The Answer to “Bad” Speech: a Comment on ALA Debate

by Mark Rozenzweig

Author’s note: Below is one answer to a perennial question, it is edited from e-mail exchanges on ALA listservs that took place during the Fall of 2003.

The old chestnut of the intellectual freedom “purists” which most librarians in ALA believe they are – is: “The answer to ‘bad speech’ is ‘better speech,’ more speech. The answer to ideas you disagree with is ideas which are better,” and so on. One would think that the American Library Association’s Council e-mail listserv, ALACOUN, and the member list, MEMBERFORUM, would be a safe place where it would be possible to demonstrate those propositions without the possible consequences one might suffer, say, in arguing with a neo-Nazi or a fanatical opponent of abortion, which many imagine they would be able to do in the real or virtual worlds.

I have always suspected that the civic courage such debate would entail is something in short supply in the majority of librarians. Librarians are simply indifferent to practicing the principle. For most, it is something of a self-deceptive conceit. I am confirmed in this pessimistic view when I look at the cover of Library Journal or American Libraries and see smiley faces of ALA functionaries, library executives and model librarians of the year or whatever banal and artificial, flattering portraits they feature. I look and wonder – given our association’s and our profession’s core commitment to intellectual freedom (known familiarly as IF, as if we were on an intimate basis with the concept in real life), its celebration of “free speech,” of pluralism, and, above all, of militant defense of the right to dissent, to disagree, to debate, I wonder why the cover of the conference issues don’t feature portraits of the librarians who have actually put themselves on the line, say, fighting the USA Patriot Act: the “shredders” of patron information, the librarian anti-war protesters, the people who actually have shown they take our beloved, self-righteous principles to heart and who, while not expecting it, surely deserve the recognition, the support, the acclamation of the profession which would be represented by their being featured on the cover of our two most popular professional magazines.

They are not there. No one notices they’re not there. Nobody asks why our journals celebrate so prominently and repetitively professional “success,” but not the difficult, if unpopular, professional activism which sparks conflict, pricks the conscience, proposes the new, pops the balloons of self-delusion, builds the community coalitions of defense of the First
Amendment, demonstrates the courage of individual conviction against the risk of professional scorn and other, more serious, consequences. It is, above all, professional conformity combined with successful “game-playing” to which homage is paid. That is symptomatic. More importantly, there is no discussion on those two e-mail lists I mentioned, no debate, no response to countless ideas and proposals on innumerable pertinent or interesting, even urgent, issues which are not already vetted by the authorities, no response to critiques and challenges, no answers to uncomfortable questions about policy or practice. No courage of conviction, no less open dialogue with ideas with which one disagrees (or with which one agrees, for that matter) – the very act of “better speech” supposedly answering “bad speech.”

Instead “good” librarians practice self-satisfied silence. We seem to be a profession of sheep, finding safety only in numbers. “Good” librarian colleagues nonetheless delight in hearing the speeches of the celebrity dissidents at their conferences, extraordinary people whose earnest presentations should rouse them to action. But, invariably, they walk away only to find again the security of conscienceless existence in the rut of routine. Ralph Nader or Barbara Ehrenreich, Jonathan Kozol or Jesse Jackson are, each and all, consumed by librarian audiences at conferences with delight, if only so they can say they’ve exposed themselves to these articulate, unusual, charismatic, challenging speakers, and are glad – comforted – there are people like that “out there.” Yes the world needs these provocative conference speakers, but their activism is not for us!

I have, unfortunately, more than proven to my own satisfaction (or should I say, dissatisfaction) – and here I speak primarily of the Council – that any craven excuse will, in ALA, be found to justify the guaranteed protected comfort of irritated quietude. Silence – whether on the floor of Council or on ALACOUN – is the best answer to “bad speech” as far as Council is concerned. That or frenzied calls for order, shut-off microphones, calling the question to end debate before it has begun, hitting the delete button. “Bad” librarian colleagues are those bristling with criticism and skepticism and occasional obloquy. But of the proper response to “bad speech” is “better” or “more speech” where are the responses to Casey, to Schneider, to Hill, to Gorman, to Kagan, to Ranney, to Sparanese, to others less-well known? Well, we dare not respond because there will then be time- and thought-consuming debate and disputation, rather than rubber-stamping. Don’t they have jobs to do? Don’t they have a plane to catch?

Council has not yet articulated its all-too-obvious (if implicit) codes of speech and communicative behavior. But it is easily constructed. There are people on Council we don’t like, with odd ideas and odd manners, and no longer just the baroquely voluble, sarcastic and ironically dramatic Sandy Berman. How many winced under his judgmental eye and his gifted tongue? Others have followed him, less grand and less talented, with their own peculiarities and styles: pushy, ungentlemanly, inexhaustible, people who want to force
us to respond, to consider something, to argue with them, to get us to act outside the well-worn paths. Yes, ladies and gentlemen of the Council, let the “good speech” of the majority, confront the “bad speech” of the minority. It will certainly be more in keeping with our shared creed and bring it off the page into life. The role of librarians is not merely to make sure ideas remain safely on their pages, shelved away neatly.

I start from the premise that libraries are, in essence, socialism in action. But the essential is buried within the sediment of ossified ideology and the historical muck of functioning for a long time in a society inimical to librarianships’ ethos and example. There is need to awaken in ourselves and our colleagues a sense of urgency about what we do and how the institutions through which we do it are affected, eroded by local and obvious day-to-day issues and by radical change in the very environment in which we function as a profession, challenging the democratic basis of the practice of librarianship and threatening the very existence of the institution as one of the few remaining outposts of the public sphere not entirely colonized by commerce, consumerism, corporate power. I realize that we can only change, reform librarianship and ALA from within, although it may seem that the demand is for total change. The key is to collectively combine in our work together an articulation of the maximum program (shaking things up with “bad speech”) with “wins” in order to attain real changes through the work of coalitions and reforms. To take an analogy from another field of work, mining requires dynamiting before the work of picking away at the coalface can be done.