



Intellectual Freedom and Inclusivity

Opposites or Partners?

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The Challenge

In November 2018, Vancouver Public Library's (VPL) Library Square Conference Centre received a request for a room rental for January 10, 2019, from Feminist Current, a group presenting a ticketed event with controversial speaker Meghan Murphy. The booking had been approved but came to the attention of the chief librarian and board when another organization asked to book the space on the same night.

As news of the event became public through news and social media, VPL received complaints and requests to cancel the booking from members and supporters of transgender and gender diverse communities. Support for continuing the event was also received.

VPL initiated conversations seeking legal advice on the situation. VPL subsequently received notice that legal action would be filed if they cancelled the booking, and legal counsel advised of risks associated with cancellation (De Castell 2019).

The Decision

The Board upheld the booking and moved the event time to after the library closed to minimize disruption of access to services and impact on staff. The VPL Board discussed the situation extensively at regular and special meetings in late November and December before making the decision, and also committed to a review of the VPL Meeting Rooms and Facilities Policy.

In the lead up to the event, the chief librarian met or talked with concerned stakeholders and attended a discussion at a local LGBTQ2+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, and others) organization, Qmunity. VPL worked with transgender authors to modify a planned program on December 6, 2018, to convert it into a facilitated discussion of the booking (De Castell 2019).

Who Is Meghan Murphy?

Meghan Murphy is the founder and editor of Feminist Current ("Founder and Editor: Meghan Murphy" 2019). Murphy actively campaigned against Bill C-16—a federal bill to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to include "gender identity or expression" as a listed ground of discrimination (Canadian Human Rights Commission 2017). The bill was passed into law in 2017.

The Aftermath

Reaction following the event was swift and vocal from members and supporters of transgender and gender diverse communities as well from those defending free speech.

If there can be a positive side to a situation that pits women, the LGBTQ community, and library workers against each other, it has been the conversations that have ensued—in essays, blog posts, and emails. Within the library community, we discussed and debated how to reconcile the intersection between intellectual freedom and inclusion—two values fundamental to our work. Outside



of the library community, the debate continued between Murphy supporters and trans advocates about whether the event should have been allowed.

One letter to the editor of the *Vancouver Sun* said, “To blame any respected learning centres for providing forums for democratic expression verges on censorship—a word we queer folk are all too familiar with” (Herman 2019), while a post from the BC Teacher’s Federation on VPL’s Twitter feed said, “Public institutions should not be hosting events or renting space where speakers promote hate against any group of people protected under the BC Human Rights Code. Public libraries, like public schools, must be safe inclusive spaces for all—including trans youth and adults” (BCTF 2019).

At VPL, coming up to a year since the event first came to her attention, the chief librarian continues to work at rebuilding bridges with the transgender and gender diverse community, library staff who felt betrayed and in some cases unsafe in their workplace as a result of the decision to hold the event, and to complete a review of the library’s meeting room policy. VPL continues to be both censured and applauded for their decision. They were asked not to participate in the annual Vancouver Pride Parade—an event of which they have traditionally been a part (Crawford 2019).

The Discussion

To further my understanding of the concerns of my colleagues and friends, I had conversations with the president of the BC Library Association, the chief librarian of VPL, colleagues tasked with intellectual freedom training, fellow managers, front-line staff, and friends and family not part of the library community. I’ve found most people very interested in exploring the frictions between inclusion and intellectual freedom, recognizing the difficulty of making decisions that honor both. Many of my library colleagues see valid points on both sides and are struggling to form a new definition of intellectual freedom for themselves and their institutions. Dialogue remains key to finding that new definition.

Two colleagues chose to publish pieces that express their strong feelings on either side of the debate about platforming controversial ideas in public libraries. Dr. Alvin Schrader is a professor emeritus at the University of Alberta’s School of Library and Information Studies and an adjunct professor at the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services. He is also a long-time advocate for both intellectual freedom and LGBTQ rights. Schrader notes that “deeply polarizing subjects have long challenged and tested the core values, institutional roles,

legal accountabilities, and time-honored credibility of public libraries across Canada . . . in the present context . . . critics are ignoring or assailing the interdependence of free expression and social justice.” His conclusion can be summed up as follows: “Public libraries must protect the right of people to be mistaken. . . . To continue honouring their commitment to intellectual freedom in the face of outrage over unpopular speakers, public libraries must err on the side of a plurality of ideas and perspectives, on the side of more voices and greater access” (Schrader 2019).

A blog post was written in response to Schrader’s article by Sam Popowich, discovery and web services librarian for the University of Alberta and a member of the Canadian Federation of Library Association (CFLA) Intellectual Freedom Committee. Popowich says “[Schrader] lists some recent challenges to the dominance of intellectual-freedom maximalism. However, he presents them all in the same light, as expressions of the same power dynamics (those who wish to speak and those who wish to prevent them), eliding the very important differences in social relations, power, history, and even severity.” He goes on to say that “it is not surprising that libraries find the navigation of values (e.g. intellectual freedom vs. community empowerment) difficult . . . libraries can only manage their balancing act by violating one or the other” (Popowich 2019).

I do not criticize the handling of the situation by VPL’s chief librarian or its board. They did not make the decision lightly, meeting several times in the fall of 2018 to wrestle with the contradictions of their joint commitments to freedom of expression, and diversity and inclusion. It was a booking of their meeting room, not a library hosted event, and it fit within their current policy of providing a venue for controversial views to be heard. They sought legal advice and could see no legal means to refuse the booking. They publicly distanced themselves from Murphy’s views (for which she attacked them). However, the backlash to the event has resulted in a fractured relationship with the transgendered and gender nonconforming community that has sorely tested VPL’s stated commitments to inclusion and to being community-led. The chief librarian acknowledges that “when content of rental events conflicts with VPL’s values and strategic initiatives, perceptions of VPL as a welcoming space for certain groups can be impacted”—as they surely were in this case (De Castell 2019).

Equally I cannot condemn those who feel disappointment and anger toward VPL for their decision. While I’d like to think of myself as an ally for the transgendered



and gender nonconforming community, I am not a part of that community. As a lesbian and a woman, I have felt that frisson of fear that occurs when an environment turns threatening, but it is an increasingly rare feeling. I am white and privileged in other respects. I can only guess that this feeling is far more common for trans and non-binary people, especially those of color, and Murphy’s vocal denial of their identity would be seen as a further threat to both dignity and safety. As a nonbinary colleague put it, “Trans people and allies have made clear that we expect public libraries to take stronger stances against transphobia. Knowing that library patrons care about libraries being trans inclusive and will advocate for this has been deeply reassuring to me in the wake of the betrayal I felt from VPL’s actions as an institution” (Jones 2019). Schrader counters the calls for silencing deniers of trans identity by saying, “My perspective is informed by the long and painful struggle in Canada over LGBTQ+ equality rights and a public voice. . . . Social justice triumphed through the supremacy of expressive rights, not in spite of them” (Schrader 2019).

While I recognize the need to consider the harm of airing views that have the potential for inciting intolerance, I have also heard and put forth the argument that the library is not, nor should it be, a safe place. Rather it should be a place where disparate views are available for its patrons to explore and decide for themselves where their beliefs reside. We have always made decisions around intellectual freedom, whether about collections or speakers, knowing that we allow one voice to be heard while another (the author, speaker, or the complainant) may be silenced. This is not a new dilemma or a new discussion. What is new is the ability for these decisions to be made more widely public and therefore to enlist the sentiments of the broader community. While this can make life difficult for those who have to make decisions that attempt to find balance with a community’s divergent views, this is not a bad thing as it makes us continue to question and examine our decisions and beliefs.

So where do we go from here? Do we hold firmly to the principles of intellectual freedom and freedom of speech and give a platform to a wide variety of speakers, including those with controversial views? Or do we temper these principles with language that allows us to refuse or cancel speakers whose ideas, while not strictly speaking hate speech, may promote discrimination?

Most meeting rooms rules and conditions draw now from policies that state clearly that the “contracting party” will not violate either the Criminal Code (which includes hate speech in Canada) or human rights codes unique to

each province. These can be quite extensive as in this language from Toronto Public Library:

The Contracting Party will not promote, or have the effect of promoting, discrimination, contempt or hatred for any group or person on the basis of race, ethnic origin, place of origin, citizenship, colour, ancestry, language, creed (religion), age, sex, gender identity, gender expression, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, disability, political affiliation, membership in a union or staff association, receipt of public assistance, level of literacy or any other similar factor. (Toronto Public Library n.d.)

Language in VPL’s draft revision of their meeting room policy includes similar language referencing the British Columbia Human Rights Code, but also includes the following:

Protecting Safety, Dignity and Security

The Library may deny or cancel a meeting room or facility booking, or may terminate any event, which is likely to cause a material risk of harm to the safety, dignity or security of Library staff, or to the public. (Vancouver Public Library 2019)

Would this language have given VPL legal grounds to refuse the Feminist Current booking? How would the final decision be made as to whether someone’s dignity or safety is at “material risk” and when that trumps the need for a plurality of ideas? What is the involvement of the community served by the library in making the decision and in potentially challenging it? What controversial ideas will we silence to support a world where everyone feels safe and included? Who will “guard the guardians” (Schrader 2019) of a shifting concept of public safety?

I am concerned about a trend toward listening more often to those with whom we agree and not challenging ourselves to hear out those who we consider our ideological enemies—a trend reinforced by our ability to filter our news and information—or have it filtered for us by an algorithm. If we can now filter who gets to speak in our public spaces, what rigorous critique of our ideas and policies do we lose? If there is any community resource better placed to give a wider view and to help build connections between disparate views, it is the public library. While I understand the need for those whose identities and livelihoods may be threatened by certain controversial speakers, I will be deeply saddened if public libraries relinquish that role. At the same time, it will be critical that we continue to work to ensure that the “plurality of ideas” includes a



wide range of voices, not just those who are most privileged or loudest.

Postscript

This article was written in September and I have had many more conversations since then. Among the most illuminating have been the ones with the people most affected by Murphy's denial of transgender identity and active advocacy against rights for transgender women in particular. While public libraries in many cases are just beginning to offer washroom alternatives for trans individuals and allow them to use their preferred names when applying for library cards, they have for decades been a place for someone questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation to find materials to help them explore their options and decide what is right for them. This is particularly critical for trans and nonbinary youth who often struggle alone and who may become desperate enough to be suicidal during that struggle, who may be homeless and need resources such as public computers

to maintain vital supports. A noted trans author with whom I spoke said they would defend the right of Murphy to have a book on library shelves. But platforming is different. Unlike a material resource that one can choose to borrow or not, to read or not, the message surrounding and during an event is hard to ignore. In their words, "Platforming hate speech against my community renders the space itself unsafe for me, personally, before during and after, and you (in my mind) can't stick rainbow stickers up in the same space as hate speech against trans people is being platformed. It's one or the other." The library community—and its broader community of supporters—remains seriously divided. Many of us, however, are still struggling to figure out where we stand—to figure out how our wish to allow diverse views and our genuine desire to be respectful and inclusive can work together. We need to continue to talk to each other, to seek understanding with those with whom we disagree, to find a way to move forward that truly honors both intellectual freedom and inclusion.

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