

There is something to offend everyone in my library

Leacey O'Brien, associate executive director, Canadian Library Association

The proof that Canadian librarians take matters of intellectual freedom to heart is most evident in a popular t-shirt slogan. Designed and sold by the British Columbia Association, this t-shirt proudly boasts: 'There's something to offend everyone in my library.'

A recent study by Dr Anne Curry of the University of British Columbia demonstrates the high value that library associations place on the defence of intellectual freedom. According to Curry's findings, the professional codes of most library associations include recommendations related to adherence to intellectual freedom statements within their Codes of Ethics.

The Canadian Library Association (CLA) is no exception. In fact, the first item in the CLA code stipulates that members have the individual and collective responsibility to support and implement the principles and practices embodied in the current Canadian Library Association Statement on Intellectual Freedom, and to facilitate access to any or all sources of information which may be of assistance to library users.

Both the Code of Ethics and the Intellectual Freedom statement are two of CLA's longest-standing position statements, dating back to the early 1970s. However, it is fair to say that over the last ten years, there has been a marked increase in the number of libraries requesting support on censorship matters from the Association. Perhaps not surprisingly, as the amount of information available to Canadians through libraries increases, so do the number and complexity of challenges to intellectual freedom in library settings.

Advocacy on intellectual freedom at CLA is multi-dimensional. It includes annual conference programs on current issues, the presentation of an Award for the Advancement of Intellectual Freedom in Canada as merited, and publishing an annual theme issue on intellectual freedom in *Feliciter*, the membership magazine. CLA is also a long-time sponsor of *Freedom to Read* week in Canada, along with other members of the Canadian Book and Periodical Council. The Association recently undertook the publication of *Have a safe trip: a parent's guide to safe use of the net*. Since 1998, CLA has published and distributed more than 250 000 copies in English and French, and now makes the English version avail-

able electronically for those libraries who wish to reproduce it locally [<http://cla.ca/resources/safetrip.htm>]. Another recent CLA publication, *Understanding telecommunications and public policy*, includes an entire chapter on *Cyberspeech and cybersafety* that provides critical analysis of filtering software in the context of reader response and information retrieval theory, as well as a complete 'Checklist for action on internet access'. This chapter was written by Dr Alvin Schrader, who is director of the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta, and one of Canada's leading experts on censorship.

The most pressing issues on the intellectual freedom agenda today are the growing requirements for new guidelines to assist libraries in developing policies and resources that respond to public concerns regarding safe internet access for children in public libraries, and monitoring and responding to challenges to library meeting room policies.

In 1999 CLA's executive council approved a major campaign designed to provide tools that enable libraries to offer public internet access with confidence in both the safety and accessibility of these services. As a first step, a position statement complementary to the existing Intellectual Freedom Statement was revised to address library services in the internet environment [<http://cla.ca/about/internet.htm>] and the Association released a position paper entitled 'Internet service in public libraries: A matter of trust'. The paper addresses the legal issues to be considered when developing access policies; emphasises the shared responsibilities of libraries, parents and guardians to safeguard the wellbeing of children; re-states libraries' commitment to offer access with the fewest possible restrictions; articulates the limitations of filters, but recognises that some libraries may choose to provide the choice of both filtered and full-access stations in a manner consistent with traditional principles. The next step in the campaign is the development of a toolkit of resources that will include sample access policies, legal information, public education programming ideas and a media response kit.

Meeting room rental policies have also become a complex issue for libraries in Canada. Libraries in several major cities have come under fire for allowing legal (albeit controversial) groups

to meet at public libraries. Most notably, library use by a group known as the Canadian Free Speech League, has led to public criticism and accusations of library support of hate groups. CLA support to these libraries in their commitment to maintaining open policies has been evident through resolutions supporting free access and denouncing racism which were endorsed at the 1998 annual general meeting; through thoughtful letters to local media in support of library's positions; and through effective and articulate participation of members of the CLA advisory committee on Intellectual Freedom in public forums on this matter.

There are few easy solutions and always much debate over intellectual freedom and censorship matters. But there is a long and proud tradition in Canada of library championship of intellectual freedom, a deep commitment to service to the community and a history of library colleagues working together — the challenges will be met. ■

Libraries
Alive!

The practitioners'
consortium - an
independent Australian
consulting company
creating library services
for the 21st century.
Verve and zest in
information management?

For details please contact
Ian McCallum
Sherrey Quinn

on (02) 6257 9177 or email at
ian.mccallum@alianet.alia.org.au