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Intellectual Freedom and the Agnostic–Postmodernist View of Reading Effects

EMILY KNOX

ABSTRACT

One of the more confusing aspects of contemporary librarianship is its support for collecting “all sides” in its institutions while, at the same time, arguing for the positive nature of reading for all. This article focuses two positions toward knowledge effects. One, the postmodernist view, is agnostic toward the effects of gaining new knowledge while the other, the traditional–modernist view, holds that the effects of new knowledge can be known and are inevitable. It is the postmodernist position that undergirds contemporary librarianship’s support for intellectual freedom.

One common theme among challengers to materials in libraries and their supporters is that librarians sanction having pornography in their collections and that such materials are easily available to children. Sometimes this theme appears in reference to filters on computers: “Did u know #ALA @OIF is listed as 1 of USA’s leading #porn facilitators?” tweeted Dan Kleinman of Safe Libraries in reference to a short news item from *Morality in Media*, an antipornography organization. At other times the theme appears in discussions regarding books in children’s collections. For example, in 2007, a challenger wrote the following in a letter to the library board in Lewiston, Maine: “It is truly a disordered concept of freedom when library policies [increase] children’s capability to get pornographic material.” Although pornography is legally protected speech, it is highly contested in the public sphere. Librarians’ disinclination to filter their public computers in order to remove pornography and their arguments for doing so are mystifying to some in the public.

While employing somewhat controversial practices with regard to problematic materials in their collections, librarians also celebrate reading as an activity. They sponsor book groups and story times for children and

generally promote reading in their communities. These two practices—a reluctance to censor while at the same time celebrating reading—seem antithetical to the many in the general public. Are librarians for or against reading objectionable materials? If they think that reading is good, why do they not attempt to limit access to books that might harm certain individuals? Louise S. Robbins (1996) states this position succinctly in her book on censorship and librarianship: “Librarians are in the peculiar position of saying that reading matters, that it entails risks, and at the same time, resisting any restrictions on access to books and other library materials” (p. 156). Librarians state that they do this because they “support intellectual freedom,” but what are the foundations for this support?

This article seeks to answer this question by investigating a particular ideology regarding the nature of knowledge and its effects on the individual and society that suffuse contemporary librarianship. It argues that much of the confusion over librarianship’s stance toward intellectual freedom comes from the general public’s lack of understanding of librarianship’s philosophical and epistemological foundations for supporting intellectual freedom. This article attempts to define this ideology, explore its background, and describe how it came to be a defining belief within contemporary librarianship. In particular, the article contends that librarians’ support for intellectual freedom is informed by a philosophy that holds that one cannot know what the effects of new knowledge will be on a particular individual or society. This is in contrast to the view that effects of new knowledge can be known and are inevitable.

This article begins with brief definitions of ideology, social epistemology, intellectual freedom, and knowledge effects. It then describes two positions—the modernist or traditional view and the postmodernist or agnostic view—toward knowledge effects. These descriptions are based in a historical overview of the so-called “fiction question.” Finally, the article discusses how the postmodernist view provides an ideological foundation for contemporary librarianship’s support for intellectual freedom.

IDEOLOGY

Ideology is defined here as a structure of beliefs and principles based in a particular philosophy of how the world works that informs the practices of a group and gives meaning to these practices. Although individuals may believe their lives and actions to be unaffected by ideology, as Louis Althusser notes, “what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise in the street), in reality takes place in ideology,” and “what really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it” (1971, p. 163). Ideology informs the actions of all individuals and social groups, including those of professional librarians. For example, one’s ideological framework determines which actions one views as “censorship” and which ones might be seen as simply “good judgment.”

Much has been written on various ideologies that operate within librarianship. For example, in her book on censorship in libraries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Evelyn Geller (1984) explores a general “ideology of librarianship” especially in relationship to professionalization. Douglas S. Raber (1997) examined the Public Library Inquiry as a manifestation of the ideology of public librarianship. Toni Samek’s (2001) investigation into the history of the American Library Association in the late 1960s and early 1970s focuses on social responsibility as an ideology within librarianship. More recently, a compilation of essays and articles from the *Progressive Librarian* titled *Questioning Library Neutrality* (Lewis, 2008) takes a critical view of neutrality as a guiding ideology for librarianship. This article follows in the tradition of these previous works and explores a particular ideology of librarianship that undergirds the profession’s support for intellectual freedom. Note that the author does not hold that the ideologies described here are the overriding paradigm for providing meaning for librarianship. Instead, it is possible that many different ideologies, including those given above and the ones described in this essay, shape the myriad practices of contemporary librarianship.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Although the concepts discussed in this article might be primarily ideological, they can also be addressed within the realm of social epistemology. Briefly, epistemology, along with ethics and metaphysics, is one of the major fields of exploration in philosophy. Epistemologists study not only what we know but also how we know it. In his article on epistemology and information science, Don Fallis defines epistemology as “what knowledge is and how people come to know things about the world” (Fallis, 2006, p. 475). Epistemologists are generally concerned with ideas of truth and justification. That is, how do we know that something is true and how do we justify this belief both to ourselves and to others? Exploration of knowledge effects can be understood to be part of a branch of epistemology—social epistemology.

Coined by Margaret Egan and first introduced by Egan and Jesse Shera (Furner, 2004) in 1952, *social epistemology* is somewhat difficult to define as it has been appropriated by researchers in many different fields. Although understandings of the term have changed over time, it now primarily refers to the idea that knowledge is social in character as well as to the study of those social frameworks. That is, knowledge is not an individual phenomenon but is embedded in social structures and practices. In a historical article that traces the development of this subject, Tarcisio Zandonade (2004) notes that Shera, in particular, believed social epistemology was the theoretical foundation of librarianship. Unfortunately, Shera’s ideas of what constituted this type of epistemology were somewhat amorphous. Zandonade’s article, for example, lists forty propositions Shera discussed

regarding epistemology in his book *Foundations of Education for Librarianship* (1972). Since the deaths of Egan and Shera, social epistemology has gained some acceptance within the philosophical community and there have been several attempts to explore the influence of Egan's and Shera's theory on various fields of thought. This article follows in the tradition of social epistemology in that it attempts to understand what social factors underlie two competing views of knowledge effects within contemporary librarianship.

Before continuing, it should be noted that there have been studies on reading and cognitive changes in fields of study outside of the ones discussed below. First, within education, English literature, and youth services there is an emphasis on children's reading and literacy. Second, the field of cognitive psychology investigates changes in brain function during the act of reading. However, this article argues that instead of relying solely on these fields of research, the ideology of knowledge effects employed in contemporary librarianship relies heavily on the field of literary criticism and reader-response theory in order to understand how people are affected by new knowledge. These areas of scholarship are less influenced by empirical studies and more concerned with questions of interpretation and social context.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Intellectual freedom is a somewhat woolly concept. *The Intellectual Freedom Manual* (2010), published by the Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, defines intellectual freedom as a right based in the First Amendment that "accords to all library users the right to seek and receive information on all subjects from all points of view without restriction and without having the subject of one's interest examined or scrutinized by others" (American Library Association, 2010, p. 3). In practice this means that librarians should also provide information giving all points of view of a particular subject.

Many books and articles have demonstrated that librarians are often negligent in upholding intellectual freedom for all. One well-known example is the so-called Fiske Report (Lowenthal, 1959), which found that librarians often chose to self-censor rather than select books for their collections that would be controversial in their community. More recently, librarians have refused to buy the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* by classifying it as erotica and arguing that they do not collect such works in their institutions. As will be discussed below, support for intellectual freedom has not always been a guiding principle in librarianship and this support has been contested even after it became a prevalent view.

KNOWLEDGE AND READING EFFECTS

The issue of knowledge effects forms the crux of arguments for and against intellectual freedom. In this article, *knowledge effects* are defined as the short- and long-term outcomes of interacting with media. These can be the effects on a single individual or the effects on society as a whole. Since this article is concerned with librarianship, most of the focus will be on the bibliographic universe and the interpretation of texts. The act of reading is understood to be a practice that disseminates knowledge throughout society. Therefore, although it can be argued that they are not strictly equivalent, this article will use “reading effects” and “knowledge effects” interchangeably.

The following sections of the article explore two ideologies of knowledge effects—one view holds that these effects are known and inevitable while the other is agnostic as to what the effects of exposure to new knowledge might be. The two positions are defined and then elaborated through the lens of the fiction question in public libraries and through brief descriptions of how the positions are invoked in other areas of librarianship.

THE TRADITIONAL—MODERNIST VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE EFFECTS

Historically, librarians did not support intellectual freedom for all. When the first public libraries opened, they were perceived by their founders to be part of the institutionalized state educational system (Sessa, 2003). This educational justification directly affected the collection policies of the libraries and meant that librarians were obliged to collect titles deemed to be edifying to the public. Nonfiction was (and is) classified as inherently instructional. Fiction, on the other hand was, and continues to be, much more contentious. The combative history of the novel has been detailed elsewhere (Davidson, 2004), but what is most important for understanding librarians’ lack of support for intellectual freedom at the time is the idea that fiction is not “true” and therefore not educational.

Within librarianship, the traditional view of reading effects underpinned the reasoning for focusing on why the truth of a particular book would matter for its inclusion in library collections. This *modernist* view is based on a causal argument that reading “good” books will lead to “good” outcomes. Concurrently, the reverse is also true—reading “bad” books will lead to “bad” outcomes. In this traditional view, the outcomes in question can be either local or universal. That is, the dissemination and consumption of good texts will lead to individuals with good character and behavior. Likewise and also as a consequence of individual practices, such actions will also lead to the improvement of society as a whole.

Crucial to understanding this point of view regarding the effects of new knowledge is that such effects can be known and have direct, causal

relationships. That is, to reiterate, good books and media—as defined by society and always subject to prevailing tastes—will lead to the improvement of the individual and society. Bad books and media—also defined by society—will lead to the opposite. There is no room for alternative interpretations of texts wherein individuals might bring differing strategies when discerning the meaning of a particular work.

The Traditional–Modernist View and the Fiction Question

Throughout the history of librarianship, the traditional view has been invoked to restrict access to certain materials. For example, during debates over the “fiction question” and throughout the public library movement with its attendant dogma of “social improvement,” librarians argued that the general public should be steered toward “quality” books. Note that the definitions of quality and immorality, though not the focus of this essay, change over time and what is considered an “immoral” text in one era might be “quality” in another.

As noted above, in the early years of professional librarianship, librarians were not strong supporters of intellectual freedom and tended to use their positions to discourage patrons from reading fiction. Novels were not selected for the collection as they were considered to be “immoral.” Dee Garrison (2003) argues that immoral fiction was primarily about the changing status of women and complaints were primarily centered on values rather than aesthetics. It was this issue of feminine discontent that “permeate[d] the domestic fiction judged ‘immoral’ by leading librarians and literary conservatives” (Garrison, 2003, p. 83). That is, the “fiction question” was primarily about the position of women as a whole and fear over their shifting place in society. Following from the traditional–modernist view of knowledge effects, reading such immoral books would lead people to “question the fundamental truths of a benevolently ordered world” (Garrison, 2003, p. 72) and ultimately lead to the ruin of both individual character and society.

Garrison notes that most librarians in the late nineteenth century believed it was their role to improve popular taste. Libraries acquired some popular books, but it was the professional librarian’s role to guide patrons to “intellectual” reading materials. One particularly notorious regulation was the two-book system (Garrison, 2003) employed during the 1890s. This arrangement allowed patrons to check out two books at a time provided that one was not a novel. The two-book system was reflective of librarians’ lack of support for intellectual freedom during this time. Patrons could have access to dubious materials as long as they also read materials that would improve their character.

Betty Rosenberg (1994) argues that this system reflected the contradictory theories behind the establishment of the public library’s fiction collection. Should the collection only include the “best” literature or should libraries give the public whatever it wants to read? The latter concept grew

out of the public library's mission (in addition to the previously discussed educational one) to provide recreation to the public. As will be shown in the following section on the ideology of the modernist view of knowledge effects, this mission developed slowly during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century due to the public's lack of interest in the library as solely a place of education.

Evelyn Geller (1984) notes in her history of censorship of public libraries that the first controversy in 1880 was over "trashy" books at the Boston Public Library. (This incident eventually led to the establishment of children's sections in public libraries.) She holds that librarians' initial exclusion of popular fiction was part of their orientation toward and membership within the elite of society. In the early part of the twentieth century, even librarians who did not censor books tended to stress "moral uplift and an elitist perspective" (Geller, 1984, p. 91). Often these arguments were made using the traditional-modernist view of reading effects. Librarians continued to be suspicious of the new naturalistic fiction even after *Library Journal* started reviewing it. Geller also notes that literary masterpieces are never immoral—only "unsuitable" for certain readers (p. 119). This argument is also based on the traditional-modernist view of reading effects—everyone will get something positive out of reading a masterpiece as long as they read it a suitable time in their development.

Reading Effects Research

Within academia, early research on reading also took a traditional-modernist point of view. Under the direction of Douglas Waples, the Graduate Library School at The University of Chicago established reading research as a major field of study. Following the research program of the sociology department at the university, Waples and his students conducted several empirical studies on reading in the surrounding Chicago area. In an introductory article published in *The Library Quarterly*, Waples (1931) writes that he assumes there will be discernible reading effects in his studies but does not take an absolute position regarding what these effects might be. However, in subsequent articles, these effects are clarified. For example, one of the clearest invocations of the traditional-modernist view of reading effects is demonstrated in the title of the article "On Developing Taste in Reading" (Waples, 1942). The term *taste* indicates not simply what people prefer to read but whether or not they prefer to engage in "meritorious reading." Another example of the traditionalist view of reading effects is found in an article on the social psychology of reading that argues that there are two types of responses to reading: stimulus-response and symbolic interaction. The author, H. Muller (1942), states that reading has both primary and secondary effects on "attitudes, emotional tensions, and subjective states" of the reader (p. 9). Another study that employs the traditional-modernist view is E. P. Jackson's (1944) investigation into the effects of reading on attitudes toward African-

Americans conducted in the 1940s. Jackson assumed that reading books with positive portrayals of African-Americans would lead to a decrease in prejudice. He did find such a shift, but it was not lasting.

All of these studies operated under the assumption that there are defined effects of new knowledge and these can be discerned through empirical research. In some respects, these studies lent scientific credibility to the traditional–modernist view. Armed with official research, those who espoused this view could “prove” that their position was correct. Not only were there definite effects from reading—these effects could be known and fully described through research. As will be discussed below, it is in the area of bibliotherapy that the scientific underpinnings of this view come to the fore.

Bibliotherapy

A discussion of the traditional–modernist view of reading effects cannot be complete without a discussion of bibliotherapy. *The Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science* defines *bibliotherapy* as

the use of books selected on the basis of content in a planned reading program designed to facilitate the recovery of patients suffering from mental illness or emotional disturbance. Ideally, the process occurs in three phases: personal identification of the reader with a particular character in the recommended work, resulting in psychological catharsis, which leads to rational insight concerning the relevance of the solution suggested in the text to the reader’s own experience. (Reitz, n.d.)

The key terms with regard to the traditional–modernist view of reading effects are “catharsis” and “rational insight” as these are considered to be known outcomes within bibliotherapy. Rhea Rubin (1979), the author of two books on bibliotherapy, linked the practice to the self-actualization movement of the 1970s and argued that bibliotherapy should be systematized and operate as a credentialed professional service within librarianship.

Although bibliotherapy was a major field of practice in the early and middle part of the twentieth century, it fell out of favor in the late 1970s. A search of major library and information science databases reveals only one thousand or so articles on the topic dating from 1919. It is not coincidental that this fall can be traced, as will be discussed below, to the rise of the agnostic–postmodernist view of reading effects. However, there have been attempts in recent years to revive the practice of bibliotherapy for targeted groups, particularly the mentally ill. In an article in *Young Adult Library Services*, Jami Jones (2006) argues that librarians are engaged in bibliotherapy when they recommend a book that is used to heal, and therefore “librarians conduct . . . developmental bibliotherapy without hesitation” (p. 26). Another example is Liz Brewster’s (2008) article on bibliotherapy from 2008 that discusses how UK libraries are providing bibliotherapy in

their institutions by supporting mental health work. More recently, Brewster and coauthors Barbara Sen and Andrew Cox (2013) called for a more robust practice of evaluating bibliotherapy in UK libraries. They noted that while users view bibliotherapy in terms of outcomes, library staff tends to focus on the types of texts that are used in the service. This lack of shared perception has made it difficult to revise the recommendations that are given in the UK's bibliotherapy programs.

Labeling

Labeling is another area where the traditional-modernist view of knowledge effects is put into practice. For example, as Robbins's (1993) article notes, Ralph Ulveling requested that the ALA Statement on Labeling, which was adopted in 1951, include a provision for the separation of communist propaganda. Although this request revealed a lack of consensus regarding intellectual freedom in the profession at the time, it demonstrates that there was concern that some patrons will not know the difference between what is "true" and what is "propaganda." This idea, that propaganda constitutes its own category of information that must be indicated to users, demonstrates that the general public was not trusted to draw their own conclusions regarding certain texts.

Officially, the American Library Association (2010) opposes the practice of labeling because it is impossible to restrict it to only one type of label. As Robbins (1993) notes, librarians are aware that labeling is a political process. However, it is a practice that continues in almost all libraries across the country. Books and other materials are often labeled for genre or age appropriateness, and some controversial materials are restricted and placed "behind the desk." These practices can be seen as continuing manifestations of the traditional-modernist view of reading effects. However, one might argue that they can also be understood as practices that give patrons more information in order to draw their own conclusions about a particular item. This latter view is important to the other position on knowledge effects—the postmodernist or agnostic view—that informs much of contemporary librarianship's relationship to intellectual freedom today.

THE AGNOSTIC-POSTMODERNIST VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE EFFECTS

In contrast to the traditional-modernist view of knowledge effects, which—to reiterate—holds that the effects of new knowledge can be known and are causal in nature, the *postmodernist* view posits that although there may be discernible effects of new knowledge, it is impossible to know what these effects might be on a given individual or on society in advance. That is, this view is agnostic regarding the effects of new knowledge. "Agnostic" is used here in its classic sense of "not known or unknowable." This position was most clearly described by Jesse Shera in his treatise

tise on librarianship entitled *Introduction to Library Science*. Shera (1976) writes that “because we do not know, with any precision, ‘what reading does to people,’ or how it affects social behavior, the profession can be magnanimous in admitting books to library shelves that present all sides of a subject” (p. 56). By the time Shera made this statement in 1976, librarianship had experienced a major shift in ideology concerning the relationship between the individual and texts. The social context and one possible theoretical underpinning for this change is described in more detail below.

THE AGNOSTIC–POSTMODERNIST VIEW AND THE FICTION QUESTION

In her book on librarianship in the United States, Dee Garrison (2003) notes that professional attitudes toward fiction shifted partially through the work of John Cotton Dana, the well-known director of the Newark Public Library in the early twentieth century. Dana did not believe that libraries should exist for purely educational purposes and worked to emphasize the recreational mission of the public library. “Public libraries, Dana hoped, could add to the social disquiet if they would extend to the people the opportunity to judge for themselves,” writes Garrison (p. 95). In light of this, Dana encouraged librarians to support different varieties of thought in their collections.

Another reformer of librarianship’s attitudes toward popular fiction was Lindsay Swift of the Boston Public Library. In 1899, Swift gave a paper at the Massachusetts Library Club titled “Paternalism in Public Libraries” in which he excoriated librarians for believing it was their duty to select only wholesome books. Swift, who had been advised not to give a paper on the subject, stated that the “spirit of paternalism” was most clearly displayed in librarians’ objections toward “vulgar” literature. “Vulgar literature?” he wrote, “What is it? The range is wide, running from Thackeray and Dickens down to ‘Chimmie Fadden’ . . . so long as respectability rests on the foundation of pretense, books which tell truth will seem vulgar” (p. 614). Swift ended his address by stating that librarians should end their selection policies based on the “helplessness of mankind” and be bold enough to choose books that might offend the public: “It is bad enough to attempt to please everybody, but it is far more difficult and dangerous to attempt to offend nobody—it is belittling to ourselves, to the public and to the institution” (p. 616). Although his language was somewhat harsh and, as discussed below, a more solid conceptual foundation for his view would not develop for another seventy or so years, it is clear that Swift was espousing the postmodernist view of reading effects throughout his statement—the public should be trusted to make their own decisions concerning what they wish to read.

Garrison also notes that by 1900, librarians who continued to cling to

the edifying mission of the library were dying off. The new generation of librarians, influenced by Dana, abandoned overt paternalism and collected the fiction that the public wanted to read. As Garrison argues, the disintegration of the cultural tradition of genteel liberalism enabled librarians to justify their existence and the existence of their professional and public institutions through means other than “their position as self-appointed censors of public morals” (2003, p. 100). One of these justifications included the continuing educational mission of the library, which was embodied in, for example, literacy programs offered by public libraries.

Rosenberg (1994) points to other factors that were instrumental in librarianship’s acceptance of popular fiction. She notes that public libraries began using circulation statistics as a measurement tool and fiction had high circulation numbers. Also of importance was the growing acceptability of mass popular culture within the wider society. Finally, librarians adapted to changing social mores and eventually the idea that “the library’s fiction ought be what was good for the reader rather than what the reader wanted became an untenable policy” (Rosenberg, 1994, p. 195). For libraries to remain supported by the public, they had to collect what the public wanted to read. By 1939, when the ALA first endorsed the Library Bill of Rights, fiction was more or less fully accepted as a legitimate genre within professional librarianship.

Although the “fiction question” seems somewhat remote in the current era, its influence over contemporary librarianship’s support for intellectual freedom cannot be overstated. Even after the fiction question was more or less resolved, shifts in the profession’s stance toward controversial materials continued to be informed by its historical responses to building suitable collections for the public. It should also be reiterated that although this shift from the traditional–modernist to the agnostic–postmodernist view of knowledge effects slowly permeated the profession, this is not meant to imply that librarians always put their principles into practice. As Robbins (1996) notes, librarians were not immediately willing to accept the idea that the general public could make their own decisions regarding what was appropriate to read. For example, librarians’ increasing support for the agnostic–postmodernist view of reading effects (and in turn for intellectual freedom for all) was tempered by the rise of anticommunism in the 1950s. However, a new theory of interpretation eventually developed that helped to solidify librarianship’s support for intellectual freedom. Coming from the field of literary criticism, it offered a new and robust theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between text and reader.

Reader-Response Theory

As noted above, *reader-response theory* is primarily concerned with the idea of interpretation. In his introduction to the concept, Steven Mailloux

(1995) defines interpretation as an “acceptable approximating translation” (p. 121). He then discusses several theories of interpretation. For the purposes of understanding reader-response theory and its relationship to intellectual freedom, two are particularly important: formalist and intentionalist. *Formalist* theories focus on the translation aspects of interpretation and attend to the words on the page as such, while *intentionalist* theories focus on the author’s meaning as shown through the words on the page. Mailloux notes that these two theories are “foundationalist” and prescribe how one should interpret.

Reader-response theory, on the other hand, describes a strategy of sense making. How does one interpret the words on the page? Mailloux states that interpretation is always politically motivated and all theories of interpretation are rhetorical. The text and the politics are never separate. Interpretive theories supply interpreters with the “rhetorical substance for interpretive debate” (Mailloux, 1995, p. 133). As Jane Tompkins (1980) notes in the concluding chapter to *Reader-Response Criticism*—a seminal work in this area—all reader-response theorists believe that meaning is always found outside of the text. This concept, which places the meaning of text within the interpreter and his or her social context, is vital for understanding the ideology of the postmodernist view of knowledge effects. A brief typological overview of these theories is given below.

In the introduction to the *Reader in the Text*, Susan Suleiman (1980) discusses six approaches to reader response. The first is the *rhetorical* approach, which focuses on the implied reader and views the text as a medium of communication. Rhetorical theoreticians are also concerned with the ethical and ideological content of the message found in the text. The *phenomenological* approach, the second in this typology, focuses on aesthetic perception and how readers appropriate the experience of reading. The *hermeneutic* approach investigates the nature of reading as such and calls for critics to be self-reflective.

Subjective/psychological theories comprise the fourth approach. They focus on the individual reader and employ a “uses and gratifications” understanding of the practice of reading and are often based on Freudian psychology. These theorists examine what the reader “gets out of” the text. For example, in Norman N. Holland’s (1980) article on identity and text, he discusses the fantasy content that is found in literature which allows the reader to “create from the fantasy seemingly ‘in’ the work fantasies to suit their several character structures” (p. 126). The fifth approach, termed the *sociological/historical* approach, discusses reading as a collective phenomenon and is particularly concerned with issues of how one’s social group determines what one reads. As an example, in Jacques Leenhardt’s (1980) article describing a quantitative study that measured readers’ reception of the same two works in two different countries, he finds that interpretation of the text is based on cultural differences between

French and Hungarian readers.

Finally, the *semiotic/structuralist* approach argues that what renders a text readable are signs and codes. The audience is inscribed within the work. This might be viewed as a type of “implied reader” but, as Suleiman (1980) notes, there is no room for an “ideal” interpreter in the semiotician’s view. Interpretation “treats the inscribed reader as simply one element among other meaning-producing elements in the text” (p. 14). This latter approach in Suleiman’s typology is important for understanding the postmodernist view of reading effects since it directly informs what might be the most influential theory within the ideology of the agnostic view—the interpretive strategy.

Interpretive strategies refer to the host of ideas and practices that people bring to a particular text. As Stanley Fish (1982) notes, “These strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (p. 171). This statement is key to understanding how the postmodernist view operates. Because the strategies a particular individual brings to a text are unknown, one cannot know what he or she will get out of it or how it will affect them. This concept of interpretive strategy was explored prior to Fish by Louise M. Rosenblatt in her book *Literature as Exploration* (1995), a now-classic work that was “rediscovered” some forty years after its initial publication in 1939. Although primarily focused on children and reading, Rosenblatt argues that literature must be experienced and that the practice of reading is transactional: “The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. . . . The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to *him* [emphasis in original]” (p. 30). What matters for interpretation is not simply what is on the page but the experiences that one brings to the page.

This theory of interpretation, though rarely stated explicitly, has great influence over contemporary librarianship’s view of intellectual freedom and the ideology of the postmodernist view of knowledge effects. The position holds that it is not that people do not have reactions or responses to media, but since it is difficult to know each individual’s life circumstances, one does not know what these responses will be. As Mary K. Chelton (1999) notes, an approach to reading based in reader-response theory offers three frameworks for librarianship. First, reading can be understood as an active practice for individuals. Second, there is no one correct way to read a text and, finally, the text itself is never objective. This theory of interpretation provides a firm theoretical foundation for understanding why libraries can afford to be “magnanimous” regarding which books are placed on the library’s shelves. Each individual is understood to bring

their own ideas and circumstances to interpreting texts and exposure to new knowledge.

THE AGNOSTIC–POSTMODERNIST VIEW AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

As noted above, some of contemporary librarianship's practices, such as reluctance to filter or attitude toward objectionable materials in collections, are often inscrutable to the general public. These examples are evidence for the strength of the ideology of the postmodernist view of knowledge effects. Another example could be found when one reflects on how a professional librarian might argue for retaining a book that is negative or hurtful toward a particular group. Consider a book that might be perceived as negative toward the LGBTQ community. *Almost Perfect*, by Brian Katcher, for example, won the Stonewall Award in 2011 but uses the "panic defense" against a transsexual teen as a major plot point. It is possible that such a book might be harmful to teenagers who are questioning their gender identity. However, the postmodernist view provides a conceptual foundation for librarians to argue that we cannot know what such an individual would bring to this text. Transsexual teens and their allies might wish to explore what the "panic defense" is in order to more effectively guard against it in their own lives. One cannot simply assume that reading such a book will cause the teen harm.

In summary, this article sought to elucidate how librarians can hold two seemingly dichotomous positions on reading. One position holds that reading is a public good and essential for the continued health individuals and of the democratic state while the other position holds that what people read may or may not matter for this continued health since the effects of reading are uncertain. It is the agnostic–postmodernist view toward reading knowledge effects that permits librarians to support intellectual freedom.

One might argue that, in reference to support for intellectual freedom, contemporary librarianship is less about the ideology of neutrality and more about a classical libertarian stance toward the individual and the relationship toward a particular text. This is, of course, what John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty* (1851/2002)—How can one know what one believes is correct if you don't hear the arguments of those who disagree with you? As Robbins (1993) noted in her article on labeling, librarianship—as a whole—sides with libertarianism. Library users should decide for themselves what is best for them to read.

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