

## The freedom to read isn't just about resisting book bans. Resisting ideological conformity matters too.

In North America, the library and publishing communities routinely highlight the importance of the freedom to read as a foundational value to democracy, launching campaigns such as Banned Books Week in the US in November and Freedom to Read Week in Canada in February. The basic philosophy behind these initiatives is sound: the public has the right to access information and ideas from the widest possible diversity of thought and opinion, and libraries should champion and facilitate this diversity, even (and especially) on controversial issues. In practice, librarians should resist calls from individuals and groups to remove materials from library collections because of ideological opposition, referring these calls to a non-political reconsideration process where library professionals apply consistent and transparent criteria that set a high bar for any limitation of access to materials.

However, this philosophy is increasingly under threat from two interlocking, underacknowledged trends in libraries' approach to making available to their communities a diverse range of books and other materials: the manner in which controversial materials are defended, and the ideological determinants of their likely purchase.

The first trend is the tendency for librarians to defend materials more vigorously when such materials promote diversity of identity, less so when materials promote diversity of viewpoints. When the books in question are consistent with an intersectional, Critical Social Justice, or identitarian perspective, espousing a view that some groups are inherently oppressors and others oppressed, libraries rush to not only defend but often highlight these works in their programming, communications, and collection development endeavors. In some cases, librarians frame those calling for the removal of materials as being motivated by bigotry. In other cases, when challenged books question or problematize such an oppression-based narrative, or present a more heterodox analysis, many librarians defend them only reluctantly, often loudly proclaiming their personal objection to the works. Or, they fail to defend them at all, instead publicly branding the works as "harmful", thereby foreclosing the possibility of wider public understanding and debate about the contemporary viewpoints and issues discussed in such books.

Consider the recent [example](#) of the Blue Hill Public Library in Maine. When Rich Boulet, the library director, accepted a donation of the book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing our Daughters* by Abigail Shrier and added it to the library's collection, he and his library faced a storm of protest from parts of the community that felt the book was an affront to the transgender community. To defend the library, he asked for help from the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, from which he received no reply. He was later told by the Office's director, Deborah Caldwell-Stone, that the request had generated "internal debate" that was responsible for the delay. In other words, ALA staff or committee members were not comfortable defending the right to read when it came to a book they disagreed with.

Another example involves the same title. [Beginning in 2019](#), the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) released [statements](#) and [guidance](#) on intellectual freedom that defended libraries resisting calls to remove *Irreversible Damage* or to cancel third-party meeting room rentals involving gender-critical feminist Meghan Murphy. In response, an [open letter](#) was penned by many librarian members of CFLA's federated organizations indicating that the statement did not speak for them and that the material in question would cause harm to marginalized communities. Later, some provincial associations took steps to weaken or undermine CFLA's stance on intellectual freedom. Some sought to replace their nominees to the federation's Intellectual Freedom Committee and others took steps to amplify critical voices among their membership. As result, when the CFLA [convened a national forum](#) in 2023 in partnership with the Manitoba Libraries Conference (MLC), [the forum](#) presented the belief that there was a moral panic aimed at silencing marginalized voices in order to protect some unnamed "power at the table" as fact and without discussion. The planned roundtable conversations to develop "a CFLA-FCAB Task Force and key actions for the CFLA-FCAB member organizations" in order to formulate plans to stop the censorship and disruption of library services resulting from the moral panic did not take place. There was no open dialogue or challenges to the message. Immediately following the forum, the Manitoba Libraries Conference commenced which overall rejected the neutrality model and focussed instead on a model that privileges "safety" over access to disfavoured viewpoints. The [closing keynote](#) speaker for the MLC was Sam Popowich whose vision for libraries appears to be as neo-Marxist "progressive institutions" whose social responsibilities are more important than access to viewpoints that challenge progressive stances. He presented the fact that there are conservatives as part of the public that libraries serve as seemingly problematic and while he acknowledged that libraries have a responsibility to conservatives, he seemed to say that libraries values aren't shared with conservatives. He then went on to suggest that libraries uphold their commitments by ensuring to only allow conservative views to be represented in the collection, but not in library room rentals due to the "power dynamic" when coming face to face with someone challenging your views.

The second trend is the tendency for libraries to disproportionately collect materials that promote this identitarianism, while avoiding collecting materials that do not conform to its tenets. While the freedom to read is certainly threatened when "book bans" are demanded by outside actors, it is no less so when libraries distort the viewpoint balance of their collections based on their personal or institutional position on political and cultural matters. Sometimes called "shadow banning" or "pre-censorship", this practice is undergirded by a similar phenomenon in the [publishing world](#), where major houses have made the identitarian bona fides of the author more important than traditional literary or commercial criteria in their decisions of what to publish. Many employ tactics such as sensitivity readers to enforce ideological alignment and minimize backlash from their staff or readers.

An illustration of library collection viewpoint imbalance is vividly painted by James Fishback in his January 17, 2024 article "[The Truth About Banned Books](#)" for *The Free Press*. Fishback is a former high school debate champion who became concerned about the suppression of conservative viewpoints in American high school debating. In researching the possibility of such suppression, he heard many students describe their school library collections as one-sided, "offering only books in line with progressive orthodoxy." This prompted Fishback to survey the library catalogues of 35 large public

schools in eight Republican and six Democratic electoral districts. He looked for titles presenting viewpoints on both sides of contemporary debates including systemic racism and transgender ideology. He found libraries overwhelmingly carried books presenting only the “progressive” or far left viewpoint of these topics. The same went for memoirs and books about progressive versus conservative thinkers. He believes libraries should offer books with progressive ideas “but only if they carry books that advocate for conservative ones too, so our young minds can benefit from the full spectrum of opinions. Unfortunately, in the school districts I surveyed, this isn’t the case.”

Another example is provided by Canadian School Libraries, an association whose [Collection Diversity Toolkit](#) for school libraries states that “it is critically important for those without power and privilege to have representation and voice in the school library”. The statement is accompanied by the “wheel of power/privilege” of Sylvia Duckworth that makes the identitarian activist aim of the toolkit very clear. The toolkit then references S. R. Ranganathan’s dictum of “Every book its reader, and every reader their book”, implying that a match between a reader’s group identity and author’s and/or main character’s group identity is of primary importance in choosing reading material.

The end result of both tendencies is that in some situations, “freedom to read” has come to mean the freedom to read what certain librarians have decided you should have the freedom to read. This is not a defensible position to take for institutions committed to serving their communities, and many librarians, elected officials, and community groups are beginning to push back against the profession’s apparent bias. To regain the confidence of our users and of society, librarians need to recognize when their own activist bias results in a reduction of access to certain viewpoints, and to reaffirm their commitment to viewpoint plurality. Moreover, librarians can use their voices (and their purchasing power) to encourage publishers and distributors to stop the practice of shadow-banning and viewpoint restriction. The freedom to read must include not only the defense of books that some seek to ban, but the return to balanced and viewpoint-neutral collections.