

January 2, 2024

The Freedom to Read statement is a statement that supports intellectual freedom as expressed in the *Library Bill of Rights*, elaborating upon principles I. – V. It was first written in 1953 in response to a wave of censorship attempts related to anti-communism. It was drafted at a conference sponsored jointly by American Library Association and the American Book Publishers Council. It rallies libraries and publishers in taking a firm stand against censorship. Since 1953, the statement has been slightly revised. In 1972, revisions were made to ensure the document addressed universal attempts at censorship, rather than a focus on anti-communism. In 1991, revisions were made to make the statement gender[0 -0.013 Tc 0.013 Tw 0.272 0 Td]

needed to the statement. Publishers were specifically not engaged in this first phase because it is important to first gauge American Library Association members' appetite for a revision. The second proposed phase is to determine co-signatories in the publishing world and the third proposed phase is to revise the statement.

The Task Force engaged American Library Association membership in several ways to solicit feedback on the Freedom to Read Statement.

Listening Sessions

The Task Force hosted

How can the statement encourage publishers and libraries to more actively promote and prioritize literature that represents diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences?

How can the statement more effectively address the issue of removing or

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not really doing anything. There's a lot of, 'well, it's not really a ban. If you can order it from Amazon. We might remove it from the school, but it's not a ban because the family can order it from Amazon.' And I'm concerned. That this is going to increase. And become a new point, a new talking point [for] our opponents. And I think we need to be aware of that and maybe something like this should be addressed.

The responsibilities of publishers and library staff were a focal point of discussion, with a consensus emerging that their duty lies in contesting foc wr

digital materials. The Freedom to View statement, last endorsed by the American Library Association Council in 1990, addresses some of this concern. But there were concerns that because of the evolution of media, a statement focused on the Freedom to Read may be out of step with all the ways people access and engage with information in modern society and in the library setting.

Finally, discussions touched upon the role of publishers.

information, as some students and patrons still rely on library staff to make those determinations for them.

Three smaller notable concepts explored were that the statement should broaden to include:

Library staff do not solely provide resources, but also educate the public about them.

There is a need for libraries to increase information literacy offerings to the public.

As noted earlier, the current statement could improve how it addresses modern media resources beyond reading. Information literacy is most critical for these new information sharing formats.

Libraries and the publishing industry, as well as other media companies, must cope productively with the decline of trust as with other sectors.

... if the Freedom to Read statement reflects that the criminalization of certain materials is a threat, then it does so, but [the statement] can be modified with specific listing or use of examples in relation to said material being prohibited or criminalized. Such as including the words 'sex' or 'gender.'

Politics can be seen in the variety of responses from both the listening sessions and the surveys. Some participants commented that they were from a politically conservative state and that this influenced their views on whether they viewed the Freedom to Read is currently under attack. They also expressed a growing sense of dread at attempts to criminalize their essential library work and to restrict resources. Some from less conservative states expressed the opposite: for example, one respondent from California said there were no issues regarding reading rights.

When laws passed by state legislatures put library work in jeopardy of criminal prosecution, library staff feel intimidation from the state. Added to that is parental and public intimidation that can bring real fear into the library. Most felt the Freedom to Read Statement does not adequately address the issue. In the listening sessions, some participants expressed concern that the American Library Association lacks legal authority to protect library staff who are facing potential criminalization of their actions by state legislators.

It could be argued that the current statement includes legislation under a general umbrella of censorship attempts. But I do feel legislation is qualitatively different than something like citizen attempts.

General support

In the listening sessions, the Task Force heard from many library staff that there is strong support for the current Freedom to Read Statement. Participants shared their thoughts on the timing of revisions. Some suggested that making significant changes in the current political climate might be viewed as a politically charged statement, potentially deterring some individuals or libraries from embracing it. They highlighted the strength of the statement in its current form, as it effectively safeguards the freedom to read for all. Here are a few quotes from those who provided feedback:

There could be a lot of power in this moment to affirm it as is, and not to rewrite it.

Revisions run a high risk of looking political, which will weaken the statement. I worked in libraries for 10 years before I actually read it. And when I finally read it, I found it to be one of the most inspiring of the American Library Association documents. I was really surprised that you guys were thinking about changing it. So, I think I would recommend be very careful about changing it because I think I find it particularly inspiring and powerful statement the way it is now.

I currently use the freedom to read statement. I think it's a valuable statement and it should stand exactly as is.

[The Freedom to Read statement] is a useful tool to help those who are willing to listen. Nothing you could change about the statement will reach those who will not listen.

The strength and durability of the statement as it now stands is that it is NOT overmuch a product of its time. If we make it too much a product of OUR time, it will not age well. Sticking to timeless principles is the way.

I think the strength of the document as it stands is that it clearly articulates democratic enlightenment values which stand true from all perspectives.

These comments suggest that this may not be the right time to edit the Freedom to Read statement.

Inclusion

definitions of marginalized groups.

It is important to acknowledge that while the feedback from these listening sessions was valuable, there were instances of repeated contributions from participants, both verbally and in the chat. Additionally, there was a noticeable lack of racial and ethnic diversity among those who actively participated in the sessions, such as by turning one on n s

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the statement in a way that libraries who want to adopt the statement are no longer able to, are we hurting those librarians/staff/libraries?

I summary, there is momentum in Boards endorsing the statement on a regular basis. thos stat X a7.6 (o ad)-1

Libraries may be at risk of not regaining approval to have the Freedom to Read Statement inform their collections or library policies.

The committee also has concerns regarding signatories. Revising the Freedom to Read Statement would entail the involvement of

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American Library Association leadership and Council have three recommendations to consider, and each has strengths and drawbacks. All were informed by feedback gathered from enthusiastic and engaged library workers and other interested parties. The feedback gathered through the listening sessions and surveys was indispensable in recommending approaches that reflect the current needs of libraries. The Freedom to Read statement is one of the most powerful and well-known statements made by library professionals, yet its reach can go further. “The freedom to read is essential to our democracy. It is continuously under attack.” Now more than ever, libraries must stand united with publishers and the public in jealously guarding this essential freedom.

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Review plan

Prepared by Johannah Genett (Committee Associate, Intellectual Freedom Committee)

Summer 2023

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At least 4 online virtual meetings open to all American Library Association members to give feedback on current statement. Themes for these meetings are the following:

How does the current statement reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion and how might it be improved in this area?

How does the current statement address current materials and author challenges and how might it be improved in this area?

How does the current statement address the theme of US democracy and the First Amendment, and how might it be improved in this area?

How does the current statement address the themes of disinformation and misinformation, and how might it be improved in this area?

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