A FEW GATES: An Examination of the Social Responsibilities Debate in the Early 1970s & '90s

by Steven Joyce

Social responsibility will someday become once again a burning issue for libraries. Others will come together with new hope, new Congresses for Change, new challenges to make the tired and sterile professional mind whirl about in confusion and anger. (Armitage 1973, 41)

He who defines the terms wins the argument. (Josey 1973, 32)

The July/August 1992 cover photo of American Libraries (AL) depicts a nondescript group of people standing behind a banner that reads, “Gay and Lesbian Task Force: American Library Association” (since renamed the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Task Force). Readership reaction to this cover was swift and surprisingly virulent and homophobic.

I was very displeased by the front cover displaying gay and lesbian librarians marching down Market Street... as a matter of fact I wanted to puke! I have already been called on the carpet by library board members who feel the American Library Association is a “lunatic fringe” association. (Witt 1992, 625)

I still find it reprehensible that an association I am a member of chooses to glorify homosexuals. The vast majority of the American people do not support such a lifestyle that flies in the face of sound family values and a healthy physical and mental wellbeing. (Hartwell 1992, 843)
When I saw how ALA is not a professional organization, but a left wing political group, I vowed that it would never receive a penny from me again. . . . We think homosexuality is WRONG – W-R-O-N-G. It is against God’s laws. . . . I propose that all God-fearing librarians start up an alternative library organization [at the time of this writing, a right-wing organization called Family Friendly Libraries is in the process of development] . (Michell 1992, 843)

Tom Gaughan, AL’s editor at the time, pointed out that

just 24 hours after the advance copies . . . of AL reached our offices, I began to get educated by readers who were irate over the cover photo. . . .

The first call was from a man so livid he had difficulty speaking. . . . he “didn’t care what people do behind closed doors” but it didn’t belong on the cover of his professional association’s magazine. He also said he “lived in a nice neighborhood” and didn’t want anyone to see something like AL’s cover in his mailbox. . . . I was startled at the depth of the fear and anger in his voice. . . . What are they seeing on the cover, I wondered – a group of people standing behind a banner, or sex acts?

The second caller made an analogy between gays and murderers. . . . Several callers criticized the “very poor taste” and the “very poor editorial decision” of selecting the offending cover photo. . . . Another complained that as a school librarian she didn’t want her students to see it. . . . The fear and loathing apparent in their voices was more eloquent than their words. (1992, 612)

Interlaced within the virulent reactions were the calm “well-reasoned” yet logically questionable arguments against such a cover photo.

I’m probably as firm an advocate of Afro-American – Native-American – Gay and lesbian rights as anyone, but I’d like to see the library profession cease its endless advocacy of social issues and return to the difficult issues of operating information agencies. (Brace 1992, 738)

When an organization espouses extreme views it runs a strong risk of losing credibility and effectiveness in its primary function. The question is not whether gays and lesbians are discriminated against, but whether this is an appropriate or relevant issue for ALA. (Rasimus 1992, 625)

Whether AL’s cover photo, in fact, advocates social issues or espouses extreme views is debatable, but it did have the effect of polarizing various factions within the library community. It became the catalyst through which the still festering social responsibilities debate of the early 1970s was reopened and reexamined.

One view, which allies itself primarily with the Library Bill of Rights (see Appendix), has it that ALA involvement with social issues must be limited and directly related to librarianship (Uricchio 1994, 574). The arguments for such a view are fairly simple and straightforward. Librarians should remain neutral and focus only on equitable access to as many points of view as possible. Further, librarians have enough to do in terms of fulfilling basic institutional goals and objectives without spending time and resources on causes that only marginally involve the profession.

Another view, not necessarily antithetical to the Library Bill of Rights, has it that social issues must be investigated. The arguments for this view are somewhat more complex than the neutralist view. Buschman, Rosenzweig, and Harger (1994) argue that “calls for ALA to purge social issues from its substantial and varied agenda are unhealthy for the profession, destructive of internal democracy, fundamentally hypocritical, and intellectually unsound” (575). They argue this for several reasons. First, librarians must become actively engaged in the society that they serve. Librarianship is concerned with literacy, intellectual freedom, and equity of information access. By holding such values, how can librarians ignore issues concerning basic human dignity and the social conditions in which human culture develops? Second, rather than eliminating debate on social issues, such debate should be seen as a sign of a healthy intellectual community. Third, who is to decide what is and is not of primary concern to librarianship? Not every political and social issue is a library one, but it is the job of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) to raise such issues so that their implications for librarianship can be discussed (1994, 576). Further, in some areas (such as Colorado) where librarians can lose their jobs on the basis of a nonconforming sexual orientation, gay rights, as a social issue, becomes directly relevant within the context of librarianship. Thus, it is both unrealistic and naive to think that librarians and librarianship can be
divorced from the social context within which they operate. The present social responsibilities debate, however, is not particularly new, and many of the arguments used today, both for and against, were first employed over 25 years ago.

In 1969, ALA created the SRRT. Its stated purposes were to:

1) provide a forum for the discussion of the responsibilities of libraries in relation to the important problems of social change which face institutions and librarians;
2) provide for exchange of information among all ALA units about library activities with the goal of increasing understanding of current social problems;
3) act as a stimulus to the Association and its various units in making libraries more responsive to current social needs; and,
4) present programs, arrange exhibits and carry out other appropriate activities.
(from ALA, Social Responsibilities Round Table 1970, 5; cited from Stevens 1989, 18)

However, the concept of social responsibilities did not actually become a primary concern until 1971 when the ALA Council voted to:

Define the broad social responsibilities of ALA in terms of a) the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or even solving the critical problems of society, b) support for all efforts to help inform and educate the people of the United States on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views on, and the facts regarding, each problem, and c) the willingness of ALA to take a position on current critical issues with the relationship to libraries and library service clearly set forth in the position statement. (cited from DeJohn 1973, 38)

The SRRT has since attempted to turn the words of its stated purposes into actions by establishing a number of task forces focusing on such issues as feminism, homosexuality, human rights, and homelessness. Some librarians, however, felt that the concept of social responsibilities was antithetical to the principles embodied within the Library Bill of Rights and that the acceptance of one would, by definition, negate the acceptance of the other. The loudest proponent of this antithesis, and the one whose voice still echoes throughout the library literature of today, was David K. Berninghausen, director of the now defunct University of Minnesota Library School.

Berninghausen was also the chair of the ALA’s Committee on Intellectual Freedom from 1948 to 1952, and from 1967 to 1972. During the early 1970s, he published a series of articles which culminated in a book entitled The Flight from Reason (1975). His first article, “The Librarian’s Commitment to the Library Bill of Rights” (1970), examined the history of both the Library Bill of Rights and the Committee on Intellectual Freedom from their inception and creation in 1939 and 1940 respectively through to the late 1960s. Berninghausen also looked to the future, and he warned librarians to be aware of those on the radical left and on the reactionary right who are prepared to further their causes by any possible means:

Probably no group, under or over thirty, black or white, religious or anti-religious, of the political left or the political right, is without a few members who are so extreme, so rigid, so intransigent that they sincerely believe that anyone who does not view the world precisely as they do should be forced to conform or cease to exist. (35)

Such a statement points up the fact that, for Berninghausen, librarians must stand vigilantly on guard for intellectual freedom and remain neutral on all non-library issues. He goes on to point out that social responsibilities, as newly defined by the Subcommittee on Social Responsibility of the Action Committee on New Directions for ALA (ACONDA), are “the relationships that librarians and libraries have to non-library problems that relate to the social welfare of our society” (36). Berninghausen links the concept of extremism to the concept of social responsibilities and, according to his interpretation of the subcommittee’s definition, the old conservative neutralist position of librarianship as espoused by the Library Bill of Rights is no longer viable. Librarians are now encouraged to embrace a new form of advocacy or partisan librarianship. Indeed, for Berninghausen, the concept of intellectual freedom and the concept of social responsibilities are antithetical, but this is not surprising when one considers the implicit syllogism he has set up: 1) those who hold intensely dogmatic beliefs are censorial; 2) advocates of the new definition of social responsibilities hold intensely dogmatic beliefs; 3) advocates of the new definition of social responsibilities are censorial and must, therefore, renounce the tenets of intellectual
freedom. It is with this simplistic and somewhat misleading view that Berninghausen will proceed in his writings.

In his second article, “Social Responsibility vs. the Library Bill of Rights” (1972), Berninghausen begins by stating that the raison d’être of ALA is not, among other things, any of the following:

1. To eradicate racial injustice and inequities and to promote human brotherhood.
2. To stop the pollution of air, earth, and sea.
3. To build a United Nations capable of preventing all wars. (3675)

“Vital as these issues are, it is not the purpose of ALA to take positions as to how men [sic] must resolve them” (3675). This statement constitutes his first major premise; and yet, he fails to examine the actual purpose or mission of ALA. Further, such a statement begs the question: if it is not the purpose of ALA to take a stand on the above issues, then just whose purpose is it? As Betty-Carol Sellen explains, “If librarians decide that the issues vital to society are irrelevant to librarians as librarians, then society may find that librarians are irrelevant to it” (1973, 27).

Berninghausen also points out that it is not the purpose of ALA “to promote homosexualism as a life-style” (1972, 3675). Such a statement shows perfectly his inability to understand a socially responsible activity and its relevance to librarianship. The Gay Liberation Task force of the SRR was created in order to help improve services to homosexuals and to help improve access to homosexual resources. At the time of Berninghausen’s writing, homosexuals received little or no library service, libraries did not collect homosexual literature unless the content was clinical or disapproving, and LC subject headings were insulting and couched between various less savory headings. Consider the memories of Barbara Gittings:

Today when I speak to gay groups and mention “the lies in the libraries,” listeners over 35 know instantly what I mean. Most gays have at some point gone to books in an effort to understand about being gay or to get some help in living as gay. In my time, what we found was strange to us (they’re writing about me but I’m not like that!) and cruelly clinical (there’s nothing about love) and always bad (being this way seems grim and hopeless). (1990, 2)

The real issue then is not the promotion of a life-style, as Berninghausen would have it, but rather a lack of access to useful and relevant resources for a marginalized group within society. Thus, he raises an issue of which he is ignorant and that is, in fact, directly relevant to librarianship; and in The Flight from Reason (1975), the reader will note the irony when Berninghausen states that “The objective of strengthening library services to the disadvantaged is clearly a responsibility of libraries, librarians, and the ALA” (111). In terms of library services and information access, homosexuals are at a disadvantage.

Perhaps one ought to give Berninghausen the benefit of the doubt: could it be that he did not view homosexuals as a marginalized group? In “Social Responsibility” (1972), he states that librarians, in the effective performance of their duties, should not find their jobs put in jeopardy because they devote their non-library hours to non-library causes (3675). Could it be that he was unaware of Michael McConnell who lost his job as a librarian because he wished, in “non-library” manner, to marry his same sex partner? This was the same Michael McConnell whose appeal was ignored by the Intellectual Freedom Committee (Gittings 1990, 4) – the very committee that Berninghausen chaired at the time.

After leaving the reader with an inaccurate and somewhat confused perception of the concept of social responsibilities, and after evading the issue that he himself raised (defining what is actually relevant to librarians), Berninghausen advances his second major premise: if ALA becomes “a political and social organization, then the principle of intellectual freedom as stated in the Library Bill of Rights will have to be discarded” (1972, 3676). He provides no proof for such a premise except in the implicit syllogism previously discussed. He does, however, attempt to make his position clearer in The Flight from Reason by deliberately misrepresenting the proponents of social responsibilities who, he says, believe that:

1. ALA should be politicized; that is, it should give up its professional character and its “traditional, conservative neutrality,” becoming instead a partisan, advocacy organization.

2. Libraries should similarly be politicized. They should reject the Library Bill of Rights’ concept of the library’s professional responsibility to provide information on all
sides of all controversial issues for all citizens. And publicly supported libraries should become “libraries of opinion.” (109)

Just as Berninghausen first examined the definition of social responsibilities as presented by the Subcommittee on Social Responsibility of ACONDA (1970), so too he would later make use of the same definition in order to (deliberately?) mislead the reader (DeJohn 1973). He states that according to the subcommittee, “ALA should endeavor to devise means whereby libraries can become more effective instruments of social change” (1972, 3677). He later revises the above phrase to read “instruments to effect social change” (3678). The difference between the two phrases (effective instruments and instruments to effect) is not merely semantic. The first implies that libraries and librarians will enable users to effect social change; the second implies that libraries and librarians themselves will effect social change. Berninghausen has changed the context of the original phrasing, and he carries the new context to its logical conclusion: 1) librarians will become immersed in partisan causes unrelated to librarianship; 2) librarians will reject the principle of intellectual freedom; 3) librarians will censor materials with which they do not agree; and, 4) librarians will thereby attempt to effect social change based on their own dogmatic beliefs. It is ironic that Berninghausen bases much of his argument on the minor report of a subcommittee, the contents of which were never actually accepted as presented to ACONDA. It is doubly ironic that he never actually examines the stated purposes of the SRRT. It is triply ironic that he seems to break his own rules of misrepresentation when he states that “It is only too common practice...to quote limited passages out of context to produce a misleading picture” (1972, 3681).

Shortly after the publication of “Social Responsibility,” Library Journal (LJ) published 19 short essays in its January 1, 1973 issue in response to Berninghausen’s arguments. In order to provide balance, the editors deliberately solicited responses from librarians who they knew would oppose the antithesis set forth by Berninghausen; and “The Berninghausen Debate” which incorporated both of the articles, became an LJ classic (1993). In 1975, Berninghausen published The Flight from Reason which extended his premise of antithesis. The book, however, received tepid reviews, and many ever-polite reviewers pointed out the good as well as the bad without actually making a judgment as to its value (see, for instance, Asheim 1976, Broadfield 1977, and Johannesen 1976).

By the mid-1970s, the controversies that led to and arose from the creation of the SRRT began to fade. Many librarians began to become aware of the relationships between social issues and library issues, and they adopted the spirit of the SRRT.

Roma Harris looked to feminism and examined the services provided to, among others, battered women, lesbians, and the unemployed. Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt looked to issues concerning gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) populations, and they examined the services provided to those populations. Many other librarians examined issues focusing on nuclear disarmament, apartheid, aboriginals (New Zealand, Australian, and North American), and immigrants. These librarians became aware that many social issues were also inextricably bound up with library issues.

In 1984, Sanford Berman and James P. Danky launched Alternative Library Literature: A Biennial Anthology. The editors came to realize over the past decade that there’s a wealth of variously wild, useful, dynamic, funny, provocative, and socially conscious “library literature” that few of our colleagues normally see. And that doesn’t make it into Katz’s yearly anthology, which deliberately attempts to be “balanced.” So here’s the first volume...a biennial, deliberately unbalanced collection of material dealing with library and information issues from a critical, nontraditional, socially responsible perspective; addressing topics usually overlooked or minimized in standard library media. (1984, 1)

As it turned out, many of the articles published in Alternative Library Literature were also published in mainstream library literature; and the “socially responsible perspective” had become not only entrenched, but also accepted within the library profession. Indeed, it looked as though the Berninghausenian view of librarianship were dead, and those who did cite him did so within an historical context with no intention of fostering debate (see, for instance, MacCann 1989 or Stevens 1989).

Unfortunately, the argument that was advanced by Berninghausen had only gone into a temporary remission. It came back full force when AL published its cover photo in 1992. Of course the reactions against the concept of social responsibilities were and are exactly that – reactions. The late 1960s were
heady times and conspicuous for the activism they spawned. And it must be admitted that the great unwashed and unkempt of the Radical Right and New Left were busy burning books, destroying card catalogues, and forcibly taking control of various institutions. The most extreme of these groups did attack the tenets of intellectual freedom, and what is unfortunate is that Berninghausen made the error of assuming that those librarians who advocated the concept of social responsibilities were extremist in their views. Berninghausen reacted to the times out of fear and anger.

By 1992, homosexuality permeated the air more so than it had ever done since the Stonewall Uprising of 1969. Vice President Dan Quayle stated that he felt the homosexual lifestyle was a choice, and a wrong choice at that. President Bush stated that, in his view, homosexuality was neither normal nor right (Malice 1993, 4). On November 3,1992, Colorado’s Amendment Two, which prohibited municipalities from passing ordinances to protect the rights of lesbians and gays, came into existence. Ironically, ALA’s Midwinter Meeting was held in Denver at that time. In 1993, the newly elected President Clinton nominated Roberta Achtenberg, a lesbian, to the post of Assistant Secretary in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (the highest post offered to an openly homosexual person to date) (Clearances 1992, 4). Clinton also instituted a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for homosexuals serving in the U. S. military. Throughout the early-mid 1990s, court cases demonstrated that both the FBI and the CIA had anti-homosexual hiring practices, and scientific evidence indicated that homosexuality was apparently the result of genetics. Indeed, a greater awareness of homosexuality came about within society as the result of more widespread public discourse – homosexuality was in the air. Unfortunately, homosexuality is more than just marginalized by society. Because of its focus on sexuality, itself societally problematic, homosexuality is further stigmatized; and much of the reaction to AL’s cover photo arose from that stigmatization.

It is unfortunate that librarians are now citing Berninghausen in order to advocate views which are not necessarily antithetical to the concept of social responsibilities. To cite one example, Dorothy M. Broderick uses Berninghausen in support of her argument that “the only political commitment we should make is to free access to as many points of view as are available when it comes to building collections and passing resolutions” (1993, 448). Marilyn Miller, ALA president for 1993, uses Berninghausen to support her contention that “Profoundly important library issues are

literally stacking up. . . . Let’s focus on solutions to these problems – to improve our ability to empower people through libraries” (1993, 578). These librarians use Berninghausen in order to help drive home the necessity for improved user access. Ironically, Berninghausen’s words do not advocate improved access. He merely showed how easy one can win an argument if one defines the terms.

Many, including Berninghausen, have argued that librarians need to remain neutral and to collect materials representing as many different points of view as possible. However, such a stance is both naive and overly simplistic. Nowhere in the Library Bill of Rights is there a statement to the effect that librarians must remain neutral. Certainly librarians must strive for objectivity, but they, like everyone else, are also the products of societal ideologies and discourses. Thus, librarians are invested with their own psychological and cultural biases, and it is reasonable to assume that they will make judgments and decisions based on those biases. Neutrality is a form of silence – “I am not for war, but then I am not for peace; I am not for homosexuality, but then I am not for heterosexuality; I am not for homophobia, but then I am not for sexism.” Indeed, complete neutrality is the ultimate form of surrender – surrender to a, dare I say it, Berninghausian orthodoxy that paradoxically detests the horrors perpetuated by and on humanity while, at the same time, it is quite happy to maintain those horrors. Having a voice does not imply the silencing of others as Berninghausen would suggest. Socially responsible librarians do not reject the principle of intellectual freedom; socially responsible librarians embrace it – “Those who believe in the concept of social responsibility want to add the underground press to their collections, not toss out the traditional press” (Sellen 28). Indeed, many materials contain information outside of the mainstream, but they are nowhere to be found in the standard reviewing and selecting sources. Librarians must actively seek out alternative sources and resources if they are to achieve anything that resembles a balanced collection.

As previously discussed, the real issue that the social responsibilities debate dredges up concerns of improved user access. In a society that tends to stigmatize the marginal, both publication of and access to alternative materials becomes and remains limited. To employ Berninghausen’s own syllogistic style, “neutral” librarians, by virtue of their silence, do nothing to promote effective access (which would be tantamount to activism). Thus, “neutral” librarians help to perpetuate society’s stigmatization of marginal-
ized populations. Thus, “neutral” librarians are, in fact, not neutral. Rather they help to maintain a status quo created by a dominant elite – an elite that, paradoxically, defines itself by the Other while, at the same time, it attempts to destroy (or at least subjugate) that Other. I am not saying that one need take a stand on every social issue, but those who sit on the fence ought to think about who built that fence. By adopting a voice, librarians can give voice to others who would not normally have one. The fence will never go away, but socially responsible librarians can help to construct a few gates.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX: LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be removed for the reason of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

3. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

4. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

5. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

6. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.
