



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Intellectual Freedom Challenges – 2024 Annual Report

Date: March 24, 2025
To: Toronto Public Library Board
From: City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the processes for dealing with challenges to intellectual freedom and to provide a summary of the four challenges Toronto Public Library (TPL) received in 2024 regarding library materials.

While the volume of formal challenges received relative to the population served is low, this report is before the Toronto Public Library Board at a time when libraries in North America continue to experience targeted challenges to materials programs, room bookings and exhibits.

Outside of the formal request for reconsideration process, staff at branches respond to customer comments about collections and services via email and in person. The leadership and commitment to Intellectual Freedom by staff in policy, procedure and practice works to create neutral offerings and transparency on how decisions are made regarding Intellectual Freedom and how customers can provide comments, compliments and feedback.

In response to ongoing challenges, TPL has raised awareness and increased education efforts through advocacy, policy and procedure development, award winning promotion and programming to reaffirm the vital role public libraries play in protecting intellectual freedom for all. Intellectual freedom training for staff launched late 2024. All of this is part of an effort to improve general understanding of the importance of intellectual freedom, free speech, and free expression in a democratic society and as a core public library value.

In 2024, there were four challenges to titles in the collection. All titles were retained. Details about the challenges and the actions taken by the Library are listed in Attachment 1.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact associated with this report.

The Director, Finance & CFO has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

The 2024 annual report on intellectual freedom challenges reflects the Library's Vision, Mission and Values, specifically that of intellectual freedom by guaranteeing and facilitating the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society, protecting intellectual freedom and respecting individuals' rights to privacy and choice. The report is also aligned with the Strategic Plan priority of being recognized internationally as the centre for social connection, community dialogue and strengthening democratic values.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are central to the promotion and practice of intellectual freedom. TPL supports this principle by, as stated in the Library's Mission Statement, providing "universal access to a broad range of human knowledge, experience, information and ideas..." through collections, programs and services. Further, TPL's commitment to equity and intellectual freedom as

mutually reinforcing principles is reiterated in the Board-approved position statements on equity and intellectual freedom.

DECISION HISTORY

At its September 18, 2023 meeting, the Library Board approved the revised [Community and Event Space Rental Policy](#), which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement and incorporates the request for reconsideration process.

At its June 19, 2023, meeting, the Library Board approved the [Request for Reconsideration and Administrative Updates](#) for the Programming and Library Space for Art Exhibits policies, which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement and incorporates the request for reconsideration process.

At its January 23, 2023, meeting, the Library Board approved the updated [Materials Selection Policy](#), which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement, and an updated version of the Ontario Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Rights of the Individual.

At its December 5, 2022 meeting, the Library Board approved the [Intellectual Freedom and Equity Statements](#), two mutually reinforcing statements that recognize TPL's role in supporting these foundational principles.

At its December 5, 2022 meeting, the Library Board approved the [Trends in Intellectual Freedom Challenges](#) report, reaffirmed its commitment to the Canadian Federation of Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Freedom and endorsed the Urban Library Council's Declaration of Democracy.

At its May 8, 2018, meeting, the Library Board received for information the [Intellectual Freedom Challenges – 2017 Annual Report](#), which, for the first time, was broadened to include not only challenges to library materials but also challenges relating to library programming, technology, and library space to provide a more comprehensive view of challenges relating to intellectual freedom. Subsequent reports continue to reflect this broader view of intellectual freedom challenges.

At its June 25, 2001 meeting, the Library Board received its first annual report on intellectual freedom challenges to library materials: [Materials Selection Policy – Reconsideration of Materials 2000](#). Since then, annual reports on intellectual freedom challenges have been provided to the Board.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Intellectual freedom is a core public library value that is reflected in the Library’s Vision, Mission, Values and policies. These policies are based on the following principles:

The Library believes that a vital society encourages members of its community to actively participate in an open exchange of ideas and opinions, and it offers materials, technology, programs, and services to support this goal. The Library seeks to offer a welcoming, inclusive environment while upholding the principles of freedom of speech and expression.

The content or manner of expressing ideas in material, programs or other activities that are purposely selected to fill the needs of some Library customers may, on occasion, be considered offensive by other Library customers. The Library recognizes the right of any individual or group to reject library material, programs and other activities for personal use but does not accord to any individual or group the right to restrict the freedom of others to make use of that same material, programs or activities.

Intellectual freedom challenges are dealt with in the context of the applicable policy governing the service area. TPL’s current processes for handling requests for reconsideration are a public library best practice.

COMMENTS

Outside of the formal request for reconsideration process staff at branches respond to customer comments about collections and services via email and in-person. The leadership and commitment to Intellectual Freedom by staff in policy, procedure and practice works to create neutral offerings and transparency on how decisions are made regarding Intellectual Freedom and how customers can provide comments, compliments, feedback and initiate a request for reconsideration or appeal a decision.

In response to ongoing challenges, TPL has raised awareness and increased education efforts through advocacy, policy and procedure development, award-winning promotion and programming to reaffirm the vital role public libraries play in protecting intellectual freedom for all. Intellectual freedom training for staff launched late 2024. All of this is part of an effort to improve general understanding of the importance of intellectual freedom, free speech, and free expression in a democratic society and as a core public library value.

Challenges to Library Material

The Library provides a process for members of the public to identify concerns about books and other material in the Library's collection. These customer objections are dealt with in the context of the [Materials Selection Policy](#) and the principles of intellectual freedom.

Library customers who object to materials located in the collection are asked to complete a written request for the reconsideration of the materials. Request forms are available for this purpose at all library branches.

The procedure for the reconsideration of library materials is intended to ensure that the concerns of the customer are dealt with in a timely manner and with sensitivity. Typically, objections are received at the branch level. Staff can then discuss the customer's concerns with them with a copy of the Materials Selection Policy. This discussion often satisfies the customer, and no further action is required. Customers wishing to pursue their challenge fill out a form detailing their concerns, which is sent to the Senior Manager, Collection Development, who forwards it to the Materials Review Committee. A letter of acknowledgement is sent to the customer explaining the process.

The Materials Review Committee is chaired by the Senior Manager, Collection Development and is drawn from a group of experienced public service librarians based on the subject of the challenge. These librarians have a mixture of expertise in adult, children's and teen materials in a variety of formats and the Manager may also call on other experts, for example language specialists, as needed. The Committee researches the disputed title by considering such elements as reviews, the author's reputation, coverage of the subject in the collection, its popularity, historical importance, all within the

context of the Materials Selection Policy. The decision on the disposition of the item is communicated in writing by the Director, Collections & Membership Services. If customers wish to dispute the decision, they may appeal to the City Librarian where the final decision is made.

In 2024, there were four challenges to titles in the collection. All titles were retained. Details about the challenges and the actions taken by the Library are listed in Attachment 1.

CONCLUSION

In general, the volume of challenges received relative to the population served is very low, reflecting the public's appreciation of the breadth of TPL's collection, the importance of public libraries in providing access to public space, programming and technology, and its understanding of the application of intellectual freedom in a library setting. Based on ongoing challenges in the wider library community TPL's focus on Intellectual Freedom advocacy and education continues as a strategic priority.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

Vickery Bowles
City Librarian

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Challenges to Intellectual Freedom 2024 – Library Materials

Challenges to Intellectual Freedom 2024 – Library Materials

Date	Item Description	Summary of Customer Comments	Investigation and Response to RFR
March 2024	Mein Kampf / Adolf Hitler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer requested that TPL remove all copies of the title because of the troubling rise in antisemitism and stating that the book has no value. • Customer shared several emails with examples of antisemitism occurring in Toronto. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responded to customer referencing TPL's Materials Selection Policy, that the title is available in the public domain, and that it is necessary text for the studies of the Holocaust, propaganda and totalitarian psychology. • Item was retained in the collection. • In response to the decision, the customer asked and was provided time for a public deputation to the Board to share their concerns.
June 2024	Men to Avoid in Art and Life / Nicole Tersigni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer requested that TPL remove all copies of the book because it contains pornographic and racist content pertaining to women and certain religions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responded to customer referencing TPL's Material Selection Policy, that the book is a comedic interpretation of classical art, and the book's appeal is influenced through an individual's own perspective and experiences. • Item was retained in the collection.
July 2024	Operation Paperclip / Annie Jacobsen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer requested that TPL remove all copies of the book because the book cover displays a swastika and that the book may infringe on bill C-313, the proposed Canadian Act to amend the Criminal code banning symbols of hate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responded to the customer referencing TPL's Materials Selection Policy, that the Library does not keep, acquire, or purchase material that the Canadian courts have found to be hate propaganda, and that Bill C-313 completed its first reading in June 2021. • Item was retained in the collection

July 2024	Voici Buffy Sainte-Marie / Elizabeth MacLeod	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer requested that TPL remove all copies of the book because it contains falsehoods surrounding Buffy Sainte-Marie's Indigenous identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responded to the customer referencing TPL's Materials Selection Policy, that the book has broad availability at public libraries across North America and received the Yellow Cedar award as part of OLA's Forest of Reading program. • The discussion surrounding false Indigenous identity is important to reflect on and the Library will continue to listen to voices within the Indigenous communities, including the Piapot First Nation band #75, who have adopted Buffy Sainte-Marie following Cree tradition and continue to support her. • Item was retained in the collection • The customer appealed the decision to retain the book, and a final review was conducted by the City Librarian where the decision to retain was upheld.
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