

Intellectual Freedom 2005, a Conference Report

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Intellectual freedom is a core value of librarianship and must be defended. This point was well illustrated by Judith Krug, Kathy Hoeth, and Howard Simon, the three speakers at the Intellectual Freedom in Libraries: Challenges and Status, 2005 program. Held at Fort Lauderdale's African American Research Library and Cultural Center Auditorium on February 18, the event was organized and coordinated by Dr. Laurence Miller, Board Member of the Florida Library Association, past chair of the Intellectual Freedom Roundtable, and Executive Director of the Florida International University Library. This event, along with a similar one in Tampa, was sponsored by the Florida Library Association and co-sponsored by ACLU of Florida, TBLC (the Tampa Bay Library Consortium) and SEFLIN (Southeast Florida Library Information Network.)

Keynote speaker Judith Krug, the director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, stressed the importance of intellectual freedom as the essential component of libraries' service to their communities. She added that a self-governing people must have access to information in order to make informed, intelligent decisions, and libraries, as purveyors of information, are a vital part of this process. Krug also named patron privacy as another key component of librarianship and discussed the ramifications of the USA Patriot Act on patron privacy, especially Section 215, which, in requiring organizations to give all information deemed relevant in investigating suspected terrorists, makes it impossible for libraries to protect patron confidentiality. Describing the post-9/11 information landscape, Krug observed that large amounts of previously unclassified information have been removed from websites and depositories by the government without notice and without records being kept of what had been removed. Among the types of information removed, she cited quality of drinking water, safety information on airplanes, trains and automobiles, and tire safety. Krug added that an independent government-funded inquiry determined, ironically enough, that keeping this information available did not threaten national security.

Krug also discussed the threat to intellectual freedom posed by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which she said claims to have the right to enforce trade restrictions against enemy nations, including prohibiting US publishers from publishing works by authors from enemy nations, including Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Sudan. Following a lawsuit, the government loosened its restrictions, now only requiring a publisher to have a license to publish. However, Krug noted, works from enemy nations can only be published in the US with 'no value added' – meaning no editing, grammar or spelling corrections, or translations into English. The work can only be published 'as is.'

Krug then discussed the pros and cons for libraries of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), which utilizes a millimeter sized chip with ID number and transponder used to track any commercial products and US currency. On the plus side, these devices are helpful for inventory purposes, self checkout and free up staff for other duties. However, Krug noted that RFID can compromise patron privacy as information is collected by third parties. On a positive note, she

said that measures under consideration to protect patron privacy from RFID include splitting transactional information from personal information and preventing patron information from being gathered via RFID.

Kathy Hoeth's presentation, "What to Do Before the Censor Comes," illustrated the importance of having established policies and procedures to deal with patron challenges to library materials. She stressed that all library staff, whether full-time, part-time, or student workers must know what to do and whom to contact when confronted with patron complaints regarding items in the collection. Everyone on staff must be aware of their library's collection development policy and be able to explain why disputed materials were chosen for the collection. Hoeth urged librarians to maintain close ties with advisory groups, Board's of Governors, Friends of the Library, and other non-librarians. Sensitivity to patrons' concerns, coupled with the ability to convince them of librarians' expertise in selecting materials for their communities consistent with the intellectual freedom principles of librarianship, are a must, Hoeth said. Librarians must also cultivate good relationships with community journalists, she added.

Florida ACLU Executive Director Howard Simon's presentation "Developing Patriot Act Policies and Procedures," discussed the Patriot Act in the broad context of understanding the need for greater security protections. However, he stressed that many sections were excessively invasive and should be removed. Of the 15 federal acts and 831 separate statutes, the most problematic were Sections 215 and 505 according to Simon. Section 505 allows the FBI to get obtain personal information as long they believe that it is relevant to an investigation of terrorist activities. Prior to the Patriot Act, such actions required authorization from the Attorney General or Deputy Attorney General. Presently, any local FBI office may obtain such an authorization whenever they choose. Essentially this act violates Fourth Amendment protections against unlawful searches and seizures.

Question and answer sessions followed each speaker's presentation, enabling both audience and participants to elaborate on the issues raised. These rounded out an enlightening and stimulating afternoon dealing with intellectual freedom, the crucial issue of ongoing concern to librarianship.