Resource Selection Policy in Public Libraries:

Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library

And

San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library

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Abstract

Both the Kansas City Public Library and the San Francisco Public Library follow the guidelines set forth by the American Library Association and the Office for Intellectual Freedom regarding development of collections policy. Both state explicitly that the libraries and their staff are solely responsible for selection of materials. Library users are provided access to these policies online and provided with means to provide feedback through requests for reconsideration of library materials and suggestions for new materials to be added to the library collections. By providing clearly delineated policies based on the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read statement and the Freedom to View statement, users are assured that the libraries are safe spaces for intellectual exploration.
Introduction

I decided to compare the resource selection policies of the Kansas City Public Library (hereafter KCPL) and the San Francisco Public Library (hereafter SFPL) to see how closely they adhere to the American Library Association’s guidelines for resource selection. The guidelines are laid out in the Office for Intellectual Freedom (2006) Guidelines for the development and implementation of policies, regulations and procedures affecting access to library materials, services and facilities, as well as the Workbook for selection policy writing (Office for Intellectual Freedom, 1999).

Upon review of the Workbook for selection policy writing, I was struck by the fact that it is divided into two primary parts, relating to selection of materials and responses to challenged materials. This would indicate the seriousness and prevalence of challenges to materials in library collections by both members of the public and library employees.

Principles for Collection of Materials

The first sections I chose to look at were those that elucidated the principles of the libraries that guided their policies. The web page for the Collection Development Plan of the San Francisco Public Library (2009), many sections relating to the Library’s policies regarding selection of materials. The main principles that guide the Library’s selection of materials are contained in the page labeled “Collection Development Policy”. In it, the Library states that

The San Francisco Public Library endorses the principles documented in the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, Freedom to Read Statement, Freedom to View Statement, Code of Ethics, and Core Values of Librarianship Statement.
However, it does not specifically state that the Library follows Constitutional, Federal, or state laws in defining its policies. The Kansas Public Library (1991) is similar in that its Collection Development policy does not make any mention of following Constitutional or either legal guidelines as bases for its policy, though like the SFPL, it too follows the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to View Statement and the Freedom to Read Statement.

Responsibility for Collecting Materials

Both libraries very clearly state that the responsibility of selecting materials fall to the libraries’ staff, and also state that the ultimate responsibility rests with the Library Director (Kansas City) or City Librarian or Designee (San Francisco), and that they in turn follow guidelines and procedures set by their respective governing boards (the Board of Trustees of the Kansas City Public Library and the San Francisco Public Library Commission). In other words, selection is the sole responsibility of the library and its structures and follows guidelines set by the American Library Association.

Challenges to Materials and User Suggestions for Materials

Both libraries contain policies dealing with challenges to materials in the collections, which both libraries call Reconsideration of Library Materials. However, only the SFPL provides users with an easily accessible downloadable Request for Reconsideration form (San Francisco Public Library, 2009) as recommended by the Workbook. The KCPL states in its Collection Development policy that users need to fill out a “Citizen’s Request for Reconsideration of Library Material” in order to challenge materials. However, this form is not readily available on the KCPL’s website pertaining to Collection Development, nor was I able to find it when doing a search. The form is actually an appendix to the full-length version of the Collection Development Plan (Kansas City Public Library, 2000), which is available as a PDF.
link from the Policies & Financials page, though not from the Collection Development page. The KCPL did have the reconsideration mechanism clearly stated in its policies, including the members of the staff who would be responsible for reviewing the reconsideration request. The SFPL did not have such a procedure spelled out, but only provided the request for reconsideration form.

The Office for Intellectual Freedom (2006) specifically addresses the need for libraries to not tailor its policies – including selection of materials – to cater to or discriminate against any particular user or group of users “based upon arbitrary distinctions such as origin, age, background or views.”

Users challenge materials when they feel that their viewpoints are not being respected (i.e. their viewpoints are being discriminated against), although this is due to the inclusion of offensive materials, rather than the exclusion of materials that they feel would be relevant. Both library systems also have mechanisms for users to suggest such materials they would like to see in the collection. Having a both a reconsideration policy as well as a means for users to request that certain materials be included ensures that libraries are providing a set of checks and balances by which they can determine whether or not discrimination is taking place.

Diversity of User Populations

Both Kansas City and San Francisco have diverse populations, with each city having a similar percentage (~60%) of White residents as defined by the US Census Bureau. An interesting statistic is that whereas the percentage of African-Americans in Kansas City is 31.2%, San Francisco has an almost identical (31.3%) percentage of residents of Asian heritage. Of even greater importance is that San Francisco has a both higher percentage of residents born
outside the United States (36.8 % vs. 5.8%) and residents who speak language other than English at home (45.7% vs. 9.7%) than does Kansas City (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009a and 2009b).

Both the KCPL and SFPL clearly state that their collections reflect the diversity of their respective communities. In addition, to listing the descriptions of the materials and collections in the Main Library, SFPL’s Collection Development Plan (San Francisco Public Library, 2008) also lists the types of materials that are held by each branch, as well as collections that are specific to each branch. For example, the Western Addition branch contains materials in Russian and Japanese, as well as Japanese and African-American interest collections that reflect the population of the surrounding neighborhood. Furthermore, the SFPL also lists the International Language collections at each of its branches.

The KCPL also enumerates the types of materials in its collection, including both the Main Library and the branch libraries in its Collection Development Plan. As with the SFPL, particular branches have collections that reflect the compositions of their local communities. Interestingly, the KCPL lists the demographic compositions of the communities served by each particular branch, which is something I did not find in the SFPL’s Collection Development Plan.

Selection Policies and Their Impact on Library Workers

The primary impact of the selection policies for a librarian or other staff member working at KCPL or SFPL would be felt in challenges to library materials. I feel that a person challenging materials at the KCPL would receive a more thorough and therefore more satisfying response than would a person requesting reconsideration of materials at the SFPL. This is due to the fact that the reconsideration process, including the types of staff involved in the process, is clearly delineated in the policy. Even though a person may not agree with outcome when it is delivered, at least they know what the process involves. Being told to fill out a form and mail it
in (as in the SFPL) by a staff person who may not know the policy as it is not clearly spelled out can be rather frustrating for the user, and potentially rather alienating. It is the job of a library’s staff to be able to respond knowledgably and thoughtfully to all the needs of its users, even if that involves a challenge to materials.

Impact on Intellectual Freedom

Having a clearly delineated selection policy serves to protect intellectual freedom, as it spells out not only the library’s commitment to protecting the rights of the user, but also demonstrates the authority and reasoning behind the library’s commitment. Having such a written statement that is readily available to the user and that can be easily understood can server to reassure the user that when he or she enters the library, that they will be entering a neutral safe space for intellectual exploration.

This being said, I noticed that of the two libraries whose policies I surveyed, only the SFPL provides links to the Library Bill of Rights, Freedom to Read and Freedom to View statements directly from its selection policy. The KCPL does provide links to these statements from its Policies & Financials page and they are included in the PDF version of the Collection Development Plan, though I find the fact that they are not directly linked to the web page for Collection Development a cause for potential confusion to the user who is trying to find the information. Furthermore, having these links separate from the selection policy could weaken their relationship to selection policy in the minds of users.

This however, may just be a question of web site design, and does not necessarily reflect negatively on the intentions of the KCPL, seeing as the Library Bill of Rights, Freedom to Read and Freedom to View statements, as well as guidelines for user behavior and other library policies are indeed available online.
The idea of the library as a neutral space for intellectual exploration is further underscored by the fact that both systems claim sole responsibility for selecting materials. Materials are not selected based on government influence, or by the influence of interest groups with their own social or political agenda, meaning that library users will be free from such influence.

Summary

The resource selection policies of both the Kansas City Public Library and the San Francisco Public Library adhere to the guidelines laid out by the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, and take as their basis of authority the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read statement and the Freedom to View statement. In addition, both libraries claim sole authority for selection of materials for their respective systems. Both library systems have mechanisms in place by which individuals or individuals representing groups can request that the library reconsider materials in its collection that may be found objectionable by some users as well as suggest materials that they would like to see in the collection. This serves democracy in that it allows users a means to provide feedback on the composition of the library collection, as well as providing a means to determine whether or not some groups are being favored over other groups, or if members of groups are being discriminated against.

Conclusion

Clearly delineated and available selection policies advance intellectual freedom in that users are provided with the means of for understanding how libraries defend their rights to open access to information as stated in the guidelines put forth by the American Library Association and the Office for Intellectual Freedom. Awareness of one’s rights as a library user ensures the
user that the library will be a safe and neutral space for intellectual exploration, and that it has means in place for ensuring that all library users are treated fairly and equitably.
References


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