Against the Grain

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Back Talk -- Freedom to Read, Speak, and Listen

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these books, long strips of yellow paper with words like “counter revolutionary literature” had been pasted cross-wise on the shelving to identify these were corrupting materials and to save them from destruction. In 1979 the scraps of the paper strips were still visible. Now, the strips are long gone with open stack libraries the rule and a very wide range of materials to read. Yet, there are still some sensitive topics for which no books are acquired, e.g., Taiwanese independence, Tibetan independence, etc.

For the second question, which overlaps with the first one, are there any limits even for a public library or a university, I think the answer is NO, but again I would suggest that the librarian managing the collection should be allowed to exercise flexibility in how this is done. A theological library of any bent should provide access to “opposing points of view” even if its only purpose is to give its users an understanding of what they are up against. This is still a problem in many parts of the world. Librarians are not always free to build balanced collections. An acquaintance of mine back in the 1960s went to a Communist bookstore in one country only to be called in to explain what he was doing when he returned to his home country and the security police noticed his face among the photographs taken of all customers leaving that bookstore. This sort of activity has no place in a free society.

As for the third question, I don’t think there are any libraries which introduce the books in their collections from their online or card (any still left?) catalogs using subject headings like Thug Authors, Ignoramus Authors, and Terrorist Authors. Yet, putting non rare books in a locked case for reasons other than preservation or value does send the reader a signal that something is awry — especially if the book is controversial within the social/cultural milieu of that library. In America, during the Cultural Revolution period of China, readers were subject to a mild form of “poisonous weed” labeling. When we bought books from stores like China Books and Periodicals (founded by the son of China missionaries but who embraced the New China) each one had a stamp on the title page indicating something like “Published in Communist China, etc.” Were I in America I think I could still find some of those books in the stacks to find the exact wording of what was stamped in the books but since this was not the practice in Hong Kong, I can’t. In any event, the reader was reminded that these were politically suspect; that they were published in a country declared to be an enemy of the American people, and the reader was to be aware of the poisonous nature of the contents.

Hopefully most libraries will continue to be places where different points of view can be read and heard, where readers are allowed to read broadly and develop their own conclusions, and where calls for this or that point of view to be censored will be rejected. This should be the goal; unfortunately it is still not a universal reality.

By September 2007, only eight vendors were compliant with the Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works. Why so few, when there are over 70 vendors compliant with the Code of Practice for Journals and Databases? Several reasons have become apparent. First, there has been much lower customer demand for usage statistics for online books, although there are signs that such demand is now building. Second, online books are at a much earlier stage in their evolution; vendors are still experimenting with a range of technical and business models. Third, even those vendors that are compliant with the Code of Practice for Journals and Databases have found it challenging to comply with the new Code of Practice. In some cases this is due to technical problems; online books are often published on a different platform with different technical capabilities. In other cases the problems are organizational; books are published in a different division than journals and the management has different priorities. Having said that, the number of applications for compliance with the Code of Practice has increased significantly in recent months.
Back Talk — Freedom to Read, Speak and Listen

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By the time this Back Talk is published, the invitation of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to Columbia University will be old history, but it got me to thinking about freedom to read sorts of issues.

The basics it seems are fairly simple: A very controversial actor on the world political stage comes to New York and is asked to take the ride up to Columbia University to speak. That Columbia would invite such a speaker should be no surprise. It may be an Ivy League university but it is anything but sleepy. It is in New York City, the capital of in-your-face and cutting-edge everything.

The reaction to the President’s speaking at Columbia was, however, anything but simple. Here is but a smattering of the un-profane reactions:

• “At the same time President Ahmadinejad will be addressing the Columbia University audience, Iranian agents will continue smuggling weapons across the Iraqi border with one goal in mind: arming insurgents to attack and kill U.S. military...” Representative Duncan Hunter, California.

• “Mr. Ahmadinejad is a hate-mongering extremist who has sponsored terrorism, denied and mocked the Holocaust and called for Israel to be wiped off the map.” The Washington Times, September 26, 2007.

• “Abe Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, called Ahmadinejad’s planned visit ‘a perversion of the concept of freedom of speech!’” Daily News, September 21, 2007.

• “John McCain noted that Columbia has refused to allow military recruiters on campus since 1969 but has no problem welcoming Ahmadinejad, who arrives Sunday to address the UN.” Daily News, September 21, 2007.

• “GOP presidential hopeful Mitt Romney said it’s disappointing ‘when our academic institutions can’t draw a line between people who bring legitimate differences in perspective versus those who are completely out of touch with reality.’” Daily News, September 21, 2007.

The reactions after his speech were equally colorful. Here are some of the comments by Columbia alums:

• “The result? The global dissemination of the genocidal and otherwise morally disgusting viewpoints of a powerful but petty thug, terrorist and ignoramus.” Columbiaspectator Online edition, September 27, 2007.

• “Since when [has] insulting the invited guests at Columbia become an acceptable norm?” Columbiaspectator Online Edition, September 27, 2007.

• “Mr Ahmadinejad responded exactly how I hoped he would: he demonstrated to America what an absolute lunatic he is.” Columbiaspectator Online Edition, September 26, 2007.

• “What if this were an American politician who advocated the nuclear destruction of all Indian reservations and the elimination of all Native Americans? Would THAT person have been given a forum?” Columbiaspectator Online Edition, September 26, 2007.

• “The last person in history to propose that the death of the Jewish people deserved discussion in any media was behind the whole thing in attempt to bolster President Bush’s approval rating by giving the American people a president, who was even less erudite, with whom to compare their president.

So, what has this to do with freedom to read/listen? For me it is fairly simple: What was being debated was:

• Should a person (recorded communication in any media) whose views are repugnant to most people, be allowed to speak (be read, listened to, etc.)?

• What are the limits of “freedom of speech”? — Let nice guys (recorded presentations) whose opinions the group sponsoring the talk agree with (legitimate talk or let anyone with a point of view speak/be read, etc., (including thugs, terrorists, and ignoramuses)?

• If you decide to invite such a person (add the recorded communication to your collection including adding a link from your catalog or library Webpage), how should he/she/it be treated?

For me, the answer to the first question, should libraries acquire and provide access to recorded communications no matter how repugnant, is YES — but of course it depends upon the nature of the library. PUBLIC libraries should do so since they are charged with meeting the reading needs of all the people. Of course how this is done is open to discussion. With the Web, libraries can link to all sorts of discourses from their catalogs easily, or they can obtain encrypted treatments of a broad range of different points of view on a particular topic. In some countries here in Asia this course of action is not yet possible. Yet progress is being made. The memory of visiting one of the two largest public libraries in China during 1979 still sticks in my mind. During the Cultural Revolution virtually all but a few books were banned, particularly those published in non-Chinese languages and those published earlier because of the “poisonous weeds” they might contain. Yet, to protect

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