

Intellectual Freedom: Issues and Information

It is most fitting that this issue of Feliciter, featuring the Freedom to Read Week poster on the cover and the preliminary program for the 2011 annual conference in Halifax, should include an article on intellectual freedom. Given the considerable diversity of interests and perspectives on our committee, we decided that the article would consist of individual overviews of particular issues and concerns, with our contributions individually signed. We hope you find something worth thinking about in each of the four pieces.



CLA's scope of intellectual freedom concerns

by Alvin M Schrader

Members of the Advisory Committee are enthused about the priority accorded intellectual freedom in the second draft of CLA's proposed future plan. Under "Why we make a difference," the very first reference is to "improving access to information for Canadians and working to protect intellectual freedom by advocating for the development of policies and position statements."

Within this broad framework, we think an important question for the CLA membership at large to consider is the scope and boundaries of the Association's intellectual freedom policies, interests and advocacy. That is, does the membership support a "library focus" on library censorship issues? Or does the membership embrace a broader societal perspective grounded in Charter freedoms and responsibilities for all Canadians?

There appear to be many nuances represented among CLA members. For example, some (if not all) school librarians see their role as promoting and teaching intellectual freedom in the context of citizenship responsibility. The CLA Award for the Advancement of Intellectual Freedom in Canada has several times been given to recognize contributions by individuals and groups beyond library borders. CLA itself is a member of the umbrella organization called the Book and Periodical Council, which among other initiatives sponsors Freedom to Read Week across Canada.

When does a freedom of expression issue become a library issue? Can we comfortably snip off the library

dimension of civil liberties? And if we do, are we open to the charge of being overly self-serving? It seems the media are often caught in the same self-serving boat – delighted to inflame library censorship controversies but holier-than-thou when their own press freedoms are under attack.

In any event, are CLA members interested in broadening our civil liberties alliances and partnerships, or more comfortable with the more traditional library focus? There are many issues awaiting your perspective. Some are addressed by colleagues below – for example, the G20 Summit protests and the case for workplace speech. But there are so many others about which the Advisory Committee needs an understanding in order to be able to take action and make recommendations – for example, the WikiLeaks controversy, defamation suits and libel chill, transgender rights, campus clashes, saving indigenous languages, Internet neutrality, filtering, government criticism of works of art, film and television ratings, Canada Border Services censorship, decriminalization of prostitution, access to government information, hate speech and the human rights commissions, or any of the inevitable condemnations from time to time of authors, cartoonists, bloggers, journalists and political activists at home and around the world.

Alvin M Schrader is convenor of the Advisory Committee, a role he also had in the mid-1980s. He drafted the original CLA position statement on internet access. He served as president of the Canadian Library Association in 2007-2008 and of the Library Association of Alberta in 1999-2000. He served 1996-2003 as director of the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, retiring as professor emeritus and currently employed as director of research for University of Alberta Libraries.

