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Op-Ed--Walking the Tightrope

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Op—Ed — Opinions and Editorials

Walking the Tightrope

by Julie Pringle (Fairfax County Public Library)

The opinions expressed here are my own, and do not represent the official opinions of the Fairfax County Public Library, Virginia. If you have any questions, or if I can be of any help, feel free to call me at (703) 222-3111. — JP

FYI

More specific information about the sequence of events referred to in this article can be found in *The Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, and the *Fairfax Journal* from 1992 forward. An interesting article on the situation in both Fairfax County and neighboring Loudoun County, Virginia, is in the Canadian monthly, *Church & State* (v.48, no.10, November 1995, pp.8-12).

A *Library Hotline* (April 15, 1996) summary of recent programs held at the PLA Portland Conference included a discussion of the program "Family Friendly Libraries: Sense or Censorship," featuring **Karen Jo Gounoud** of Family Friendly Libraries and **John Clark** of Northern Virginia Citizens Against Censorship — both residents of Fairfax County, Virginia, and both involved in the ongoing debate in Fairfax County about libraries, their collections, and their access policies. The program was on the national conference agenda because the issues and controversies that have been raised in Fairfax County, Virginia are being raised across the country.

The subject of public library collections and what they should contain has always been controversial. How a library's collection reflects a diverse community's needs and interests — and whether it should — has been a major issue in the Fairfax County Public Library for the past several years, and is still an issue. The controversy began in 1992 when the decision was made to distribute free copies of a weekly newspaper, the *Washington Blade*, which had been in the library's collection for over 20 years with no previous complaints. I am convinced that if the *Washington Blade* had not been the issue, another title in the collection would have been.

Questions about whether public libraries should provide a variety of materials, reflective of a diverse and pluralistic society, or whether they should provide only materials which espouse "traditional family values" are only part of the current debate. Questions about whether materials selected for adults should be available for children to read in the library or to check out, and many other questions about access, display and location of materials, have also been raised in Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) and elsewhere. The issues we are dealing with are part of a larger issue. They could be seen as a test case for special interest group control of public institutions.

In Fairfax County, there were two major public arenas for the issues: the press, and the Library Board. For the press — always out for a good story, writing under a deadline — Karen Jo Gounoud was good copy. She and the organization she later formed got good coverage for their perspective in the Washington area from the start. The anti-censorship perspective did not get good or informed coverage until Northern Virginia Citizens Against Censorship was formed. I am convinced that without the formation of this citizen group for balance, the story in Fairfax would have been quite different. Since this balance has been achieved, I am convinced that democracy is working in Fairfax County — because democracy by its nature is a process that incorporates many voices and many opinions. In communities where this balance has not been achieved, the story can be quite different — and a small group of people can impose their opinions on others.

The public library system in Fairfax is governed by an administrative board, representative of county citizens, appointed by the elected Board of Supervisors of the county. Many of the issues raised by Karen Jo Gounoud became major issues for the library because they were

introduced and/or supported by one or more members of the appointed Library Board. Library Board meetings became a focus of special interest group attention, and it required a great deal of courage and energy to be a Library Board member and to withstand some of the extreme and sometimes vicious and personal tactics of some citizens. But Library Board members of all perspectives and opinions participated in the process following Board procedures. Here again, democracy prevailed. In a different situation, with less dedicated board members, or a different structure, the outcome could have been quite different.

Selecting materials for library collections has largely been an easy job; but an era of rising costs, declining budgets, and increased expectations has changed the job from difficult to extremely challenging. Controversy about collection content and attacks on library collection policy make the process even more challenging. Yet, since FCPL has had a thoughtful and thorough Library Board-approved selection policy in place since 1983, the collection management office in FCPL has been free to select a wide range of materials following these guidelines. These materials, in our professional judgment, best suit the goals of our system and the needs of the varied people and communities the library serves. We also go out of our way to ensure that the collection is responsive to citizen input, and measure collection use extensively. Thus FCPL's collection includes materials that reflect the viewpoints and perspectives not only of — for example — the Northern Virginia Citizens Against Censorship, but also those of Family Friendly Libraries.

The 1983 selection policy is still in place, supported by a majority of the Library Board. This support is there in large part because of the principles and personal courage of many library board members, FCPL's library director **Sam Clay**, library staff, and many citizens of Fairfax County. And because, I believe, the policy is inclusive and democratic.

Since this is a real-life story, there are often more questions than answers. But are there any lessons that might be applicable in other places and other types of libraries?

•• Importance of a selection policy.

To borrow a question from **Will Manley**, (*American Libraries*, October, 1994) does intellectual freedom give libraries the right to lie? Are libraries in the position of judging whether opinions are true, or should we offer a wide range of opinion? How do we separate truth from opinion? Should we? Is it our role to judge what is true and what isn't, or is it our role to respond to our user's demands for material by providing information that corresponds to what is available in the "marketplace of ideas" and to provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas?

FCPL's selection policy emphasizes the selection of a responsive and diverse collection, representing multiple viewpoints. "Different viewpoints on controversial issues will be acquired, including those which may have unpopular or unorthodox opinions." I interpret the FCPL collection statement to mean that FCPL's collection should be inclusive. The library profession is not necessarily in agreement about what should go in a collection, or about what selection policies should be. It is easier to select materials that you agree with. It is harder to

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defend materials that you don't agree with. The FCPL selection policy says the collection should include both. I agree, but not all libraries will. It is imperative that all of us think carefully about these issues. Each library system should think carefully about these issues, and should have policies in place to deal with people who do not agree with what they carry.

•• **Non-biased and responsive selection.**

One of the perennial questions in collection development is when selection becomes self-censorship, and I think it's important to talk about because self-censorship can be tempting when selection policies and selections are questioned. Selection can also become censorship if what we like plays a part in what we select.

The process of non-biased selection is a difficult one, and is open to abuse by library selectors if we aren't constantly aware that what we like has nothing to do with what is appropriate to select. As much as possible we need to use agreed-upon objective criteria to select materials for our libraries. That's another way of saying that we select materials based on our institution's goals, its selection policy, and responsiveness to our users.

A local Fairfax County newspaper, responding to excerpts from some FCPL materials that had been taken out of context, encouraged library staff to use "plain-vanilla common sense" when selecting, or deciding not to select, materials for the public library. When does plain-vanilla common sense become self-censorship? Selection is always a difficult balancing act, especially when you don't have enough money, and constantly have to make choices between what to buy and what not to buy. To me, being a selector is like being a high-wire performer. You can't become careless or complacent. You need to constantly balance pressures from one direction with pressures from all the other directions. Or you'll fall, and won't reach your goal — inclusiveness and objectivity. But I also think that you need pressures

from all directions — because if you lean too far in one direction or another, you'll also fall. And fail.

How can you avoid what happened in Fairfax County? I don't think you can. But you can be prepared for it, and plan for how to handle it. Libraries are uniquely vulnerable because a person who's looking for something offensive can generally find it. If we're doing our jobs, the collections contain, and I quote again from the FCPL selection policy, "... materials which offend, shock, or bore one reader but are considered pleasing, meaningful, or significant by another." It's pretty easy to take one book and take pictures and text out of context and make a case for protecting children from ideas and information they're not ready for, for controlling what children have access to, and therefore controlling what goes into a collection. But this is a democracy. Everyone has a right to an opinion, and public institutions should represent multiple viewpoints. We will continue to be a democracy as long as all of us participate in the process. In Fairfax County, people who disagree with Ms. Gounoud — like Valerie Eastwood and John Clark of Northern Virginia Citizens Against Censorship and their supporters — are active and have invested enormous energy in this debate. As have Karen Jo Gounoud and supporters of Family Friendly Libraries. That's what democracies are all about. And why public libraries are part of this debate.

The past four years have not been easy — all involved parties have spent a great deal of time and energy on the issue of collections and policies relating to collection access. But these issues have inevitably led to questioning why public libraries exist, and who we serve. These issues are real, and our assumptions about them should not be taken for granted. Time spent dealing with them, and reviewing policies related to fundamental principles, and how we interact with and respond to our constituents, is never wasted. If public libraries are to be responsive, which I believe we have to be to survive, we need to listen to all of our constituents, and the collection needs to respond to a wide variety of interests and perspectives. By the same token — a few constituents should not dictate what is available to all.

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supply the correct item. Libraries can benefit from expressing their requirements to vendors unambiguously and completely. It is false economy for libraries to shortchange pre-order searching and verification in the hope that the vendor will do it. The quality of orders libraries send to vendors ultimately affects costs.

Across the industry, cost savings and benefits of speed and accuracy can be achieved from increasing accuracy in the use of ISBNs. The ISBN system seems to be here to stay. During the first 25 years of use, ISBNs were assigned to an estimated seven to eight million titles worldwide and uses were found for the number beyond those envisioned by the system's creators.¹⁵ There is every reason to believe that use will continue to expand. Libraries, vendors and publishers all have a contribution to make towards its increased success.

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nals" which often consist simply of sites on the World Wide Web to which new information or articles are added. Are these serials, books, or something else entirely? And, how many ISSN does a publisher need — or want

— for a given title in various formats? What constitutes a "reproduction" in the online environment?

These are just some of the challenges that NSDP staff face every day, but fortunately, for the most part, we find such challenges exciting rather than daunting. When publishers call us to ask about ISSN for a kind of

FOOTNOTES

¹International ISBN Agency, *Publishers' International ISBN Directory*, 22nd ed. 1995/96 (Munchen; New Providence: K. G. Saur; Berlin: International ISBN Agency; New Providence: R. R. Bowker, 1995), ix.

²Ibid.

³*The ISBN System Users' Manual* (Berlin: International ISBN Agency, 1986), 11-12.

⁴Ibid., 14.

⁵Koltay, Emery, "Standard Book Numbering." In *The Bowker Annual* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1969), 72.

⁶Bowers, Richard A., "ISBN: A Marketing Infrastructure for Publishers." *CD-ROM Professional* (May 1993): 100.

⁷"BISAC E-Mail Orders." *Harrassowitz Newsletter* (Feb. 1996): 5.

⁸Barwick, Margaret, "Survey on the Use of ISBNs in Libraries." *ISBN Review* (1994): 35-46.

⁹Scumson, John, "Numerical Analysis: Paying the Authors." In *ISBNs in Book Ordering and Control: It's All Done by Numbers* together with *The Use and Misuse of ISBNs*. (London: MARC Users' Group, 1986), 6.

¹⁰Eaglen, Audrey B., "The ISBN: A Good Tool Sorely Misused." *Collection Building* (1989): 74.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.: 75-76.

¹⁴"The Use and Misuse of ISBNs: The Report of the MARC Users' Group." In *ISBNs in Book Ordering and Control: It's All Done by Numbers together with The Use and Misuse of ISBNs*. (London: MARC Users' Group, 1986), 47.

¹⁵"Twenty-five Years Playing the ISBN Numbers Game." *Library Association Record* (Dec. 1991): 821.

publication we've never even heard of, we feel like pioneers on the electronic frontier, gazing in wonder at each new electronic "creature" that comes our way. And, while we're not sure what the serial of the future will look like, we all are quite determined that it will need an ISSN and that NSDP should be there to give it one!