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Intellectual Freedom and Libraries: Building Community

By John Mack Freeman

When it comes to intellectual freedom, I often don't know.

That may be a strange way to start an article on intellectual freedom (IF) since I'm the current chair of GLA's Intellectual Freedom Interest Group and the incoming chair of ALA's Intellectual Freedom Round Table.

Intellectual freedom is the right to seek and review information without restriction. But because information and the way the world interacts with it is constantly in flux, so is what it means to be free in pursuit of it.

It most often seems like intellectual freedom comes to the forefront of people's minds when there is a problem. And those problems typically happen when people are alone. But the world of intellectual freedom is anything but a lonely place.

Problems Happen Alone

One of my first experiences with intellectual freedom was in an early library job when a graphic novel I had initiated the purchase for had a complaint lodged against it. I had been trained in the library on the formal process for dealing with concerns. But instead of the formal process playing out and the item being given the chance to stand on its own merits, it just disappeared. For a while it was still in the catalog in a damaged status, but after a few more months, it went away completely. No explanation. No process. Just gone.

To many people, this may sound like a relatively common occurrence. It is simpler to eat the cost of an item and get rid of it than to confront the challengers and risk bad press. Over time, this demonstrates that it is better to avoid even

unintentional offense than to stand up for the professional ideas people learn in library school.

I felt naive that I did not see this face-saving outside-the-system solution as a possible end to this issue. But it also helped to clarify for me why IF is important, even outside the classroom. I realized that I had not given enough consideration to the politics of intellectual freedom and what it would really mean to put these beliefs into action in the public sphere. Since then, I have kept diving further and further into IF, learning more about censorship, filtering, the right to be forgotten, disinvited speakers, public forums, and so many other topics. And the more I learned, the more I knew that any lasting change in this area would have to be accomplished as a group. Luckily, the IF community is there.

The IF Community

When libraries or individuals get challenged on issues that have intellectual freedom implications in day-to-day life, they can feel isolated. A single library person has to weigh a lot of factors and decide what is the most correct. The classic example is someone showing up to the library to launch an angry tirade about a book they want to challenge, but IF concerns crop up in numerous areas. Do new vendors the library wants to work with respect user privacy? Are new staff members trained on the ethics and principles inherent in contemporary library work? Do library workers self-censor to avoid the possibility of conflict? Is it the library's place to take a stand on hot button issues like "fake news," or should our advocacy be more passive? These ongoing issues, coupled with an inherent lack of perfect information, can make any person feel overwhelmed and alone.

But while problems may arise in lonely situations, they do not have to be solved that way. What intellectual freedom advocates have is a community that they can fall back on. At the state level, the Georgia Library Association has the Intellectual Freedom Interest Group. At the national level, the American Library Association has the Intellectual Freedom Round Table, the Intellectual Freedom Committee, and the Office of Intellectual Freedom. There is the Freedom to Read Foundation, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and dozens of other organizations that combine into a veritable alphabet soup of advocates fighting for the First Amendment and the right of people to express themselves.

However, all of this infrastructure does not matter at all if it is not put to use.

These groups may seem daunting. Some are based far away. Some can have thousands of members, and it can be hard for people to find their place inside of them. Others may be small or new and still discovering their power. But what they all have in common in my experience is a wealth of knowledge and a willingness to help, either by themselves or by connecting people to those who are experts.

The IF community is not monolithic, and the debate that it engenders can help each person clarify their beliefs. But because there are so many different ways to be involved and so many different groups to keep track of, it can help to start small.

Building Your IF Community and Knowledge

The first step in building an IF Community is to start talking about the issues that matter to you personally and to your community. Find others who have a common point of view on these issues, and engage them in conversation. This informal group of peers can be an important sounding board when looking to explore the nuances that come up in daily work life.

If there is no one local that seems like a fellow IF advocate or if you need larger and more immediate support, reach out and join a larger association. Most states (including Georgia) have a group dedicated to intellectual freedom, and the members are typically good for sharing information, offering support, and providing a sounding board when IF issues arise in the library. They often have committees or sponsor programs that can provide ways for people to get involved with IF in their professional service. Additionally, they bring together people from all types of libraries, which can be helpful in providing unique perspectives on issues under discussion. But if you need someone immediately to give advice about a crisis, the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom is staffed with people who are ready and willing to offer assistance.

The next most important thing is to stay informed about what is going on with intellectual freedom issues. The Office of Intellectual Freedom blog at <https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/> can be a good place to find up-to-date information of what is going on with IF on a weekly basis. Also, Google alerts can provide daily information on what is going on in topics of special interest. However anyone decides to stay informed, the most important thing is to make staying informed a conscious choice that is continually developed. Issues emerge constantly, and new developments happen every day. Information is the key to being part of the IF advocacy conversation. Also, starting to learn about a topic after an issue arises at a library is often too late. Forewarned is forearmed, and those best protected from emerging IF issues are those who have spent the time preparing for them.

Conclusion

Sometimes it may seem that IF people have all the answers. After all, many of them bring decades of knowledge and experience to the table. But because the world is constantly

shifting, because there is always something new, and because people keep changing, there reaches a point when everyone who answers truthfully must say “I don’t know” about something in the intellectual freedom world. There is no shame in that. But that is the first step. After that moment, the problem can be taken to the community for assistance, discussion, and workshopping until the right answer for that situation is discovered. Sometimes that group may be as simple as a call to a colleague whose opinion is respected. Sometimes that group may extend nationally

and lead to a formal guidance document that hundreds of libraries can use as a model. But whatever the size of the group, the ultimate result is that the issue gets solved and that no one had to do it alone.

Like I said at the beginning, I often don’t know. But I have confidence that we can figure it out.

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