

Editorial

Racism and “Freedom of Speech”: Framing the Issues

The production and distribution of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom’s 1977 film was one of the most controversial and divisive issues in ALA history. *The Speaker: A Film About Freedom* was introduced at the 1977 ALA Annual Conference in Detroit, and was revived on June 30th, 2014, for a program in Las Vegas titled, “Speaking about ‘The Speaker.’” ALA Council’s Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) developed the program, which was cosponsored by the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF), the Library History Round Table and the ALA Black Caucus (BCALA).

Some background is necessary for context. This professionally made 42-minute color film was sponsored by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom in 1977 and made in virtual secret without oversight by the ALA Executive Board or even most of the Intellectual Freedom Committee members. In fact, requests for information about the film, for copies of the script from members of these two bodies were repeatedly rebuffed. Judith Krug (now deceased), Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, was in charge with coordination from a two-member IFC subcommittee and ALA Executive Director Robert Wedgeworth. The film was made by a New York production company, and was envisioned by Krug as an exploration of the First Amendment in contemporary society.

The film’s plot is a fictionalized account of real events. A high school invites a famous scientist (based on physicist and Nobel prizewinner William Shockley) to speak on his research claiming that black people are genetically

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inferior to white people. The school's diverse Current Events Committee seems to have been influenced by its advisor to invite the speaker. She is a well-respected white teacher with perfect, high-toned diction who is about to retire. She claims that students needed to hear all points of view, and that the speaker's theories had neither been validated nor disproved, and that it would be censorship to not invite him. (But of course, in reality Shockley's racist theories had no scientific credibility in 1977!) Two or three students – black and white – quit the committee when the majority votes to reaffirm the invitation. This enrages the local community and the school board pressures the Current Events Committee to rescind the invitation. The film's moral is that the racist speaker should have been allowed his First Amendment rights to speak at the high school.

The film was made during the term of ALA's first black President, Clara Jones, who along with ALA Executive Board members were horrified when they viewed the film. The Black Caucus, SRRT, and supporters of in-coming ALA President Eric Moon were enraged that an ALA Office would choose this most volatile topic to make a case for the First Amendment. They argued that the film was racist, insensitive, full of stereotypes, and that the central thesis was "counterfeit and falsely identified as a First Amendment issue."¹ To avoid charges of censorship, the Black Caucus and members of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) did not suggest that the film be destroyed, rather they proposed resolutions to the ALA Membership Meeting to simply remove ALA's name from the film. The Black Caucus resolution was not discussed, but the SRRT resolution was debated. The first vote was 372 to 326 for removing ALA's name. But ALA Executive Director Wedgeworth declared a counting error. The original decision to remove ALA's name from the film was reversed after two more votes.

SRRT also wrote a motion censuring Krug and the Office for Intellectual Freedom, but it was withdrawn and never voted.² The Council later reaffirmed its support for the film. The debate carried over to the 1978 Midwinter Meeting where TV stations and national newspapers covered the Council meetings.³ There were 2000-3000 people at the ALA Council Meeting! In front of a national audience, the Council refused to limit the film distribution in any way.⁴ Major Owens (later a US Congress member from New York) said that it revealed a "secret agenda of racism," and E. J. Josey (principle founder of the Black Caucus) asked members "to support the humanity of black people."⁵ Sandy Berman (guru of user-friendly cataloging) circulated a statement that was signed by sixty-five prominent librarians. It read in part,

WE ARE ASHAMED AND DISGUSTED. The American Library Association has produced a film, *The Speaker*, that purports to deal with intellectual freedom and the First Amendment. It does not. Instead, it

distorts and confounds the First Amendment. But even worse than this intellectual dishonesty is the film's wanton assault upon Black people. In effect, it says: "Blacks are irrational. Blacks are unprincipled. Blacks must be 'protected' by Whites. And Blacks may indeed be less than fully human."⁶

Bill Eshelman, editor of *Wilson Library Journal*, put it this way:

The decision to make the "liberals" the villains who wish to prohibit the free speech of the "reactionary" is very strange and flies in the face of the facts of American, if not ALA history...It makes one question whether the IFC knows who the real enemies of the First Amendment are.⁷

With this history, we can now come back to the 2014 program. The panel in Las Vegas included Mark McCallon (Associate Dean for Library Services at Abilene Christian University), Bob Wedgeworth (ALA Executive Director, 1972-1985, and currently on the National Museum and Library Services Board which advises the Institute of Museum and Library Services), and Beverly Lynch (Professor of Information Studies, UCLA). The panel was moderated by Julius Jefferson Jr., President of the Freedom to Read Foundation and Information Research Specialist at the Library of Congress. They also showed a film clip of *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather's television report on *60 Minutes* about the first showing of the film at the 1977 ALA Annual Conference in Detroit.

In a posting on the blog of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), Doug Archer, current IFC Chair, had previously noted two historical pieces, one for and one against the film. Tellingly, the program's sponsors only chose to provide handouts of the favorable article and place them in the back of the room.⁸ And it is important to note that three ALA past-Presidents made forceful statements against the framing of the program on the OIF blog and the ALA Council listserv (Mitch Freedman, Pat Schuman, and Betty Turock). Freedman and Schuman called for adding *Library Journal's* John Berry to the panel since he had critically reported on the debate at the time. However, their request was denied.

Note that all three panelists are supporters of the film believing it meets the originally envisioned purpose. McCallon's research turned up evaluation surveys from the first showing in the ALA Archives. He provided graphs of the responses and used the data of this flawed survey to support his positive regard for the film. Questions in the survey were rated on a four-point scale, from most positive to most negative – superior, good, fair, poor. The survey is problematic in that the third category was "fair" – a category that could allow either a positive or a negative interpretation. McCallon disregarded the negative

“fair” responses and claimed that the majority of the audience who turned in forms rated the film in a positive light. But he reported that 199 rated the film in the first two positive categories and 261 responders rated the film in the two negative categories.

Wedgeworth was ALA Executive Director when the film was made. At the recent program he claimed that he did not review the script, but was only involved in finances, and he said he had no regrets about his role or the result. He even repeated Judith Krug’s false claim that the film had won a minor film award, a complete fabrication. Lynch continues to use the film in her classes, and continues to frame the debate in the original way. She even made a point that in January 1977 the IFC had tried to rescind the Council’s 1976 resolution against racism and sexism on the grounds that the IFC believed ALA should be *neutral* in regard to racism and sexism. To her displeasure, the IFC’s attempt failed. In moderating the panel, Jefferson revealed no criticism of the original framing of the debate. It is important to state that both Wedgeworth and Jefferson are African-Americans, and by their presence gave more legitimacy to the film.

The Las Vegas audience totaled perhaps 250 mostly white people, and the great majority were too young to have been at the meetings in 1977 and 1978. Most seemed to take the issues seriously but were probably unaware of the history, and so were unaware of how the panel was manipulating that history. There were jokes from the stage and there was laughing several times during the presentations. The IFC succeeded in presenting a program that justified the production and distribution of *The Speaker*. In this way, they were able to revise history for those in attendance and to justify Bob Wedgeworth’s collusion with Judith Krug. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Judith Krug’s husband, Herbert Krug, won the Freedom to Read Foundation Roll of Honor Award in Las Vegas.

Members of the audience were given the chance to speak after the panel presentation. Only a few of the 16 speakers were at the original 1977 film showing. Some of the speakers congratulated the sponsors for presenting a program where the difficult issues around race and intellectual freedom could be discussed. But there were also several critical speakers, so one would hope that many of the audience members who were laughing and self-congratulatory did get an inkling that not all was right with what was going on. Binnie Tate Wilkin reminded the audience that the film was released just after the end of segregation and that it was difficult for blacks to speak out at that time. She asked why ALA had chosen to publicly humiliate blacks. Mary Biblo noted the conflict between ALA’s first black President Clara Jones and Judith Krug. She reminded the audience that civil rights are again under attack today, particularly in restricting the right to vote, and she asked why we should be surprised that the film was resurrected at this time. Ismail Abdullahi directly confronted the Black Caucus, and asked how they could cosponsor such a skewed panel. He

asked whether the founders of BCALA were wrong in their vigorous protests of the time!

As the 1978 BCALA statement noted, the “fundamental error” in equating program planning to a mandate for inviting a racist speaker is never addressed in the film.⁹ “Democracy does not require ‘tolerance of ideas we detest.’”¹⁰ In fact, “this nation was founded by people who would not tolerate ‘ideas they detested.’” Further, how could anyone justify making the film in secret, not vetting the script with the BCALA before production, and refusing to share information about the film with members of the Executive Board and the Intellectual Freedom Committee? On June 11, 2014, the BCALA issued “An Open Letter to the Library Community.”¹¹ In that document, they stated that “times have changed,” and it was time to discuss the issue. That would be a valid argument if the panel included even one speaker who could have discussed what was wrong with the film and why the Association made a huge mistake in producing and distributing it. Someone might have discussed entrenched societal racism, and why Krug either wittingly or unwittingly produced a racist film. Instead, we got a real whitewash. The current leadership has framed the debate just as Judith Krug did in 1977. And those who frame the debate have a powerful tool to revise history for the new generations. Indeed, the African-American leaders of the 1970s would be aghast at what just happened. We need to set the record straight.

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NOTES

- 1 See the statement from 25 prominent African-American librarians endorsed by the BCALA in the Documents section of this issue of *Progressive Librarian* on page 184.
- 2 Kenneth F. Kister, *Eric Moon: The Life and Library Times* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 343-344.
- 3 *ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table Newsletter*, no. 49 (June 1978): 2. Dan Rather told *Wilson Library Bulletin*, “If I were black, I would think the film was racist and if I were a woman, I would think it was sexist.” And see William R. Eshelman, *No Silence! A Library Life* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1997), 257.
- 4 Kister, 334-350; and *ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table Newsletter*, no. 46 (September 1977): 4-7.
- 5 Kister, 343.
- 6 Sanford Berman, “E.J. and Me: Twenty Years of Correspondence and Agitation,” in *E.J. Josey: An Activist Librarian*, edited by Ismail Abdullahi (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1992), 72.
- 7 VI Eshelman, 254. See also Donnarae MacCann, ed., *Social Responsibility in Librarianship: Essays on Equality* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), 7-8.

- 8 For the posting see <http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=5018>. The handout distributed was Dorothy Broderick, "Son of Speaker," *American Libraries* (October 1977): 502-504. The other piece not distributed was Zoia Horn's account in her book, *Zoia! Memoirs of Zoia Horn, Battler for the People's Right to Know* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 201-217.
- 9 See the statement from 25 prominent African-American librarians endorsed by the BCALA in the Documents section of this issue of *Progressive Librarian*.
- 10 This formulation was actually in the final paragraph of the 1973 interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, titled "Sexism, Racism and other -Isms in Library Materials." The exact quote is, "Toleration is meaningless without toleration for the detestable." This interpretation was twice revised and finally replaced in 1990 by another interpretation titled, "Diversity in Collection Development." See Horn, 223.
- 11 http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TheSpeaker_PR_BCALA.pdf