

## Libraries and Civil Rights

In this week's reading assignment in *Information services today: An introduction* (Hirsch, 2015), I was most intrigued by the following quote:

"The role of information professionals continues to evolve beyond the physical setting to one where they are positioned as drivers of change. They will serve as advocates on important issues, such as the right to read, academic and intellectual freedom, digital rights and copyright, and censorship." (Chapter 5)

I find these concepts to be especially compelling, considering the advancing rate of technology and society's struggle to maintain an ethical framework within which to operate. I wanted to learn more about how modern information professionals deal with and advocate for these principles.

I discovered the American Library Association's (ALA) stance on intellectual freedom in its policy manual, which appears on its website. I also found that since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the ALA has passed several resolutions addressing concerns about infringements of constitutional rights.

Further research led to "*Baseless Hysteria*": *The Controversy between the Department of Justice and the American Library Association over the USA PATRIOT Act*, a scholarly article by Katherine K. Coolidge.

Law librarian Coolidge explores the 2003 controversy between Attorney General John Ashcroft and the American Library Association (ALA) over the USA PATRIOT Act. She describes the speedy passage of the Act in October 2001, which followed the terrorist attacks of September 11. Section 215 of the Act pertains to investigations of

terrorist suspects by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC). Coolidge presents background information regarding the FISC, and the tools it uses against international crime. The author details the processes required in obtaining a FISC surveillance order, and compares it with the requirements under Title III. While librarians are concerned that the secrecy of FISC investigations is at odds with civil liberties, the Department of Justice contends that sufficient checks and balances are in place to prevent abuses.

Attorney General John Ashcroft went on a tour of twenty cities in 2003, at which he spoke to select audiences to promote the USA PATRIOT Act. The ALA questioned the vagueness of the language in the Act, the lack of accountability, and the refusal of the Department of Justice to explain its use in obtaining library patron records. Ashcroft responded with dismissive remarks.

Coolidge's thorough research includes statements and interviews of representatives from both sides. Coolidge believes that both were guilty of gravitating to extremes during the ensuing controversy. Instead of addressing legitimate concerns about how the Act affects constitutional privacy rights, Ashcroft resorted to mockery and derision. The ALA failed to understand the Act and to represent it truthfully. An opportunity for meaningful dialogue between law enforcement agencies, the Department of Justice, and library and information professionals was missed.

The article provides a relevant and interesting perspective on the how national security can be at odds with civil rights. It reveals the handling (or mishandling) of one such dilemma by information professionals and government officials.

Coolidge's article is noteworthy because it demonstrates how intellectual freedom is challenged in the modern landscape, which is shaped by fear and terrorism. This controversy highlights the concern that, while technology affords an increase of freedom and access, it can also limit privacy. The most important idea shared by this article is that modern information professionals are at the forefront of important contemporary civil rights issues. The ALA is seen as a dynamic organization that actively advocates for the principles outlined in its policy manual.

### References

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