

## FREEDOM OF ACCESS

The Intellectual Freedom Panel (IFP) believes that the right of free and unrestricted access to information is vital for any populace. In order to make informed decisions and to participate intelligently in a democracy, a citizenry must have free access to all forms of information and expressions, whether economic, political, scientific or social.

The American Library Association (ALA) "[Library Bill of Rights](#)" states that, "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves" and, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."

Some ideas or expressions may be objectionable to certain individuals or groups, but these same ideas may not be objectionable to others. It is not the library's place to take sides on such issues. While it is true that a library must follow the laws of the society, it is not reasonable for the library to give up its neutral stance in favor of the opinions of one particular group. There is an essential societal need for an institution that unflinchingly defends the free and unfettered provision of information and exchange of ideas. That institution is the library.

One major benefit of an unrestricted flow of information is to allow our society to progressively expand our human knowledge base. Society progresses on mountains of ideas, built through the free exchange of knowledge. One person may originate an idea and a second may expand on it. Still others learn of the idea, use it to their advantage and may also add to it. It is this progressive exchange and building of ideas that allows us to find the answers to pressing and changing human concerns. Any restriction of this process, such as denying access to certain information, can be an impediment to progress.

### Freedom of Access and Government

In the aftermath of the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, the federal government, and many state and local governments, undertook a steady reassessment of the types of information they make available to the public, in light of the potential that such information may be used by a terrorist agency to commit acts of terror. The library community took notice that many materials, which were once freely accessible, were no longer available. IFP believes that while some materials may be too sensitive for public release, governmental agencies must be ever diligent to minimize any restrictions on public access to information. Two primary reasons for this stance are:

1. Freedom of Access to information is necessary to support a government that is receptive to the needs and desires of its citizens

In order for a representative form of government to work effectively, a governed people must have the basic right to understand the current societal and governing issues. The public should also be made aware of what the current members of government are doing about the particular issues, so that well-informed decisions and actions can be undertaken.

Libraries play a key role in this process. They are one of the few institutions that can offer neutral, unbiased source materials about the inner workings of government and on societal debates. Libraries typically provide access to such information through the conduit of traditional print materials and electronic access to library databases and materials on the Internet.

## 2. Freedom of Access to information is necessary to prevent tyranny

The framers of the U.S. Constitution created a government of checks and balances to discourage the power elite from imposing their will upon a free people. The architects of the Constitution were well aware of the significant potential of the misuse of power and understood the benefit of creating a balanced three-branch government. The intent was to ensure that no one person or group, nor one branch of government could achieve absolute power over the other and, in turn, over the governed.

Our government was intended to be a representative government with these checks and balances in place. While it was designed to ensure the free flow of information among its citizens, there have been times when citizens' rights to free speech have been abrogated, or at least curtailed, due to National Security interests. These situations will occur and may be tolerable, for the short term and within limits. This is true as long as the citizenry is well informed as to the reason, as to what rights are being threatened, and from whom these rights are being taken away. With this information, the individual citizen can then voice his or her opinion or exercise his or her vote about the process.

As Timothy Snyder points out in his book *On Tyranny*, “Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given.” The potential for tyranny must be constantly monitored, and corrected, when violations that begin to erode our basic human rights occur. Without a well-informed citizenry we have little defense and without free access to information it is difficult to have an informed citizenry.

Another disturbing trend has been the suppression or distortion of information for political purposes that have nothing to do with the security of our country, and everything to do with an attempt to impose a point of view on the nation. Examples include [interference with the dissemination of scientific and medical information](#), [attempts to legislate against school curricula](#), and [treating “alternative facts” as valid data](#). Putting gag orders on researchers, educators, and the media restricts the ability of citizens to make decisions based on authoritative data. Such suppression must be fought by the producers, providers, and consumers of information. Giving as much weight to “alternative facts” as to those supported by evidence is a danger to intellectual freedom because it asserts, in effect, that there is no distinction between fact and fiction, true and false—a step that is foundational to establishing tyranny. Hannah Arendt, one of the world's great thinkers on the subject, pointed out that “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists.”

In summary, unencumbered freedom of access to information is necessary to allow for a truly enlightened citizenry, to allow for the growth of this citizenry's cumulative knowledge base and to engender a truly representative form of government. A curbing of the freedom of access to information would inevitably erode these goals. IFP believes it is the librarian's role to prevent this from happening, whether the source of the restriction comes from an individual, a group or our government.

## Collection Development

Within any library collection development policy, there is a critical need for clear and simple guidelines to minimize internal restrictions placed on the content of information collected. The selection of materials portion of any collection development policy should include a clear statement affirming the adherence to freedom of access principals. Without such a selection statement, collection development is in danger of being limited to only a few commonly accepted viewpoints. Ignorance, through the suppression of ideas, fosters fear and misunderstanding. In the case of libraries, the internal suppression of topics or ideas leads to self-censorship. Instead of being avoided, controversial ideas should be welcome in a library collection.

Libraries should encourage this ongoing flow of ideas by providing unrestricted patron access to both established and controversial opinions and expressions. Unpopular views are as worthy of our shelves and electronic databases as those that are universally admired.

For examples of selection policies in libraries, see the links at the end of the citation section below. For details about what a good selection policy should include, see “What to do before the censor comes” in the section labeled Censorship in this manual.



## Works Cited in this article:

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951.

Branch, Glenn. “Antiscience legislation in Texas.” *National Center for Science Education*, 3 Feb. 2017, <https://ncse.com/news/2017/02/antiscience-legislation-texas-0018449>. Accessed 14 April 2017.

“Library Bill of Rights.” *American Library Association: Advocacy, Legislation & Issues*, 16 Feb. 2017, [www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill). Accessed 14 April 2017.

Resnick, Brian and Julia Belluz. “Sudden changes at the EPA, USDA, and CDC under Trump, explained: Government scientists are being ordered not to talk about their research — and it’s only week one.” *Vox.com*, 25 Jan 2017, <http://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/1/25/14370712/trump-science-gagging-explained>. Accessed 14 April 2017.

Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, 2017, p. 17.

## Further Reading:

Delgado, Richard. "[Precious Knowledge: State Bans on Ethnic Studies, Book Traffickers \(Librotraficantes\), and a New Type of Race Trial.](#)" *North Carolina Law Review*, Vol. 91, 2013. U of Alabama Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2274898. Accessed 14 April 2017.

“[Research Findings Suppressed by Government – Environmental Science.](#)” *National Coalition Against Censorship*, (n.d.). Accessed 14 April 2017.

## Sample Selection Policies:

“[Collection Development Policy.](#)” *Boulder Public Library*, 1 June 2016. Accessed 28 April 2017.

“[Library Acquisition and Selection Policy.](#)” *University of South Carolina Beaufort*, (n.d.). Accessed 28 April 2017.

“[Materials Selection Policy.](#)” *Enoch Pratt Free Library*, 2007. Accessed 28 April 2017.

“[Selection Criteria for School Library Media Center Collection.](#)” No date given. *Garces Memorial High School*, (n.d.). Accessed 28 April 2017.