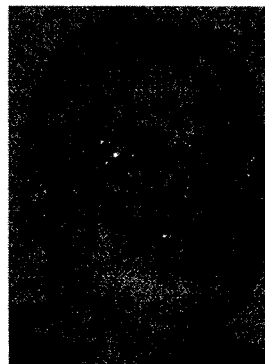


**Berman's Bag: "Not In My Library"**

By Sanford Berman, U\*L Contributing Editor.

Says Michael Moore on page 115 of *Stupid White Men* (ReganBooks, 2001):

For most of us, the only time we enter an American high school is to vote at our local precinct. (There's an irony if there ever was one--going to participate in democracy's sacred ritual while two thousand students in the same building live under some sort of totalitarian dictatorship.)



Well, Michael, an even greater irony thrives inside libraries, invariably hailed as "bulwarks of democracy" and "exceptionally democratic institutions," which are commonly operated much like medieval fiefdoms, replete with hierarchy, secretiveness, and arbitrary decision-making. This is from the minutes of LAPL's Librarians Guild Professional Concerns Committee (5-3-01):

Regimentation and deprofessionalization of LAPL librarian work: Those present discussed the ominous trend within our

Department to standardize every aspect of our work environments and even the ways in which we organize our desks, the tone of our voices, and our facial expressions. This leads to an inflexibility in responding to public needs, actually lowers efficiency in the workplace, and results in an unpleasant work atmosphere. Paperwork has been greatly increased, with unnecessary justifications required for every professional decision.

That is not the stuff of democracy. Indeed, the D-word, while often enough bandied about in self-promoting PR, is actually regarded with contempt by most library managers in real-time administration. During nearly three decades as a supervisor at Hennepin County Library, I attended many Management Team meetings. Almost always, suggestions to expand and diversify that policy-making group by adding the Children's Services Coordinator or a senior clerical supervisor elicited anguished wails from hierarchs who jealously sought to maintain their monopoly on power and status. Likewise, proposals to survey the whole staff on critical policy matters evoked angry reactions from the managerial elite, typically expressed in nonsensical, not to mention hysterical, declarations such as "You can't expect us to consult with 500 employees on every little thing! (No, not on "every little thing," but why not on "every big thing"?)

I've cataloged a few of my own unfree-speech tribulations at HCL in "Inside' Censorship" (<http://web.library.uiuc.edu/ahx/ead/ala/9701040a/berman/intro.html>) Here's an excerpt which incidentally illuminates the frequent charade of "team-based decision-making":

In the summer of 1996, I was accused in the Director's office, with only my immediate boss present, of being disruptive and undermining. It was manifest that I would be disciplined in some way. And what terrible act had I committed? I publicly opposed the first proposal to emerge from a Revenue Generation Team assembled by the director: a plan to raise \$100,000 a year by doubling the juvenile fine rate. The purpose was not to get books back on time or to instill greater responsibility in youthful borrowers. It was single-mindedly to impress the Board of Commissioners downtown with how tough and effective the Library could be in reducing reliance on property taxes, on public money. It happens that neither the Board nor County Administrator had ever made a formal, written request or demand to raise non-tax funds.

It was just something that our administration thought they should do. And realizing that much of the staff, not to mention public, might question such a kid--and also poor--bashing policy, the Team deliberately did not consult with the system's two dozen children's librarians or anyone else who might have objected. Instead, the plan was railroaded through the Management Team and Library Board with great haste and minimum opportunity to criticize or debate. I and the Children's Services Coordinator testified at a board meeting, where we were rudely received. The day before, there had been a brief discussion among the Management Team, concluding with a 10-10 split vote on the proposal--a vote that was never even intended (I had to ask for it). Half the senior managers opposed it, but the Administrative Committee that afternoon approved it anyway and

the appointed Library Board did likewise the next day, with only one member dissenting.

Given the appalling lack of staff and public input, I talked to someone at [the] alternative news weekly who ran a short story on the issue, captioned "Library Pinches Nickels, Kids" and I initiated a simple petition, finally signed by nearly 140 staff, which asked that the fine policy be withdrawn. As it happens, the policy did get revoked, but probably because of a call from one county commissioner, who had been alerted to the library's plan and surely recognized it to be both unfair and a probable PR disaster. I wasn't the person who contacted the commissioner, but I know who was: someone I had merely spoken to, a citizen and library activist who realized that this was bad news for kids and poor people. Anyway, for testifying publicly, talking to the press, and starting a petition, I was about to be reprimanded. And I would have been—except that I could afford \$500 to hire labor lawyers who phoned, faxed, and mailed the administration, advising that free speech rights might be involved and that they intended to represent me at any hearing or trial. That did it. They backed off. But how many librarians can afford the \$500 to buy their First Amendment rights? How many have their mortgages paid off already? I did but I was lucky.

As a footnote, during that dressing-down, the HCL Director became particularly livid concerning the petition then circulating among staff. I earlier called it "simple." In fact, it went something like this:  
Based on reasons already articulated by HCL's children's librarians, we, the undersigned HCL staff, request

that the, new juvenile fine increase be withdrawn.

It garnered about 140 signatures without any special effort. Anyway, that morning I mumbled a few words about the "right of petition" and "First Amendment." The Director's very deliberate reply, from just two feet away, eyes bloodshot, was:

NOT IN MY LIBRARY!

Later, in the course of that same encounter, I was asked to swear that in the future I would uphold all management decisions. I refused, observing that no one could any longer do that in good conscience since the Nuremberg Trials. You can imagine how that went down.

The problem of workplace repression and biblio-fascism is hardly limited to Los Angeles Public Library and Me. Colleagues in recent years have been rebuked or dismissed for:

+Conducting a program on Israeli censorship.

+Writing pro-labor freelance newspaper columns and—as City Librarian—scheduling a series of labor films, which offended local business interests. (This person was summarily dismissed from her job and escorted with her belongings to the sidewalk by a security guard.)

+Questioning why a system closed on Easter but not on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. (The library's "Diversity Coordinator," she was admonished for raising the "Jewish Question" and being "controversial." The Deputy Director banned her from attending any further systemwide committee meetings.)

+Criticizing library management at a City Council meeting.

+Supporting a Black coworker who charged the administration with job discrimination.

+Opposing a new main building with inadequate space for books.

+Asking for improved security after a violent sexual assault.

(Several of these cases are documented in a June 2001 University of Alberta course paper by Stephen Carney, soon to appear in the *Journal of Information Ethics*.)

So what recourse is there within the profession to bolster and protect workplace speech and democracy? These are three approaches:

One, where the library staff is organized, is to bargain for a contract clause guaranteeing members the right to express themselves freely on library policy and other professional matters. In the aftermath of my experience at Hennepin, the nonsupervisory librarians union there—100 strong—got such language included in their contract. (That's AFSCME Local 2864. So far the clause hasn't been invoked, but it COULD be and in the meantime perhaps contributes to a slightly more open workplace.)

Second, the national profession itself could be much more forthright and vigorous in supporting staff free speech. In June 1999, while still a member of ALA Council, I submitted a resolution to amend the holy Library Bill of Rights by adding

7) Libraries should permit and encourage a full and free expression of views by staff on professional and policy matters.

What happened to that effort to secure the same protection for library staff as for library materials and meeting rooms is summarized in a letter I sent in August 2001 to Bill Gordon, ALA Executive Director:

In March 1999, I proposed an amendment to the Library Bill of Rights that would have extended free speech rights to library staff. On June 29th, in New Orleans, Council referred the proposal to its Committee on Professional Ethics. In an "Open Letter to ALA Members" I warned that this "vital issue" of workplace speech might ultimately be buried or muted. I believe, two years later, that what I feared has indeed happened.

The Ethics Committee unilaterally decided that "the existing tenets of the ALA Code of Ethics address this issue" although they palpably do *not*, and then undertook preparation of a question-and-answer document to clarify the matter. The Q&A draft I examined in late 2000 I subsequently characterized as "a manifesto supporting 'managerial prerogatives,' not free speech."

Apparently not even the craven, diluted Ethics Committee "explication" has yet reached Council. When (and if) it ever does, that manager-friendly body will doubtless approve it, effectively consigning librarians' workplace rights to oblivion. Believing that our OWN free speech deserves at least as much attention as anyone else's, I ask that my proposed LBR amendment be presented to the entire ALA membership as a referendum. To date, it has not been voted upon within ALA, Council in 1999 merely having "referred" it to a committee.

If there is a better way than a referendum to get action on workplace speech and librarians' rights, I'd welcome it. What's essential is not to let the issue evaporate or vanish down a bureaucratic "memory hole."

As you can perhaps guess, I'm still awaiting an answer. And nowhere in the august library press, that bastion of First Amendment advocacy, has there ever been an editorial endorsement of free speech in the workplace--or of that Library Bill of Rights amendment in particular.

Third, in Stephen Carney's words, "in order to ensure that library employee intellectual freedom is protected and to foster a 'free speech situation,' libraries and librarians should consider adopting organizational structures or practices that allow the worker to take an active, participatory, responsible, and equal role in the operation of the library workplace." As one actual model, he cites Dickinson College Library in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which in 1975 scrapped "the hierarchical underpinnings of traditional management" in favor of a "collegial pattern...with a rotating chair." Still another precedent is reported by Tom Eland in the July 2000 *Counterpoise*: Minneapolis Community & Technical College library, a "peer-based collegial department." According to Eland:

We have no library director and all decisions are made by consensus. Sometimes our staff meetings get a bit long, and on occasion we enter into spirited debates, but the entire staff is invested in the process and we keep each other honest.

Jeff Schmidt, in *Disciplined Mind: a Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), offers a whole panoply of ways that individuals within institutions can contribute "to more equality and democracy, to less hierarchy and authoritarianism." Here are examples from his final chapter, "Now Or Never":

...encourage coworkers to connect themselves with radical organizations and to read and subscribe to radical publications. You circulate antiestablishment periodicals, or selected articles from them, to professional and nonprofessional coworkers who might be interested.

...air your institution's dirty laundry in public. When you make public an internal fight over the nature or quality of the institution's products or services, you expose your bosses to pressures that make an outcome in the public interest more likely and the usual outcome that serves elites less likely. This pressure can be strong, because even members of the public who seem to be apathetic perk up when let in on what is going on behind the scenes; they can see where the decision is being made and can, for a change, imagine themselves influencing it.

...debunk the myth or neutrality of the profession and its working principles. You challenge the social role of the profession.

...help lay bare the intimate details of management's decision-making about the content of the work. Because workplace secrecy increases the power of the bosses by ensuring that they are the only ones with a comprehensive knowledge

of what is going on, you work to spread around as much information as possible. When you know the details of how the bosses made a particular decision, you inform people inside and outside of the organization, and you encourage coworkers to do the same. This helps reveal management's politics and enables people to predict its decisions in the future.

...encourage openness in personnel matters, specifically, in individual disputes with management. When you have a dispute with management, the bosses insist on discussing it with you behind closed doors not because they want to protect your privacy, but because they want to deny you the support of coworkers. Behind closed doors you stand alone against the institution. Hence, you try to handle conflicts with the boss in front of coworkers to whatever extent possible. In any case, you recount the details of your disputes to coworkers, and you encourage coworkers to do the same when they have disputes with management.

...help organize a union. After all, management is organized and sticks together to defend its interests.

(An extremely concise and persuasive critique of "hierarchical power structures" appears on pages 271 and 273.)

The wrap-up goes to Stephen Carney who eloquently summarizes the D-word dilemma:

The protection of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression for all people is essential to the proper functioning of modern liberal democracy. It must be

recognized, however, that these tenets cannot be fully exercised or protected unless they exist alongside a commitment to the substantive social and economic equality of all citizens. In other words, the civil right to freedom of expression requires a recognition that not all citizens in western society are equal, and that social and economic status may have a direct impact upon a person's ability to exercise his or her own right to freedom of expression... The public library is often conceptualized as an arena in which freedom of expression and intellectual freedom can be achieved and thoroughly defended. The library, as a site in which the public sphere can be realized, is in this context thoroughly democratic. Often the defense of intellectual freedom requires the library employee to take a specific stance or position on an issue and to recognize that not all people are automatically afforded the same civil rights. Just as certain societal factors inhibit the protection and defense of these principles, certain institutional practices and structures that are common to the library as a place of work inhibit the library worker from openly recognizing that these societal factors and limitations do actually exist. When the library worker is unable to challenge these practices, factors, and limitations, the defense of universal intellectual freedom and freedom of expression is inhibited as the voices that wield more power are allowed to dominate the dialogue of human communication. Challenging the hierarchical organizational structure that is common to the library as a place of work may then be looked upon as a first step towards the development of an egalitarian free speech

situation, where intellectual  
freedom actually exists alongside  
real social and economic equality.

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