

Q & A about Intellectual Freedom

What is Intellectual Freedom?

Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored.

Why is Intellectual Freedom Important?

Intellectual freedom is the basis for our democratic system. We expect our people to be self-governors. But to do so responsibly, our citizenry must be well-informed. Libraries provide the ideas and information, in a variety of formats, to allow people to inform themselves.

What is Censorship?

Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous. It is no more complicated than someone saying, “Don’t let anyone read this book, or buy that magazine, or view that film, because I object to it!” Censors try to use the power of the state to impose their view of what is truthful and appropriate, or offensive and objectionable, on everyone else. Censors pressure public institutions, like libraries, to suppress and remove from public access information they judge inappropriate or dangerous, so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up their own minds about it. The censor wants to prejudge materials for everyone.

Who Attempts Censorship?

In most instances, a censor is a sincerely concerned individual who believes that censorship can improve society, protect children, and restore what the censor sees as lost moral values. But under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, each of us has the right to read, view, listen to, and disseminate constitutionally protected ideas, even if a censor finds those ideas offensive.

What About Protecting Children From Pornography?

The primary responsibility for rearing children rests with parents. If parents want to keep certain ideas or forms of expression away from their children, they must assume the responsibility for shielding those children. Governmental institutions cannot be expected to usurp or interfere with parental obligations and responsibilities when it comes to deciding what a child may read or view.

Who decides how a movie should be rated?

Many, but not all, films in the Library display MPAA ratings. These ratings are a voluntary system developed by the Motion Picture Association of America, a private non-profit organization of studios, filmmakers and movie theaters. Music ratings are similarly applied by the Recording Industry Association of America. These ratings are designed to offer advance information about movies to help parents decide what they want their children to see. The voluntary nature of the rating system is of key importance. Filmmakers submit their films voluntarily. Movie theaters post the ratings voluntarily. Ratings do not have any legal weight or authority.

What about R-rated movies?

When movie theatres and rental stores block a minor’s access to R-rated films, they are acting as private businesses voluntarily choosing to limit access to their customers. As an organization supported by tax dollars, the Library cannot enforce the rating system of a private organization. It is a violation of Federal and State law. In fact, the MPAA has sued library systems and communities that have attempted to enforce ratings as if they were law. When a person of any age registers for a library card, they are entitled to use that card to access any item in the Library collection.

Text adapted from the American Library Association (www.ala.org)