

Freedom to Read Statement Task Force Report

Freedom to Read Revision – Membership Engagement

January 2, 2024

Introduction

The Freedom to Read statement is a statement that supports intellectual freedom as expressed in the *Library Bill of Rights*, elaborating upon principles I. – V. It was first written in 1953 in response to a wave of censorship attempts related to anti-communism. It was drafted at a conference sponsored jointly by American Library Association and the American Book Publishers Council. It rallies libraries and publishers in taking a firm stand against censorship. Since 1953, the statement has been slightly revised. In 1972, revisions were made to ensure the document addressed universal attempts at censorship, rather than a focus on anti-communism. In 1991, revisions were made to make the statement gender inclusive. In 2000, revisions were made to ensure the statement reflected censorship attempts related to internet content. In 2004, revisions were made to better reflect political realities post-September 11, 2001 (Garnar & Magi, 2021).

Since 2021, libraries have seen a dramatic increase in censorship attempts. In 2021, the American Library Association issued a statement on Book Censorship that captures the climate of censorship attempts occurring at present:

“[A] few organizations have advanced the proposition that the voices of the marginalized have no place on library shelves. To this end they have launched campaigns demanding the censorship of books and resources that mirror the lives of those who are gay, queer, or transgender, or that tell the stories of persons who are Black, Indigenous or persons of color. Falsely claiming that these works are subversive, immoral, or worse, these groups induce elected and non-elected officials to abandon constitutional principles, ignore the rule of law, and disregard individual rights to promote government censorship of library collections. Some of these groups even resort to intimidation and threats to achieve their ends, targeting the safety and livelihoods of library workers, educators, and board members who have dedicated themselves to public service, to informing our communities, and educating our youth....” (“American Library Association statement on Book censorship,” 2021)

Because of the recent surge in censorship attempts and the length of time since the statement was last reviewed, Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) and American Library Association (American Library Association) leadership determined that it was time to consider a revision. At the IFC meeting held during American Library Association Annual Conference 2023 in Chicago, Illinois, Committee Associate Johannah Genett presented a plan to revise the Freedom to Read Statement (see attachment A) that had been approved by IFC Chair Lesliediana Jones. The first phase of the potential revision was focused on membership engagement. The purpose of this was to engage American Library Association members on the themes of the Freedom to Read statement and offer an opportunity for members to provide feedback on what changes may be

needed to the statement. Publishers were specifically not engaged in this first phase because it is important to first gauge American Library Association members' appetite for a revision. The second proposed phase is to determine co-signatories in the publishing world and the third proposed phase is to revise the statement.

Summary of Engagement

The Task Force engaged American Library Association membership in several ways to solicit feedback on the Freedom to Read Statement.

Listening Sessions

The Task Force hosted five virtual listening sessions in the fall of 2023. The purpose of the listening sessions was to hear from American Library Association members on how well the current Freedom to Read statement addresses five themes and what suggestions members may have to adjust the statement regarding these themes or other concerns. The five themes, dates, times, and attendance are listed below. The listening sessions were recorded but transcriptions were anonymized. All listening session data will be destroyed upon completion of the work of the task force.

Theme	Date and Time	Attendance
First Amendment	9/28/23 1:30-3pm	108
Misinformation and Disinformation	10/5/23 2-3:30pm	85
Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion	10/13/23 1:30-3pm	65
Authors and Books	10/19/23 2:30-4pm	62
Youth Materials	10/25/23 2-3:30pm	66

For each theme, anonymous surveys were also shared for American Library Association members to complete. This was not a popular way for members to provide feedback; there were only 103 responses from the seven surveys. Six of the surveys were specific to the listening session with one general survey sent out after the listening sessions. Online discussions on American Library Association Connect were also hosted.

Questions asked at listening sessions

At all listening sessions and on all surveys, the following questions were asked:

- How do you currently use the Freedom to Read Statement?
- How do you intend to use it in the near future?
- Any other thoughts on the Freedom to Read statement that you would like to share?

Below are the questions asked on specific topics:

First Amendment

- In your opinion, what does the statement get right or wrong on the theme of the First Amendment? Is anything missing?
- We have seen a huge rise in book challenges, in areas such as LGBTQIA+ content and content related to BIPOC experience, coming from across the political spectrum. How does or doesn't the current Freedom to Read statement address these areas?
- PEN America recently drafted an article about censorship in the publishing world, arguing that books are being censored or pulled because they are problematic. They specifically share examples of books being canceled by publishers because of stereotypes, outdated tropes, unrealistic character sketches. They state that some believe that even reading such books is to "become complicit in [the book's] alleged harm." How do those ideas impact our understanding of the Freedom to Read Statement?
- "A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone." -- do you think that quote is still true? Is it appropriate?
- The American Library Association is a multi-issue organization, and as such, the broadness of what is covered by the First Amendment/Freedom to Read can lead to conflicts in values. What are your thoughts on that?

Misinformation and Disinformation

- The current FTR Statement speaks to "fear," "silencing" and suggests monitoring of information consumption. How are we seeing these ideas play out in the library/information environment(s) today? Does the FTR Statement address these issues adequately enough?
- The current FTR Statement squarely places trust in Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation. Is this assumption appropriate in today's informational ecology? Does this part of the FTR Statement need to be strengthened and if so, how?
- Saunders (2023, C&RL) discusses news literacy and librarians' roles in supporting it. She highlights the need for "...critical thinking competencies for evaluating information to identify credible and trustworthy information." She also alludes to "bad actors," poor skills at identifying misinformation, and "confirmation bias. "Is credibility of information a bigger problem today than twenty years ago and if so, how?
- Does the FTR Statement go far enough to clarify today's problems with the freedom to read and those who are responsible for those problems?

Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion

- How can the Freedom to Read Statement be updated to explicitly address the underrepresentation of authors of color and diverse perspectives in libraries and in the publishing industry?

- How can the statement encourage publishers and libraries to more actively promote and prioritize literature that represents diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences?
- How can the statement more effectively address the issue of removing or excluding books that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- Given the evolving landscape of digital platforms and self-publishing, how can the Freedom to Read Statement extend its principles to ensure equitable access and visibility for authors from marginalized communities who may face additional barriers in the industry?

Authors and Books

- Social media and online resources create a platform that has increased organization amongst groups advocating book bans. In many cases, a small group creates many of the challenges. Does the statement need to address this, and if so, how?
- With legislation being proposed, and in some cases passed, that criminalizes carrying certain materials, there is a very real threat to librarians and their freedom. Does the current statement accurately represent that threat?
- Obstruction to intellectual freedom can come in forms other than formal book challenges. Examples include hiding books, removing materials from displays, and restricting access to books. Should this be directly addressed in the FTR?
- Is there anything in the statement that encourages the average person to advocate for intellectual freedom? A call to action?
- FTR contains several statements that support inclusion of all materials not declared illegal by the courts. Does the statement go far enough, too far, or is there anything missing?

Youth Materials

- We have seen a huge rise in book challenges, and particularly challenges with any LGBTQIA+ content. Parents' rights advocates argue that such content is obscene, even when such ideas are protected by the First Amendment. How does or doesn't the current Freedom to Read statement address that?
- A more subtle way of controlling youth access to materials is to label it as not "age appropriate." Access may be restricted by removing it from a curriculum or from a library that serves youth. How does or doesn't the current Freedom to Read statement address that?
- Updates from ILS vendors allow parents to block categories of materials from checkout. How does or doesn't the Freedom to Read statement address those technologies?
- State statutes generally govern and define the scope of obscenity laws in this country. Current obscenity and harmful to minors laws in 44 states have defenses from prosecution from criminal code for certain professions or particular types of workplaces, including librarians and libraries. However, state legislators are currently at work in many states to remove those protections. How does or doesn't the Freedom to Read statement address these actions?

Outreach to roundtables and committees

Task Force members communicated with many American Library Association organizations, sub-committees, and affiliate groups to encourage attendance. Targeted reach outs were made to: Rainbow Round Table, Intellectual Freedom Round Table, Public Library Association, REFORMA (National Association to Promote Library & Information Science to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking), Social Responsibilities Round Table. An additional listening session was conducted with the American Association of School Librarians.

Weakness in outreach efforts

Task Force members noted two weaknesses in these efforts. More effort should have been made to host listening sessions at in-person events. For example, had the engagement occurred in the winter or summer, in-person listening sessions could have occurred at LibLearnX or the American Library Association Annual Conference. Members also noted a lack of racial diversity when such attributes could be observed, such as when participants in virtual discussions used their cameras.

Themes from Engagement

Below you will find themes that the Task Force heard from these engagement efforts, organized alphabetically.

Access for Youth

The intention of the Freedom to Read statement is to assert the reading rights of all, regardless of age. Participants in the listening sessions and surveys identified specific challenges libraries are currently facing in ensuring that youth have access to a broad array of materials and ideas. Some say that the current Freedom to Read statement may be too focused on the adult reader.

There is no doubt that the current surge in book challenges has a focus on youth's access to ideas and materials. This is echoed by data provided by the Office of Intellectual Freedom: in 2022, 51% of book challenges happened in the school or school library setting ("Censorship by the Numbers," 2023). It is also supported by legislation that has been proposed in many different states, including law HB 1557, signed into Florida law in 2022, commonly known as the "Don't Say Gay," law. One participant talked about the challenges of meeting demands made by such legislation:

I think we are opening ourselves up to vulnerabilities in the rights of, you know, limiting the actual rights of children.... because I also grew up in a very conservative religious evangelical community and there are perspectives on the world that I accessed through the library¹.

¹ Throughout this report, quotes from listening sessions or survey participants are included. These quotes are denoted through italicization.

Many of the participants in the survey results agreed that library staff, parents, and teachers have a shared responsibility to prepare the young people of America to meet the diversity of life experiences to which they will be exposed through society, and society has a shared responsibility to help students learn to think critically for themselves as library professionals and the public. One participant best paraphrased the overall sentiment by stating that personal values differ and are subjective to individual beliefs, and values cannot be legislated for the political demands of one group over others without limiting the freedom of others when it pertains to the Freedom to Read, Library Bill of Rights, intellectual freedom, and students' constitutional right to read and explore in our modern American diverse society.

There was discussion about age relevance and age appropriateness. The labeling of materials as "not age-appropriate" was viewed by some as a form of censorship particularly when it is driven by the diversity of the author or culture depicted. It is a concern that is communicated more strongly in the Library Bill of Rights but could be reinforced in the Freedom to Read statement.

Several participants commented that libraries should not engage with companies that offer technology limiting youth's access, such as integrated library system vendors who provide tools for caregivers to block categories of materials from checkout. Some expressed that they would like to see more leadership from the American Library Association on this particular topic.

Some participants mentioned that a revised Freedom to Read statement should specifically mention the first amendment rights of students and youth to read widely and broadly. Some stated that the Freedom to Read statement is focused on adults and the wording should be changed to better reflect youth's freedom to read. Others commented that the restriction of youth access to materials should be named in a revised statement. Others mentioned creating new tools or statements to specifically address this topic (see section below: alternate formats).

Collections and Publishing Trends

Participants in listening sessions and surveys expressed thoughts on how the current statement does or does not reflect current collection development practices, publishing trends, and formats of library materials. The conversations reflected a diverse range of opinions regarding whether the statement should more explicitly encompass more passive forms of banning, such as labeling materials, restricting access for some groups, or self-censorship caused by the fear of book challenges or bans. It was noted that there is a prevailing sentiment among library staff that there is a lack of understanding regarding these latter issues.

Concerns were voiced about the potential dilution of the statement by addressing numerous issues and the risk of altering the meanings of critical terms like "banned" and "challenged." One participant commented:

Okay, I have seen online and watching senate hearings and things. People are trying to change the words to a different meaning to make it sound like they're [book banners are]

not really doing anything. There's a lot of, 'well, it's not really a ban. If you can order it from Amazon. We might remove it from the school, but it's not a ban because the family can order it from Amazon.' And I'm concerned. That this is going to increase. And become a new point, a new talking point [for] our opponents. And I think we need to be aware of that and maybe something like this should be addressed.

The responsibilities of publishers and library staff were a focal point of discussion, with a consensus emerging that their duty lies in contesting encroachments on the freedom to read, both through legislative and judicial means. Suggestions were made to include self-published authors in the statement, along with a mention of the Alliance of Independent Authors.

The discussions brought to light the impact of recent legislation and attacks on library staff, with reports of fear leading to a reluctance among librarians to add new materials and even cancel programming, including events like drag queen story time. A predominant sentiment emerged that the American Library Association should play a role in addressing legislation that targets library staff and concerns their safety. However, there was a collective belief that the Freedom to Read statement might not be the most suitable platform for these specific issues.

Some spoke to self-censorship library staff engaged in from a liberal perspective. One participant noted:

We do not discuss the censorship efforts from our own professionals and the political left enough. This is arguably more dangerous to our professional values because more and more people entering the profession want libraries to be activist organizations. Everyone in the profession agrees that we must fight conservative efforts to censor but flip it and people get really uncomfortable.

Critiques were expressed about a problematic phrase in the statement that seemed to confine adults to reading matters deemed suitable for adolescents. This raised concerns that the statement does not acknowledge that children have the same rights as adults, especially considering the evolution of young adult (YA) and new adult genres.

The current statement reads, "There is no place in our society for efforts to coerce the taste of others, to confine adults to the reading matter deemed suitable for adolescents, or to inhibit the efforts of writers to achieve artistic expression. This statement no longer reflects current sentiments on adolescent materials. Certainly, every reader deserves access to materials that meet their reading and cognitive level. But the current phrasing implies that adolescent materials are an insult to adults.

There were general comments that the statement is directed at adult readers more so than youth: "As it stands [the statement] is heavily weighted towards adults and could do more to directly support youth access."

Furthermore, participants expressed apprehension about the statement being outdated in the formats it addresses, mainly limited to reading rather than encompassing viewing, listening, and

digital materials. The Freedom to View statement, last endorsed by the American Library Association Council in 1990, addresses some of this concern. But there were concerns that because of the evolution of media, a statement focused on the Freedom to Read may be out of step with all the ways people access and engage with information in modern society and in the library setting.

Finally, discussions touched upon the role of publishers. There was uncertainty about whether the statement adequately addresses publishers' First Amendment rights to decide what to publish. Another participant commented on the need to collaborate with others on messaging:

I see collaborative recommendations but no collaborative action with these stakeholders [authors, illustrators, booksellers, publishers, library professionals]. So, we're continuing to exist in our own bubbles. We're stronger together - and I realize that takes planning and hard work.

While the statement was acknowledged for correctly identifying viewpoint diversity and political neutrality as pivotal to inclusion, participants discussed the statement's role in addressing publisher responsibilities and questioned whether it should comment on publishers' duties and rights. Some participants expressed concerns about publishers' motivations for profit and their role in promoting diverse materials.

While there was overall appreciation for the Freedom to Read Statement as a declaration of professional values, uncertainty lingered regarding its intended use. The need for clarification on how the statement differs from other documents, such as the Library Bill of Rights, was emphasized.

While the Freedom to Read Statement was acknowledged as a valuable articulation of professional values, the feedback suggests a need for careful consideration of its scope, target audience, and relevance in the face of evolving challenges within the library profession. Addressing these concerns may require further discussions within the American Library Association to ensure the statement remains a robust and applicable tool for safeguarding the freedom to read.

Concern American Library Association and the Freedom to Read statement not recognized

Comments from across the listening sessions indicate that there are barriers facing the American Library Association's efforts to take the lead in advocating for the values expressed in the Freedom to Read statement. A specific barrier is a lack of awareness of the statement itself amongst library staff and the public. There is also a lack of widespread familiarity with the American Library Association and its mission, particularly for those practicing in school or public library settings.

I doubt the average person is even aware this statement exists. It's mostly useful as [a] basis for creating library policy and for educating governing bodies. I also think local libraries are best positioned to reach out for local support. I don't think a national org like

American Library Association has the same power to reach individual library users when we need their support.

New library students and professionals need to be told early and often that this [is] fundamental to what we do and [they should be] taught the value of it.

This perception is compounded by the recent withdrawal of multiple state libraries from the American Library Association membership along political lines.

Disinformation, Misinformation, and Credibility

I have real trouble with this assumption of trust in the general public. I think the general public is extremely unprepared to separate misinformation and disinformation from truth. I think it is our job as librarians to help teach the public this skill, which is not innate but must be taught.

Hard to assume when most [of the public] do not have the foundation to guide them to choose the "right" or "wrong" information.

No. I feel Americans are not so well-informed and are easily swayed by social media and misinformation.

It is hard to recognize propaganda. However, if it is, then the library should still distribute. All books should have a disclaimer that the library doesn't necessarily agree with all statements.

In reviewing the comments from the participants of the listening session and the parallel survey, the Freedom to Read statement mostly addresses concepts related to misinformation and dis-information adequately. Three major concepts arose that might indicate a need for adding to or strengthening the Freedom to Read statement in this area:

- In “trusting citizens to recognize propaganda and dis-information,” respondents introduced the idea that perhaps the Freedom to Read statement could encourage the “responsibility” of citizens to develop this critical awareness.
- Respondents offered that some distinguishing explanations around “censorship” versus “dis-information” might be useful.
- Participants acknowledged a perceived conflict between the professional responsibility to provide high demand “popular materials” containing potential disinformation or misinformation and the role of being a trusted source for accurate information. Questions arose about whether library staff are responsible for protecting patrons from harmful

information, as some students and patrons still rely on library staff to make those determinations for them.

Three smaller notable concepts explored were that the statement should broaden to include:

- Library staff do not solely provide resources, but also educate the public about them. There is a need for libraries to increase information literacy offerings to the public.
- As noted earlier, the current statement could improve how it addresses modern media resources beyond reading. Information literacy is most critical for these new information sharing formats.
- Libraries and the publishing industry, as well as other media companies, must cope productively with the decline of trust as with other sectors.

Only the first of these could be neatly introduced as an addition to the current Freedom to Read statement.

Constitutional rights, politics, and intimidation of library staff

The Constitution, in the First, and 14th Amendments, and to lesser extent the Fourth, offers protection for speech and the ability for citizens to express and share information, ideas, and opinions free of government restrictions based on content. The Task Force heard from participants their concern that these Amendments were not being followed in some situations. There were also suggestions that the Freedom to Read Statement did not rely enough on the Amendments and case law to stress the protections afforded by the law.

I believe American Library Association is vague in this area leaving it up to individual states. It is tough dealing with the law and legalities ...The statement is quite clear and concise. It is all a matter of interpretation by state legislatures. That is why we are where we are today.

It should be noted that the Federal Constitution overrides state laws in this area but too many jurisdictions ignore the Constitution and Supreme Court rulings.

The right is our legal and human right to read is what the statement gets correctly. The constitutional intent is to protect the rights of all...

...The Freedom to Read statement cannot fully address this issue of this part of the First Amendment that has been undeniably ignored by the states as a whole...

Some deeply conservative state legislatures have passed a number of laws that ban books or that allow local jurisdictions or guardians to restrict access to books and information. Respondents generally felt that the Freedom to Read statement does not adequately address this growing trend.

... if the Freedom to Read statement reflects that the criminalization of certain materials is a threat, then it does so, but [the statement] can be modified with specific listing or use of examples in relation to said material being prohibited or criminalized. Such as including the words 'sex' or 'gender.'

Politics can be seen in the variety of responses from both the listening sessions and the surveys. Some participants commented that they were from a politically conservative state and that this influenced their views on whether they viewed the Freedom to Read is currently under attack. They also expressed a growing sense of dread at attempts to criminalize their essential library work and to restrict resources. Some from less conservative states expressed the opposite: for example, one respondent from California said there were no issues regarding reading rights.

When laws passed by state legislatures put library work in jeopardy of criminal prosecution, library staff feel intimidation from the state. Added to that is parental and public intimidation that can bring real fear into the library. Most felt the Freedom to Read Statement does not adequately address the issue. In the listening sessions, some participants expressed concern that the American Library Association lacks legal authority to protect library staff who are facing potential criminalization of their actions by state legislators.

It could be argued that the current statement includes legislation under a general umbrella of censorship attempts. But I do feel legislation is qualitatively different than something like citizen attempts.

General support

In the listening sessions, the Task Force heard from many library staff that there is strong support for the current Freedom to Read Statement. Participants shared their thoughts on the timing of revisions. Some suggested that making significant changes in the current political climate might be viewed as a politically charged statement, potentially deterring some individuals or libraries from embracing it. They highlighted the strength of the statement in its current form, as it effectively safeguards the freedom to read for all. Here are a few quotes from those who provided feedback:

There could be a lot of power in this moment to affirm it as is, and not to rewrite it.

Revisions run a high risk of looking political, which will weaken the statement. I worked in libraries for 10 years before I actually read it. And when I finally read it, I found it to be one of the most inspiring of the American Library Association documents. I was really surprised that you guys were thinking about changing it. So, I think I would recommend be very careful about changing it because I think I find it particularly inspiring and powerful statement the way it is now.

I currently use the freedom to read statement. I think it's a valuable statement and it should stand exactly as is.

[The Freedom to Read statement] is a useful tool to help those who are willing to listen. Nothing you could change about the statement will reach those who will not listen.

The strength and durability of the statement as it now stands is that it is NOT overmuch a product of its time. If we make it too much a product of OUR time, it will not age well. Sticking to timeless principles is the way.

I think the strength of the document as it stands is that it clearly articulates democratic enlightenment values which stand true from all perspectives.

These comments suggest that this may not be the right time to edit the Freedom to Read statement.

Inclusion

Many participants emphasized the pressing need for inclusivity in the Freedom to Read statement. They pointed out that the current statement falls short in explicitly supporting diverse materials and specific communities, such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities. It was suggested by some participants that the statement should recognize and uphold the rights of underrepresented and marginalized groups and also acknowledge the importance of representing minority voices.

The discussion also touched on the timeless nature of the statement and the question of whether it should explicitly mention specific underrepresented groups. Participants pondered whether such references might date the statement. Some participants recommended language like "Libraries will provide access to materials from authors of color and uplift marginalized voices."

I think the actual terms [equity, diversity, and inclusion] paired with how the [Freedom to Read statement] addresses Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is what is missing. So far, it is up to the interpretation of library institutions themselves to relate [equity, diversity, and inclusion] and the [Freedom to Read statement]....The terms of people of color, underrepresentation, and marginalized communities are not in the [statement]. These terms are fairly new to the vocabulary and language of libraries as focal points in values/missions, actions plans, etc.

Historical context was another important aspect discussed. Participants noted that the current statement lacks references to the history of exclusion and suggested that adding historical context would emphasize the significance of rectifying past marginalization.

Comments from participants highlight the need to strike a balance between timeless principles and specific issues related to inclusion in the statement. While some participants advocated for specific mention of diverse communities, others suggested general language to ensure inclusivity without unintentionally excluding others. Emphasizing diversity beyond the local community and recognizing the importance of historical context is important, but it is also essential to avoid overemphasis on majority/minority language and to consider changing

definitions of marginalized groups.

It is important to acknowledge that while the feedback from these listening sessions was valuable, there were instances of repeated contributions from participants, both verbally and in the chat. Additionally, there was a noticeable lack of racial and ethnic diversity among those who actively participated in the sessions, such as by turning on their cameras.

Library Staff Orientation, Training, and Awareness

In the listening sessions, the Task Force heard that the Freedom to Read Statement is being used as support for training staff. Specific examples included orientation for new library employees, training for paraprofessional librarians (without a Master of Library Science degree), training before events geared towards promoting intellectual freedom (Banned Books Week), and formal instruction for library science students. The document has served as a core values statement for librarians in a wide range of settings, including school, public, and academic libraries.

The statement has impacted everyday decision-making, including purchasing, cataloging, weeding, and displaying materials in collections. In addition, the document aids staff as an authoritative source when they are responding to materials challenges. Some participants noted that even when an organization cannot endorse the statement officially, its principles inform library staff's behavior and work. Additionally, the statement provides a tool for those making hiring decisions to set expectations with a potential employee:

Yeah, even in our interview, whenever we're looking for a new hire, we talk about confidentiality and intellectual freedom. So they upfront know that there are going to be times where your beliefs, your personal beliefs may conflict with what your job is as a librarian and that's to get whatever book into the hands of whomever. Whether it's that child in front of you or that teen. Or even that adult so that's just part of our whole concept of even hiring somebody.

Despite these examples, the Task Force also heard that many practicing library staff are unfamiliar with the document. Some participants characterized this as a lack of exposure to the statement. One example directly addressed library staff who tend not to be American Library Association members:

In our state the system is set up so that small, rural, underfunded libraries, which are often the hub of a community, are staffed by people who do not have library degrees for the most part. They often are not even aware of the Core Values of librarianship and are sometimes surprised by documents such as the Freedom to Read statement.

However, it's important to note that inexperience with the document is not limited to rural libraries nor to paraprofessional librarians outside of American Library Association membership.

As one example, a Task Force member engaged with the American Association of School Librarians in a separate listening session specifically addressing youth access to materials. The listening session participants decided to spend a significant portion of their allotted time in a close review of the document because many had not recently been exposed to it.

In summary, the document has served its broad purpose as a basis for staff training, but adopting an awareness-building strategy within the American Library Association about the document's importance could be a project for leadership to consider.

Onus (for professionals and the public)

A theme emerged about onus – what is the role of the public to advocate for the freedom to read. Many who provided feedback on the Freedom to Read statement spoke of the role library professionals and organizations currently play in countering legislation that impedes upon the freedom to read and the role of the library. Because many behind this legislation represent what is considered a conservative point of view, some have viewed the actions of library professionals to be partisan. As a result, several local and state libraries have severed or intend to sever ties with the American Library Association. The current Freedom to Read statement, some feel, is not a strong enough “call to action” to the public, regardless of political viewpoints, to stand united with libraries and publishers in support of this necessary freedom.

One participant commented on the need to collaborate with others on messaging:

I see collaborative recommendations but no collaborative action with these stakeholders [authors, illustrators, booksellers, publishers, library professionals]. So, we're continuing to exist in our own bubbles. We're stronger together - and I realize that takes planning and hard work.

Another participant commented that they had recently attended a community group focused on LGBTQIA+ support:

I would say that everybody there was ready to go out and do battle for the right to read banned books... we have allies. And we need to strengthen our ties to those allies.

This theme once again brings forth the question: who is the audience at which the Freedom to Read statement is directed?

Policy Support

In the listening sessions, the Task Force heard that library staff are using Freedom to Read Statement in support of Library policies. This includes referencing the Freedom to Read statement in collection development and management policies and practices, materials challenges, and having Library Boards endorse the statement. One library shared that they reference it in the terms of use statement that patrons must sign. Some library staff shared that while their organization cannot endorse the statement, the staff incorporate ideas from it in their organization's policies. Here are a few quotes:

[M]y intent [is] to rely more on the Freedom to Read statement going forward over the Library Bill of Rights just because it seems like the Freedom to Read statement is a little more robust. And, we have local legislators...that are kind of taking us to task for saying...libraries have their own quote unquote Bill of Rights. But the Freedom to Read statement references constitutional rights a lot more than the Library Bill of Rights does.

This statement is definitely being used in the next week with our constituents and our five counties to help remember like this is a basic freedom that we are all guaranteed. So I found this statement incredibly important, incredibly helpful, and even though it was written in the fifties, it's incredibly timely.

The staff person who made the following comment shared that because they worked for a conservative, religious school, their library was not allowed to explicitly endorse the Freedom to Read statement. Regardless:

[E]veryone in our department supports it. All of our policies embody it. We just don't ever use the words.

The Task Force did not hear significant feedback that there are challenges in using the current statement in this manner. The Task Force did hear concerns that significantly revising the Freedom to Read statement could raise questions from Library Boards and potentially lead to some Boards choosing not to endorse the statement. Here are some quotes from those who provided feedback:

I think the other worry about the revision is then it would bring back to our boards to then reinstate.

Any change to the Freedom to Read will be criticized from a political perspective. And the certain negative impact of making changes now should be balanced against the expected benefits.

I will say, well, I would love to see this modernized and revised a bit. I think doing so at this time in our political climate would be seeing more as a political statement. That may make more people turn away from it. As it is, it stands really steadfast on its own without revision and lends itself to protecting all sorts of diverse and inclusive groups . . . [It] protects the freedom to read for all ages and the parents right to choose materials for their child as well as the teachers right to educate those children. . . In a perfect world, we could revise this at any time and it wouldn't be seen as, you know, being an extremely liberal process and making some people turn away from it. A lot of libraries will adapt this on an annual basis. And whenever you revise it, that gives them an opportunity to choose not to adopt it as part of their policy so this might not be the friendliest time to revise since things are so tense, in many political sectors. If we write

the statement in a way that libraries who want to adopt the statement are no longer able to, are we hurting those librarians/staff/libraries?

In summary, there is momentum in Boards endorsing the statement on a regular basis. Significantly updating the statement could undermine that momentum.

The Task Force also heard that while past messaging on the statement may have been focused upon protecting divisive ideas or opinions, many libraries are using the current statement to celebrate that the library has something for everyone and protects the right to choose a user's information source:

[Our] library has pivoted to celebrate the freedom to read. So, we can lean into really lean into celebrating that every member of the community has the right to choose.

Privacy

Supporting the privacy of thought....there's no place in our society for efforts to coerce the taste of others.

The First Amendment, which protects freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly, also implicitly safeguards the right to privacy in the form of freedom of thought and intellect. The current Freedom to Read statement explicitly references the importance of not judging a work because of the private life or political views of its creators. In listening sessions, participants also referenced the rights of library users to privately access materials and ideas, particularly youth.

The Freedom to Read Statement guarantees the rights of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Intellectual freedom is one of the core values of the library profession; it promotes access to information and guides the defense against censorship. Participants spoke at length about efforts to undermine the rights of youth to access ideas. For example, one participant commented that parental rights activists can construe any depiction of sexuality or sexual preferences as obscene. Private access to information is an essential function of libraries.

Additional suggestions on tools or alternate formats

Additionally, the Task Force heard suggestions for other tools or formats that may be needed. These include:

1. A plain language version of the Freedom to Read Statement and/or an abbreviated version. Some participants felt the length and complex structure of the document was a deterrent to familiarity with it, particularly for those who are neurodivergent or who experience other accessibility issues with written text. A few voiced support for a graphic novel version. Here are some comments participants made on this topic:

I think that moving to a more plain language revision of the statement would make it more accessible, especially to the general public/those with cognitive disabilities.

I would prefer a supplementary education material / an interpretation as an explainer, but not as the main document.

A concise summary, probably in plain language, could be a helpful addition. It is a rather long statement, and we know folks don't take time to read more than a paragraph or two these days.

Perhaps not revising of the base "statement" but make an elevator speech version for pamphlets. . . like a vision/mission statement. [The Freedom to Read statement is] a little long for using to get people who are not already on board . . . They look at this and that's just too long for them to read. So., I think there may be a place for educational materials outside of this . . . the Library Bill of Rights has more affirmative obligations . . . Whereas [the Freedom to Read statement] is more of an explanation of our philosophy and I think that's a good distinction to maintain.

Is there a way to have a general public edition?

Pushing [the Freedom to Read statement] out to people is not going to, they're just going to get turned off, especially with the anti-intellectual bias that we're seeing in a lot of society at this time and as somebody who has ADHD. I found this difficult to read the first few times I tried.

Could we have multiple versions for different audiences? One for legal ease contexts, one for administrators, one for patrons, etc., or does that dilute it? Does that open too many cracks for confusion to creep in?

2. A version of the Freedom to Read Statement focused on youth access to materials. Some participants want a stronger statement asserting the reading rights of youth; others expressed a need for more clarity on the complicated topic; still others stated concern that taking too strong of a stance may undermine the library's standing with caregivers who want to strongly influence what minors under their authority can access. Selected comments:

I'd love to see a version of the [Freedom to Read] statement for children. Empower the youth!!

I work for an academic library in an extremely red state and I just want to address one of the assumptions of the Freedom to Read where it says we do not believe that they as in the American people are prepared to sacrifice their heritage of free speech in order to be protected against what others think may be bad for them. The problem we're having in my state is that parents do . . . they are willing to sacrifice everything so that their children never hear anything that they [the parents] disagree with.

For Minors [sic] there is an interpretation of the library bill of rights for minors. I think a [Freedom to Read statement] for minors would be empowering!

[A] separate bill of rights for under 17 makes sense if we are planning based on a secondary miller test.

[It's] the school librarians that are experiencing the brunt of the problem in our state. The legislature is trying to legislate them out of business in terms of giving parents absolute rights to decide what goes into school libraries.

3. Specific format suggestions included more structure to the document to assist in comprehension and/or accessibility devices, more accessible versions.

Reformatting the statement itself to include headers/etc. can also help and might also make it more accessible to things like screen readers.

Would there be an opportunity to create a graphic novel/comics version of this with a prominent cartoonist/artist?

Recommendations

The Task Force respectfully requests that American Library Association leadership and Council consider three separate recommendations, presented in no particular order:

Leave As-Is Recommendation

It is the recommendation of some members of this subgroup to refrain from revising the Freedom to Read Statement. The final question asked in every listening session, "Is there any other feedback you would like to add?" revealed general support for leaving the statement unchanged as we saw with comments such as "What do you do when a large group no longer cares about democracy?" or "Very inspiring. Careful about changing."

During this time of crisis when the very authority of the American Library Association is not recognized by select individuals and extremist groups, revising the Freedom to Read Statement may not be wise as its revision would ultimately require library boards and schools to revisit having their policies adhere to the Freedom to Read statement in the first place. Thus, the Freedom to Read statement would effectively be up for discussion in areas where conservatives and elected officials are actively working to limit what children and adolescents can read. Bringing the Freedom to Read statement up for debate in such places could easily backfire if representatives ruled against collections policies' renewed adherence to the statement, potentially leaving the intellectual freedom of minors more vulnerable. This concern was echoed in the third listening session with comments like,

Since a lot of the concerns seem to be around if libraries will adopt a new version, do we have any evidence there was trouble when it has been previously updated?

Libraries may be at risk of not regaining approval to have the Freedom to Read Statement inform their collections or library policies.

The committee also has concerns regarding signatories. Revising the Freedom to Read Statement would entail the involvement of all existing signatories, which include publishers. The time it would take to garner additional feedback and organize review is too precious during this critical time when the Freedom to Read Statement is critical in the defense toolbelt of library workers around the country. As publishers essentially operate a business, their prerogative can contradict the values of the American Library Association; ergo, soliciting their involvement could open the discussion of which signatories should remain at the table and whether any new signatories should be invited.

Furthermore, the Freedom to Read Statement is strong and relevant as it stands. The document has stood the test of time, having been developed in 1953. One American Library Association member said, "I love it and swear by it. It has guided me for half a century. Tread lightly." The statement has national credence.

Light Revision Recommendation

Some of the members of the sub-group expressed support for light revisions of the Freedom to Read Statement. Four areas to consider in such a revision:

1. Onus -- citizens have a responsibility to recognize propaganda.

What is the role of the public to advocate for the Freedom to Read? Many who provided feedback on the Freedom to Read statement spoke of the role library professionals and organizations currently play in countering legislation that infringes upon the freedom to read and view. The current Freedom to Read statement, some feel, is not a strong enough call to action to the public, regardless of political viewpoints, to stand united with libraries and publishers in support of this essential freedom.

2. Historically under-represented groups are under attack and that needs to be acknowledged.

The Office of Intellectual Freedom notes: "The vast majority of challenges [in 2023] were to books written by or about a person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community" ("Book Ban Data," 2023). This continues a pattern of exclusion found throughout modern US history. As the publishing world increases the diversity of published authors and the diversity of stories told, most libraries have pro-actively embraced the opportunity to better diversify their collection. Participants noted that the current statement lacks references to the history of exclusion publishing and libraries.

They suggested that adding historical context would emphasize the significance of rectifying past marginalization and support the work library workers are performing to ensure their collections meet the needs of a diverse community. A significant number of books challenges are rooted in racist, homophobic, and/or transphobic beliefs. The Freedom to Read statement is one opportunity to name this. A revision should be cognizant of addressing specific issues and timeless principles to ensure the terminology does not become outdated.

3. Better address digital formats and challenges

While the Freedom to View statement was written decades later and the 2000 revision of Freedom to Read broadened the statement beyond print material, the Task Force sees weakness in the current statement in addressing all the way patrons access information. Participants expressed apprehension about the statement being outdated in the formats it addresses, mainly limited to reading rather than encompassing viewing, listening, and digital materials. This limitation raised concerns about its effectiveness in contemporary library settings. Some examples that emerged during the listening sessions included: integrated library system vendors who allow caregivers to restrict access to certain materials; eBook licenses that terminate for profit-making reasons; and the role of the public in creating information for dissemination.

4. Outdated language about youth materials

The current statement reads, *“There is no place in our society for efforts to coerce the taste of others, to **confine adults to the reading matter deemed suitable for adolescents**, or to inhibit the efforts of writers to achieve artistic expression.”* This statement no longer reflects current sentiments on adolescent materials. Certainly, every reader deserves access to materials that meet their reading and cognitive level. But the current phrasing implies that adolescent materials are an insult to adults.

There were general comments that the statement is directed at adult readers more so than youth:

As it stands [the statement] is heavily weighted towards adults and could do more to directly support youth access.

Consider Alternate Formats Recommendation

Making this foundational document readily accessible to the public and library workers is important. Reading skills can be a barrier, particularly for youth and also for those with cognitive disabilities or those new to the English language. The Task Force recommends alternative formats be considered. Suggestions from participants include a plain language version, a “teen” version, and/or a graphic novel version.

Conclusion

American Library Association leadership and Council have three recommendations to consider, and each has strengths and drawbacks. All were informed by feedback gathered from enthusiastic and engaged library workers and other interested parties. The feedback gathered through the listening sessions and surveys was indispensable in recommending approaches that reflect the current needs of libraries. The Freedom to Read statement is one of the most powerful and well-known statements made by library professionals, yet its reach can go further. “The freedom to read is essential to our democracy. It is continuously under attack.” Now more than ever, libraries must stand united with publishers and the public in jealously guarding this essential freedom.

Authors

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Citations

Censorship by the Numbers. Advocacy, Legislation & Issues. (2023, April 20).

<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/by-the-numbers>

Book Ban Data. Advocacy, Legislation & Issues. (2023, October 2)

<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/book-ban-data#:~:text=Between%20January%201%20and%20August,more%20than%2020%20years%20ago>.

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Attachment A

Freedom to Read Statement

Review plan

Prepared by Johannah Genett (Committee Associate, Intellectual Freedom Committee)

Summer 2023

Sub-Committee Members

Deborah Caldwell-Stone, Peter Coyl, Paul Flagg, Johannah Genett, Eric Gomez, Katia Graham, Jennifer Griswold, Ray James, Lesliediana Jones, Michael J. Miller, Jennifer Nippert, Aimee Strittmatter, Tracey Thompson

Meeting cadence

Every other Thursday from 3-4pm Central, beginning Thurs, July 20

Task #1: American Library Association Membership Engagement on Revision

Performed by: Sub-Committee #1

Timeline: Work begins July 1, 2023 with themes summarized in a report to Deborah Caldwell Stone & Joyce McIntosh no later than January 1, 2024.

Summary: American Library Association membership needs to be engaged on the large themes of the Freedom to Read statement and provide feedback on what changes may be needed to the statement. This process should not be focused on wordsmithing, but on the broader ideas presented in the statement including, but not limited to:

democracy; totalitarianism; censorship and active opposition to it; free expression and creative thought; reading; propaganda/misinformation; free press; stakeholders impacted by suppression; conformity; diversity; availability versus endorsement; labeling authors or ideas.

Membership should be engaged in the following ways: with the general American Library Association membership via surveys or meetings (virtually or in-person at conferences; and/or via other American Library Association round tables or divisions, particularly those round tables or divisions that represent diversity, public libraries, and schools. A sub-committee (3-5 IFC members) will recommend major themes and details on what may need to be revised.

Engagement plan

- At least 4 online virtual meetings open to all American Library Association members to give feedback on current statement. Themes for these meetings are the following:
 - How does the current statement reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion and how might it be improved in this area?
 - How does the current statement address current materials and author challenges and how might it be improved in this area?
 - How does the current statement address the theme of US democracy and the First Amendment, and how might it be improved in this area?
 - How does the current statement address the themes of disinformation and misinformation, and how might it be improved in this area?
- 4 simultaneous online discussions on American Library Association Connect (General) on themes listed above.
- An online survey focused on the themes above.
- Engagement with at least 5 of the following roundtables or associations.
 - American Association of School Librarians
 - American Indian Library Association
 - Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association
 - Black Caucus of the American Library Association
 - Chinese American Librarians Association
 - New Members Rainbow Roundtable
 - Public Library Association
 - Rainbow Roundtable
 - REFORMA (Latino/Spanish Speaking Assoc.)
 - Social Responsibilities Roundtable

Task #2: Joint Signatures

Performed by: Sub-Committee #2

Timeline: Work begins February 1, 2024 with recommendation presented to Deborah Caldwell Stone & Joyce McIntosh no later than May 1, 2024.

Summary: the original statement was jointly signed with the Association of American Publishers. It was subsequently endorsed by several organizations. A sub-committee (3-5 IFC members) will make a recommendation on a) whether the Statement is written jointly with another organization and if so, whom; b) a decision on whether endorsements will be sought after completion and if so, by whom.

Task #3: Revision

Performed by: Sub-Committee #3

Timeline: Work begins June 1, 2024 with the first draft presented to IFC no later than November 1, 2024.

Summary: Using the decisions and reports made from the work of previous sub-committees, the sub-committee will revise the Freedom to Read Statement.