

You Work for the Public; Your Thoughts Aren't Sacred: Responding to Antelman's False Crisis in the Privacy of Thought

JOHN MACK FREEMAN

ABSTRACT

This article responds to Kristin Antelman's "Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training" by challenging the premise that public employees have an unqualified right to cognitive privacy (Antelman 2025). Drawing on legal precedent, professional ethics, and lived experience, this piece argues that DEI efforts in libraries are not coercive but necessary interventions in a field tasked with equitable public service. It critiques the uneven distribution of privacy in the workplace and refutes the idea that belief and behavior can be meaningfully separated, particularly in public institutions where accountability to the entire community is a professional obligation.

Introduction

In "Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training," Kristin Antelman warns that diversity initiatives in libraries threaten a fundamental human right: the right to think freely (or as she terms it, "privacy of thought"). Framing DEI programming as an incursion into employees' cognitive liberty, she argues that training staff on concepts like unconscious bias, structural racism, or cultural competency amounts to ideological coercion. Antelman presents DEI as a threat to intellectual liberty, but public employment has never offered the kind of sweeping cognitive privacy she imagines. In libraries that operate as public institutions, personal beliefs are not above scrutiny, especially when they shape behavior that impacts service.

This response proceeds in three parts: first, it locates the concept of "privacy of thought" within the legal realities of public employment; second, it shows how privacy at work is unevenly distributed by identity; third, it argues from behavioral science that belief and behavior cannot be cleanly separated in public-serving institutions. Thus, while there may be individuals who desire a "privacy of thought" within the public workplace, an unlimited right to that concept is nearly impossible to square with the demands and realities of library work.

The crisis Antelman identifies is not one of liberty but rather one of discomfort—specifically, the discomfort of dominant groups being asked to interrogate the assumptions that shape how they move through the world and serve others. But putting that aside, there is a larger problem at play here.

There is no legal or ethical basis for the idea that public employees have an absolute right to keep their beliefs, values, or biases beyond scrutiny. This is especially true in institutions tasked with equitable public service. Although librarianship is often framed as a unique field, it must also be understood, in most cases in the United States, through the lens of public employment as well. As public employees, library workers operate under fundamentally different privacy expectations than those in private-sector roles or in their capacity as private citizens. These lines are blurred when Antelman bizarrely refers to a “public sphere of the workplace” (432), a conflation of the public sphere of civic life and the much more contained and constricted domain of the public workplace.

Even if Antelman’s arguments around privacy in the workplace were accurate, her argument further obscures the uneven distribution of privacy in the workplace. Marginalized employees (e.g., queer staff, immigrants, people of color, poor people) have always been expected to perform, explain, and justify their identities in professional settings. These individuals (and the author counts himself among them) had to do this not to advance ideology, but to survive. What Antelman describes as coercion reads, from the other side of the institutional power line, as the bare minimum of reflective practice.

This article responds to Antelman’s framing by situating her claims within the legal realities of public employment, the structural power dynamics of institutional life, and the lived experiences of those whose labor has been made invisible. “Privacy of thought” is not a neutral, universal value; it is a shield selectively wielded by those most invested in preserving their comfort at the expense of others’ safety and truly equitable service. And on a legal, ethical, and practical level, the concept presented in Antelman’s article fails to pass muster.

To understand just how flimsy Antelman’s argument is, analysis must begin by examining what privacy means in the context of public employment. Her argument hinges on rights that simply do not exist in the way she describes them for those employed by, and accountable to, the public.

Privacy and the Public Institution

Antelman’s argument leans heavily on the idea that privacy of thought is a foundational right, even in the workplace. But this position ignores a basic reality: public employees do not enjoy the same workplace privacy protections as those in the private sector. In public institutions (like public universities and libraries), there is no impermeable barrier between personal belief and professional responsibility.

While I am not a legal scholar, the precedent is clear and well-established. In *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006), the Supreme Court ruled that when public employees speak as part of their official duties, their speech is not protected by the First Amendment. In other words, when people represent the organization, their ability to speak their own beliefs is subordinate to the institution’s right to ensure that the speech aligns with its mission. Libraries often pursue noble goals that are ethically aligned with their employees (e.g., equitable access, intellectual freedom, belonging), but when the two are in conflict, the employer’s needs hold sway.

Further, *O’Connor v. Ortega* (1987) and *City of Ontario v. Quon* (2010) establish that public employees have a very limited expectation of privacy in the workplace. Offices, devices, com-

munications, and more can be searched for legitimate administrative purposes. Privacy for public employees is and always has been contextual.

Were there to be issues with a DEI-related training, 2025 guidance by the EEOC and DOJ protect those objections under Title VII (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2025a, 2025b). However, court decisions have consistently found that being required to attend a DEI-related training does not rise to the level of creating a hostile work environment. They have also found that peer pressure is not enough for a training to go from being voluntary to mandatory (relevant case law includes *Vavra v. Honeywell International, Inc.* [2024], *Young v. Colorado Department of Corrections* [2024], *Norgren v. Minnesota Department of Human Services* [2024], *Diemert v. City of Seattle* [2025], and *De Piero v. Pennsylvania State University* [2025]). Additionally, the Eleventh Circuit found in *Honeyfund.com Inc v. Governor, State of Florida* (2024) that a law that banned mandatory workplace trainings that “espouse or promote a set of beliefs related to race, color, sex, or national origin deemed offensive by the state” was unconstitutionally vague and an unlawful content- and viewpoint-based speech restriction.

Antelman seems to misunderstand the legal framework around workplace training. Within the context of a public employee’s role, employees do not have rights against compelled speech, and employers can regulate speech that is part of official duties or disrupts the workplace. Further, *Connick v. Myers* (1983) confirms that public employers can discipline internal speech that doesn’t concern broader public issues but undermines workplace efficiency. It stands to reason that public institutions could further take steps to address potential issues of bias, silence, or exclusion that could arise in the workplace affecting either users or coworkers.

Antelman frames DEI as an overreach and a sign that library leadership has embraced a politicized mission that undermines individual freedom. But this reverses the actual accountability structure of public work. Public employees are not free agents. They are representatives of the state. When institutions fail to examine how the internal beliefs of employees shape external actions, they are at risk of reproducing the very inequities that they are tasked with addressing. Accountability to the public trumps personal discomfort about institutional values and evolving norms. These constraints on privacy and speech are not experienced evenly; who you are changes what “privacy at work” means.

The Unequal Burden of Identity at Work

Even if Antelman’s legal assumptions held water, they would still obscure the more fundamental reality: that privacy in the workplace is unevenly distributed by identity. Antelman treats “privacy of thought” as a universal workplace value. But anyone who has spent time as a visibly marginalized person in a public institution knows that privacy has never been evenly distributed. For LGBTQ+ people, BIPOC, immigrants, and other marginalized folks, there is no “right” to opt out of identity work. These individuals do not get to leave their beliefs or needs unspoken. Instead, they are interrogated simply by existing. This is not a speculative quibble; it shows up in daily practice. The following brief examples illustrate how “privacy” is experienced asymmetrically by workers in public institutions.

My experience as a cisgender gay white man has been relatively light compared to many of my colleagues, but I hope that a few of my stories will be illustrative: Like the time a public library director asked me to meet with a county commissioner from a different district because he and I were both gay. Or the time a public library director told me that her community of over one hundred thousand just wasn’t ready for “gay books.” Or the time a tenured

professor looked at a rainbow bracelet I was wearing my first week of a new job and said, “You know, you’d have been fired for wearing that around here ten years ago.” Or being the on-call person for anyone with a queer-related personnel or HR question for several organizations. While I’ve learned to laugh some of these off, anyone who believes that marginalized library workers don’t carry similar stories is either willfully blind or staggeringly incurious. In many institutions, there is an assumption that the majority represents the normal, and that outliers most conform to their norms or serve as a representative of their uniqueness in these spaces (Hathcock 2015).

Library workers’ experiences are not outliers; they reflect who holds numerical and cultural power in the field. Credentialed librarians are 88 percent White (Kendrick and Hulbert 2023) and 89 percent women (AFL-CIO 2025). Even where a group is comparatively over-represented—LGBTQ+ workers constitute up to 29 percent in one study (Siegel et al. 2020) versus 9 percent of the U.S. population (Yurcaba 2025)—they remain a workplace minority without default norm-setting authority. In settings like these, majority perspectives easily become the implicit baseline, and differences are treated as deviations to be managed. The result is predictable: uneven expectations for explanation and emotional labor, uneven exposure to bias, and a persistent illusion that “everyone has the same experience” when, in practice, they do not. This is not theoretical; it is structural. While some dominant-identity employees may rail against having to share their pronouns or attend a DEI session, marginalized workers have long been expected to explain their communities, defend their presence, and stay calm while doing it. It is the unspoken “other duties as assigned” that has a pernicious effect on the scope creep of library workers of all types (Ford et al. 2019). Antelman warns that DEI trainings might pressure someone to disclose their beliefs; she says nothing about what this means for minority library workers and users and their needs.

The claim that DEI programs are coercive collapses when measured against the quiet, uncredited labor marginalized workers do every day to navigate their own safety and support others’. Antelman casts herself as defending workers from ideological intrusion. But she erases the people who have never had the luxury of ideological neutrality to begin with.

I chaired a working group on LGBTQ+ services at a former employer. The only directive I was given for this project was that under no circumstances should I bring back a recommendation for drag storytimes. At the time, I thought this was a ridiculous request. The community had no strong presence of drag performers nor had there been any community demand for this; the odds that this would have wound up as a recommendation were close to zero. But with the benefit of hindsight, I wonder if the direction came from a place of wanting to support queer people, but not if it had been done loudly or publicly or in the face of community backlash. The majority often signals support for marginalized communities, but only if that support remains palatable to a wider audience, quiet and assimilationist. Institutions are often not willing to defend their support for marginalized communities if it becomes broadly known, leading to a breakdown between professed values and lived realities.

The Myth of Belief-Behavior Separation

There is still an argument to be made that privacy of thought, if not a legal reality, then at the very least is an ethical ideal to ascribe to. And yet, even on this level, the argument in this article fails basic scrutiny. Antelman’s central move is to argue that beliefs and behavior can be cleanly separated; basically, as long as a library worker “does the job,” their personal worldview is irrelevant. But this argument is both professionally irresponsible and intel-

lectually dishonest. In any public-serving institution, beliefs absolutely influence behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein 1972; Bandura, 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen 2011; Granados Samayoa and Albarracín 2025). Public employees are given wide latitude to decide what gets prioritized, who gets heard, what risks are taken, and who feels seen. And their own beliefs are often the driving forces behind these efforts.

Libraries, like all institutions, are staffed by human beings, and human beings do not operate from a blank slate. They create a worldview from their experience, values, assumptions: what some people might call “thoughts.” While the belief in neutrality may be laudable, neutrality is not a *prima facie* good if it stops analysis on actions (Chiu et al. 2021). If someone believes certain communities are too sensitive, they are more likely to dismiss valid concerns. If they believe neutrality means saying nothing about injustice, they are more likely to uphold the status quo. If they believe pronouns are optional, they will misgender someone. This is outside of the structural and algorithmic biases that librarians must address when working with users that may be out of their direct control but still may require their intervention and explanation (Noble 2018). While individuals are free to hold their beliefs, they are not entitled to act on those beliefs in ways that undermine equity or violate professional expectations. The behavior must be held to account, and it is not unethical for an organization to seek to provide training that would forestall these negative outcomes.

DEI work doesn't exist to indoctrinate. It exists because unexamined thoughts become decisions. They become hiring biases, reference interactions, policy enforcement, and programming choices. Organizations are defined by the choices they make, and organizations with limited resources must decide what to include and what to leave out. It is in the interest of the public to make sure that those choices are made with everyone in mind. These choices will further have impacts on the employees inside these publicly funded libraries, becoming reasons not to speak up, not to apply, and not to stay.

A key piece of Antelman's argument depends on the false binary that thought is private and behavior is public. But in practice, they are hopelessly entangled. That's why public institutions invest in DEI: not to punish dissenting opinions, but to reduce the harm that unacknowledged biases inflict on the people libraries are supposed to serve—which brings us back to Antelman's central claim that DEI training constitutes coercion. However, that framing only works if readers accept a series of deeply flawed assumptions about the role of public employees, the nature of belief, and the meaning of professional accountability.

DEI Isn't the Thought Police

The idea that public employees have an unlimited right to “privacy of thought” misunderstands both the nature of public service and the stakes of equity work. In libraries, as in all public institutions, the obligation is not to protect individual comfort. Rather, libraries work to deliver just, accessible, and equitable service. That work requires reflection and grappling with how our beliefs shape actions, especially when those actions impact a library's users.

Antelman's article invites readers to imagine themselves under siege, facing forced reeducation at the hands of ideologues (going to so far as to make a specious comparison between the rationale for DEI training to that of “state-sponsored torture” [432]). But for many library workers, there has never been a version of professional life that did not require navigating others' biases, absorbing institutional harm, or performing endless labor to make others feel safe. What some may consider a violation is often nothing more than being asked to participate in the work of making the profession better than it has been.

I care deeply about privacy: my own and that of others. I believe in data minimization. I refuse smart home devices. I am deeply suspect of technological innovation. I think government surveillance powers are wildly overreaching. But there is a difference between protecting private life from authoritarian overreach and shielding public employees from accountability for how they wield institutional power. Privacy in public work is not absolute. Public institutions must be open, and the people who serve within them must be willing to examine how their private beliefs impact their public responsibilities.

Further, DEI work in libraries is not above reproach. Like any evolving field, its practices are imperfect, its delivery uneven, and its impact at times uncertain. Indeed, many of the sharpest critics of DEI are those doing the work that see the gap between current practice and desired outcomes (for a small list of examples, see Burress et al. 2024; Crilly 2023; Geiger et al. 2023; Leong 2023; Phillips 2025; Pittman et al. 2025; Poole et al. 2021). But the absence of a perfect framework does not relieve libraries of their responsibility to confront systemic inequities in the meantime. DEI will improve through iteration, but that work cannot wait until it's flawless. This is a field of practitioners, and as such, it learns through practice. If there are concerns about DEI trainings, there are a few things that can be immediately put into practice to clarify the goals to participants:

- **Start with job relevance:** Write a one-sentence statement that ties the training to a service or performance competency you already measure.
- **Define success up front:** List three observable behaviors the training should change; draft how you will check them in six weeks.
- **Pre/post lightly:** Add one practical pre/post check tied to behavior (mystery-shop interactions; form quality; response times), not attitudes alone.
- **Build opt-in depth:** Provide optional resources and coaching circles for those who want more; keep the core training concise and job-tied.

Privacy of thought may be a philosophical ideal. But in practice, it has never been equally distributed, and it cannot be used as a shield against the responsibility that comes with public employment. If someone is uncomfortable being asked to consider how their worldview affects others, that shows a rejection of openness to feedback that is a red flag in any employee.

The argument towards protecting “privacy of thought” is a straw man. In publicly funded libraries, the ethical imperative is to serve a diverse public, and that requires training, reflection, and accountability. Legally, public employees’ on-duty speech and privacy are limited and contextual, not absolute. Ethically, public institutions owe a duty of equitable service that justifies reflective practice and training. Professionally, beliefs predict behavior in ways that shape service and workplace climate. For library leaders, the implication is to document the job-related aims of DEI training, align it to policy and service standards, and evaluate outcomes the way they would any other operational training.

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Author

John Mack Freeman is the assistant dean for interdisciplinary initiatives and director of Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons at the Georgia Tech Library. His professional interests include professional development of library employees and the intersection of libraries, public policy, and practice.