Interview:

Adult Librarian I

San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library

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Intellectual Freedom Seminar

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Abstract

An interview with a librarian at the San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library on intellectual freedom reveals that there many steps are involved into making sure principles of intellectual freedom are put into practice. Libraries must serve the needs of the community in which they are situated. Questions around collection development often have a lot to do with cost. Librarians have to overcome biases and look at the larger picture when selecting works that they do not agree with. Filtering does not work and gives a false sense of security, and librarians encourage parents and children to communicate amongst themselves about appropriate reading material. Patron privacy is extremely important, though it is often hard to put into practice due to layout of library spaces.
Introduction

I interviewed an Adult Librarian I at the San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library. This interview took place on Tuesday, November 24, 2009.

This interview was recorded, and permission was received from the subject to be recorded and to be identified by name, as well as the location of the library in which the subject works. However, for the purposes of the submission of this paper as evidence for the e-Portfolio, I am rendering the subject anonymous. Hereafter, the librarian will be referred to as “LIBRARIAN” or “the librarian”.

Collections Development

JL: In your opinion, or in your experience, when selecting materials, which do you believe takes greater precedent: the needs of the local community or the needs of the majority, (e.g. the majority opinion or the majority population)?

LIBRARIAN: Well, the needs of the local community. Basically I’m trying to find things that people will find the need or desire to consult or read, and I’m especially interested in things that people might have a harder time coughing up the money for themselves or finding other places or having access to, so there’s both the need for things that people have a desire for induced in them, by advertising or popular culture, but things that might go out less often, but will be of importance to their education, to the public good, to the common wealth, I want to make sure we have those too.

JL: Have you ever encountered a situation where personal biases have impacted your selection of library materials, or have you noticed this with other librarians?

LIBRARIAN: well, of course, everyone is biased, and we’re always making decisions based on our imagination about what is necessary and desirable to have on the shelves,
and some of the time I’m going to say “Gee, I don’t think that’s necessary”. You can call that a bias, you can call it professional judgment. There may not be a really good way to distinguish between the two. I mean basically I think it’s more important to have things that are less mainstream in a variety of ways, especially things that are more expensive, that people won’t buy for themselves. A lot of times librarians, in my experience (talking about bias) will say, “oh, that book costs $75.00. That’s too much money for a circulating book”. And I’m thinking those are the very books that people won’t buy for themselves, and if it gets stolen, it’s a shame, but in my experience many, many library books don’t get stolen. And if we have it, and I would almost rather have it circulating than reference, just because people will be able to use it more thoroughly if they don’t have to sit in a library. So, I’m in favor of expensive books, rare books, obscure books, I’m in favor of buying things that maybe I don’t think are such great books, but if the library has it, then people don’t have to spend their money on it.

JL: Which also fulfills the library’s mission and purpose.

LIBRARIAN: Yes.

JL: How do you deal with selection of materials whose viewpoints you don’t agree with and do the same issues come into play with selection of Internet resources as with physical resources?

LIBRARIAN: Again, I think that, in particular with things I don’t agree with…like I’m not particularly fond of Ayn Rand as a thinker in our culture, but I think she’s a fascinating figure and people will want to read books about her and maybe will learn more about the economy and how she influenced Alan Greenspan, and I will want to have her books and books about her. And that’s something, of course there are two new
books about her on the market right now, both of which I think probably are critical, but I haven’t read the reviews to know that for sure. Also I noticed the other day someone from the San Francisco community came in and asked for “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. I don’t think I’d ever had that question before.

JL: Wait, who came in?

LIBRARIAN: A patron. It wasn’t my question. My colleague had it. And she was not familiar with this book, and he wanted to know why he couldn’t get it easily. Anyway, it turned out that San Francisco Public Library had the only copy that was available, that we could find easily on the Link+ system. Now it may be that the other libraries did not have it because they’re not sharing it and it’s not part of their database (I’m not quite sure how those things work), but even though it’s a horrible hoax and it’s not a book that I would want to recommend to people as something worthy, I nevertheless want people to have access to it so they know what people are talking about when they see this book that says that Jews are responsible for taking over the world and so forth, this very old hoax…So again, it’s a delicate balance. I’m glad we don’t have it on every shelf of every branch, it would get stolen, and in fact our copy is reference only, and it probably would get stolen if it were circulating, for a variety of reasons, but there’s a balance between buying things and having things available so you can learn about them, even things that are “bad” and “wrong” and that I disagree with.

JL: I guess the same applies to Internet resources?

LIBRARIAN: San Francisco, in my experience, we don’t link to that many things so far. When it comes to the paid databases that would be true as well. I wouldn’t want us to have things that are objects of scrutiny in a variety of ways. I do wish we had more things
that were less mainstream. What you end up with is a lot of databases that are either academic or sometimes specialized, but there are not as many ones that would be of interest to progressive San Franciscans, but aren’t going to be bundled by these aggregators.

Filtering

JL: Do you agree or disagree with the principle of filtering?

LIBRARIAN: In my experience it doesn’t work well: false negatives, false positives, too much stuff that gets cut out that shouldn’t be, too much sense of false security. We do not filter at all in San Francisco. We turned down money that if we had asked for we might have gotten, and we’ve been very happy with that decision. Occasionally I’ll get somebody saying “What? You don’t filter?” and I will explain the problems, about false security, that it doesn’t work very well with images, a lot of reasons. Now, I haven’t kept up with the latest research on how well the filters are doing these days, but for the most part, I get very few complaints and the people that I talk to seem to be satisfied with the explanation I give them, or if they do write a letter of suggestion or complaint, I still don’t hear from them again, at least not in my experience.

JL: Is it that San Francisco Public Library never had filters?

LIBRARIAN: They never had filters. They decided early on that they were a bad idea and that we could afford to go without them, and as a very progressive city we didn’t want to go in that direction and curtail access to articles about breast cancer or masturbation or gay sex or whatever it is. We just didn’t want those prohibitions on our populace or even our children. And also it’s a question of having parents and children realize they need to be responsible for their actions.
JL: Have you spoken with librarians at other systems?

LIBRARIAN: I mean sometimes, if your city forces you into it, there may not be much you can do. I have to say that occasionally we do have people looking at pictures of naked people or semi-naked people, and especially if somebody complains, we will tell them that it is offending somebody. We have privacy screens, but they do get stolen and they don’t work that well. We do try to tell patrons that it’s better not to ever look at anybody’s screen, though sometimes you can’t avoid it, it just catches your eye when you’re walking by, even if you’re not intending to, and these screens are in full public view. There are difficult questions, because if it really is child pornography then it is illegal, but we’re not mandated to go look at people’s screens, so it becomes a very odd thing: if somebody complains, do we then have a right to go look? Mostly, we just tell people that someone has complained and we would rather they not do it.

JL: There’s only so much enforcing that you can do.

LIBRARIAN: A court is the one that is going to determine that it really is illegal, but if we value people’s privacy, we’re not going to be scrutinizing what they’re doing. If somebody complains…it get’s complicated.

JL: I could see that if somebody complains it is therefore brought to your attention and you therefore have knowledge.

LIBRARIAN: But it’s somebody else’s idea about what is pornography.

JL: It could be Michelangelo’s “David”, or it could be something much more…

LIBRARIAN: I would say this is an area of intellectual freedom that is under-examined. I’m actually on the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the California Library Association this year, and Mary Minow, who you probably heard of, was saying if it is child
pornography, then it is illegal and we would have to report it, but then there’s the thing about under what circumstances should we feel free to go look and see if we can figure out what it is, and then what would be our next step? And I don’t even know what those answers are.

JL: You said you have known patrons who have questioned the lack of filters. Have they opposed the lack of filters, or just questioned them?

LIBRARIAN: They’ve questioned it. “Why don’t you have filters? If I can have filters at home why can’t I have one here?” I don’t know if you would call that questioning or opposing, but it sounds like an opposition, a negative. They aren’t insisting that we have them but they are finding it odd.

JL: I guess there’s something about the way they ask it.

LIBRARIAN: Right, right. It’s not like “Oh, do you use filters, because I’m opposed?” or “do you filter because I’m in favor of them?”

JL: What is your opinion of the potential impact of filters on underserved communities?

LIBRARIAN: Obviously if you do have filters and you have a community where they are less likely to have computers because they’re poor, they’re less savvy, it’s harder to get them for whatever reason, and where the library is the only place where you can get access to the Internet, it can definitely be problematic to have filters.

Patron privacy

JL: Say someone is looking at child pornography, how would you know which computer it’s on, how would you know who is the person using the computer? Then there is the question of what kind of records you keep on patrons?
LIBRARIAN: If it’s a 15-minute computer we have no idea who’s on it. If it’s an hour-long computer we have records from the booking system, if they sign in with their card we can tell who they are, but those get eliminated after 24 hours or less. I guess if I did think that’s what was going on I might copy down the name from the booking system and discuss it with the security guards because they are usually around. When we’re open, security guards are available.

JL: Do you ever feel there’s a need to keep records of users’ borrowing or Internet search habits, or personal data, other than the circumstance you mentioned of letting the security guard know?

LIBRARIAN: Sometimes someone will complain and say “Oh, that person’s been on for more than an hour, or for two hours” or whatever. Then we can go look and see if it looks like someone is using someone else’s card, or something like that. There are times when we might, in order to enforce our policies, go and look. Or, if somehow, someone was able to sign in for more than one hour, because if there were a flaw in the booking system, we would want to know that too.

JL: Have you ever been approached by any law enforcement agency requesting user records?

LIBRARIAN: I don’t think so. Not me. It did happen in one of the branches a number of years ago that someone was threatening something on one of the computers and I think they did comply, but I don’t remember whether they had a search warrant or not. But we do have provisos about passing on any requests like that to the city librarian or the deputy city librarian immediately and not complying. Even if they showed us a piece of paper we would have to get somebody to help us make the decision.
JL: So it would just go up into the administration?

LIBRARIAN: Yes.

JL: Aside from the login records, are there any other records that the library keeps?

LIBRARIAN: Well the main thing, which is my concern, is that even though we have a privacy policy that says we will provide the privacy policy…[at this point LIBRARIAN looked up the San Francisco Public Library’s Privacy Policy (San Francisco Public Library, 2004)] You see, it’s not that easy to find but it didn’t take me too long, but I know it was there so that made it easier. Ok, this is what is really good: (Reading)

“to make this policy easy to find, the library makes this policy available on its website, and at every point where personally identifiable information may be requested”.

So let’s look and see if this happens. It may be that it’s true except for this one case. So if we go to “log in to your record” [navigates to “log into your record”, unable to find link to privacy policy]]. Anyway, they’re trying, they’re definitely trying. The thing that I find, and it’s one of the reasons I joined the Intellectual Freedom Committee this year, because other people are interested in this too, so we had this big privacy audit, which was a good thing to do, but it was sort of about our online database, how secure that is. But the big weakness from my point of view is that we reserves are on open shelves, with your name, your entire name in giant letters, and people can just pick a book up and look and see what the title is. Even if they were totally wrapped up we would still not be observing them. Somebody could just pick it up and go in a corner and [un]wrap it. Wrapping it does not solve the problem. We offer privacy, but most people don’t know we offer privacy, and even when we do give them privacy, we keep it behind the desk where somebody could still see your name in large letters from ten feet away.
JL: I can kind of see them from here [where I was sitting].

LIBRARIAN: Right, you can see them from the vestibule. So there are two issues. One is somebody can tell that I might be coming to this branch, and that I use this branch, or that I’m in San Francisco, or whatever it is, and if it’s on the open shelf, they can actually see this book. It’s great that we’re offering privacy, but we have to find a way to be more obvious about the fact that we’re offering privacy, and given that policy, that says we should tell you we’re offering policy, when you go to reserve a book, it should say “if you would like this book held in a place where no one can see it, please click here” or something like that, and then we should adhere to that, we should make it so that those books are shelved on the side, or something. It should take a few minutes more to arrange them. You could put them in another room. Obviously every branch, we all have limited amounts of room but you don’t want technical considerations to override our need for doing what we say we want to do. San Francisco Public Library does a magnificent job of caring about this stuff and trying to do it right. It’s this last inch that’s not being taken as seriously as it should be and if a patron complains about it enough at a library committee meeting it might get some traction. 99% of people don’t care and don’t need it.

JL: And some don’t even notice. I never actually thought about it until you brought it up.

LIBRARIAN: And you don’t admittedly some library systems have tried some things like where they put part of the name, or they put the library bar code. None of those things is really sufficient. For example, if my name is “Li Ma”, that’s going to be my whole name on there. If I use the last four digits of my bar code, my husband might know that when I have my book on divorce, or herpes, or whatever it is. So, we’re doing such a
magnificent job, I want us to complete it and take that one more step to make it really good.

Minors’ Access to Library Materials

JL: Have you encountered users who requested that their children be restricted from accessing certain materials?

LIBRARIAN: So, the answer would be no. Nobody ever actually took it that far.

JL: Have you ever handled requests from minors who requested materials that you felt may be adult in nature?

LIBRARIAN: No, anybody can take out anything, basically. Sometimes I’ll say to a parent “it’s up to you to determine whether you want your child to have this” but if the parent isn’t there, I guess occasionally I’ve said “it’s up to your mother to decide” but it’s just by way of accounting for all possibilities.

JL: So you basically feel it’s between the parent and the child what the child reads?

LIBRARIAN: Yes. And after a certain age of course, a lot of the intellectual freedom policies of ALA are designed to help children who may be under the thumb of particularly difficult, or censorious or whatever parents, there is a way in which the library will encourage each child to become all they can be even if the parent wishes to curtail them. It is a little difficult. Does that mean that the child wants to read books on setting up a meth lab (which we don’t have) or does it mean that the child wants to learn about incest? There’s a whole lot of things. A lot of what we have done is try to find ways to protect the individual rights of the child against any oppressive agent including their own parents. So in a way, it’s a way of teaching a child to regard themselves as becoming a more and more responsible and self-regarding person.
JL: So, basically, the library as a safe haven/safe space?

LIBRARIAN: Well the weird thing is that of course it’s not a safe space, because we’re not filtered they could come into contact with books that they would find, shocking, repelling, upsetting, but in a way there’s no accounting for taste. Some children are frightened by Disney movies.

JL: When people come into a library, it’s kind of at their own risk as to whether they will be offended?

LIBRARIAN: Libraries, like the world, can be for some people a frightening and dangerous place. (At this point, the librarian and I moved away from the microphone as we were looking at signs that were posted in the children’s room regarding adults supervising their children’s reading, and the fact that adults unaccompanied by children are not allowed to use the children’s room).

LIBRARIAN: …So if a patron has no reason for being in here other than that they like this room, or there is a place to sit in here, we will encourage them to go to the adult areas, because as a space, it’s a haven for children. Now that doesn’t mean that every book in here, and especially the Internet, is going to be something that will not be scary to a child. And we can’t really guarantee the safety of anybody. Crazy people come to the library all the time; they could pick up a chair and throw it at you. You never know what’s going to happen.

JL: Do you believe there are any materials that minors should not be allowed to access under any circumstances?

LIBRARIAN: Not really. A lot of people say that kids won’t seek out things until they’re ready for them, because there’s sort of a group mentality. People won’t look for things
until they’re ready for them, they’re not just interested in them, unless it’s something that they need to learn about or that they’re ready to learn about. Like with my own child, knowing how sensitive she was, and as her mother, I would say “I bet you’re not going to like this, it’s really violent and creepy” or “I was looking through this and I think it’s something you won’t like” but I’m not going to tell her “don’t look at it”. I’m just going to warn her that it’s something that I think she won’t like.

Restricted Materials

JL: Have you worked in libraries that restricted access to materials based on the user’s age or other criteria?

LIBRARIAN: Sometimes you’ll find in some libraries people will say “you have a child’s card, you’re supposed to take out children’s materials”, but that’s more about we don’t want adults taking out movies for them on their child’s card if it’s not something they’re watching with the child, because there’s no fine on the children’s card. It used to be done by the material, but then we changed it to the card because plenty of eight year-olds check out plenty of materials from the adult areas. It doesn’t mean they’re going to read the whole thing, but if there’s a speech by Martin Luther King it’s going to be in the adult section.

JL: In your opinion, would materials that are kept at a page desk or in a special collection be considered to be restricted, and why do libraries keep some materials at page desks?

LIBRARIAN: San Francisco has huge amounts of material at the Main Library that you have to ask for at the paging desk and most of it is merely because we don’t have enough open shelving. The library is not big enough, which is one of the problems with that building, in that unlike Chicago Public Library, which is an entire block and seven stories
we were on a footprint that was too small to begin with, and we lost a floor because of water flowing underground, and because the city librarian at that time didn’t feel that having a large number of books readily accessible for browsing was a top priority. For ordinary people, being able to paw through the shelves is one of the ways they discover things they otherwise didn’t know existed. We hope that scholars or journalists have other ways of doing that. It’s not easy. The other big reason that I hear of for making things behind page desks is there are some kinds of things like occult books or books on sex that do tend to get stolen more often. But many people will say you should just keep buying more copies. But not every library has endless amounts of money, and some libraries won’t even buy those things if they’ll get stolen. Better to have them and keep them in a place where you have to ask for it, then to not buy it at all. This is the realpolitik of intellectual freedom, if you’re not going to buy it at all because somebody might steal it; it basically amounts to the same thing. And if it’s books that people are going to be afraid to ask for, because they’re afraid you’ll know that they want books on sex or the occult, or whatever else it is, it gets very tricky. And I’m definitely in favor of having as much stuff as possible on open shelves but there’s odd things about the shape of the library and where your desk is…for instance, this (next to the desk) is open shelving, but people have to walk behind you…

JL: …And then people can see what you’re working on…

LIBRARIAN: That’s true. And also if I have this on the screen and I pull up somebody’s record, they might be able to see somebody else’s name on the screen, which is really bad.

JL: It’s like a lot of it is the luck of the draw, how the library or buildings are set up.
LIBRARIAN: And if I’m helping somebody place a reserve, I might not even realize it, unless I do it every day, that if I click on the reserve list, other people’s names are going to come up and I’ve got to make sure I never do that. There is another problem, which is that you want to be able to help people, we should be able to look at the same screen at the same time. If I’m going to teach you how to do something it might be even better if you could handle it yourself. That’s almost impossible if I take you over there, there aren’t enough computers…

[At this point in the interview, a father who was in the children’s section with his six year-old daughter was asking for advice on audio books to take on a car trip. He wanted to know about materials that would be appropriate for his daughter’s age and was trying to decide between two choices. The librarian mentioned that one of the books might have material that the child might find scary. The librarian suggested to the girl that if she found the book too scary, that she did not have to read it, or turn it off, as it was an audio recording. I did not record this transaction as I wished to protect their privacy. It is at this point that the conversation between the librarian and I continues.]

LIBRARIAN: (referring to the little girl who just left with her father) …So she’s starting to control her own atmosphere. What you read, you can control much more than almost anything. You can’t avoid some headlines on the street, or billboards sometimes but it’s one thing you can learn to have a lot of control over and – this is a tricky one – not to read things you don’t want to spend time on. Of course we want people to know about things they don’t like because that’s the world we’re confronted with, so it gets a little tricky there.
JL: Are you aware of instances where users have been reluctant to ask for restricted materials, that they know it’s restricted and they just can’t take it off the shelves? Let’s say the book was in a restricted area, and because it was restricted they say, “Uh oh, I don’t want anybody to know that I’m asking for this book”.

LIBRARIAN: Actually, in a similar manner, but it’s the privacy about the reserves. I had a teenager say to me, “I’m not going to put any more books on hold at San Francisco Public because anybody can see what they are and I really don’t like that”. The girl was maybe about fifteen. She was very insistent. And the odd thing is that we will claim that it’s more private because people at the circ desk can’t see what you’re checking out because you can use the self-check. You can go get your book and check it out at the self-check and you don’t have to interact, if you don’t want to, with a clerk or a library technician for checking out. But the fact is, anybody can see what you’re checking out, not just the person at the circulation desk, so it seems like little reassurance that it’s more private.

JL: In other words, “more private” does not necessarily mean “private”?

LIBRARIAN: It’s potentially more private because you’re not looking in the eyes and the face of the person who’s checking the book out to you, but it’s less private in the sense that anybody who wanted to, who saw your name, could look and go and see what the book is.

JL: What about language barriers. Do you think they have an impact on preventing a user from requesting restricted materials? Have you ever encountered that?

LIBRARIAN: Well, language barriers are always barriers in the sense that the more difficult and imperfect the communication, the harder it is for somebody’s needs to be
discerned and met. I don’t really speak any other languages well. I work in the Mission Branch every few months and I sometimes have to get pages and technicians to help me with translations.

JL: So it isn’t restricted to “restricted materials”?

LIBRARIAN: Exactly. We have an international languages section and there are people who speak various languages. We also have a list of people in the library system that we can draw on that speak various languages. It’s not always instantaneously available. With Chinese we have many Chinese speakers here, both Mandarin and Cantonese and also Chinatown obviously has a lot of people that speak…so within a decent amount of time I usually can get someone to help with a question if I need.

Labels and Rating Systems

JL: Has San Francisco Public Library ever employed labels or rating systems?

LIBRARIAN: Now this is an interesting question because we used to have in some branches, and we still do, I think in some branches, a whole separate collection. Mission Branch has an English-language collection, a Spanish-language collection and a Latino Interest collection. So that’s kind of a labeling system. That’s different from this kind of labeling system [referring to the shelf behind the desk] in which we put symbols and words on some of the books, but they’re not separated out, so it makes it easier to browse for certain genres. It’s a descriptive thing. In the Eureka Valley Branch we have a Gay and Lesbian Collection. Now that gets a little more complicated: is it a gay author? Are you outing the author? How do you know whether they are gay or lesbian? What if the topic is women but not lesbians? There’s a lot of things. So in some ways, this kind of system [next to the desk] is less, shall I say, “ghettoizing” because if you made a mistake
with your label at least someone could browse it, and if the label was wrong, at least it’s not segregated off into a place where someone wouldn’t stumble upon it. It’s good to have finding devices and one kind of finding device is a label on the spine of a book, and another kind of finding device may be a special collection. And of course, part of the idea behind those labeling systems is that if it’s a pejorative label, that’s a bad thing. But what if it’s not pejorative to my point of view, but the person looking for it perceives it is pejorative or is using it for bad reasons, so, it’s a complicated question about how you can serve the needs of the people best without making it harder for us to find what we want when we don’t know where it might be. Then there are things like the motion picture, the MPAA ratings. We don’t use that. If there is a label already on something we won’t take it off, but we won’t add. It’s for people to find easily the books that they want that they think will be at the right level. But there’s two questions. One is the reading level, and the other is the intellectual level. We do have databases now that help with the reading level and also we have rough divisions by “older readers” and “younger readers”. But when somebody comes to me and says, “is this for a six year-old or for an eight year-old”, I’m kind of saying, “it’s up to your kid or it’s up to you”. You don’t want someone who’s six years old to be saying “I shouldn’t be reading this because it’s for a four year-old”.

JL: What about suggested reading lists, such as “Fun for the Summer” kind of lists? Do you think they have the potential to be prejudicial?

LIBRARIAN: I’m sure anything has the potential of being prejudicial. This is a difficult question actually. In San Francisco, every single children’s book, we get hold of it, and one librarian reads and reviews it, and the reviews are shared, and we decide whether
we’re going to put it on the list or not. It’s very hands on. Unlike the adult books, we look at every single book, and sometimes we end up not buying books, because people felt that they did contain racial stereotypes or ethnic stereotypes or something we felt we’d rather not spend our money on or felt we’d rather not have in our library.

Sometimes after years we’ve relented and gotten those books because they’ve become popular, classics, and it became clear that if the rest of the world was not finding this such a problem maybe we should just go with the flow. If you’re going to spend limited resources, you also want to have books that are going to make people feel good about themselves and about other people that are different from them. Probably we err on being the side of being overly stringent at times.

JL: Do you feel there’s a place for librarians to suggest materials for users without advocating such materials over other materials? Is there a way of saying, “this is a good book” without saying, “that’s a bad book”?

LIBRARIAN: I might often say things like “I really loved this book. I can personally recommend it” or “a lot of kids who come here have been asking for this. I haven’t read it myself, but they seem to really like it, and their friends like it”. So I wouldn’t shy from recommending things.

JL: Have you ever steered people away from anything? Or have you known instances where another librarian steered someone away from a book that they didn’t agree with, such as something by Bill O’Reilly?

LIBRARIAN: Knowing something about the provenance of the book can be useful. Most of the people who are asking for Bill O’Reilly know what they’re asking for. If somebody’s asking for something I would not steer them away from it. If they said
recommend something to read I would probably not recommend Bill O’Reilly, but if they’re asking for Bill O’Reilly, I would not steer them away. Or I might say, “You might want to read this too.”

JL: There’s a point at which you can offer an opinion, say, “this is popular, this is what people like, if you like this book you might like some more books”?

LIBRARIAN: Yes. For instance, I helped write the Green List which is on here (San Francisco Public Library, 2004) and there was one book which somewhat pooh-poohed global warming, but if I have what I think are pretty sound reasons for respecting the science and facts…every fact has its theory but I don’t agree with every theory. We all have our own ideas about what’s real and I think it’s important to pay attention to those things and I try to be broad and open, but if I have a chance to influence the shape of the world for the better through reading lists, I’m going to do it in ways that I respect given my own knowledge, and I have to do that. I’m citing myself as a source, is what it comes down to. You know “cite your sources”? I’m citing myself as a source, and if I’m putting together this list, I’m going to stand behind myself as an expert in putting together this bibliography.

JL: Have you ever experienced a situation wherein a uses has objected to the way material was classified or labeled on a shelf, because he or she felt that such labeling was prejudicial.

LIBRARIAN: Well yes, sometimes things do end up with the wrong call number and sometimes things end up in places that makes it really hard to find them like books on hotels in France, that are under “hotels” instead of “travel”, and that’s one way in which I can sort of see that a bookstore that keeps multiple copies of books, could put one in
travel, one in food, etc. We try to make libraries as self-service as possible and we have an advantage over bookstores which is that we have a record of every single book we have, and we know exactly where the book should be, at best, and that’s why we have people here to help you. But that doesn’t get at this prejudicial thing. There’s this thing of putting things at the beginning of the Dewey decimal system, like unexplained phenomena, such as Bigfoot and flying saucers are right in the very beginning in the 000’s. And sometimes, people have said, “that’s a weird place to put stuff. Why don’t you put it with the witches and occult stuff?” but they don’t ask that very often. Just as long as they know to ask for help.

Challenged Materials

JL: Have you personally encountered users who have objected to the presence of certain materials in library collections?

LIBRARIAN: Banned books…one time I was asked by the librarian, among some other people, to read on the steps of the library some banned books and I was assigned William Burroughs, and I had a hard time finding some passages that I felt comfortable reading out loud in a public setting. There are not that many long passages that are not full of swear words, or sex or drugs, or are even comprehensible. But I think I have had people say “why do you have this book?” but I can’t think of any examples right now, and it didn’t go very far. It’s more like “why don’t you have filtering?” It’s not like they actually want to take it to the end. I think there have been times when I’ve handed people the “Comments and Suggestions” form, which they then can send to the city librarian. But usually, I almost try to avoid handing out those forms. I often am likely to talk something through with somebody and say “you know I know you really don’t like it, but
it helps people see their enemy, if they have this book available.” Not everything we have is something we believe is important for good reasons, sometimes it’s for bad reasons, for people to have access to it. It’s being able to learn about what’s out there. Even though you know it’s really horrible, it’s then figuring out why it’s horrible.

JL: Thank you very much, and I greatly appreciate your time.
Summary

There are many factors that go into a librarian’s ability to practice intellectual freedom in the setting of the public library. Some of these are logistical, such as funding as it relates to library filters and the decisions surrounding which library materials to acquire, as well as physical space in libraries, which affects what materials need to be kept separate from the general collection, as well as the ability to keep user information practices private. Minors should have the same access to materials as adults, and it is up to the parent and child to determine among themselves as to what materials are best suitable for the child to read. While librarians may have definite opinions as to the content of some materials, it is important to have a broad viewpoint so as to develop a collection that provides a variety of viewpoints, as while some people may find some materials to be objectionable, it is still part of the world in which we live.

Conclusion

The issues of intellectual freedom are many, and librarians deal with them on a daily basis. The neutrality that librarians maintain in assisting patrons with their information needs, while simultaneously protecting their privacy, fosters allows the library to become a space where users can freely exercise the dictates of their consciences. Having a diverse collection allows libraries to be a repository of the various ideas that our culture has to offer and thus be a reflection of ourselves.
References
