

Librarians and “information justice”

Toni Samek explains why professors need to worry about librarians’ academic freedom

Academic freedom is the first directive encoded in the Canadian Library Association’s Code of Ethics, but when we look across our Canadian campuses, we see that while some librarians have academic freedom, most do not. The librarian’s practice, however, is limited if she or he is not able to exercise fully freedoms of thought, conscience, opinion, and expression—all of which are human rights that underlie academic freedom. These limitations will detract from the ability of the academic librarian to provide the best levels of collections and services possible. Professors should be concerned about academic freedom for the librarian not only because librarians are deserving academic colleagues whose rights are often fragile and tenuous, but also because librarians work on the front-lines of intellectual freedom battles every day as part of their contribution to the intellectual life of our campuses. Without full academic freedom, their ability to do this work is compromised.

The librarian takes on such significant challenges as lobbying for copyright reform and public access to government documents in the digital age. The librarian’s daily practice (e.g., collections, knowledge organization, reference) is conducted in the face of difficult challenges, such as global market fundamentalism, a heightened legalistic environment, and anti-terrorism legislation both in Canada and internationally. Indeed, librarians and faculty suffer the same threats to academic freedom (e.g., one-voice policies, security costs of controversial speakers on campuses, academic research as insurgency). Of course, these points are coming into sharp focus, as human rights violations have received increased attention in the 21st century and in the aftermath of 9/11. And these have considerable ethical implications for library and information practice in such areas as access to information, privacy, confidentiality, civil liberties, and intellectual freedom.

The Canadian Library Association’s current value statement opens with the phrasing: “We believe that libraries and the principles of intellectual freedom and free universal access to information are key components of an open and democratic society.” Accordingly, the first directive the association’s code of ethics is



to support and implement the principles and practices embodied in the current Canadian Library Association statement on intellectual freedom.” The latter statement supports, and directly references, the nation’s Bill of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Other library statements also speak directly to intellectual and academic freedom, underscoring the inextricable connection to the free flow of information, literacy, Internet neutrality, reasonable intellectual property rules, and cultural heritage. Ironically, Canadian academic librarians advocate for intellectual and academic freedom they may not benefit from themselves.

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Academic librarians in Canada normally have some of the academic rights and responsibilities that faculty have, but not necessarily academic freedom. It is not easy to survey the status of aca-

demographic librarians in Canada, but one can study collective agreements and related terms and conditions of employment. Most regulations for the librarian are drafted as a subsection of the faculty agreement. Some institutions have separate librarian agreements. All institutions have some sense of security of tenure for librarians, but its extent varies. A survey of 25 major universities, conducted in spring 2007 for the purpose of this article, suggests that at least three institutions get it right for the academic librarian.

An outstanding model is on the books at Queen's University, where the university faculty association agreement makes no distinction between professors and librarians and where academic freedom is linked directly to the practice of the acquisition of materials, no matter how controversial these materials may be. Simon Fraser University's librarians have a duty to promote and maintain intellectual freedom as well as a responsibility to protect academic freedom and are entitled to full protection of their own academic freedom, as written into their collective agreement. And at the University of Guelph, the terms and conditions of employment for librarians note that every librarian has the right to academic freedom and to having that freedom protected, and is expected to accept the responsibility in protecting the academic freedom of those who do not have it.

As noted in 2005 *Conference on Academic Freedom Post 9-11*, organized by the Harry Crowe Foundation, key conditions for the production and transmission of new knowledge include full and frank debate; trust; creativity; collaboration; innovation; freedom of inquiry; freedom of association; freedom of expression; access

of citizens to government information; openness; and, willingness to speak truth. Academic freedom for the librarian, in my view, is necessary to realize fully an academic culture of information justice, that is, a culture that promotes and supports such positives as cultural pluralism, unfettered trans-border data flow, community access to information and communication technology, cross-border scientific knowledge-sharing, access to information, and freedom of expression.

There is more at play here than the notion that academic librarians should have such rights inherently—as academics. There is also a utilitarian notion to consider; namely that professors should be concerned about librarians' academic freedom since it is a necessity if librarians are to be effective advocates for everyone else's academic freedom. The rights and responsibilities given to academic librarians can be measured to some extent by looking at the academic freedom clauses in collective agreements. But the actual level of academic freedom on any particular Canadian campus is more complex—because even with good contract language, academic freedom can still be thwarted.

Ultimately, academic freedom is a necessary condition to the proper functioning of academic information services on our campuses. The stakes are high if the end game is the expansion of knowledge and the reduction of information poverty. **AM**

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