

Reflection: Librarians and Free Speech

On 14 October 2016, "[When Librarians are Silenced](#)" appeared in *The New York Review of Books*. The article describes an incident that took place during an event at a public library in Kansas City in May 2016. A former presidential advisor was invited to speak about Truman and Israel. Due to recent violence at a Jewish Community Center, the library had hired three off-duty policemen and one former police officer for the evening. It had been agreed in advance that controversial questions were to be allowed, and that security guards were to consult library staff before removing any nonviolent audience members.

A patron, who was known to library staff as a writer and activist, asked several confrontational questions. Although there was no physical threat, the security guards began to eject the patron. The library director peacefully intervened, explaining that the patron was allowed to exercise his right to free speech in a public building. The library director was physically assaulted, and both he and the patron were arrested and charged (the patron with trespassing and resisting arrest and the library director with interfering with an arrest).

The suppression of the constitutional right to free speech is a paradoxical method of maintaining order. Adherence to fundamental rights is crucial during times of fear and unrest, when democratic principles are at risk of being overlooked. Librarians must be guided by the [ALA Code of Ethics](#) and defend intellectual freedom. The Kansas City library director showed courage and conviction in this difficult circumstance.