

Your voice

Intellectual freedom: the primary professional rationale?

John Levett is a veteran stirrer. His titillations on censorship are paraded unashamedly before us in both of the recent issues (*inCite* June p20, July p5). Described bluntly, they are a mish-mashed resurrection of age-old controversies.

Not content to condemn censorship caused by religions, governments, managers, telcos, monarchists, pedestrians, women in shearing sheds, executioners, film-makers, merchandisers, ISPs, and loners in June, by July 'library educators' have been added to his whopping black-list of miscreants.

John's language is sensationalist, chauvinistic and conspiratorial. For instance, his 'sub-pubescent females' in shopping malls are not necessary to his argument at all, but presumably are inserted to create a gloss.

He refers to a 'recent' meeting of 'a significant number' of library educators in Adelaide. The time was actually last December. It was a well-publicised forum which included many more librarians and students than it did 'library educators', and it was reported in *inCite*. I attended. One purpose of the meeting was to discuss the feasibility of unearthing a set of core values in librarianship and professional ethos. My memory of the discussion bears no resemblance to John's depiction of a gaggle of rabid economic rationalists.

One of many questions bandied about was whether 'intellectual freedom' was the primary professional rationale for all libraries today. There was no mention of censorship. The meeting raised objections to elevating any single professional value above a full gamut of fundamental values.

It was considered that commodification of 'knowledge products' and services, and mass production of most publications, limited the actual influence of libraries on generic societal mores. In addition, the full range of library sectors and institutional contexts was one reason to prevent the viability of making a ranking within or outside any hypothetical 'Bill of Rights'. Only about five minutes were allotted to discussion of these big questions, and attendees agreed that much more time should be set aside

to discuss them fully. No recommendation was forthcoming.

In lieu of a supposed censored or censorious cabal, we sped tentatively through a variety of issues requiring further consideration. Next time John should join us.

**Graeme Johanson,
Brunswick**

Respecting religion...

I was interested to read the articles on censorship in June *inCite*. John Levett [p20] mentions Sir Arthur Rylah and Ronald Ryan: it is also worth noting the name George Hodson — he was the prison warder killed by Ryan.

John is fairly dismissive of religion in relation to the real world and the offence of blasphemy. However, Mairéad Browne in her article talks of the need to withhold from general circulation 'certain Aboriginal knowledge' for cultural reasons.

If Aborigines' beliefs are treated with respect, so should those of Christians and members of other religions, and blasphemy not be treated as a joke?

If it's good for school children to read books with 'dirty' words in them, why not allow them to experience a wider range of 'filth'? Schools could save money by cancelling the cleaning contracts for classrooms, eating areas and toilets.

Keith Gaymer, Dapto

Freedom to read?

John Levett's letter (*Your voice*, July) is replete with multiple ironies. He claims that his article 'Censorship: some contemporary reflections' (*inCite*, June 2000, pp20–21) was censored by the 'managing editor' — who also appeared in print in that issue deploring the use of software to block e-mails containing potentially offensive language.

The apparent unwillingness of *inCite* to publish the 'F' word — I can only assume it is the 'F' word — inhibits quotation from a major reference tool to which most of your readers have ready access, and to which many have frequent recourse. I refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and I wish to quote from it because Professor Levett refers to the word in question as an 'Anglo-Saxon expression'. The earliest occurrences of the 'F' word recorded by the *OED* are, however, all Lowland Scots: 'Be his feris he wald have fukkit' (William

Dunbar, 1503); 'Bischops ... may f— their fill and be unmarryt' (Sir David Lindsay, 1535); 'Thir foure, the suth to sane, Enforsis thame to f—ing' (Alexander Scott, 1568). No Sassenach is known to have used the word until 1598 when John Florio, a first-generation Pom, glossed the Italian 'fottere' as 'to iape, to sard, to f—e, to swive, to occupy.' Hengist and Horsa may possibly have 'swived' but they almost certainly never 'f—ed.'

'Freedom to read' is not just a political catch-phrase to defend down-at-heel public libraries: it is a basic professional need for all of us who work in the 'information industry'. Whichever sector we work in, our job requires of us that we understand and anticipate our clients' information needs. We are confronted daily with the Sisiphean task of imposing order on the ever-expanding universe of knowledge.

If we censor our own professional discourse, we are beaten before we start.

Ian Morrison, Melbourne

What are our core values?

No, John Levett, there was not a 'significant number' (*inCite* July 2000) of library educators equivocal about the importance of the profession's commitment to intellectual freedom at the December 1999 Adelaide seminar.

There were enough, nonetheless, to perplex and worry most participants, not the least the American and Canadian educators present. One of them, the convener of the Canadian Library Association's committee on intellectual freedom and who teaches intellectual freedom in her library school could barely believe her ears. The equivocators appeared to have lost sight of the fact that our profession, in all of its manifestations, is about more — much more — than just information management and technology.

It is indeed an ill wind that blows no good, however. The debate showed clearly that the sooner the profession has a clear statement of its core values as a reference point for library education course recognition, the better it will be.

Michael Gorman in his Adelaide 98 conference keynote address 'New libraries, old values' made the points about the enduring values and

breadth of responsibility of the profession as well as anyone. That address is at pages 29–34 of the printed proceedings *Pathways to knowledge*, edited by Di Booker and published by ALIA. In it Gorman reminds us that we are the custodians of the human record. How ironic, then, that there will be no permanent formal record of the proceedings of the ALIA2000 conference — only papers posted on a web-site. Of all the professions we, surely, should show awareness that the only reliable way to share and preserve text for present and future generations remains to print it on acid free paper, bind it and distribute it to as many libraries as possible.

The proceedings of the Adelaide 1900 conference of the Library Association of Australasia I located easily and consulted recently. Those of the Adelaide 98 conference I similarly located easily and consulted recently. In my extreme dotage in the year 2100, I will still be able to locate and consult them — but what of the outcomes of the ALIA2000 conference? The decision not to produce printed proceedings is even worse than those conferences which produce so-called, and usually incomplete, proceedings before the conference has proceeded. Are the papers at ALIA2000 to be so ephemeral as to be unworthy of maximum accessibility and preservation? Of course not.

Conference proceedings can be — usually are — a collecting, editorial, fiscal and publishing pain in the arse. One can sympathise with the decision of the hard-pressed conference committee to take the 'electronic easy route', but it should reconsider. A limited print-run using Docutechs and responding to firm orders would be at least cost-recoverable — and if an editor cannot be found or funded, at least one volunteer would be forthcoming.

Alan Bundy, Hawthorndene

Your voice

Your letters on any issue of relevance to the library and information sector are welcomed.

All letters should be addressed to the *inCite* editor and may be e-mailed to incite@alia.org.au, or faxed to 02 6282 2249, or posted to: *Your voice*, ALIA, PO Box E441, Kingston ACT 2604. Please include your name and postal address with your letter or e-mail.

Letters will be accepted for publication until the 18th of the month.