

THE DISCUSSION WE NEED TO HAVE

SOCIAL JUSTICE



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In October 2019, the Toronto Public Library was widely condemned by LGBTQI communities when they allowed the anti-trans feminist Meghan Murphy, to give a talk to a sell-out crowd.

The Toronto Public Library Manager, Vickery Bowles, refused to cancel the booking, saying: 'We are a democratic institution and we are standing up for free speech' and added that Ms Murphy has never been charged with hate speech. Meghan Murphy had also organised a talk at the Vancouver Public Library to another storm of protest with the same response from the library service – that we as libraries stand up for free speech.

There has been quite a bit of commentary in the library sector regarding our social justice agenda and how this does not align with the librarian as warrior for free speech image and non-censorship stance. This stance is long standing from the time when publishing, media coverage and limited platforms for alternative voices was available. My question is in the day of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, when anyone can reach vast audiences with false facts, propaganda, and discriminatory views, as well as spewing hate everywhere, is it time that Libraries stood up for truth, tolerance and democracy instead of free speech. Because the current fake news, the spreading of hate, conspiracies and lies that are part of today's internet is the actual threat to democracy, not freedom of speech.

Freedom of speech is not the same as freedom of reach and I believe that any presentation at a library gives a legitimacy and bigger platform to the presenter purely from it being situated within the library. We in the library world need to be very aware of this responsibility.

Saying that these are just hirers of meeting rooms and are not part of library programming is disingenuous at best as communities just see that the event is being held at a library – with all the legitimacy that library events attract. The hirers of meeting rooms also attract some of that legitimacy, and the trust associated with the library, to their event. When there are so many other platforms for fake news, bigotry and vile conspiracies, libraries should stand up for objective truth and facts. Not provide a further legitimised amplified platform for lies and bigots – even when they do not reach the threshold of hate speech.

I am not saying that community debates and tough conversations should not be held. Libraries could sponsor tough community conversations, promoting tolerance and building understanding of the 'other' in our community whoever that may be. Providing safe spaces to build understanding and empathy should be a library's goal. Providing a platform for truth from experts to challenge false facts, false science and promote community conversations will strengthen communities and democracy, rather than promote division and intolerance. Library programs do this in many innovative, tolerant ways and our meeting rooms should not have a separate policy to our community agendas.

So, my view is that we should choose social justice over freedom of speech. I accept that there are others, and some of the stalwarts of our profession support Vickery Bowles and her position in this instance, but for me there are many other publishing platforms amplifying division in the community under the banner of freedom of speech and I do not accept that the library should be another. Instead libraries should be standing for tolerance, truth, and empathy in everything that we do and everything that happens within our library walls from community behaviour to the events held in our meeting rooms. ✎

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