and detainment camps for Muslim-Americans are a reality. Two teens set off on a desperate journey, hitchhiking through the heart of an America that is at times courageous and kind, but always full of tension and danger for anyone deemed suspicious.--Amazon

**A Birthday Cake for George Washington** by Ramin Ganeshram (never published)
Everyone is buzzing about the president's birthday! Especially George Washington's servants, who scurry around the kitchen preparing to make this the best celebration ever. Hercules, a slave, takes great pride in baking the president's cake.--Amazon

**Brave New World** by Aldous Huxley  FICTION HUXLEY
The astonishing novel Brave New World, originally published in 1932, presents Aldous Huxley's vision of the future-of a world utterly transformed. Through the most efficient scientific and psychological engineering, people are genetically designed to be passive and therefore consistently useful to the ruling class.
Why are these books on this list?

**Dangerous** by Milo Yiannopoulos  323.443 Yiannopoulos
A book on free speech written by the Breitbart columnist and blogger Milo Yiannopoulos.

**Fahrenheit 451** by Ray Bradbury  FICTION Bradbury
Nowadays firemen start fires. Fireman Guy Montag loves to rush to a fire and watch books burn up. Then he met a seventeen-year old girl who told him of a past when people were not afraid, and a professor who told him of a future where people could think. And Guy Montag knew what he had to do …

**A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Treat** by Emily Jenkins  j Jenkins
Depicts families, from England to California and from 1710 to 2010, preparing and enjoying the dessert called blackberry fool. Includes a recipe and historical notes.

**Ghosts** by Raina Telgemeier  j GRAPHIC NOVEL Ghosts
Catrina and her family have moved to the coast of Northern California for the sake of her little sister, Maya, who has cystic fibrosis--and Cat is even less happy about the move when she is told that her new town is inhabited by ghosts, and Maya sets her heart on meeting one.

**The Hate U Give** by Angie Thomas  TEEN Thomas
After witnessing her friend's death at the hands of a police officer, Starr Carter's life is complicated when the police and a local drug lord try to intimidate her in an effort to learn what happened the night Kahlil died.
Why are these books on this list?

_Mein Kampf (My Struggle)_ by Adolf Hitler   BIO Hitler
_Hitler’s autobiographical book that also discusses socialism and his views on resolving social and political problems in Germany._

_There is a Tribe of Kids_ by Lane Smith   jp Smith
_Simple text follows a young boy and the many animals he meets on his adventure through the jungle._