

Threats to reaching knowledge: why libraries play a vital role

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Hello, my name is Rachael Jolley. I am the editor of Index on Censorship magazine, a global magazine that has been publishing for 43 years on issues of freedom of expression.

When I was nine, ten and eleven, my mother, my brother and I had a weekly ritual of driving to the local library, a flat modern building with big glass windows. We'd spend a quiet hour wandering up and down its carpeted corridors, picking out two or three plastic-covered books to take home to read.

All sorts of people found stories, history and biographies within their reach.

Andrew Carnegie: library endower



I have measured out my life in library books: from weekly visits to Bristol libraries, to school in Pittsburgh – a city which pays tribute to the greatest library supporter of them all Andrew Carnegie – to further study at the great Colindale newspaper archive library, and perhaps the most exciting celebrity library spot, standing next to the poet and librarian Philip Larkin in the neighbourhood butchers in Hull.

US poet laureate Rita Dove believes that libraries provide: “A window into the soul and a door into the world.” There are two types of freedom captured in that thought: The freedom to think, and the freedom to find out about others.

Books, magazines and newspapers ARE a door into the world and that’s why over centuries governments have tried to stop them being opened.

When THAT door opens on to the world, who knows what people might think or do? That door is not open to everyone now, or in the past. And when it comes to THE freedom to express oneself: to write, draw, paint, act or protest then restrictions have often been levied by governments and other powerful bodies to stop the wider public being allowed those too.

Over the centuries, often, books were only made available to some. Sometimes they were written in a language that only a tiny group of people knew. When paper was expensive, books were for the few, not the many. In times gone by education was also expensive (AND IT STILL IS IN MANY PLACES); those who were allowed to learn reading and writing were once in the minority.

That’s why public libraries, open to all and funded from the public purse, are so important . Their existence helped the many get access to what the few had held close to their chests; information, literature, inspiration.

US businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was one of the world's most enthusiastic endowers of libraries. He helped fund more than 2000 libraries around the United States

California's Carnegie libraries



HERE: CARNEGIE's libraries, plus hundreds more in the UK and beyond, because when he was a poor teenager a wealthy man, Colonel James Anderson, opened up his private library of 400 books to Andrew and other working boys on Saturday nights, and it was this Carnegie believed made a huge difference to his life chances, and his ability to rise from poor, struggling beginnings to be a successful and wealthy steel magnate.

Carnegie believed in libraries' power to do good. To open people's minds. To help build knowledge. To help the ordinary person be introduced to ideas that might never otherwise be seen.

Of course, the history of libraries is much older than Carnegie's time stretching back to the Romans, Greeks, Chinese and Islamic libraries, where archives of important documents were kept.

Libraries hold history; documents that tell us what was bought and sold in ancient Greece times; or how a Roman senator spoke. They inform us about the reality of other times, and allow us to learn from that past.

That's why conquering armies have looked to destroy libraries and museums. Part of imposing a new present on a population is sometimes about re-writing the past.

From the Library at Alexandria, to the Mosque library at Chinguetti to the Roman library on the Palatine Hill. If documents had not been preserved, we would know far less. We can do more than guess what might have happened, we can actually KNOW details, because records are still available.

In the 21st century libraries are under threat from many directions. As governments and local councils cut public spending, libraries in many western countries, including in the United Kingdom, are being closed down. Does that point to a lack of need or desire for such things? Have libraries become redundant?

Libraries under threat: UK

A map of possible library closures, with red dots showing those forced to close, blue under threat, green saved from closure

Source: Voices for the Library



UK LIBRARIES SLIDE

In this new age of enlightenment is our thirst for knowledge less desperate than in previous generations or is our thirst quenched by easy access to hundreds of television channels and the internet? Indeed, with electronically accessible information free to anyone with a computer, is the internet the ultimate library, rendering its brick and glass-built equivalents redundant, in the same way the printing press marginalised the illuminated manuscript?

We in Europe are more free than previous generations have ever been to learn, find and understand. With our zillions of instant access points for information and discussion, we can look at Facebook, Twitter and thousands of ideas online in the twitch of mouse click after all. But does that access bring more understanding or deeper knowledge? And what is the future role then of a library? LIBRARIANS are much needed as valuable guides: to help students and other readers to learn techniques to sift information, question its validity and measure its importance. TO UNDERSTAND WHAT TO TRUST AND WHAT TO QUESTION; AND THAT ALL INFORMATION IS NOT EQUAL. Students need to be able to weigh up and sift different sources of research. The University of California Library System saw a 54% decline in circulation between 1991 to 2001 of 8,377,000 books to 3,832,000. It is shocking that some students are failing themselves by not using a broad range of books, and journals that are free from their university libraries to widen and deepen their understanding.

Both libraries and newspapers in their analogue form gave us the opportunity to stumble over ideas that we might not have otherwise encountered. Over there, on that page opposite the one we are reading in a newspaper, is an article about Chilean architecture that we knew nothing about it, but suddenly find a spark of interest in, and over there on the library shelf next to Agatha Christie, is Henning Mankell, a new author to us, and one that suddenly sounds like one we might like to read. And then off we go on a new winding track towards knowledge; one that we didn't even know we wanted to explore. But that analogue world of stumbled-upon exploration is closing down. We have to make sure that we still have the equipment to carry on stumbling down new avenues and finding out about new writers, and history that we never knew we would care about.

Technology tends to remove the "stumbling upon", by taking us down straight lines. Instead it prompts us to read or consume more of the same. Technology learns what we like, but it doesn't know and cannot anticipate what might fascinate us in a chance, a random, encounter. In a world where we remove the unexpected then we miss out on expanding our KNOWLEDGE. Something that libraries have always offered. The present is all too easily an echo chamber of social media where we follow only the people we agree with, and where we fail to engage with the arguments of those with whom we disagree. Is the echo chamber being enhanced by the linear nature of the digital library, the digital bookstore and the digital newspaper? AND if we follow only those that we like and agree with, do we lull ourselves into believing that those are the only opinions and beliefs out there. And we are so unused to disagreement that we want to close it down. We are somehow afraid to have it in the same room as us. Somehow we seem to be stumbling on towards a world where disagreement is frowned upon, and not embraced as a way of finding what is out there.

This is just one challenge to freedom of expression and thought. There are others.

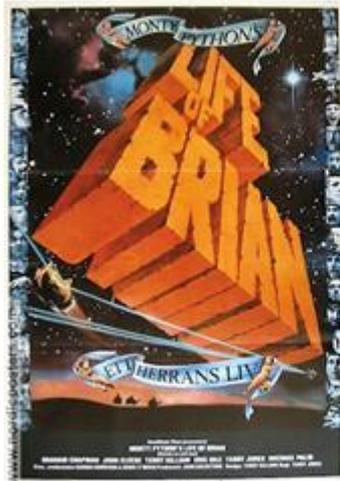
Recently at Index on Censorship, we heard from Chilean-American writer Ariel Dorfman, a long-time supporter and writer for us.... that his play, *Death and the Maiden*, was being banned by a school in New Jersey because some parents didn't like the language contained in it. In other words it offended or upset somebody. Meanwhile Judy Blume's books about the realities of teenage life, including swearing and teenage pregnancy, gets her banned from US libraries and schools.

But isn't fiction, theatre and art about connecting with the real, isn't it about challenging people to think, and to be provoked?

When a film has been banned from our cinemas or a book banned from distribution has it meant no one is keen to read it? In fact the opposite is usually true, people flock to find out what it is or to watch the film wherever they can. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *A Clockwork Orange* and DH Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* found new audiences because they were banned. Monty Python's controversial film *Life of Brian* was once marketed here in Sweden as the film so funny, it was banned in NORWAY!! (AS YOU CAN IMAGINE IT DID VERY WELL HERE)

Censorship and comedy

Banned in
Norway!



Increasingly there are loud voices saying that we shouldn't think about the unpleasant bits in the world, that we SHOULD ignore the difficult or traumatic because it is too complicated, or too ugly to have in the room. In a special editorial published at the time of the Charlie Hebdo killings, the South African Mail and Guardian said; "The goals of terrorism, if we are to dignify utter insanity with aims, are fear and polarisation." If we live in a society where we think we are not allowed to speak about subjects; where they are considered too controversial, where appearing on a platform with someone is somehow seen as a tacit nod to agreeing with them, are giving into those goals?

So what can those living in Europe do to enhance or defend freedom of expression and what are the role of libraries? Firstly, we should never stop learning about our history. Remember periods where freedoms of expression, of thought, of living in a non traditional way, or practising a religion that was not state sanctioned, were not laid out as European rights as they are today. From witch trials, to the Edict of Nantes, to social stigma of unmarried women, to children abused by adults. There are moments in every family's history, when someone had a desperate need for some secret, some taboo, some injustice to be talked about. To be put under the public spotlight.

Given that historical, but personal, reflection, perhaps each of us can have a clearer understanding of why freedom of expression as a right is something worth defending today.

Freedom of expression has always had a role in challenging injustice and persecution. Some argue that without freedom of expression we would not have other freedoms. Freedom of expression also includes offering groups that have historically been ostracised or sidelined or ignored --- a chance to put their views, to be part of the wider debate, to be chosen to join a television chat show. Europe is a diverse society, all those voices should be heard.

Another point about enhancing freedom of expression in Europe, and outside, is that a lively and vigorous and diverse media is extremely important. So we should fight against control of the media by a single corporation, or by increased government influence. We need

newspapers, and broadcasters, that cover what is happening, and don't ignore stories because SOMEONE would rather those stories were not covered.

And another role for libraries of the future is as debate houses - A LIVING ROOM - at the centre of communities where people of different backgrounds come together to hear and discuss issues at the heart of our societies. And to meet others in their community. These neutral spaces are increasingly needed.

The value of passionate argument is often valued less than it should be. Where debates or arguments are driven underground, those who are not allowed to speak somehow obtain a glamour, a modern martyrdom. We MUST allow dissent and argument. We MUST let people whose ideas we abhor speak. Freedom of speech for those we like and agree with is no freedom at all.

There are those that dismiss freedom of speech as an indulgence defended by the indulged OR the middle class OR the left wing OR the right wing OR some other group that they would like not to hear from. However throughout history, freedom of speech and thought and debate has been used by the less powerful to challenge the powerful. Governments, state institutions, religious institutions. And to argue for change. That is not an indulgence.

And if you believe someone else's arguments are ill founded, incorrect or malicious, then arguing a different point of view in a public place, a library, or a university hall, is much more powerful, than saying you are not allowed to say those things because we don't like or disagree with them. To make those arguments, to understand what is happening we need to be able to access knowledge, libraries must continue to be community spaces where people can delve for that research and find out about the world, and themselves.

Libraries and those who support them have often been defenders of the right to knowledge. Because at the heart of any library is the idea of a freedom to think and discover.

We should remember that reading something never killed anyone. Watching a play didn't either. If you find something that you disagree with, even disagree strongly, it is not the same as a dagger through your heart, as someone told me it was last summer in Italy.

As Turkish writer Elif Shafak said recently the response to a cartoon is another cartoon, the response to a play is another play. We are and can be prepared to listen, read or watch things that we disagree with. Listen to the argument; argue back with your own. Consider the evidence. The point of speech is to arrive at truth, and no one should be offended by that.

Index on Censorship

- ▶ Founded in 1972, Index on Censorship is the only international freedom of expression organisation which also publishes an international magazine. It works to combat censorship and campaigns worldwide for the preservation and establishment of freedom of expression.
- ▶ *Index magazine has published some of the greatest campaigning writers of our age, from Václav Havel to Aung San Suu Kyi. Index has also published some of the most renowned names in literature, including Nadine Gordimer, Mario Vargas Llosa, Samuel Beckett and Kurt Vonnegut.*
- ▶ www.indexoncensorship.org

