



Outdated and Irrelevant?

Rethinking the Library Bill of Rights—
does it work in the real world?

By Julian Aiken

Adopted in 1948, the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights represents an effort to codify a set of basic principles upon which all library services should ideally be founded. Since its inception, through a number of reassessments and revisions, it has evolved into an open challenge to librarians across the country to battle relentlessly against censorship, and to protect and promote our First Amendment rights. But a recent national survey indicates that it is a challenge we are failing to meet, a battle many of us seem no longer interested in fighting.

This raises a fundamental question: Are a great number of U.S. librarians simply failing in their professional duties, or has the Library Bill of Rights become an outdated and increasingly irrelevant document?

Unquestionably the greatest focus of controversy has always been the bill's Article V: "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."

Specifically, it has been the inclusion of "age" within this article—last reaffirmed by ALA in January 1996—that has caused continual, sometimes heated, debate. And it is this article that is creating a fissure between the practices of many libraries and policies of ALA.

In October 2006 I mailed a survey to 400 public library directors randomly selected from every state across the U.S. The survey, focusing on the provision of access for children and young adults to nonprint materials, asked two questions:

1. Do you allow your young patrons to access any library material, regardless of whether it might be considered inappropriate due to its "adult" nature?

2. Do you allow your young patrons free access to social networking sites on the internet?

For the purposes of the survey, filtering mandated by the Children's Internet Protection Act was deemed not to be a violation of the Library Bill of Rights. Attitude toward access to nonprint materials was prioritized, as librarians have tended as a profession to draw a distinction between printed materials and less-traditional methods of information dissemination. (This point was, indeed, highlighted by the response of one librarian, who argued that, while his library did not allow free access to the internet or movies for its young patrons, it could not be accused of violating the Library Bill of Rights because it was a vigorous defender of controversial books such as *Daddy's Roommate*.)

Many library directors responded that they allowed free access to nonprint materials, provided parents or guardians granted written permission for their child. However, in "Access for Children and Young Adults to Nonprint Materials: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," passed in 1989, ALA's governing Council affirmed, "Policies that set minimum age limits for access to any nonprint materials, with or without parental permission, abridge library use for minors." Nevertheless, two statistical analyses of the survey results were made. The first (a) is based on free access being granted to minors with parental permission; the second (b) is based on the more stringent ALA standard of free access being granted to minors without the need for parental permission.

The results of the survey make for depressing reading for anyone who believes that freedom of information ought to be a founding principle for public libraries. Examining the results of analysis (a) first, of the 110 directors who responded, 18 (16.4%) did not allow minors free access to all library materials, and 19 (17.3%) did not allow minors to access social networking sites. More than a quarter (26.4%) of the responding libraries failed in one of these ways to provide young people free access to nonprint materials.

Turning to the results of analysis (b)—the strict interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights—the results are more worrying still: Of the 110 returned survey results, 34 (30.9%) banned minors from accessing some nonprint library materials, and 41 (37.3%) prevented minors from accessing social networking sites. Fifty-six libraries (50.9%) did not permit free access for minors to nonprint materials. If these results are representative of the nation as a whole, more than half of our public libraries are not conforming to Article V of the Library Bill of Rights.

Facing reality

The survey results raise the question of whether ALA should continue to cling to its absolutist standard of intellectual freedom. Ought we accept that the realities faced on a daily basis by public librarians mean that some compromises have to be made? ALA has no authority to require that libraries adopt the bill, nor does it attempt to censure those who do not adhere to it. Yet if more than half the U.S. public libraries are failing to conform to one of its central tenets on intellectual freedom, can it be said that ALA still truly represents American libraries? In taking so principled yet

STATISTICS

Type of censorship	% of libraries censoring minors' access to "adult" materials	% of libraries censoring minors' access to social networking sites	Overall % of libraries failing to conform to the LBOR
(a) with parental permission clause	16.4%	17.3%	26.4%
(b) ALA standard	30.9%	37.3%	50.9%

impracticable a stance, ALA appears to be alarmingly out of touch with many of its members.

ALA continues to maintain that it is not a librarian's role to act in loco parentis: "Librarians and library governing bodies cannot assume the role of parents or the functions of parental authority in the private relationship between parent and child" ("Free Access

"Pretty awful, I know." Another expressed fears of being challenged on the library's decision. Others referred to the fact that they headed small, rural libraries and that their patrons would resist free access for minors. A common theme running through many of the responses was the difficulties inherent in explaining more liberal policies to parents. One librarian argued, "That also

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to Libraries for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights"). But family structures have undergone quite radical changes in recent years, as working patterns for American parents have shifted dramatically. In "The Economy that Never Sleeps" (*Contexts* magazine, Spring 2004), Harriet B. Presser writes, "One out of five employed Americans work most of their hours outside the range of 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., or have a regularly rotating schedule. Many more work at least some of their hours in the evenings or at night. About one-third of employed Americans work Saturday, Sunday, or both."

Parents are no longer able to closely monitor their children's activities in libraries, so some librarians are giving them the option to do so at a remove, by requiring written permission from parents for children to access the internet and "adult" materials. Perhaps it is time ALA recognized the validity of this practice and adapted the Library Bill of Rights to suit the pragmatic needs of working parents.

At issue here is not the question of whether librarians should actively censor, but whether they should enforce choices made by absent parents. This is not to say librarians should directly assist in the raising of other people's children. They should not: The parent-child relationship is simply too complicated, too nuanced for outsiders to usefully become involved. While libraries undoubtedly provide a great deal of indirect assistance to parents in terms of information, materials, programs, advice, and suitability guidance, this ought to constitute the outer limit of our professional responsibility. The question remains as to how to bridge the gap between ALA policy and library practice.

A number of library directors who did require parental permission for minors to access nonprint materials admitted to misgivings about their policies. One wrote,

makes my job more difficult because I have to spend more time dealing with, responding to, and educating parents as well as children." Ultimately, however, librarians make better communicators and educators than they do enforcers, and it is here we should be focusing our energies.

Communication breakdown

It appears that a breakdown in communication lies at the root of the disconnect between the articles of the Library Bill of Rights and the individual policies of directors across the country. Of the librarians who successfully follow ALA guidelines, many responded that they made a point of communicating their policies—and the reasons for these policies—to their patrons during the library card application process. The local library is only one of an increasingly broad set of options for the determined young person wishing to access material parents might consider inappropriate. We need to be openly discussing these issues with our patrons, so that parents become more actively involved in helping their children become responsible information users.

ALA has a role to play in all of this. The results of the survey indicate that there is some ground to be made up if library directors are to be convinced of the importance of implementing the Library Bill of Rights. Better communications are needed: Library administrators need to be equipped with a set of answers to deal with challenges to their policies on this issue. A national campaign aimed at raising public awareness of the Library Bill of Rights, coupled with the provision of local support materials, might go some way toward resolving the disparity between library principles and practice. Without such an effort, the Library Bill of Rights may well find itself relegated to the trash can of history reserved for ideas that are splendid in principle but which cannot be expected to work in the real world. ■