To Uphold and Resist: Protecting Intellectual Freedom through Progressive Librarianship

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ABSTRACT
Public librarians uphold an ethical commitment to protect the intellectual freedom of their patrons, but when information is accessed online, users become vulnerable to censorship and surveillance. The public library is a democratic institution in which patrons should be able to interact with information free of restriction or judgment, and this right is threatened by the conflict between access and privacy. Librarians should reject the notion that they are neutral and instead adopt a political stance in defense of intellectual freedom; they should actively combat surveillance and limitations on access. A framework for activism can be found within Birdsall’s theory of progressive librarianship.

Introduction
Intellectual freedom has long been a part of the ethical foundation of librarianship. Codified in the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics, Library Bill of Rights, and other documents that guide the profession, upholding the principles of intellectual freedom is expected to be a mission of every public library. Although the principles of librarianship have remained largely the same since the ALA first established its professional values in 1939, the evolution of information technologies has greatly impacted librarians’ ability to ensure intellectual freedom. The Internet provides a global network of communication that enhances free thought, but this access to information conflicts with intellectual freedom by opening the door to censorship and surveillance. Censorship and surveillance are impediments that go hand in hand and are embedded in recent policies and practices that have further compromised individual privacy, thus impinging on the ability to consume information without scrutiny. The conflict between providing valuable information technology in libraries and protecting patrons from violations of their free thought raises my research question for this article: how should public librarians defend intellectual freedom? I will approach this question from the theoretical perspective of progressive librarianship as articulated by William Birdsall, which is introduced in the following section. My method is to conduct a literature review of existing conceptions of intellectual freedom in libraries to see how progressive librarianship fits into this landscape. This will demonstrate that this theory is an effective lens through which to construct the role of librarians in ensuring free thought through free access to information.

Background: Theory of progressive librarianship
It is useful to briefly clarify Birdsall’s theory of progressive librarianship, which shapes my approach to the topic of intellectual freedom. Birdsall roots his theory in a human rights framework and expands on other articulations of progressive librarianship in that he considers the library in the context of technology and globalization, and their effects on the rights of
citizens. A crucial aspect of Birdsall’s theory, and what I find the most inspirational, is the restructuring of the flow of information. In his proposed structure, information would spread horizontally among the people instead of coming from the top down, such as through mass media that is controlled by corporations or vendors who determine what resources can be licensed. He even discusses the popular concept of libraries as “gateways” and argues that this role favors the top-down model that harms free thought. This approach differs from how this topic is usually discussed, as demonstrated by the literature review below. The mission of public librarians has traditionally been founded on the concept of an informed citizenry, but Birdsall argues that this concept does not go far enough. It is difficult to assess to what extent libraries function to inform citizens, or even what it means to be informed in the ever-evolving information landscape shaped by global electronic communication where information flows freely until barriers are erected in its path. It is clear, however, that people get a great deal of information from the Internet. Therefore, intellectual freedom and technology in the library cannot be separated.

In response to what Birdsall calls a global communication environment, his theory aims to establish the human right to communicate as the foundation of librarianship. Herein Birdsall draws on Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that all people have the right to free opinion and expression through the freedom to hold, seek, receive, and impart information/ideas without interference. If the right to communicate is recognized, then intellectual freedom is strengthened because information must flow and every person must be part of that flow. The key here, evidenced through the phrase “seek, receive, and impart,” is the interaction between the individual, the information, and in Birdsall’s framework, another person or a larger community. These interactions are more crucial than ever as access to the Internet steadily increases and more attention is drawn to systematic problems that hinder access. The role of public librarians in the communication environment, where they must reconcile tension between access and the invasions it brings, is the focus of this article.

**Literature review**

**Perspectives on librarianship and intellectual freedom**

There is no shortage of literature pertaining to intellectual freedom and public librarians, but there are unique perspectives that stand out and encourage a rethinking of the issue. Political approaches are most relevant, and most interesting, to this article because they address the agency of public librarians and contribute more complex theoretical foundations for intellectual freedom than simply echoing the ALA Code of Ethics. Knox focuses exclusively on professional standards and ethical codes, arguing that librarians have a “sophisticated” theoretical foundation for fighting censorship and protecting intellectual freedom that has been formed through codification, institutionalization, and investigation (i.e., research on the topic). Naturally, such frameworks only matter if they are translated into practice. Knox views the “symbolic capital” of professional codes like those prescribed by ALA as giving librarians power to uphold ethical principles. The concept of power is critical to the research question at hand because the flow of information is determined by power structures. Librarians possess power to the extent that they mostly determine library services, but the library in turn struggles against far more powerful entities in society that do not recognize that libraries are essential to democracy.

The theme of power is addressed from a more activist position by Jaeger and colleagues, who agree with Knox on the relative weakness of librarians but offer ideas on how to strengthen their place in society. A long-established and increasingly criticized trend has been to approach librarianship from a neutral stance, insisting that the librarian takes no sides and serves as an objective intermediary between users and information sources. Neutrality is a problem because intellectual freedom is a political issue with real implications for how citizens think and live. In Jaeger and
colleagues’ terms, librarians try to remain apolitical despite the fact that their professional values are inherently political.\textsuperscript{6} The differences between librarians as neutral information portals and librarians as active political agents can be surprisingly blurred. Graham writes from a less technologically advanced moment in time, but I find his ideas significant as he addresses what it means for the library to be a cornerstone of democracy.\textsuperscript{7} There is tension between being a democratic institution that contains all possible views on a given subject (librarians are neutral) and being a democratic institution that excludes views that actually harm intellectual freedom (librarians are not neutral). Graham offers racist materials as an example of the latter, explaining that librarians exercise their power when they develop collections and make value judgments about certain types of materials.\textsuperscript{8} His short article does not delve into why racist materials harm intellectual freedom, but I argue that having books in the library that espouse hate toward a given race creates a hostile environment. Given that racism is a structural problem, and in light of Birdsall’s theory of progressive librarianship, racist materials would support a flow of information in which one race is oppressed by another. That oppression, in turn, restricts the free thought of those who are subject to it.

Some writers assert that more focus should be placed on enforcing broader democratic ideals in the library rather than focusing on intellectual freedom alone. In an article for \textit{Progressive Librarian}, Sparanese writes that it is the social responsibility of librarians to be advocates of democratic and pluralistic values.\textsuperscript{9} Without such values, intellectual freedom is not possible. Sparanese sees a history of activism in librarianship that is certainly not neutral, and cites examples relating to race and war. Her own story of activism is fascinating and relevant here. In 2001, Sparanese heard that Michael Moore’s book \textit{Stupid White Men} was set to be published by HarperCollins, but that the publishing company halted production and demanded substantial rewrites of the book, which was deemed too offensive and unpatriotic.\textsuperscript{10} Sparanese spread the word to other librarians, sparking enough of a backlash to contribute to the decision of HarperCollins to publish the book and gain recognition from Moore himself. This is an excellent example of top-down information flow that harms intellectual freedom. The government was not involved in the HarperCollins conflict; the judgment on the book as being too unpatriotic came entirely from the publisher due to the intense climate of fear sweeping the country at that time. When librarians spoke up, they were fighting for the right of the people to have access to controversial views and exercise their intellectual freedom.

It is impossible to consider democracy, politics, and intellectual freedom without also taking capitalism into account. In the library as much as outside of it, politics and economics are inseparable. Jaeger and colleagues write that the library has great social value, but also that social value means little in a society that prioritizes economic value above all else, so their question is how to legitimize that social worth in a capitalist system.\textsuperscript{11} Their solution is to keep metrics to prove that the library feeds back into the economy, such as through job search assistance that puts people to work. This is a reasonable proposal, but it is not a progressive one because it does nothing to subvert the established norms of what is valuable and what is expendable. Jensen sheds light on the problem of playing into the system when he discusses neutral librarianship in the context of capitalism.\textsuperscript{12} According to Jensen, being a neutral librarian would mean siding with the dominant ideology of elite citizens and corporations who are more powerful than the library and whose interests lie with profit. The very progressive Durrani and Smallwood believe that librarians have a social responsibility to combat biased information that is sent down to the masses from the dominant powers.\textsuperscript{13} They also introduce another Birdsall-esque idea: “global librarians.”\textsuperscript{14} The label of global librarians refers to librarians who maintain the status quo and who make deals with companies who supply them with certain resources over others. If librarians are not critical of the information that makes its way into the library and thus into the hands of patrons, then the collection will naturally contain that which attracts the least controversy—that which adheres to the status quo.

On the other hand, there is also the idea that librarians are not solely responsible for keeping the library an intellectual freedom-friendly environment. According to Stripling, patrons also have their own social responsibility, which is to be critical of information, and librarians should support this by
guiding patrons in the evaluation and use of information. Helping patrons be critical on their own is part of Stripling’s proposal that the 21st century requires a shift in the definition of intellectual freedom, a move toward being “free to” find, consume, and create information as opposed to being “free from” hindrances to intellectual freedom. This is a more active type of intellectual freedom. In a “free to” model, librarians need to focus less on protecting users and more on empowering them to participate in, or at least freely access, whatever they choose.

Digital resources and web access in the library add another element to the idea of intellectual freedom as user empowerment. Collections exist outside the library as much as, and sometimes more than, inside the library. Librarians have less control over information under these circumstances, and Graham points out that neutrality is even less of a feasible stance when there is so much information to evaluate and librarians must increasingly act as “information advisors.” The effect of the Internet on intellectual freedom in the library is further explored by Kajberg, who writes from a progressive perspective about Library 2.0. Library 2.0 refers to efforts by librarians to integrate Web 2.0 technology into the library in order to remain relevant. Most of these Web 2.0 practices encourage patron participation and communication through comments, chat reference, forums, social media, and the integration of websites like GoodReads into the library’s own web services. Kajberg envisions a political library that can serve as a democratic cornerstone to society, if librarians can successfully take advantage of Web 2.0 technologies and adapt to the digital information environment. Web 2.0 is important here because it is characterized by interactivity and an exchange of information between users, which directly relates to the right to communicate. Instead of consuming information from a website, users can talk to each other, comment, and in the case of a site like Wikipedia, edit content. Intellectual freedom exists on a new frontier in this environment, and this may even be a change to the structure of information flow where information is generated on a mass scale from the bottom up.

Online censorship in public libraries

In public libraries, intellectual freedom is inseparable from access to the web. But while the web offers endless sources of information and opportunities to connect, it also opens the door for impediments to free thought and expression. Censorship is a broad impediment that encompasses both passive and active hindrances to access, such as leaving certain materials out of a collection or purposefully removing materials out of fear, pressure, discrimination, or a number of other forces. Censorship is not always as obvious as the banning of a book, especially when censorship is happening on the Internet. As mentioned briefly above, the web cannot be accessioned or weeded from a collection like a book or movie. Pinnell-Stephens of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom conceives of the Internet as a single item of a library’s collection, meaning that librarians cannot pick and choose what to include from the web, and she emphasizes that restricting access to web resources violates the First Amendment rights of library patrons. Regardless of how much power librarians have within their library, they have few ways of dealing with the Internet aside from educating users, writing policies on Internet use, and using “content- and viewpoint-neutral” methods such as privacy screens. These are perhaps the safest approaches a librarian can take, as they are the most neutral.

Of course, we have seen that neutrality is not that simple. The most prevalent form of censorship on the web in public libraries is Internet filtering. Filtering is, for the most part, out of the hands of librarians who have been forced to install filters in their libraries as required by the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which was enacted in 2001 and upheld by the Supreme Court in 2003. CIPA requires any public or school library that is to receive federal eRate funding to have Internet use policies and to install technology that blocks or filters Internet content that has been deemed harmful to minors. While school libraries are always subject to much greater regulation, this is an invasive policy for public libraries that offer computers that are used by children, teens, and adults. It is well documented that filtering software is ineffective because it blocks appropriate content while allowing obscene content to be
accessed due to flawed means of detecting inappropriate text on websites. Because of this inefficiency, much of the literature has been devoted to how CIPA violates the First Amendment rights of all users by restricting certain types of speech and requiring adult users to request the deactivation of a filter, thus subjecting them to scrutiny. A recent case of this occurred in 2012 in Bradburn et al v. North Central Regional Library District, when patrons in Spokane, Washington, alleged that librarians refused to unblock websites that contained content that adults should be able to access under the First Amendment. This is surprising in light of the fact that the 2003 Supreme Court decision specifically addressed the issue of unblocking content for adults, stating that librarians should comply with requests when constitutionally protected speech is blocked by a filter. Caldwell-Stone believes that this case illustrates how librarians do not understand their patrons’ rights under CIPA and further obscures the obligations that librarians have to their patrons even when facing outside control.

Aside from the thoroughly explored First Amendment problems with CIPA, there are perspectives that delve more deeply into the relationship between information technology and human rights in the context of the library. Dresang looks at these issues in terms of the radical-change theory, which asserts that the state of society today can be explained by three “digital age principles”: connectivity, interactivity, and access. The digital age has come about rapidly, but can be traced back to the emergence of television as a common household object in the 1950s. Television was a major advancement in getting to the global communication network we have today, where those three digital age principles bring possibilities for communication and information exchange to the individual level. This is important because, as Johnson discusses, expression is the often forgotten aspect of intellectual freedom. Johnson focuses on school libraries, but the idea applies to public libraries as well. Each person has more power, or at least potential power, to communicate than ever before. According to Dresang in her discussion of intellectual freedom in libraries, this power in the hands of minorities and youth is one possible explanation for why policies like CIPA have been enacted by the government. Following this idea, the social implications of censorship seeping into libraries are huge. It is not just about the violation of freedom of thought and expression, but the violation of the human right to communicate for people who rely on the library for their technology.

Dresang’s discussion raises the idea of equality as an aspect of intellectual freedom in libraries, which is also addressed by Buchanan and Henderson. They argue that policies resulting in online censorship (with specific reference to CIPA) violate the nature of libraries to function as equalizers in society. Libraries serve as equalizers by providing access to information and services to patrons regardless of who they are, but the problem is that not all libraries are equal in what they can offer and what their patrons need. Librarians who have fewer resources will rely more heavily on outside support, such as the federal e-Rate funding that can now only be obtained if Internet filters are installed. If a library is located in a poor area and serves underprivileged patrons, it is more likely to need this funding in order to purchase the technology and thus will have to install the filters required by the government. As a result, patrons who are already disadvantaged will have their intellectual freedom further compromised. The flow of information is cut off from the top, in this case by the government, and too much control is placed over what people can and cannot do online. Buschman, writing from a highly progressive point of view, captures this problem when he calls on librarians to defend the human right to information. He associates the right to information with the expectation that people have a right not to be abused physically or mentally. Through this lens, an obstruction to the mind (to intellectual freedom) is an affront to the individual’s humanity.

### Surveillance and intellectual freedom in the library

The relationship between surveillance, the Internet, and intellectual freedom lies in the conflicting values of access and privacy. Electronic resources enhance intellectual freedom by providing access to a large amount of information, but these resources take away from the individual’s privacy. Rubel provides examples that demonstrate this tradeoff, such as the tracking of e-book borrowing, particularly on the Amazon Kindle, and the pulling of data from user accounts by vendors of
electronic journals and other resources. He also points out that neither Amazon nor other vendors are subject to state library privacy laws, which means they have more freedom to possibly exploit personal data. This matters for intellectual freedom because when privacy is lacking, people must self-censor and their autonomy is restricted. Self-censorship limits what an individual will explore through reading and communicating. Even if a person is unaware of surveillance, autonomy is restricted because their understanding of their own circumstances is diminished. According to Rubel, this is a problem because when a person is only exposed to limited perspectives, their intellectual freedom is harmed. Even if there is no one holding them back from looking at certain information, their autonomy is compromised. Rubel’s argument is reminiscent of John Stuart Mill in that both authors believe that exposure to multiple views is necessary in order to further knowledge as a whole.

A recent example of data collection was reported by Andrew Crocker, an attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). In 2015, the EFF, on behalf of a coalition of libraries and bookstores, filed an amicus brief in the Wikimedia Foundation v. NSA case. Organizations including the Association of Research Libraries and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions are part of the coalition behind the amicus brief, which opposes the National Security Agency (NSA)’s Upstream surveillance tactics that collect data from Internet traffic. Under this surveillance in a library context, a patron’s activity in the library catalog would be vulnerable to scrutiny along with any other online research they conduct. This violates their intellectual freedom. The government has attempted to have this case dismissed on the basis that Wikimedia cannot advocate for the First Amendment rights of its users, but Crocker argues that this claim is false and that libraries, along with Wikimedia, do have the right to protect their users.

There are many ways that patrons are exposed to surveillance while using the Internet. On the largest scale, there is Big Data. Big Data is described by Vaidhyanathan and Bulock as a process of storing and replicating huge amounts of personal data in servers, analyzing it with algorithms, and then using it for the purpose that the entity studying the data is aiming for. Vaidhyanathan and Bulock focus on Google, just one player in the world of Big Data, and they believe that the company is trying to fulfill the role that librarians have played (making all information accessible and helping people find it), but without the ethical standards that librarians follow. Google does not want to make books available for the sake of knowledge, but rather wants as much data as possible in order to make a profit. Obviously, problems with Google are not limited to use in the library, but Vaidhyanathan and Bulock concentrate on what data collection means for intellectual freedom. They argue that civil liberties (here, privacy) are collective and do not belong to any one individual, so individual efforts to protect privacy are insufficient. This means that one person can try to protect him- or herself, but if the entire community is not on the same page, then no one will have privacy. We operate in an opt-out instead of an opt-in digital environment, meaning the default in online interactions will typically fall on the side of exploiting the user’s data. This mass exploitation is why librarians should be uniting and pushing for change in the practice of collecting data on the individual’s web trail. It is the responsibility of librarians to combat surveillance because they must ensure that patrons exercise intellectual freedom autonomously. Free thought is only possible if the intellectual activities of the individual are free, and giving people the ability to think without interference affirms personhood/personal dignity. Therefore, librarians are responsible for protecting patron autonomy.

Antisurveillance measures can focus on individual efforts or the big picture of broad change. The huge legal battle discussed by Crocker is one approach, while groups like the Library Freedom Project (LFP) are starting to bring change to libraries one at a time (although always with the goal of culminating in broader change). Enis writes about the LFP’s Library Digital Privacy Pledge, which urges libraries and the vendors they deal with to implement Hyper Text Transfer Protocol Secure (HTTPS) on their websites. HTTPS would encrypt the information that is transferred between the browser and the server, which is vulnerable to interception if using HTTP. This initiative aims to establish a network of “volunteer technologists” that can help librarians get on board with this
privacy protection strategy. The problem with HTTPS is that the protocol requires annual renewal of expensive security certificates. The concerns of Buchanan and Henderson are echoed here, as libraries with the most vulnerable patrons (those who rely on the library as their primary source of electronic resources) will be the least able to invest in antisurveillance technologies.

A popular topic within library surveillance is social media, which is one aspect of Library 2.0 technology. Interestingly, Vaidhyanathan and Bulock suggest that people cannot be social without being private. This means that having too much information about oneself accessible on the web is dangerous and can actually hinder freedom in various ways. For instance, people share details about their lives through social media, but also curate their lives in the same way to leave out any information they so choose. Even though people may be careless with their personal information, the library is a specific setting with its own norms. Librarians should therefore preserve the standards of privacy, not sacrifice them for the sake of Library 2.0. Social media contributes to the tension between librarian ethics and privacy invasions required by social media services. According to Lamdan, librarians need to defend intellectual freedom in the realm of social media just as much as they do in any other setting. If privacy is necessary for social exchange, then intellectual freedom on social media is primarily a privacy issue. The U.S. government is increasingly requesting user tracking by Google and data collection from Facebook, and there is no legislation that protects user data from these requests. People cannot count on the government for protection, and they cannot count on private companies either. Librarians, on the other hand, have allegiance to their patrons—not the forces at the top of the ladder.

**Justification**

Intellectual freedom is one of the most important facets of librarianship, and will therefore always be of concern to librarians as they serve their communities. The literature review above analyzes perspectives on intellectual freedom, censorship, and surveillance, with a focus on activist/progressive views on these topics. While many of the authors present arguments that align with one another, there is no unified statement about the role of librarians in defending intellectual freedom. To address this problem, I have discussed the literature through the lens of Bird’s theory of progressive librarianship, emphasizing his claims regarding the right to communicate and the restructuring of information flow in the age of global communication. This theory can serve as a foundation for bringing together the progressive ideas that conceive of librarians as active political agents, thus filling a gap in existing research on this issue.

**Research question**

This article asks: How should public librarians defend intellectual freedom?

**Method**

To answer my research question, I conducted a literature review of scholarly articles and books that address intellectual freedom, censorship, and surveillance as they relate to libraries. A range of perspectives are represented, from the activist to the more traditional, and key themes include First Amendment rights, human rights, neutrality, and the integration of technology into the library. To help demonstrate the relevance of intellectual freedom in libraries, I include recent examples of intellectual freedom conflicts, such as the work being done by the LFP and the involvement of libraries in the Wikimedia Foundation v. NSA case. I primarily limit the literature review to authors who consider intellectual freedom in relation to information technology with an emphasis on the Internet, which is essential for understanding intellectual freedom in my theoretical framework of progressive librarianship. Because the focus of this article is exclusively on librarianship, most of these sources were retrieved through the Library Literature & Information Science Full-Text database. All but one of the sources I discuss have been published within the last ten years to ensure
relevance to the current state of librarianship, with the majority of the sources dated 2010 or later. Last, the focus of this article is limited to public librarians, but future research could be expanded by addressing librarians at other settings, such as schools and universities.

Findings

The most important finding of my research is that libraries are not neutral institutions and librarians are not neutral actors. If there are librarians who still believe that they should be neutral, the literature widely suggests that this is no longer a topic for debate. Power dynamics outside and inside the library must be of concern to librarians because, even though they provide free services and adhere to lofty democratic ideals, they are subject to political and economic forces that threaten the values of the public library. This means that librarians cannot operate in a vacuum when they need to make decisions about how to serve their patrons. Therefore, librarians should protect intellectual freedom by embracing their political agency and actively combating censorship and surveillance.

It is also clear from this study that intellectual freedom in the library now goes far beyond elimination of banned books because the Internet is a necessary part of every collection. The Internet connects the library to the world while raising a number of concerns on multiple levels. At the lowest level, it is the consensus that each librarian has a social responsibility to educate patrons about Internet use and privacy and to do their best to ensure patrons are able to reach their information needs. However, not all library collections are equal in terms of the technology they can offer and the patrons they serve. This imbalance becomes apparent in cases such as CIPA where access relies on censorship mandated by the government. Similarly, librarians are also at the mercy of corporate interests that gather user information through everything from e-readers to social media.

Finally, I found that although there are many ways to approach intellectual freedom in libraries, there is often a common theme of human dignity that appears either explicitly or between-the-lines. The literature covers First Amendment rights, social responsibility of librarians, the effects of technology, and more, but all of these perspectives rely on the autonomy of each patron and their ability to exercise that autonomy. As also discussed in “Online Censorship in Public Libraries” in the literature review above, Buschman sums up this idea as he asserts that obstruction of intellectual freedom is an affront to a person’s humanity. This is why public libraries are an essential democratic institution: they are meant to serve as a space where people can interact with information regardless of race, class, or any other factor that distinguishes them from one another. When restrictions enter the library, either imposed by the government or a corporation, patrons lose this freedom. I can therefore conclude that librarians cannot feign neutrality, for if they do, they are only allowing more powerful forces to violate the library’s values.

Conclusion

In this article I asked a research question: how should public librarians defend intellectual freedom? To answer this question, I conducted a literature review to evaluate arguments that have been made by other researchers regarding the duty of librarians to defend the intellectual freedom of their patrons. I focused on censorship and surveillance in the digital environment as hindrances to intellectual freedom. I analyzed the literature through the lens of progressive librarianship as defined by Birdsall, who bases intellectual freedom on the human right to communicate and calls for a restructuring of information flow from a top-down pattern to horizontally among people. This theory is a useful framework that can strengthen and unify the wide array of existing ideas on intellectual freedom in libraries, thus filling a gap in the research. The literature review led to three major findings. First, libraries are not neutral as popular theories have suggested. Second, the Internet opens new possibilities for communication, but also for invasion and inequality. Last, human dignity and autonomy are essential to any conception of intellectual freedom and should greatly influence how librarians defend intellectual freedom. These findings led me to conclude that
librarians should protect intellectual freedom by embracing their political agency to actively keep censorship and surveillance out of the library.

Notes

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