

# Clarifying Intellectual Freedom, Neutrality, and Professional Expertise to Better Defend Libraries from Books Bans, Disinformation, and Defunding

PAUL T. JAEGER AND ALLISON JENNINGS-ROCHE

---

---

## ABSTRACT

When the *Library Bill of Rights* was adopted in 1939, it represented a significant departure from the many professional goals and ideals articulated when the American Library Association had been founded in 1876. In creating new professional ideals of intellectual freedom and neutrality, the *Library Bill of Rights* reoriented the field and altered the responsibilities of libraries to their communities. However, the poorly defined nature of some of these ideals has created continuing problems for the field, problems that are particularly evident in the current political environment heavily defined by censorship and disinformation. As the 150th anniversary of the American Library Association will occur in 2026, this paper explores the ways these issues were debated at the time of the 100th anniversary of the American Library Association as a lens for examining the significant current ramifications of these unresolved issues.

## Introduction

In 1976, as the 100th anniversary of the American Library Association (ALA) approached, library science journals and conferences were, not surprisingly, populated by discussions and debates on issues at the heart of the field. Multiple perspectives were offered on the implications of foundational ideals like intellectual freedom and neutrality and the professional missions and societal contributions that libraries should be embracing in the future.

In fundamental ways, the field was closer to being newly formed than well established as the ALA's centennial neared. The Master of Library Science (MLS) degree had been the standard in the field for about a fifth of the organization's existence. The *Library Bill of Rights*, which formalized significant changes in the field and signaled its entry into the modern conceptualizations of librarianship, had been adopted in 1939 and only in place for about one-third of the history of the organization. Encoded in the *Library Bill of Rights* was, for the first time, a statement of protection of the ability of patrons to access information presenting the widest range of perspectives possible about issues of current and historical political, economic, and social importance and a statement of opposition to all efforts to censor materials

in the library. These statements gave rise to the ideals of intellectual freedom and neutrality in the profession of librarianship, which have both been unsettled since their introduction.

Leading thinkers and educators at the time of the ALA centennial—such as David Beringhausen, Dorothy Broderick, Evelyn Geller, Michael Harris, Archibald MacLeish, and Wayne Wiegand—offered different potential paths forward for the field to answer yet unsettled questions and craft a more coherent vision for the future of the field following the adoption of the *Library Bill of Rights* in 1939. Unfortunately, these discussions around the centennial faded without resolution as the field was distracted by the economic upheavals of the later 1970s and the advent of the age of neoliberal economics with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, which cut into library budgets and began the process of undermining the social standing of libraries.

The 150th anniversary of ALA in 2026 is now looming, and libraries are under enormous pressure from book bans, disinformation, budget cuts, closings, threats of incarceration, and many other antagonisms from highly organized anti-library political action groups and anti-library politicians holding offices from the most local levels to the presidency (Jaeger 2025). The fundamental questions raised in the years leading to the centennial continue to remain unanswered, as well. The failure to adequately address these issues for the past half-century plays a significant part in the social and political difficulties that libraries—especially public libraries—currently face. This paper examines the core issues raised by the centennial debates and their implications for the current anti-library political environment. By finally engaging and answering these long-avoided challenges to foundational ideals of the field, we may be much better able to respond to external political challenges to the field.

## From Proscription to Avoiding Information Evaluation Expertise

When the ALA was founded, there was no doubt among the founders about the role of librarians—particularly library leaders—as information evaluation experts who would provide the people of the local community what they needed to read rather than what they wanted to read. Librarians were there not only to provide access to reading materials but to provide access to the correct reading materials. A core belief shared among the elitist founders of ALA—white, socially conservative Christian men with exuberant facial hair—was that readers were not sufficiently skilled to pick out what they should read on their own. At the first ALA meeting in 1876, “Most agreed that the mass reading public was generally incapable of choosing its own reading materials judiciously” (Wiegand 1986, 10).

The original leaders and benefactors behind the public library movement saw the establishment of libraries as a means for both the betterment of the individual—by the definitions of the powerful—and for the betterment of the democratic society. The underlying hope was to draw people away from what were perceived at the time as immoral behaviors and forms of entertainment to education on how to be better citizens and better employees. The belief in the civilizing influence of public libraries extended so far as to view them as an important step in taming territories that were not yet states, educating residents of the territories on proper behavior once statehood was achieved; public libraries were even viewed as critical to ending practices of polygamous marriage in the Utah territory (Stauffer 2005, 2016).

This belief in libraries—especially public libraries—as a means by which to civilize the masses and uplift their morals extended so far as to view those who opted not to use the library as a drain on society. Andrew Carnegie, who donated \$41 million for the creation of 1,679 public libraries at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth cen-

turies, wanted libraries to assist “the best and most deserving poor” (1965, 38). He believed that all the libraries he had financed would “make men not violent revolutionists, but cautious evolutionists; not destroyers, but careful improvers” (quoted in Frazier, 1970, 821).

The original leaders of the public library movement saw their mission of “improvement” without changing the values held as the status quo among the wealthy, white, educated classes. Because of access to appropriate public library materials, members of the public would be more educated and moral as citizens and better behaved and more skilled as workers.

To accomplish these goals, the ALA and state library associations provided detailed lists of the exact titles that public libraries should stock based on the size of their communities (Wiegand 1986, 2011). Books were selected based on the values of the library leaders and the wealthy backers of libraries, of course, meaning the book lists were focused on middle- and upper-class interests, with an emphasis on producing skilled workers and well-behaved citizens. Early public library collections emphasized reference materials, dictionaries, grammars, histories, books on political and moral issues, and books on practical sciences like agriculture, anatomy, astronomy, biology, chemistry, geometry, and mathematics (DuMont 1977).

Breadth and diversity of perspective were not concerns; promoting responsibility, temperance, and order were. At the time of the founding of the ALA, “Librarians wholeheartedly embraced the role of dedicated promoter of democratic values and responsibilities” (Halsey 2003, 18). It was a very specific conceptualization of democracy as reflecting elitist goals, but it was nevertheless an embrace of expertise and responsibility by the field. Public libraries were positioned as an alternative to saloons, pool halls, speakeasies, racetracks, and other spaces deemed morally corrupting; the library was the essential infrastructure of a more educated public and a better democracy. To get there, librarians had to determine what was best for the community to read.

One result of this proscriptive approach was the library being positioned as a highly knowledgeable arbiter of culture. A patron would ask for a book on a certain topic, and the librarian would hand them the book deemed most appropriate for their needs. Libraries and library workers offered reassurance that the materials provided correct information in a socially acceptable manner (Parker 1997). Potentially controversial materials were avoided as part of collections, and the definition of controversial was broad indeed. As one example, the immensely popular Oliver Optic novel series by William Taylor Adams was kept out of many library collections in the late 1800s and early 1900s because they were deemed to give too much hope to the poor for an improved life. In 1928, Charles Compton, the director of the St. Louis Public Library, offered hope that “in the far distant future—we shall have a public that will be sufficiently intelligent to select their own reading” (quoted in Luyt 2001, 451–52).

The fiction of a typical 1920s public library collection would have emphasized traditional Christian values, small-town life, and hard work in the face of life’s hardships. We now remember T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy Parker, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf as key authors of the 1920s. Yet, eminently forgettable—and now pretty much forgotten despite some awesome names—authors like Coningsby Dawson, Warwick Deeping, Zona Gale, Zane Grey, Cosmo Hamilton, Knut Hamsun, Julia Peterkin, Mazo de la Roche, T. S. Stripling, Thyra Samter Winslow, and Harold Bell Wright ruled the popular reading available in libraries during the Roaring Twenties.

As Michael Harris (1973, 1976) explored around the ALA centennial, however, the adoption of the *Library Bill of Rights* and embrace of a much greater multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences in library collections did not inevitably mean that librarians needed

to entirely shift responsibilities regarding knowledge acquisition from the librarian to the patron. Librarians used the *Library Bill of Rights* as an opportunity to decide that the field was one devoted to technological and organizational issues of information: “The librarian need only provide access to the information; the user was responsible for coming to the library to acquire it” (Harris 1973, 2514). Except in certain kinds of libraries, such as large academic libraries with dedicated information evaluation experts, libraries generally provide a wide range of perspectives but minimal guidance. Beyond perhaps some readers’ advisory services and a shelf of staff picks, the patrons must figure out what might be the correct answer. As the Master of Library Science (MLS) became the standard degree of the field, the ALA requirements for the degree emphasized technical competencies over information evaluation expertise (Swigger 2012).

While the original aggressively proscriptive nature of libraries was deeply condescending and unappealing, the 180-degree turnaround precipitated by the *Library Bill of Rights* did the field no long-term favors. It is not necessarily a benefit to patrons, some of whom might desperately want clear direction on the most accurate information for a particular question. Further, it has not only been used to reduce the perceived value of library science degrees and the competence of librarians (Bertot et al. 2012), it is now an extremely helpful tool for opponents of libraries. Why take the opinions of librarians seriously about what materials should be in a collection when the librarians themselves assert that they are not there to evaluate the information in library collections?

## Neutrality and Intellectual Freedom

The decision to flee from information evaluation expertise was part of a larger, and currently very unhelpful, embrace of the broad ideal of neutrality. Providing materials representing a wide range of political, cultural, and economic issues would not necessarily preclude librarians from having professional opinions on the issues, especially issues related to topics of information. However, the ideal of neutrality became a staunch corollary of the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Neutrality was originally focused on the collection itself, providing many perspectives rather than the previous single perspective. However, it was quickly applied to the institutions and the workers as well, creating an implicit professional expectation of passivity toward accuracy. As Harris summarized the outcome of neutrality, librarians “were bound by the library’s new philosophy *not* to try to influence the user’s opinion,” as “they were *obligated* to remain generally uninvolved in the patron’s efforts to a make a decision” (1973, 2514, emphasis in original).

In contrast, David Beringhausen was one of the most vocal and unwavering proponents of neutrality the field has ever produced. He asserted that neutrality was the responsibility to “select materials from all producers, from the whole world of published media, to build balanced collections representing all points of view on controversial issues, regardless of their personal convictions or beliefs” (1972, 3675). The first problem with this should be obvious from a practical level, as what Beringhausen details would not be possible in terms of finances, infrastructure, or time. The larger problem is that neutrality instructs librarians to “keep quiet” about important issues, even those that directly impact other library values like literacy and access. Since the adoption of the *Library Bill of Rights*, the vast majority of librarians have fallen in line with this directive to “keep quiet,” often to the detriment of libraries and their communities (Kent 1996, 212).

Harris, the most vocal challenger of Beringhausen's position on neutrality at the time of the ALA centennial, listed the appeals of neutrality to librarians as including avoidance of conflict with those possessing different views, avoidance of responsibility for patron decisions, limitation of interactions with patrons overall, and absolution from engaging issues outside the library building. None of these are particularly positive in general, and they are particularly detrimental in the current political climate.

Archibald MacLeish, to his lasting credit, was a strong opponent of neutrality from the adoption of the *Library Bill of Rights*, asserting as Librarian of Congress that the basic act of opening a library to allow people access to information that they would not otherwise have will always be an inherently political act (1940). Still advocating for libraries to be viewed as political institutions at the time of the ALA centennial, he declared that "the library, almost alone of the great monuments of civilization, stands taller now than it ever did before" in the face of failures of numerous other political institutions through the days of Watergate and the Vietnam War (1972, 362).

Since the centennial, the problems with neutrality have become increasingly evident, and the literature exploring its negative impacts on the institutions, professionals, and communities served by the field has grown exponentially, exploring problems from the technical and philosophical impossibility to the moral relativism to the fact that no materials are neutral (see Jaeger et al. 2014, 56–58 for a summary of the primary problems now identified with neutrality). Despite all these arguments against it, however, neutrality clings to the profession like a lamprey with its disk of teeth dug in deeply. Curiously, the ALA *Policy Manual* is actually full of clearly political positions—such as passing a resolution opposed to nuclear weapons—taken by the organization over the years.

Like the previously discussed issue, neutrality now haunts the field as it tries to respond to attacks based in censorship, disinformation, cultural erasure, and anti-intellectualism (Jaeger 2025). Nearly a century of telling librarians that it is their professional responsibility to be quiet and not have opinions has ineluctably created a situation in which librarians, as a whole, have serious difficulty defending the field and what it stands for, let alone their own personal expertise in collection development or information evaluation.

The trouble in articulating what the field stands for is demonstrated by another major issue that was in the discourse around the ALA centennial, most notably what the field actually meant by the goal of protecting intellectual freedom. Evelyn Geller noted that intellectual freedom had been taken as a "self-evident" pillar of the field since the adoption of the *Library Bill of Rights*, even though the meaning was never formally established and the ALA hoped that libraries would figure it out at the local level (1974, 1365).

The embrace of intellectual freedom was, again, like neutrality, a complete shift in direction for the ALA and the profession. Library leaders, including many presidents of ALA, were originally openly enthusiastic about keeping "immoral," "false," "unclean," and "improper" materials as they were variously described, with the role of "censor" being one of the primary contributions of librarians to their communities (quoted in Geller, 1976). Librarians even positioned themselves above other learning professions based on their careful selection of "proper" materials to shape the values of the public they served (Parker 1997). The public was not capable, in their reasoning, of making the kinds of choices that would support a more enlightened democracy. Intellectual freedom would be antithetical to the positioning of librarians as moral educators in the public sphere.

To Geller, however, intellectual freedom was an "unanticipated consequence" of the creation of public libraries, establishing a sense of social responsibility for the library to

ensure that more than just the powerful voices were heard both inside and outside the library (1974, 1367). In contrast, Dorothy Broderick (1971) claimed that intellectual freedom had a much different meaning. Broderick viewed it as a breach of the original notion of the library as having a “covenant with the community,” moving from an active – if not always inclusive – participant in the intellectual life of the community by choosing materials that it thought best fit the local population to a passive neutrality that relinquished its local responsibilities. ALA itself was seemingly ambivalent or uncertain about the extent of intellectual freedom for a long time as well, only extending the concept to children and young adults in 1972.

Americans – members of the public, elected officials, and jurists – have long grappled with the interpretation and implementation of the First Amendment in the public sphere, and the profession’s attempts to contextualize the concept for libraries into the idea of “intellectual freedom,” has always been a site of contention within the field (Jaeger, Lazar, Gorham & Taylor, 2023). The field of librarianship would seem to have sufficient cogent explanation of intellectual freedom to enable members of the public and elected officials to understand what the field means by the term, but librarians themselves often lack the tools to apply such values in their everyday work.

The pliability of intellectual freedom as a concept has led to the recurring problem of ALA and its member libraries defending possession of materials in their collections that are dangerously wrong and pernicious – such as overtly racist or antisemitic materials – or, alternately, defending not having these same dangerously wrong and pernicious materials in their collections. ALA blundered in making itself the center of this problem the year after its centennial by producing an educational film called *The Speaker*. Presenting a fictionalized version of a speaker at a high school lecturing to students on the racial inferiority of non-white people to white people, the 1977 film was intended to demonstrate the reasons for promoting neutrality and protecting intellectual freedom but inadvertently instead made a terrific case for critical flaws in both neutrality and intellectual freedom.

Without contextualizing intellectual freedom and neutrality in line with other broader American or democratic values, they are simply tools to defend the presentation of materials that are blatantly harmful to parts or all of the community (Swan & Peattie, 1989). This failure to better define the meanings of both neutrality and intellectual freedom – and the accompanying failure to recognize that they can be inherently contradictory – has left libraries for nearly a century with little practical and actionable guidance on how to navigate the seemingly incompatible roles of neutral facilitator and interventionist promoting diverse viewpoints without promoting incorrect information (Heckart, 1991).

### **The Last 50 Years into the Now**

The debates about these issues around the 1976 ALA centennial did not lead to any clear resolutions or even moderate clarifications. Subsequent major ALA documents like the *Code of Ethics* and the *Freedom to Read* statement both further enshrine theoretical ideals of neutrality and intellectual freedom without making them sufficiently practicable and precise to be readily understood by community members and government officials. These well-intentioned ideals are now causing difficulties for librarians – most notably public librarians – as they attempt to respond to censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure efforts.

To the people promoting book bans and seeking to remove entire cultures from collections, the ideal of neutrality means that librarians should not object to the bans. To the people promoting disinformation, the ideal of intellectual freedom means the librarians should not

object to their disinformation because it is just one more protected perspective. To all of those who oppose the library, the assertion by the field of librarianship that librarians typically are not information evaluation experts supports their beliefs that they have as much right as library professionals to determine what is in the collection.

And, of course, these issues also cause problems for the librarians themselves in knowing how to respond to book banners, disinformation purveyors, and other anti-intellectual and anti-library groups. If neutrality really does mean being quiet and intellectual freedom really does mean giving space for every view, then it is not especially clear how to professionally try to stop censorship or disinformation or cultural erasure.

None of this is to say that the belief in intellectual freedom is an inherently bad thing. But nearly a century of ambiguity of what intellectual freedom means and how it is supposed to be applied in concert with other professional values is an enormous problem. In an age increasingly defined by disinformation, for example, being crystal clear that intellectual freedom does not include harmful medical disinformation that might be fatal to patrons would seem to be a necessary step. Even better, a thorough articulation of what libraries should not be willing to defend as having intellectual or educational value would provide much more solid ground on which libraries could stand when confronting bigots, censors, and other anti-library factions. In the current political environment, the ideal of intellectual freedom – were it clearly defined – could be an extremely valuable defense against those who wish to purge certain ideas and certain populations from library collections.

The embrace of neutrality and the requisite distancing of librarians from assertions of information evaluation expertise are much harder to defend for in the current context, especially as they are incalculably detrimental to libraries in the now. If neutrality were strictly limited to the notion of collection that represents many viewpoints, that would be feasible. If it were to specifically mean that the library does not endorse individual candidates in elections, that would be reasonable. However, as a holistic, and still ill-defined, concept it is a massive self-inflicted wound for the profession. The broad sense of neutrality keeps libraries from explaining both their needs – in terms of funding, policy, and staffing – and their contributions to their communities effectively. Neutrality inhibits the ability of librarians to promote issues that would ultimately benefit each library and the community it serves.

Right now, our self-imposed ideal of neutrality is a gift to those who wish to undermine, defund, and disappear libraries, as it tells librarians they cannot even speak up to defend themselves. Similarly, turning the desire to avoid proscriptively telling people what they can read into the fear of asserting information evaluation expertise stands as yet another self-inflicted wound to the profession and a gift to its opponents. Refusing to articulate that being a librarian means knowing which sources are more accurate and more reliable only empowers those who peddle disinformation and those who claim there is no need for libraries. Again, if the librarian is not an acknowledged expert, then the opinion of anyone else about the accuracy of information sources could be seen as equally valid, even those arguing for the addition of more pro-flat earth materials to the collection.

When considering solutions to these festering problems, it is worth remembering that the problems are entirely of the making of the library profession. The *Library Bill of Rights* has no legal sway. The free speech protections enshrined in the US Constitution are not invalidated by choosing librarianship as a career. Courts have consistently held that librarians do not have limitations on their speech beyond that which interferes with their job and that which has been specifically limited under local or state law as it relates to their professional

duties (Jaeger, Lazar, Gorham, and Taylor, 2023). Neutrality is not and will never be a legal obligation.

During the debates around the ALA centennial, Archibald MacLeish wrote: “But what is more important in a library than anything else – than everything else – is the fact that it exists” (1972, p. 359). For the first time since the ALA was founded in 1876, we are in a political environment where that existence, especially of public libraries, is threatened across the United States. Many local government positions are now being held by those who seek to limit or close libraries; state governments in a majority of states have passed anti-library laws, including an alarming number that have created threats of incarceration for librarians; and the three branches of the federal government are now dominated by open supporters of censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure.

To endure what will likely be years of significant political strain at all levels of government, and across all branches of government, libraries will need all the strong defenses that they can muster. Clarifying these ideals, as statements, in practice, in the continuing education of current professionals, and in the education of future professionals is not only greatly overdue, it is now an essential survival strategy.

## References

- Beringhausen, D. 1972. “Antithesis in Librarianship: Social responsibility vs. the Library Bill of Rights.” *Library Journal* 97 (20): 3675–81. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ067077>.
- Bertot, J. C., P. T. Jaeger, and L. C. Sarin. 2012. “Forbes Folly.” *American Libraries* 43 (9/10): 30–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23280812>.
- Broderick, D. 1971. “Censorship Reevaluated.” *Library Journal* 96 (November 15). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ047736>.
- Carnegie, A. 1962. *The Gospel of Wealth*. Harvard University Press.
- DuMont, R. 1977. *Reform and Reaction: The Big City Public Library in American Life*. Greenwood Press.
- Geller, E. 1974. “Intellectual Freedom: Eternal Principle or Unanticipated Consequence?” *Library Journal* 99 (May 15): 1364–67. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ098143>.
- Geller, E. 1976. “The Librarian as Censor.” *Library Journal* 101 (11): 1255–58. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ138374>.
- Harris, M. 1973. “The Purpose of the American Public Library: A Revisionist Interpretation of History.” *Library Journal* 98 (16), 2509–14. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ086396>.
- Harris, M. 1976. “Public Libraries and the Decline of Democratic Dogma.” *Library Journal* 101 (19): 2225–30. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ146991>.
- Heckart, R. J. 1991. “The Library as a Marketplace of Ideas.” *College & Research Libraries* 52 (6): 491–505. [https://doi.org/10.5860/crl\\_52\\_06\\_491](https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_52_06_491).
- Jaeger, P.T. 2025. “The Immortality of Hatred and Revenge: The Interconnections of Censorship, Disinformation, and Cultural Erasure in the Book Bans Targeting Marginalized Populations.” *The Library Quarterly* 95 (1): 4–41. <https://doi.org/10.1086/733171>.
- Jaeger, P. T., U. Gorham, J. C. Bertot, and L. C. Sarin. 2014. *Public Libraries, Public Policies, and Political Processes: Serving and Transforming Communities in Times of Economic and Political Constraint*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jaeger, P. T., J. Lazar, U. Gorham, and N. G. Taylor. 2023. *Foundations of Information Law*. ALA Editions.

- Kent, S. G. 1996. "American Public Libraries: A Long Transformative Moment." *Daedalus* 125 (4): 207–20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027394>.
- Luyt, B. 2001. "Regulating Readers: The Social Origin of the Readers' Advisor in the United States." *The Library Quarterly* 71 (4): 443–66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/603315>.
- MacLeish, A. 1940. "The Librarian and the Democratic Process." *ALA Bulletin* 34 (6): 385–88, 421–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25690467>.
- MacLeish, A. 1972. "The Premise of Meaning." *The American Scholar* 41 (3): 357–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41208780>.
- Parker, A. M. 1997. *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-censorship Activism, 1873–1933*. University of Illinois Press.
- Stauffer, S. M. 2005. "Polygamy and the Public Library: The Establishment of Public Libraries in Utah Before 1910." *The Library Quarterly* 75 (3): 346–70. <https://doi.org/10.1086/497312>.
- Stauffer, S. M. 2016. "Supplanting the Saloon Evil and Other Loafing Habits: Utah's Library-Gymnasium Movement, 1907–1912." *The Library Quarterly* 86 (4): 434–48. <https://doi.org/10.1086/688032>.
- Swan, J., and N. Peattie. 1989. *The Freedom to Lie: A Debate About Democracy*. McFarland.
- Swigger, B. K. 2012. *The MLS Project: An Assessment After Sixty Years*. Scarecrow Press.
- Wall, J. F. 1970. *Andrew Carnegie*. Oxford University.
- Wiegand, W. A. 1986. *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876–1917*. Greenwood Press.
- Wiegand, W. 2011. *Main Street Public Library: Community Places and Reading Spaces in the Rural Heartland, 1876–1956*. University of Iowa Press.