

# The Vital Role of Libraries and Democracy Needs Protection

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*The current spate of materials challenges in libraries globally calls out for new defenses. Concepts of library neutrality and librarian objectivity fall flat in light of current developments, and against organized challengers not interested in objectivity. New defenses of library services must be based on librarian expertise and activated network of diverse community members. The field needs to strengthen societal protections for librarians in the conduct of their work.*

Challenges, censorship, policy, neutrality

## How Society Sustain Argument and Debate

Several years ago, I was watching a lecture at Oxford. One of the exchanges was about the special place academia holds in society. Academia, it was argued, was given a special place in society to allow it to argue over ideas for decades and even centuries, whereas business and governments had to make decisions in days and weeks. Universities and colleges could tackle (and argue over) topics like the nature of matter; the meaning of life; and even how does one best prepare librarians. And society ensured scholars had the space to do this with things like tenure, government subsidies, tax exemptions, and so on.

There is great reward for nations, it is argued, in this special dispensation. Big ideas and shifts take time. It takes time to develop questions, experiments, gather data, report, discuss, and then seek replication. Ideas like evolution, relativity, even positivism and post-modernism take time and in that time the application may not be readily apparent. But over decades and centuries, once obscure topics like quantum physics or germ theory can revolutionize the world as we know. Long after we have forgotten what an iPhone is, we will still be developing new anti-biotics to counter bacterial resistance explained through evolution.

There are other near universal types of institutions that occupy societal carve outs. Nations spend a significant portion of their Gross Domestic Product each year on public primary and secondary education for example. The public libraries also have, or should have, a special place as well. For all that libraries do, it is increasingly recognized that public libraries serve as anchor institutions for democratic participation.

## Public Libraries as Democratic Anchor Institutions

For a people to govern themselves, they must be equipped (empowered if you prefer) to govern. This isn't just about elections, this about the responsibility of a people to oversee elected leaders. An obligation to be informed on topics, and to push forward ideas needed for a civil society to prosper.

Basic literacy, while a long-time objective of libraries, is a vital skill to democratic participation. Information literacy is vital in being able to critically examine texts (laws, governmental reports) and to find these texts in the first place. We have seen how misinformation and malice disinformation has been weaponized to undercut trust in elections and civic institutions. Society needs counterbalance available to all.

The short hand phrase that is often used to encapsulate these ideas is that a people who govern themselves must be educated to do so. This concept is often cited in the necessity for a free press. However, as newspaper circulation plummets, and governments at all levels are withdrawing human mediated assistance from the public square across the globe, the public library is often the last civic institution left standing. Adults can't go to grade schools for help. Citizens don't hang out at police stations or city hall looking for a third place free of work and family pressures.

And so, society carves out a space for the public library in society. Through government support, copyright exemptions, and specific liability waivers in obscenity laws and the like, libraries are meant, from a democratic lens, to be an instrument of dialog, debate, and action. This exemption is explicit in national library laws in say Norway and Finland, and implied in most nationalities.

## Materials Challenges and Democracy

Yet in the United States, South Korea, and in nations across the globe, this exemption is under specific and targeted attack. Materials challenges have shifted from an exceptional process where motivated individuals question the appropriateness of a resources, to well-coordinated campaigns to censor books. In the United States lists of books that discuss homosexuality, gender transitions, critical historical analysis, and even stories that feature minority protagonists are being developed, circulated, and used to censor ideas from the community discourse<sup>1</sup>.

What's worse, is that these coordinated attacks on the free circulation of ideas comes at a time when the very paradigm of librarianship is shifting. While the scale and coordination of the banning efforts are new, the challenge of materials is not. In the past these challenges were warded off by positioning libraries (and the librarians that run them) as objective and neutral. Libraries needed to collect controversial books because they were objectively addressing topics and serving all audiences equally.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian Newspaper has done a series of articles on this topic in the United States context: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/24/us-conservatives-campaign-books-ban-schools>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/20/librarians-banned-books-attacks-library>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jul/27/right-wing-proud-boys-libraries-book-bans>

## Post-Neutrality Defenses

However, in the past ten year the idea of library objectivity and neutrality has not only been severely challenged, in many parts of the world it has been abandoned. This can take the form of discussing equitable service over equal service. Equitable service is where libraries devote special effort to reach and help the underserved and the historically marginalized. In other contexts, attempts at neutrality have demonstrated harm on parts of a community. Hosting neo-Nazis in a public room is not a neutral act – it can cause harm (and certainly a lack of trust) in minoritized populations.

So, from the idea that libraries have biases toward their stated values (against censorship, for free access, toward marginalized voices) to outright activism by librarians on behalf of their communities, the argument that neutrality alone can stand against censorship campaigns has fallen flat. Not to mention, that many of the organized attacks on the free expression of ideas never valued objectivity, as they want to put in place a clear ideological regime within the library.

The paradigm that has replaced objectivity is a strong community focus. Where once librarians were focused on facilities and tools, they are now centering those they serve in their work. Librarians are activists for literacy, for empowerment, and for positive social change. This is not neutrality. It can also, initially, make defense against challenges harder. After all, if librarians are shaping services around communities, then if the community wants to remove certain books or hide certain topics, isn't that being responsive? Doesn't community-focused (new librarianship, community led librarianship) in essence mean the removal of books and ideas are OK?

The very short answer is no. But to understand where that “no” comes from and how we must mount a different defense, we must delve a bit deeper in what being community-centered means.

Libraries should absolutely shape themselves around communities. They must become “of” the community, not simply “for” it. Some localities need large book collections, some small, and some none at all. Some local libraries will be focused on the creation of new knowledge and new content with galleries and maker spaces. Some libraries will be quiet places of reflection. In South Korea there is a growing number of libraries dedicated to children and young adults. RFID bands keep adults out of places with drum kits and dance studios side by side with shelves of materials to create a safe space for teen expression.

But here is the important part: libraries need to shape themselves around all of a community, not just part of it. What's more the librarians of that library are part of the community and have a voice and agency. It is upon these two ideas: inclusivity and the expertise of librarians, that we must muster new defenses against censorship. Let me take them in turn.

Communities are not monolithic wholes. A community is any group of people organized around some common feature (like where they live, work, or play) and a mechanism to allocate scarce resources (money, land, time). When we talk about putting the community at the center of what we do, this is not the same as assuming community members all agree, or have the same needs, or even support the library. We must shape services around sub-communities that divide by location (why we build branches), topic (some branches have special collections or collection needs), or background. The policies we write and the collections we build are in light not of the majority, but the diversity within a community.

## **Clear, Consistent, Inclusive, and Transparent**

This means that when there are challenges to materials, by an individual or an orchestrated campaign, we must have dispute processes that are clear, consistent, inclusive, and transparent. Clear in that our dispute process must have stated procedures, the first of which is to read the book under review. Consistent in that no matter who makes a challenge (librarian, elected official, mother, priest) this challenge is treated the same as all others. Challenge processes must be inclusive. It is not enough to have a librarian alone do the review. Our review groups must be diverse drawing from across the community. Finally, the process must be transparent. The public needs to know what is being challenged and the result of any challenge. Decisions made under the cloak of dark or closed sessions goes against the very value of the public library.

The second part of the defense is the role and nature of librarians. Librarians are not neutral; they fight for inclusion and access to ideas. They do this by building trust. They build trust through their expertise and through staying connected to communities across their differences. Librarians must be activist for not only the unheard parts of a community, but for their own expert view. Librarians know that the best learning comes from the richest sources. Librarians know the importance of striving to make safe spaces to explore dangerous ideas.

To be clear, there will be books banned, and that's OK... so long as doing so came through a clear, consistent, inclusive, and transparent process. Also, to be clear, that these things alone, a policy and an expert librarian, are not enough to fend off dedicated ideologues. In fact, one of the stated techniques of the current coordinated far right challenges is to by-pass formal procedures by being vocal in public events with elected officials. They use volume (and threats) to appear to be a larger percentage of a community. Also, to be clear, they will not use words like "ban" and "censor." They will use words like pornography, grooming, values, and, ironically, enough, parental choice. The difference between having a parent control their child's reading, and the idea that a parent can impose a view on all children (to protect them all) is not a distinction they will debate.

So, what else is needed in this community frame? Trust and diverse networks. Trust is not a new idea in librarianship. However, as we have shifted from false ideas of neutrality the concept of trust has also changed. Trust doesn't come from not having opinions or stands, but by consistently applying the ones we have. The reason dispute processes have to be clear, consistent, inclusive, and transparent, is because that is how you build trust. People may not like the outcome, but at least they can trust the process. Likewise, librarians are not trusted because they don't have goals of ideologies, but because they are clear, consistent, inclusive, and transparent in them.

Libraries have declared values, like service, learning, intellectual honesty, diversity, and a push for intellectual freedom & safety. These undergird our world view, or ideology. Parents, business people, seniors, and elected officials know they can not only count on us to provide service, but do so in accordance with stated principals. It is exactly for this reason so much book banning seeks to bypass librarians in the process. This brings me to the need for networks.

Librarians must focus (always, not just in terms of challenges) on connection development over collection development. We must let the community that trusts us, also know they need to defend and include us. We must be ready to reach out to those in the community on concerns of censorship and seek their participation. We do this not out of a sense of politics, but out of the need for a community to be informed about topics so important, that some would seek to ban them from discourse. This is true on the right and the left.

Seeing the role of the librarian as agent of trust and professionalism, instead of neutral arbiter, means that librarian must be protected in their work. All of those carve outs and policies I mentioned before were mostly put in place when collections were seen as the primary value of libraries. We need to seek laws and policies that protect librarians in the professional conduct of their duties. We need to look at library laws and strengthen them to ensure all communities have access to libraries in order to facilitate true democratic participation. We need legal structures to act as guardrails that would bypass inclusivity in weeding and disputes.

## Society

I know some may think I am being alarmist, or that such ideological book banning is a problem of the United States. But I can tell you from the front lines of these issues, that if they are not in your library currently, they are coming. Far right groups seeking to control the conversations around race, history, and diversity are gaining footholds, not losing them across the globe. We have seen the resurgence of authoritarianism, and xenophobic nationalism on nearly every continent (thank God for Antarctica). If you are not currently seeing a rise in book banning and challenges to libraries, great. Now is the time to ensure you have the trust of your whole community. Now is the time to build your network. Now is our time to build a strong librarianship that seeks equity and trust, discarding false narratives of universal objectivity. Our communities are too complex for such simple solutions, and they deserve better from us. They deserve the services of a vital social role for facilitating hard conversations on difficult topics.

## About the Author



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R. David Lankes is the Virginia & Charles Bowden Professor of Librarianship at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Information. He is the recipient of ALA's Reference and User Services Association 2021 Isadore Gilbert Mudge Award for distinguished contribution to reference librarianship. His book, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* won the 2012 ABC-CLIO/Greenwood Award for the Best Book in Library Literature. Lankes is a passionate advocate for librarians and their essential role in today's society:

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