



**STAFF REPORT  
INFORMATION ONLY**

**Communications Report**

**Date:** April 29, 2024

**To:** Toronto Public Library Board

**From:** City Librarian

It is recommended that the Toronto Public Library Board:

1. receives Communication (a) from Tommi Laitio to TPL Board Members via TPL's Library Board Officer, dated April 4, 2024, regarding analysis of Toronto Public Library's institutional response to the challenges on intellectual freedom that libraries are facing across North America.

**SIGNATURE**

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Vickery Bowles  
City Librarian

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## **Philippa Williamson**

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**From:** Tommi Laitio  
**Sent:** Thursday, April 4, 2024 3:49 PM  
**To:** Philippa Williamson  
**Cc:** Vickery Bowles  
**Subject:** Fwd: #3: Intellectual Freedom

Dear Philippa Williamson,

I hope this message finds you well.

I wanted to share with you my analysis of Toronto Public Library's institutional response to the challenges on intellectual freedom that libraries are facing across North America. Having overseen the public library system as a Executive Director for Culture and Leisure for the City of Helsinki (Finland), facilitated a global learning network for library leaders and conducted research on partnership practices of parks and libraries around the world during my two-year inaugural Bloomberg Public Innovation Fellowship at Johns Hopkins University, I feel many public and civic institutions can benefit from your institution's work. I currently do development projects for civic and cultural organizations across the world and I find myself quoting this work time and time again.

Vickery Bowles and her stellar leadership team have been extremely generous in sharing their insights with me.

Best,

Tommi Laitio  
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[www.tommilaitio.com](http://www.tommilaitio.com)

Subscribe to my monthly newsletter on clever public policies for co-existence. Read my latest post on Toronto Public Library's exemplary work in defending intellectual freedom at the library.

Download our Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation case study on Tom Lee Park in Memphis as a model for inclusive placemaking and read my interview on how their park rangers foster neighborliness in practice.  
Read my reflection on 3 lessons on friction from my public innovation fellowship.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Tommi Laitio from Policies for Convivencia** <[tommilaitio@substack.com](mailto:tommilaitio@substack.com)>  
Date: Wed, Apr 3, 2024 at 3:17 PM  
Subject: #3: Intellectual Freedom  
To: <[tommilaitio@tommilaitio.com](mailto:tommilaitio@tommilaitio.com)>

*Policies for Convivencia is a newsletter by Tommi Laitio, featuring clever policies for co-existence and the people behind them. The Latin American notion of convivencia, understood as a capability to co-exist across differences, encapsulates the ideal state for public life where the parties do not strive to resolve differences but have the ability and willingness for pragmatic solutions.*

## #3: Intellectual Freedom

Public libraries are facing unprecedented attacks on freedom to read and assemble. Toronto Public Library has built exemplary institutional capacities for intellectual freedom.

TOMMI LAITIO

APR 3



*Toronto Public Library's campaign on intellectual freedom at Dundas Station.*

*Image: Toronto Public Library*

I have spent most of the last few years focusing on what makes a great library. The idea of a public library is very radical in its generosity:

- Libraries are for everyone.
- Libraries are free of charge.

- There is no obligation to justify your presence.
- Libraries see every person as a responsible and curious individual.

Most people instinctively support these principles. But the last few years have demonstrated that defending access to information, freedom to read and the right to assemble within the limits of the law is easier said than done. Coordinated attacks from legislators, advocacy groups and private individuals to ban and remove items from North American library shelves **have more than doubled** in two years.

As the infographic by the American Library Association shows, the book challenges have disproportionately targeted books addressing questions of race, sexual orientation and gender identity. (It is important to note that **a majority of these challenges are carried out by a dozen or so individuals**.)



Source: *The American Library Association*

Just this week, the City Council of Huntington Beach (California, USA) voted 4-3 on the final approval on a 21-person unappealable **Community Parent-Guardian Review Board** with the right to call any current and future children and youth library materials “with sexual content” for review. The board will consist of a total of 21 community members with every City Councillor having the right to appoint three persons.

Next to collections, public libraries are facing pressure on programming. The criticism and challenges come from multiple directions. When some characterize the library as an overly liberal left-leaning organization, others feel that libraries are giving unnecessary or harmful visibility and resources to hate, prejudice and bigotry.

Standing for intellectual freedom is generating tensions on multiple fronts:

- between library leadership and staff
- between libraries and their philanthropic and public funders
- between libraries and legislators
- between libraries and community groups

In this letter, I highlight [Toronto Public Library](#)'s (TPL) work in protecting and even strengthening intellectual freedom as a fundamental core of libraries. Based on my research and practitioner engagement with civic institutions across the world, I feel many civic and cultural institutions could benefit from adopting similar practices like TPL's intellectual freedom and equity statements.

I first heard Toronto's City Librarian Vickery Bowles speak about this work at the [Urban Libraries Council](#) conference in Washington DC in November 2022. Bowles presented the statements as a way to strengthen their institutional capacity in a polarized and vitriolic world. I have since had the opportunity to visit Toronto Public Library and talk to their leadership about the ways these statements influence service delivery and partnerships. (Full disclosure: I will be collaborating on events with TPL in 2024.) I have also had the privilege to get to know [Lisa Radha Vohra](#), TPL's Director of Collections and Membership Services who has led this work and is an extraordinary advocate for intellectual freedom.



*City Librarian Vickery Bowles discussing intellectual freedom with (then) Executive Director of the American Library Association in a public event at Toronto Public Library on 11 September 2023. Image: Toronto Public Library*

Toronto Public Library's board approved the intellectual freedom and equity statements in December 2022. The [document](#) describes the institutional commitments, legal and other normative frameworks and lays out the way these commitments are managed, operationalized and evaluated. The goal of institutional strength is stated explicitly:

*The Statements reinforce TPL's Vision, Mission and Values and help to expand the understanding of library values among customers and staff. The goals outlined in the Statements provide direction and accountability for collaborative community work the library will continue to prioritize. Further, they promote commitments to perspectives and approaches that staff will implement in their work at the library and with the communities we serve.*

As TPL's Director of Branch Operations and Customer Experience Moe Hosseini-Ara explained in our discussion last May, the statements are a way to ensure that TPL is able to act according to its values even in a moment of a public attack: "Once you

*have these in place, you can deal with the situation and refer back to your policy which has been developed without being in the heat of a reaction response. You can make a decision because you have already done the thinking in advance.”*

I have come to believe that policies, like these statements, are fundamental for public sector legitimacy and accountability. They help people and stakeholders inside and outside a public institution in understanding the institution’s core values and driving principles. They support institutions in preparing for and navigating controversies around individual items or events. Successful policies provide sufficient predictability while leaving room for innovation and changing circumstances.

There are four reasons why TPL’s **statements** stand out as exemplary public policy.

## **1. The Statements include clear definitions.**

Many public institutions have a tendency to use words, like safety, intellectual freedom, wellbeing, or equity, in public communications and partner dialogue without ensuring that the parties share an understanding how similarly or differently they define these phrases. This is one of the main reasons why well-intentioned dialogue often leads to either conflict or lack of action.

TPL developed its statements in collaboration with the **Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University**. The key concepts are clearly defined in the document:

*At Toronto Public Library (TPL), **intellectual freedom** means supporting and facilitating the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society, and respecting each individual’s rights to privacy and choice.*

***Equity** is about understanding, acknowledging and removing barriers that prevent the full participation of any individual or group. It focuses on making fair treatment, access, opportunity, advancement and outcomes possible for all.*

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## 2. The Statements build on friction.

TPL sees intellectual freedom and equity as mutually reinforcing while recognizing their imminent tension. They use their resources, programming and communication to provide a platform for “*equity-deserving groups*” while not censoring third-party events or collections, which fall within the limits of the law.

TPL is not claiming that this work is easy. As Director for Communications, Programming & Customer Engagement Linda Hazzan explained: *”How do you educate and communicate is the core challenge. You've got staff that are challenging you. You've got politicians that are challenging you. It becomes a very emotional conversation instead of a philosophical or a policy conversation. And that ability to educate and communicate is what we're working towards with these foundational documents.”*

Based on my research and development work on public space organizations, good public policy is built on the recognition of friction as something natural and expected rather than treating disagreement or friction as a surprise, mistake or a problem that needs to be fixed. TPL’s statement document does not shy away from friction:

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*Ensuring that TPL spaces and services provide freedom of expression to all, without censorship, ensures that all voices can be heard, including and especially the voices of equity-deserving groups. At the same time, it means that individuals who may utilize the library’s services may come across information or ideas they find offensive.*

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The way TPL’s Director of Collections and Membership Services Lisa Radha Vohra explained the need for stronger policies on intellectual freedom linked it to the quality of their library service:

*”That core value [intellectual freedom] allows us to offer a breadth and depth of programming, services and collections that we could not otherwise. We have intentionally stated in numerous policies, clearly for transparency, that you might find some of the services and collections and programs and art exhibits offensive and that we fully support you to self-select in not participating or accessing those things*

*but equally not limiting other people's access to use those things."*

The way she explained these statements in practice makes it clear how a commitment to intellectual freedom needs to be combined with a serious commitment to equity:

*"Our Materials Selection Policy and many other policies clearly say how we make decisions and that we don't censor. But as there are human beings doing all this work, there's an opportunity for much bias in the work that we do. We acknowledge our biases and the policies direct and guide us even further. Simultaneously as we do not censor, the equity statement and our policies guide us to amplify Canadian voices, Indigenous voices, voices of equity-deserving groups and a lot of the voices that have been intentionally excluded or unintentionally excluded or not given the opportunity to have a platform.*

*There is a lot of privilege that has allowed platforms for a lot of things. We are intentionally acknowledging privilege and deconstructing that privilege and platforming and amplifying voices in our collections, services, and programs. We do this for allyship, for providing windows and mirrors for learning, for self-reflection, for self-actualization, and sometimes just for because it's a good read or a program. But there's no endorsement. There was either a demand, the book is a best seller or it matters based on our materials selection policy. We're creating the environment for each person to find the best ideas for themselves."*



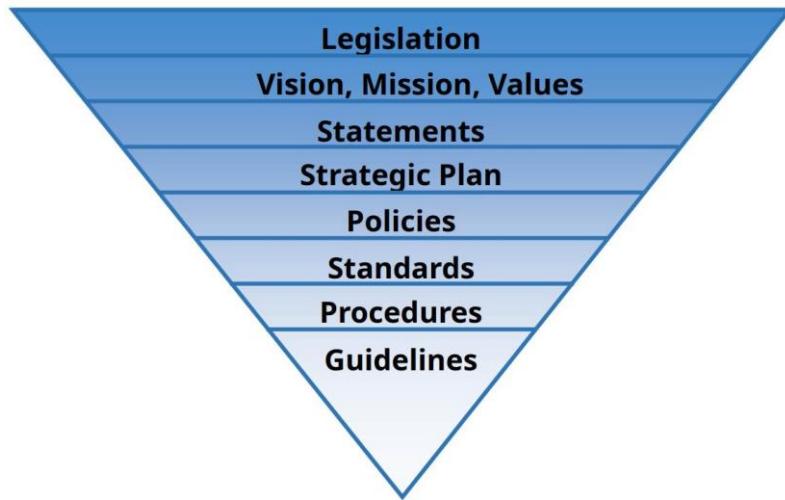
*George M. Johnson's award-winning memoir on growing up Black and queer in America has been one of the most challenged books of the last few years, highlighting how the challenges are disproportionately targeting books on race, sexual orientation and gender identity.*

### **3. The Statements are part of a policy architecture.**

With over 100 branches, Toronto Public Library is a massive institution. Director for Branch Operations and Customer Experience Moe Hosseini-Ara explained that for the organization to be able to deliver its services equitably, efficiently and with high quality in a quickly changing and tumultuous urban environment, it is critical to understand the difference between procedure and policy. While policies lay frameworks to **what and why** something is being done, procedures outline **how** things are done. Statements, strategic plans and policies are long-term guidelines approved by the board while procedures are operational matters that can be changed faster with an executive decision.

Shawn Mitchell, TPL's Director for Policy, Planning and Performance Management explained how the statements are a new category in TPL's overall **policy development framework**. The statements sit below the organization's vision, mission, and values but above its strategic planning (see image). In this way, they are

dependent on the organization's reason for existence but are more lasting than a strategic plan.



*Toronto Public Library's Policy Development Framework*

A statement is defined in the framework as:

***Statement***

*Codifies, defines, and explains the values that guide the delivery of public library service and the advocacy efforts of the public library sector and the library profession.*

*Audience: Board, staff, public*

*Compliance: Mandatory*

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## **4. The Statements are operationalized.**

What happens when rubber hits the road , i.e. in practice, is the ultimate test for good policy. In the case of TPL, the statements are supported with staff training, policies, guidelines and procedures.

On my visit to Toronto in May 2023, I had a chance to attend an innovation session where staff members were presenting project ideas on the topic of intellectual

freedom. The suggestions ranged from how libraries can provide reliable information around local elections to a program series on democracy, intellectual freedom, and challenging subjects. It was moving to see how the staff members felt empowered, encouraged and supported to tackle themes that are not easy.

TPL does not carry out this work in isolation. It joined the Book Sanctuary Movement initiated by Chicago Public Library to defend the right to read and display books currently or previously challenged. It actively shares all its policy development and responses to book challenges with libraries across North America as it understands that it is not in competition with other libraries. The battle for intellectual freedom requires a strong and united front and it is actually small and mid-sized libraries in more conservative areas that need the support of big urban libraries, like TPL.



*The Book Sanctuary is a program initiated by Chicago Public Library educating the public of intellectual freedom and censorship effort*

As evidence of its systematic approach, TPL has a clear procedure on how the public can request for a reconsideration of the library's position. This is a way to create accountability and predictability.

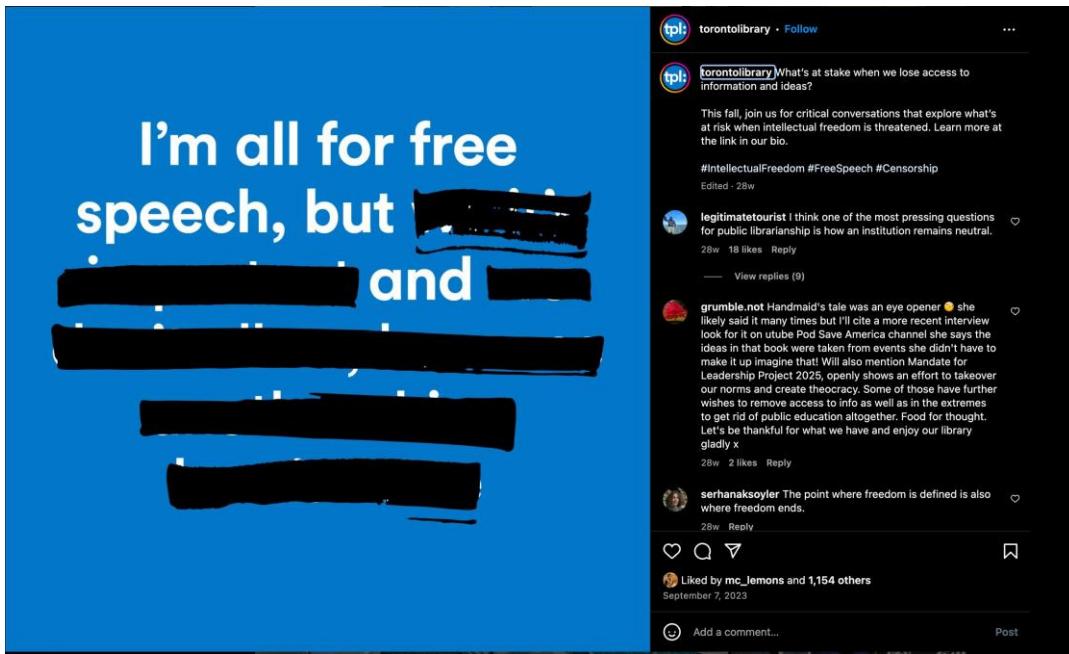
*If a customer wishes to appeal a decision based on Intellectual Freedom, they may do so by writing, indicating those areas or points with which they disagree, to the City Librarian at 789 Yonge Street, Toronto M4W 2GB, or by email to [citylibrarian@tpl.ca](mailto:citylibrarian@tpl.ca)*

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To ensure accountability in and learning from this process, the progress in operationalizing the statements is reported annually to the board:

*Annual reporting to the TPL Board on Intellectual Freedom Challenges will continue. Reporting on progress on the goals outlined in the Equity Statement will be integrated into the annual Enterprise Balanced Scorecard and reported to the TPL Board beginning in 2023.*

Toronto Public Library has also made the theme prominent in its communications and marketing. The tone is frank but not seeking controversy or shock factor.



*TPL's communication campaign on Instagram on intellectual freedom.*

## To conclude...

Culture wars, targeted attacks, intentional misunderstanding, and misinformation are bound to increase. Public institutions - and cultural institutions, like museums and festivals - dealing with intellectual and artistic freedom need to build protocols and practices before they need them. For these policies to be legitimate, institutions cannot develop them in isolation. Dialogue with staff, community organizations and local research organizations is vital to contextualize the policies.

What we can learn from Toronto:

1. Define what you mean with intellectual/artistic freedom.
2. Connect freedom of expression to equity and recognize the imminent friction.
3. Talk about the friction openly with staff, governing bodies, funders, partners, and the public.

4. Integrate your statements into existing management and policy systems.
5. Make your policies short.
6. Make your policies operational.
7. Join regional, national and international movements on freedom and equity and share your practices with others.

This work might sound hard. And it is. But the most hopeful thing mentioned by Lisa Radha Vohra, however, is that TPL's action-oriented commitment to its core values is building new demand and support:

*"The biggest thing that's happened is that What's At Stake series and all the critical conversation programming is constantly sold out. It is oversubscribed and actively attended online. There's been more engagement. We are hearing from our customers that they want more. They now have an expectation that their library is doing intellectual freedom awareness and championing it in practice. "*

That's it for today. Stay hopeful, truthful and free.