

Missing the Boat: Journalists, Librarians, and Intellectual Freedom

By Evan Davis

One of the things that surprised me when I became a librarian was how important intellectual freedom is in this profession. I had spent most of the previous 25 years writing for newspapers and was well and truly committed to freedom of the press, but I had never realized that journalists had such close potential allies over at the library.

I don't recall any reference to mutual interests with librarians in the various journalism publications I read and conferences I attended, not to mention the newsrooms where I worked -- vice versa for library publications, conferences, and workrooms. Newspaper editors were traditionally wary about allying with anybody about anything for fear of losing their journalistic objectivity. Meanwhile, librarians saw the press as a conduit for promoting library programs and perhaps as a watchdog over library policies and spending -- if the newspaper bothered to cover the library board meetings at all.

Yet, the shared interests are important. Newspaper journalists and librarians both depend on a literate public, which means early and excellent education is vital to them. They work to maintain Americans' rights to say or print what they want; to read and view what they want; to oppose censorship; to advocate for open and available government records.

On the down side, both libraries and newspapers are dealing with intense competition from new technologies. The Internet erodes newspapers' revenues. It reduces use of the libraries' reference desks, while e-books mount a challenge to the whole concept of printed books. Both fields anxiously court the younger generations; libraries struggle to keep up with technologies and social media while newspapers try to adjust to the trend of young people getting their news over the free Internet. I'm not predicting the demise of either institution, but shrinkage is happening and change is mandatory. I'm grateful I'm not out job-hunting in either field.

How can libraries and newspapers work together for the common good of themselves and of the people they serve? It's a question that's gaining traction. The Seattle-based organization Journalism That Matters held a conference in April 2011 titled "Beyond Books: News, Literacy, Democracy,

and America's Libraries" (Journalism, 2011). Later, two of the speakers from the Seattle event took part in a panel on civic engagement at an American Library Association annual conference. As recently as this April, Journalism That Matters held an event about journalism's future that included librarians.

As part of its Privacy Revolution initiative ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom has received a two-year grant intended to assist library users, librarians, and journalists in learning how to evaluate the news. The primary target group is high school students, who will be asked to create journalistic projects based on news literacy principles. Four large library systems hosted journalism "summer schools" in 2012 (American, n.d.).

Closer to home, the Indiana Library Federation's (ILF) Intellectual Freedom Committee looked into the possibility of hosting a pre-conference at the 2012 ILF conference on the topic of the shared interests of newspapers and libraries. Unfortunately, not enough people signed up and the pre-conference had to be canceled. Nevertheless, the IFC will continue to work to raise awareness in both the newspaper and library communities that they are in the same battered boat and that helping each other will increase their chances of staying afloat.

References:

Journalism That Matters. (2011). Beyond Books.

<http://journalismthatmatters.org/blog/2011/06/25/beyond-books-video/>

American Library Association. Office for Intellectual Freedom. Privacy Revolution. <http://www.privacyrevolution.org/>

Author:

Evan Davis is a member of the Business, Science & Technology librarians team at the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne and had over 25 years of experience as a journalist before becoming a librarian. He is currently chair of the Indiana Library Federation Intellectual Freedom Committee. edavis@acpl.info