



Information for Social Change

"an activist organisation that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers..."



TRACKING SOCIAL ACTION IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION WORK WORLDWIDE

by Toni Samek

Action expresses priorities.
Mohandas Gandhi

Background

Librarians' development and articulation of a broad conception of intellectual freedom has been an important and necessary step in the evolution of librarianship into the 21st century. In 2006, our understanding of intellectual freedom far transcends struggles over classic challenges to library resources as well as more recent controversies around open Internet access policies. We grapple continuously with intellectual freedom issues at countless fronts on local, national, and international levels: commercialization of public space, copyright and access to information, cultural destruction, digital preservation and obligations to memory, imposed technologies, anti-terrorism legislation, poverty, privacy, privatization, self-censorship and information suppression, social exclusion, limits to international exchange of ideas, governmental restriction and surveillance of Internet use, transborder data flow, implications of World Trade Organization agreements such as GATS and TRIPS, freedom of inquiry, access of citizens to government information, suspect communities, the contingent worker model, censorship, and a global infrastructure of mass registration and surveillance. At a level of higher magnitude than even these concerns, however, is the unfortunate recognition that the conditions of intellectual freedom are absolutes (e.g. peace not war or fear of war; justice and just law for all; equal opportunity to education for all; the basics of life regardless of class, wealth, and power; sustainability for untold future generations). Indeed, when in August, IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Committee launched its World Report 2005 on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries titled "Libraries, National Security, Freedom of Information Laws and Social Responsibilities" (a summary of 84 country reports), it sent us a disturbing message: **"the state of intellectual freedom in many parts of the world remains fragile."**

The August IFLA report was heavily reinforced in a December 15, 2005 statement issued by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Ambeyi Ligabo: "The World Summit on the Information Society has been marked by political considerations and commercial perspectives taking precedence over genuine commitment to the respect for human rights, thus marginalizing debate over the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The "Tunis Commitment", one of the Summit's main outcomes, did not fully reflect the actual nature of the debate, particularly participation by the civil society, nor provide solutions to the problems of Internet governance. Access to information, freedom of speech and freedom of expression should be at the heart of any further discussion on the information society. ... Too many governments are still putting obstacles to people's exercise of freedom of opinion and expression, and particularly media freedom ... A good occasion to demonstrate openness and respect for freedom of expression was wasted." [United Nations Press Release. UN Expert: Political and Commercial Considerations Took Precedence Over Human Rights at Information Society Summit." December 15, 2005.]

Responsibilities associated with the role of the librarian in society are encoded in our ethics statements, intellectual freedom statements, and so on. For example, the first directive in the Canadian Library Association *Code of Ethics* is to "support and implement the principles and practices embodied in the current Canadian Library Association *Statement on Intellectual Freedom*". This statement in turn directs that we "have a duty" to uphold the principles of intellectual freedom. I would argue that our duty is our daily strength in a fragile world.

Project

One of the expressed aims of Information for Social Change (ISC) is "to encourage information workers to come together, to share ideas," and "to foster" alternatives. [Excerpt from the ISC website.] Having recently joined the ISC Board, I felt it only appropriate that I share something along these lines. So, this brief article is to alert readers that I am writing a book for CHANDOS (Oxford) Publishing titled *Librarianship and Human Rights: A 21st Century Guide*. The 2006 book is intended to be of practical help to library and information workers worldwide who face issues on which they seek to – AND quite likely have a professional responsibility to -- address at individual, institutional and/or societal levels. The work is grounded in practical, critical, and emancipatory terms; social action is a central theme.

In a 2001 book by Neva Welton and Linda Wolf titled *Global Uprising: Confronting the Tyrannies of the 21st Century: Stories from a New Generation of Activists* (New Society Publishers), the authors identify the following manifestations of social action: anarchism, campaign, cooperation, coalition, infiltration, mass direct action, militancy, mobilization, movement, nontraditional associations and collaboration, nonviolent direct action, organization, refuge, resistance, revitalization, solidarity, struggle, and survival. In *Librarianship and Human Rights*, I adapt each of these broad manifestations to the context of library and information work for social change. I provide examples presented

in quoted/excerpted format in order to retain the authentic voices/messages of the actors. Although concentration is on Canada and the U.S., the examples selected also reference numerous other geographical contexts including Africa, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijani, the Balkans, Chile, China, Cuba, Germany, Iceland, IFLA-level work, India, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, North-South cooperation, Pakistan, South-east Asia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, U.K., and Venezuela. For illustration, an example of the broad social action *survival* is treated below in the context of library and information work.

Example: Library services to address poverty, homelessness, and people living on fixed income. Brief Description: “In the wake of recent news reports, the Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force wishes to express concern about public libraries adopting punitive policies clearly targeted at homeless people. “[Odor policies](#)” of the sort enacted by San Luis Obispo County, California, and the “[civility campaign](#)” launched by Salt Lake City Library to “teach the homeless, children and others how to behave” (*Deseret Morning News*, 3/9/05) are at best misguided and at worst contribute to the criminalization of the poor. Libraries are now participating in a deliberate process that geographer Don Mitchell calls “the annihilation of space by law”: The anti-homeless laws being passed in city after city in the United States work in a pernicious way: by redefining what is acceptable behavior in public space, by in effect annihilating the spaces in which people must live, these laws seek simply to annihilate homeless people themselves ... we are creating a world in which a whole class of people cannot be—simply because they have no place to be. Homeless people are forced to live and dwell in public places. Why? Because we fail to create adequate, dignified shelter and affordable housing options that provide private space—among other basic human needs—for our most vulnerable citizens. We want to clarify that poor hygiene and homelessness are conditions of extreme poverty, not types of behavior—a view inadvertently promoted by “problem patron” literature in recent years.” We challenge policy makers and front-line librarians to review the American Library Association’s [Policy 61](#) (“Library Services for Poor People”) and ask themselves the following questions: Do I understand the scope of poverty in my community and its human face? Are our programs and services inclusive of all poor people and their needs? Do we actively partner with social service providers and anti-poverty groups? Do we advocate for public funding of programs that help poor people? Do our actions address core problems or simply treat superficial symptoms? ... The democratic principles that govern our work demand a humane and informed response to people struggling with homelessness and poverty.” [Are Public Libraries Criminalizing Poor People?” March 21, 2005. Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force. Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association.]

The *Librarianship and Human Rights* treatment of broad manifestations of social action are reinforced by coverage of more than fifty discrete forms of action. These include: adventurous programming; alternative action programs; alternative conference guides; alternative conference programs; awards; blogs; books; boycotts; campaigns; civic voting; conference/pre-conference activity; coalition; cooperation; court cases; critical dialogue; declarations; dedications; development; disaster response; dissent; documentation; eco-friendly; education; educative approaches; essay contests for scholarships; expositions; fairs; fundraising; government lobbying; grassroots; guides;

history; honouring activism; interviews; leadership development; letters; listservs; manifestos; media response; media relations management; meetings with government; memory projects; multidisciplinary and international cooperation; naming responsibly; outreach; petitions; platforms; position statements : posters; press releases; proclamations; products; protests; publishing; rallies; reaffirmations; representation ; resolutions; speaker series; speeches; seminars; student groups; symposiums; texts; translations; and, trustee education.

Benefit

A subtext of Librarianship and Human Rights is to help include (and de-marginalize) within library discourse the agendas of numerous library groups (local, national, and international) who readily identify as progressive, critical, activist, radical, alternative, independent, socially responsible, and/or anarchist in orientation. These groups (e.g., Anarchist Librarians Web, Bibliotek i Samhälle, Cuban Libraries Solidarity Group, El Grupo de Estudios Sociales en Bibliotecología y Documentación, Information for Social Change, Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group, Progressive Librarians Guild, Radical Reference, Librarians Without Borders, Social Responsibilites Round Table of the American Library Association) represent various points on a continuum of library perspectives, are sometimes complementary in their approach to issues, are sometimes at odds (e.g. Cuban libraries), and ultimately demonstrate both varying degrees of difference and commonality in their social action agendas. For example, lib-plic is an active contemporary international library network of progressive librarians who participate in “exchanging views, submitting early warnings, sending signed petitions or other letters in urgent issues” that threaten libraries and intellectual freedom. But participants in lib-plic “don't have to share a common view on each library or social subject” and “are not obliged to go along with every initiative on the list.” However, lib-plic participants do share a common ground. [Bibliotek i Samhälle (BIS) website. “The lib-plic list.” http://www.foreningenbis.org/English/lib_plic.html]

Readers are encouraged to track such library rhetoric through the practical examples. In the process, it should become apparent that social action in the context of library and information work involves both so-called “mainstream” and progressive pushes. Historically, the profession's claim to library neutrality drew a line between library issues and so-called non-library issues. This line has been paralleled in a categorical division between library advocacy and library activism. Hopefully, Librarianship and Human Rights will help to blur these artificial lines -- and to expose them as both counter-intuitive and counter-productive to the very nature of our work.

Toni Samek, Author of *Librarianship and Human Rights: a 21st Century Guide*, Chandos Publishing: Oxford, 2006. See: http://www.chandospublishing.com/catalogue/record_detail.php?recordID=82