

GUEST EDITORIAL

CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE LIBRARY WORKPLACE

by Toni Samek

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

As Kathleen de la Peña McCook notes in her article “Workplace Speech in Libraries and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”: “in the spring 2005 Berman put forth the proposition in the *Journal of Information Ethics* that ALA adopt a policy on workplace speech. With some modification from Berman’s proposal, a resolution ‘Resolution on Workplace Speech’ was passed in June 2005 and a policy incorporated in the *ALA Policy Manual*.” Fast forward three years later to Thursday, May 22, 2008. On this date, at the Canadian Library Association (CLA) Annual Conference in Vancouver, the Advisory Committee on Intellectual Freedom hosted a landmark session titled “Inside Talk: Freedom of Speech in the Library Workplace.” The official session description read as follows:

What are library and information workers talking about on the job? Whose voices are coming through the library channels? To what extent is self-censorship or inside censorship a common practice? What is and is not acceptable when librarians participate in citizen journalism that criticizes employers in the blogosphere? And in a professional community that holds intellectual freedom so dear, why did the ALA see the need to adopt a 2005 Resolution on Workplace Speech which states: “Libraries should encourage discussion among library workers, including library administrators, of non-confidential professional and policy matters about the operation of the library and matters of public concern within the framework of applicable laws?” Should the CLA adopt a sister-resolution? And what about our library administrations? The pros and cons of resolutions on workplace speech for library institutions are up for debate with panelists Kathleen de la Peña McCook, [Mitch Freedman], Sam Trosow, and Paul Whitney, who will discuss just what resolutions on workplace speech might look like and mean for the CLA, library administrations, and Canadian library and information work in the 21st century. Audience participation is highly encouraged in this timely, reflective look inside our very own institutional culture.

Learning Outcomes:

- What is “workplace speech” in the context of library institutions?
- What is the history and context of ALA’s 2005 Resolution on Workplace Speech?
- The pros and cons of adopting sister statements in the context of the daily-life, recruitment, and retention of Canadian LIS workers in the 21st century.

The speakers, in order of appearance, were Maurice Freedman (former ALA President and current publisher of *THE UNABASHED LIBRARIAN*); *in absentia* Kathleen de la Peña McCook (Distinguished University Professor, University of South Florida); Paul Whitney (City Librarian, Vancouver); and, Sam Trosow (Associate Professor, jointly appointed to the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario). I convened the session, which involved organizing it (with the aid of the Committee members), providing the introductory and closing remarks and, delivering Kathleen’s speech. Prior to the conference, library activists in Canada and the United States rallied interest in the session via two essential blog postings. The first notice, titled “Employee Expression in the Library Workplace, Encouraged or Censored?,” was posted on May 15, 2008 to the Concerned Librarians of British Columbia blog. (This is an advocacy group of Canadian librarians formed in 2004 whose goal is to heighten awareness on current issues as they pertain to the profession). The second notice, titled “Freedom of Speech in the Library Workplace”, was posted by Rory Litwin on May 19, 2008. Rory wrote:

I don’t often blog conference programs, but this is one I want to highlight, in part because I’m hoping that it will generate some papers and activities that will be helpful to people outside the conference and I want to let people know about that possibility. ... ALA affirmed the right of librarians to intellectual freedom on the job, which is great, but despite that affirmation it is something that needs more discussion and advocacy in order to advance. I hope that this program will be helpful outside of Canada and I look forward to hearing about how it went. [The post was filed under Intellectual Freedom, Labor Issues, The Profession.]

So what happened? About 70 people attended, which was an encouraging number for a conference registration of less than 600 with simultaneously overlapping sessions. I delivered the introductory remarks to contextualize the session. Then Mitch spoke. Then I read Kathleen’s speech *in absentia*. Then Paul weighed in. Then Sam gave a kind of closer that picked up on what was already said, and he did so partly through a legal lens. I then made some summary comments and suggestions for future directions. Four or five audience members spoke eloquently at the end, including a librarian from Winnipeg, from Saskatoon, and Alex Youngberg – the recently named *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). These audience contributions provided interesting and supporting comments in favour of more momentum for workplace speech in libraries. Overall, the session included examples from both US and Canadian perspective. We read aloud ALA’s 2005 “Resolution on Workplace Speech” and encouraged the room of people to help build discussion about whether CLA should adopt a sister resolution and whether or not a day may come when CLA opts to censure libraries that do not uphold its values. We acknowledged that ALA’s Resolution is a persuasion and consensus building tool, but does not reflect enforcement authority in libraries. We also read out a model clause from the Saskatoon Public Library

agreement that directs the institution to uphold CLA's "Statement on Intellectual Freedom," both in the external context of the library's publics and the internal context of its workers. Of special import, Paul Whitney gave some attention to the newly amended Code of Conduct for the City of Vancouver, which includes mentions of both criticisms of policy and of city officials.

I express thanks to my critical librarianship colleagues at *Progressive Librarian* for publishing Kathleen's outstanding speech and for giving me the opportunity to contextualize it within context of the conference session and its aims. This creates an important – and bibliographically accessible – historical record to put the session in our collective memory. I extend thanks to all four session speakers – Kathleen, Mitch, Paul and Sam – and to the folks who came out to hear them. A very special thank you goes to the students in attendance! Having a cadre of Canadian MLIS students present was particularly heartening. Because, as Kathleen states so elegantly: "Why some will advocate for values like Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (cited above) and others will not, is likely due to a lack of focus in LIS education on ethical issues and by the profession at large" and that the "adoption of the 'Position Statement on Information Ethics in LIS Education' [ratified] by ALISE [in January 2008] is a step forward in guaranteeing that these issues, including workplace speech, will be addressed in programs of LIS education." Of special note, two attending MLIS students, Darby Love and Kathleen Reed, just launched the "New Librarian Guide to Workplace Speech" website on May 31, 2008. Their pioneering work was originally published in print brochure format on March 25, 2008 as part of an assignment for me in LIS 592 Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility at the University of Alberta's School of Library and Information Studies.

The location and timing of the CLA conference session was especially significant, because it was held in Vancouver and the Vancouver Public Library had its first strike in 2007 (shortly followed by a lockout at Victoria Public Library). The strike, in part, prompted CLA's related 2007 resolution on pay equity titled "Canadian Library Association Position Statement on Equitable Compensation for Library Workers," approved by Executive Council, October 5, 2007. Will a workplace speech resolution follow? And if so, would it be sufficient to cultivate a culture of freedom of expression in the library workplace? And would it acknowledge that freedom of expression includes freedom to dissent?

Sources

- Concerned Librarians of British Columbia. <http://concernedlibrarians.blogspot.com/search?q=Freedom+of+Speech+in+the+Library+Workplace> (accessed 31 May 2008).
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- Canadian Library Association Statement on Equitable Compensation for Library Workers. http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Position_Statements&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3420 (accessed 31 May 2008).
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