

## The dilemma facing public libraries

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THE ongoing controversy over the National Library Board's decision to take three titles off its shelves should be seen as part of a perennial debate all societies engage in - about what they believe, value and reaffirm they are prepared to stand up for.

The titles were removed after queries from at least one reader over whether they were suitable for children. The titles are: *And Tango Makes Three*, based on a true story of two male penguins which hatched an egg in a New York Zoo; *The White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption*, featuring a lesbian couple among others; and *Who's In My Family? All About Our Families*, which features various family structures.

A similar debate could have, and has, arisen from local drama productions, or episodes in TV programmes. It could even arise from a painting exhibited in one of our museums.

I should declare at the outset that I am a member of the National Library Board (NLB), but that my views in this article do not represent those of the board.

NLB's decision to remove the three titles from the shelves of the children's section of one of its public libraries - and to pulp or destroy the books - was the catalyst for this round of the perennial debate. Public opinion reflected in the letters to the Forum page of *The Straits Times* appears divided between support and disapproval of the NLB's decision.

The argument against the NLB's actions assumes that libraries are repositories of knowledge that societies need to function and survive. Libraries serve their societies by helping their diverse groups learn more about themselves, about others, and the world around them.

Libraries should be about the promotion of knowledge and learning, not restricting the flow of information. Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon's commentary in this paper last Friday articulates this argument well, and concludes that libraries should not be the judge of what is appropriate information to be disseminated. What role should a library play?

### National repository

FIRST, as a national and reference library, like all other national libraries, Singapore's National Library tries to collect everything about Singapore and its surrounding environment. Either via legal deposit, under which a copy of everything published in Singapore is deposited in the National Library, or via systematic collection policies, the library tries to collect as much as possible of what is published about Singapore or relevant to helping Singaporeans come to terms with a rapidly changing world.

The challenge is not whether a book is offensive and not collected, but whether the National Library is collecting enough. Should the National Library bid at an international auction for a rare 16th century Dutch atlas with maps of *insulae Indiae Orientalis* (as our world was then known to

Europeans) which would help us understand how this island was seen by 16th-century Europeans?

Or, should we subscribe to, for example, a new database on climate change and energy security, that would shed light on how the choices we make for a secure, stable and sustainable supply of energy have an impact on global warming and climate change and ultimately the survival of our planet?

Difficult choices have to be made about what the National Library collects. But the difficulty does not lie in discerning the sensibilities of the library's patrons and readers over its choice of particular books, but rather in determining what is relevant and necessary knowledge to understand ourselves and our evolving world.

### **Social spaces**

THOSE who support NLB's decision to take these three titles off its shelves may have in mind the notion that libraries are social spaces serving the needs and interests of local communities and as such, should be mindful of the sensitivities of its constituents.

This is essentially the position of Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim when he said on Friday that "public libraries serve the community and it is right that they give consideration to community norms".

The 25 public libraries scattered across Singapore have a slightly different mandate from the National Library. While the latter is seen more as a reference library and repository of publications about Singapore and the region, the former are social spaces for the community where they can pick up books, browse, or engage in a range of activities related to books and learning. The NLB's public libraries have to be mindful of the sensitivities of its constituents.

Balancing the interests and values of different groups of constituents about what books they would like to see on library shelves is a hard task for not only our public libraries, but also all other public libraries. As Dr Soon notes, libraries in the United States have received requests to take down books like *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* because of its racial stereotypes, or *The Catcher In The Rye* for its sexual promiscuity and vulgarity. Responding to complaints about inappropriate content of some books is part of the work routine of public librarians, especially now with readers becoming more vocal and demanding.

As Dr Yaacob wrote on his Facebook page: "This is not the first time, nor will it be the last time, that public institutions like NLB find themselves facing such a controversy."

### **Arenas for public debate**

WHETHER they like it or not, libraries as social spaces are also becoming arenas for public debate about what the books on the library shelves say about the values and norms of the community.

The library can take the position that it takes no position on dictating the reading choices of its readers. After all, reading, as the political philosopher John Stuart Mill argued, is a "self-

regarding act". It is something one can choose to do or not to do: to go or not to go to the library and what books to read or not read.

But deciding that the content of a particular book is offensive and wanting it to be removed from the shelves is an "other-regarding action" which affects others who may want to read such a book.

The library then becomes the arena for a debate initiated by the "other-regarding actions" of readers about the library's collections. It may ultimately not be a debate about the content of the book, but about the library's response to "other-regarding actions" of its readers.

In this respect, in hindsight, the NLB could have been more reflective and measured in its response to the complaints about the three titles it removed. The decision-making process could be more consultative. Such a consultative process may have recognised that the books are perhaps not that problematic.

Certainly the decision to "pulp" the books may be in accordance with government procedures for disposing of unwanted items, but it was an unfortunate choice of words in this context.

Our public libraries will have to learn how to better manage such debates.

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