

**Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk: What Libraries Say They Do But Frequently Don't
a talk by Sanford Berman, April 17, 1997, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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Libraries, especially public libraries, tout themselves as bastions of democracy, as the people's university, free sources for information and dialogue, a kind of commons committed to all sorts of ideas and trends, open spaces for reflection and exploration. They're supposed to be accessible, egalitarian, and neutral not peddling any one ideology or product, not skills for any particular class or party or worldview. They're places where what you think or how you look shouldn't matter. Well, that's the talk.

In reality, libraries internally are often the very antithesis of democracy: hierarchically structured, making key decisions arbitrarily and secretly, and demanding loyalty and conformity from unempowered staff. Last summer at Hennepin, 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 fashion. 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. So 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 questioning the whole effort. Given the appalling lack of staff and public input, I talked to someone at an alternative newsweekly 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 trashed, 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 probably 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 bucks to buy their First Amendment rights? How many have their mortgages paid off already? I did. But I was lucky.

Despite the frequent rhetoric about free-and-public, libraries seem increasingly to identify with the middle and upper classes, with wealth and property. Fines of any kind are arguably classist, discriminatory yet there's no discernible trend or movement to abandon them. And the same for fees for basic services like Internet use or online database searches or getting a book that's at another branch. If anything, these are multiplying. Baltimore County's Charlie Robinson declared candidly in a *Library Journal* interview last year what I suspect is widespread but seldom admitted: that his library was firmly and unapologetically a middle-class institution serving the middle class. No one needs to be a savant to appreciate that resources expended on investment and business tools and services astronomically exceed what is devoted to similar materials and outreach to workers, labor union members, and poor folks. There's literally no comparison. Where I work, as simply an indication of mindset and orientation, senior managers regularly get informational routings from the Director's office. Much in these packets is directly library-related: newsletters and reports from other library systems and groups but invariably there are also bulletins and announcements from local chambers of commerce, along with *everything* issued by a Twin Cities right-wing think tank called the Center for the American Experiment. The slant of these routings I've challenged at least twice, not urging that the business and conservative stuff be dropped, but rather that material from labor, antipoverty, women's, and ethnic sources be included. The routings continue as always, the assumption being that to emphasize business and property and wealth is right and normal and somehow *not* political.

Finally, anyone who's attended an ALA conference or read about public-private tie-ins in the library press realizes that libraries are increasingly and overtly being commercialized. Indeed, we last week created a new heading at HCL: Libraries United States Commercialization, to reflect a discussion on precisely that development in Herbert Schiller's 1996 book, *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America*. The first program at this year's San Francisco conference will doubtless as in the past couple years be billed, not as the ALA Opening Session, but as the Ameritech Opening Session. At this year's midwinter meeting in Washington, DC, a major panel program sponsored by ALCTS featured 12 speakers talking about outsourcing. Every one of them was a vendor. Not one represented consumers or expressed an anti-outsourcing viewpoint. That was about selection. The day before, a two-hour session on outsourcing cataloging did include two librarians, who essentially reported how they did it good (i.e., abdicated their cataloging responsibilities), but their presentations were dwarfed by a twice-as-long performance by someone from OCLC who, in effect, conducted an unabashed infommercial. When, at the very end, I questioned out loud the quality and value of outsourced catalog records, I was greeted by an almost totally hostile response from both speakers and audience. And then there's SFPL, as an example, naming whole areas or rooms to commemorate corporate donations like the Exxon or Amoco Room (I forget which.) That's akin to providing daily, nonstop advertising to the beneficent donor. And it *is* political. It affects and undoes the feeling of a neutral, nonthreatening, nonhuckstering turf that a public library ought to have.

Another shibboleth: Libraries are supposed to oppose censorship and provide the widest possible spectrum of perspectives and information cultural, social, economic, political, religious, sexual. At the national and state policy levels, something curious has happened. ALA and state associations rightly battle legislation like the Communications Decency Act, and support school and public libraries facing challenges to particular books or films or magazines. However, the time and energy spent on these matters is so overwhelming that as a profession we don't seem to have noticed, much less done anything about, the growing actuality that the very channels and producers of intellectual and cultural goods are shrinking in breadth and vitality and diversity. It's what Schiller, Ben Bagdikian, Michael Parenti, Noam Chomsky, and Jeff Cohen have tried to warn us about for years. And what *The Nation* has stunningly documented with respect to publishing alone in two recent issues. It's the rapid concentration of media ownership, the expansion of conglomerate publishing, the death of independent bookstores (and the variety they promoted) under the onslaught of Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores, as well as K-Mart discount operations; the giveaway of public airwaves to the Big Boys; and the not surprising dictation by superstores, K-Mart, and Blockbuster Video not to mention Baker & Taylor through its best lists of what gets published, what gets pushed, and even what gets expurgated (e.g., sanitized rap). The bottom line militates against producing or distributing novel, experimental, or critical material that may have limited markets.

To be a little melodramatic, while we're agonizing over *Of Mice and Men* being dropped from a school reading list in Peru, Illinois, Ted Turner, Disney, Viacom, and Bertelsmann are walking away with the whole store. These giants decide what's okay, what's fit to be read, or seen, or heard. And like well-bred sheep, we buy right into it. Our library orders hundreds of copies of books that in some instances haven't been published yet and in others haven't even been *written*. Why? Because Random House announced it will spend \$50,000 on hyping the new Grisham or Mary Higgins Clark novel or Marcia Clark memoir. Quality, relevance, accuracy, style none of that's as important as sales and hype. We become willing accomplices in the homogenization and commodification of culture and thought. Again, we're ostensibly anticensorship. Yet at HCL a few years ago, a staff member jokingly posted a *New Yorker* cartoon related to the Bobbitt case on his cube wall. It showed two fully clothed men at a bar or diner. The caption included the word "penis". Someone filed an anonymous complaint. Instead of realizing the inoffensiveness of the cartoon and the inherent contradiction of a free speech library banning or removing a *New Yorker* cartoon, a cartoon incidentally available upstairs on the periodical shelves of the same building, the Administration ordered it taken down. For whatever it's worth, the staffer and I sought aid and solace from the state and national library intellectual freedom office and also the ACLU but got none. No help at all. In fact, we also asked for support from the *New Yorker*, but the magazine itself was supremely uninterested in its own content being banned.

Which brings us to the dirty little secret of self-censorship. Put another way, it's the fact of seldom-acknowledged and hard-to-justify boundaries or exclusions. As examples, most libraries don't collect comics, except in bound-book formats. And few get any zines whatever, even though that is arguably the hottest contemporary publishing scene. And then there's sex, particularly if it's in the form of photos or film or deals with beyond-the-pale topics like anal intercourse or s&m. Ordinarily, libraries would've bought multiple copies of anything by Madonna. But her graphic *Sex* book, which featured a number of s&m pics, was barely bought at all or treated like a communicable disease: one copy sequestered behind the reference desk, only to be glimpsed in house after giving up your driver's license as collateral. These are a few live examples of works that libraries true to the Library Bill of Rights should buy but don't: *Erotic by Nature: A Celebration of Life, of Love, and of Our Wonderful Bodies*, edited by David Steinberg (a tasteful, artistic melange of drawings, photos, prose, and poetry); *Femalia* by Joani Blank (a collection of 32 full-color photos of vulvas); and *X-Rated Videotape Guide* by Robert H. Rimmer (5 volumes, 1970-1994).

Lastly, libraries tend to trumpet how easily and helpfully their wares can be accessed. Some really seem to think that just because they have online catalogs with keyword searching, everything is findable. Well, as the several HCL handouts illustrate, basic, national cataloging records either created at LC or in the LC manner provide too few subject and other access points, seldom include searchable and clarifying notes, and continue to employ abbreviations and other bibliographic conventions that most people don't understand. What's more, many topics are still not recognized by LC (try searching for CORPORATE WELFARE, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, WORKING POOR PEOPLE, or CLASSISM.) LC could mandate much more helpful cross-references, but the sorry truth is that even when such cross-references are sanctioned, many local libraries don't put them in their catalogs. I've tried to find LATINOS in catalogs at UCLC, Albuquerque Public, and Los Angeles Public, coming up empty each time. This is not to claim that no one in Libraryland talks and walks in harmony and consistency. But it's rare. And I guess the challenge remains to get our actual practice in better sync with our professed principles.

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