

What would you do if your library was asked to host a talk by speaker whose views you disagreed with? Sometimes library staff are put in the position of having to make difficult decisions. So, to give our readers a better understanding of the thought process behind making such a decision, like the one Vickery Bowles made recently for Toronto Public Libraries in Canada, ALIA asked two library leaders, JANE COWELL and ROXANNE MISSINGHAM, to respond to the situation.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

In 2019, the role of spaces in our libraries is being deeply challenged. Recently protests erupted when the Toronto Public Library allowed a speech by anti-trans feminist Meghan Murphy. While Extinction Rebellion hosted a sit-in demonstration when they were banned from a meeting in the rooms of Brisbane City's public libraries.

We are not alone in facing this challenge. Former Chief Justice of the High Court, Robert French, was commissioned by the government to undertake an independent review of freedom of speech in Australian higher education providers. His almost 200-page report (bit.ly/2DHcmrb) takes a broad view of the issues including social, ethical and legal perspectives on this complex matter. He noted the view of Australian National University Chancellor, Gareth Evans, that: 'an absolute priority in this respect is maintaining totally intact, with no qualifications whatever, the traditional idea of the university as the home of free speech, of the clash of ideas, of unconstrained argument and debate'.

To understand the environment around freedom of expression French notes that Australian legislation provides for freedom of speech, religion, association and movement. While the courts have set a high bar in defining speech that is 'offensive, insulting or obscene, harassing or intimidating', there is a balance of perspectives that must be considered beyond any one legislative instrument. His words echo a conundrum: 'there are probably no hard and fast rules which can be devised to cover that aspect of academic freedom. Far more important than rules will be a culture which embraces the inevitability of dissent on the one hand and the importance of compromise to the effective functioning of the institution'.

For libraries, conceptualising our position in this legally and morally complex area must take thoughtful discussion and be drawn from deep theory. Through history libraries have responded to different challenges to knowledge. Our collections reflect the extraordinary biases of



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publishing where many voices were suppressed and indeed many peoples were actively prevented from writing their stories.

Further, taking a broad philosophical view, we need to challenge assumptions of universal independent views of issues and question what may be asserted as knowledge and indeed whose knowledge it is. Contemporary society should be filled with debate with the role of libraries in providing the interstices between the competing opinions constructed from an understanding of philosophies and perspectives.

To frame the intellectual understanding that we need for our members, institutions and the professional association to debate the use of spaces and our collections, it is timely to review our theory of knowledge and library science as well as assess the institutional and legal framework so carefully outlined in the French report. I encourage members to understand the moral bravery of institutions that have allowed deeply confronting issues to be debated but have applied mechanisms that provide value statements from organisations and leaders that give power to balance the debate.

Our narrative is ready for another stage, one in which the professional association can support discussion and analytic thinking to revisit our objective 'to promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy, environment and democracy' in a newly nuanced manner. I look forward to hearing your opinions. 🗣️