

Libraries should promote learning, not police values

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ON WEDNESDAY, news of the National Library Board's (NLB) withdrawal of some books was reported in the mainstream media. The NLB's move was a response to feedback from a patron that the books go against the "pro-family" ethos of Singapore society as they dealt with same-sex partners.

By noon, reactions to what NLB did spread online, with at least two individuals setting up petitions calling for the library board to resume circulation of the books. While the NLB's move has attracted some support, the castigation directed at it via blogs, social media and its feedback page was glaringly obvious. The dismay towards the NLB has increased since it announced at a press conference yesterday that the books will go through a "discarding process" where they will be pulped.

The criticisms against NLB's move run the gamut from the philosophical to the material. It has fuelled the ongoing debate on the different interpretations of the term "pro-family". It has also led to a discussion about the freedom of people to read what they want, who should bear the responsibility of managing a child's reading diet (the library or the parent) to whether it foreshadows the culling of more books deemed offensive by some (would self-help books on coping with divorce and single parenting be the next to go, some wonder).

The storm brewing around this incident is not unique to Singapore. Censorship - defined by the American Library Association as excluding, restricting or removing materials - is an ongoing tussle even in liberal countries such as Norway, Sweden and the United States.

Despite the Library Bill of Rights, libraries in the US have received challenges by members of the public to remove books including "The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn" (racial stereotypes), "The Catcher In The Rye" (sexual promiscuity and vulgarity) and the Harry Potter series (the occult and disrespect to authority).

Libraries in the US are governed by the Bill which stipulates that "books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves". It also states that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues" and that "materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval". In this spirit, libraries have stood up against complaints and even public attacks.

In the midst of the ongoing debate, I would like to bring back into focus the often overlooked contribution of public libraries to our society. During the Institute of Policy Studies' flagship conference Singapore Perspectives 2014, Minister of State (Education, and Communications and Information) Sim Ann spoke about developing empathy to deal with an increasingly diverse society and how literature could be a tool to cultivate that quality.

A public library cannot compel people to weigh different views equally, without bias and based on evidence. But it is society's best shot at getting access to wide-ranging informational resources that can empower people to take part in discussions that yield productive outcomes for themselves and society.

Last year, I wrote an article questioning if we have what it takes for the Government and citizens to talk to one another. I had argued that in order to have meaningful conversations, people need to have access to information. In this way, they come armed not just with enthusiasm to contribute to policy-making but also with facts and reason.

Political scientist James Fishkin, widely cited for his work on deliberative democracy, has identified five elements integral to legitimate deliberation. They include making accurate information and relevant data available to all participants, and attaining substantive balance where different positions are compared based on their supporting evidence. There is also a need to allow for diversity, where all major positions relevant to the matter are considered, and the practice of conscientiousness, in which participants sincerely weigh all arguments. Finally, equal consideration should be given to views based on evidence and not on the people who advocate those views.

Singapore's public libraries have done well in this respect. Providing free annual memberships for Singaporeans and permanent residents (with a nominal one-time registration fee for the latter), the NLB's numerous branches ensure that the charming playfulness of P.G. Wodehouse, the imagination of J.R. Tolkien and the iridescence of Aristotle are within everyone's reach, regardless of the size of his or her pocket.

Besides being a bastion of knowledge, public libraries also enable Singaporeans to participate more effectively in building a better society for all. To be engaged citizens who understand trade-offs and propose expedient solutions requires that we be exposed to information and viewpoints that at times may challenge what we hold dear. Critical thinking skills are best honed when we are exposed to contradictory ideas, data and dogmas.

Our public libraries, with their richly varied offerings, expose us to the unfamiliar, the unknown and the untested, challenging our assumptions and fostering critical minds.

Perhaps, the public library is a microcosm of today's society, a place where different values, cultures and philosophies come under one roof. In the face of clashing ideals, the NLB ought to leave the moral policing to the larger heterogeneous public, who should have a chance to articulate their views on what is offensive or not.

Other institutions exist to promote moral values. Our libraries should stay true to their core principles of promoting learning and literacy, and use these as their guiding light.

To quote from the poet T.S. Eliot: "The very existence of libraries affords the best evidence that we may yet have hope for the future of man".

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