

Unsung Activists Who Protect Our Privacy, Our Right to Know
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It was one of those books that I picked up, started reading, and then accidentally returned. I couldn't remember the name; in fact I still don't know what it was called, but I desperately wanted to check it out again.

I returned to the library and began describing the book to an agreeable librarian and asked her to look up my checkout history. She proudly and promptly informed me that the library's computer system automatically destroys every person's past media checkout record.

In the age of the Patriot Act, librarians have stood their ground. Patrons of the library are protected from their records being reviewed by a Homeland Security agent or by any other interested person. It was the first, but by no means the last time I viewed librarians as activists and unaccredited champions of our constitutional right to information and the essential privacy to seek it.

Not only are librarians destroying our private records and thereby protecting our right to privacy, notably the privacy of belief, but they are also providing the forum in which we, as citizens, have free access to any and all information.

Freedom of information is a corollary to freedom of speech. It is as vital to our ability to form opinions and express ourselves as the very right it acts in conjunction with. As stipulated in *Board of Education v. Pico*, "the right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient's meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom."

In this light, book banning and censorship as a whole are a direct attack on freedom of speech. Classics from Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird," and Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" to less-known but just as significant bans are constantly threatening our First Amendment rights.

In fact, if it weren't for the courage and tenacity of the librarians who constantly challenge censorship, we would live in a society where the information we receive would be filtered by every conceivable angle.

Although regularly attempted, book bans based solely on the basis of a conflict of ideology, such as a promotion of homosexuality, are not allowed, even in school libraries.

The library is the temple of knowledge and information, and the librarians are its vigilant defenders. Protecting information is not just making books and electronic

media readily available, but also pamphlets on local access to abortion and other personal pursuits.

Freedom of information is not just providing the information, but making it easily accessible. Controversial children's books such as "Heather Has Two Mommies," cannot be kept in the adult section or require that it be requested and brought from a back room. It belongs in the children's section just as much as the "Winnie-the-Pooh" books or "Charlotte's Web."

What if patrons request the highly controversial and inflammatory "Mein Kampf," or even information on bomb building? Is it the librarian's job to filter that information or question why? They maintain that it is absolutely not. Restricting access to information is more dangerous than what the individual might do with that knowledge.

The ability to retain books on sensitive subjects is necessary to ensure each individual's right to form an educated opinion about a subject and share it. In essence, free speech is present only so far as freedom of information exists. Without this abundance of information, there would be no reason to protect freedom of speech.

Freedom of information implies that libraries are constitutionally essential. Even with the Internet, libraries and the access to information that they supply will never be obsolete. It is too easy to omit words or phrases on Internet versions of a document, to block access to Web sites and to track people's searches. The Internet does not supersede books, but is an asset which librarians have incorporated into the existing structure of knowledge.

As Americans, we are protected by the Bill of Rights. As such, we often forget that in totalitarian dictatorships, where media is tightly controlled, simply publishing a non-government-approved book is an act of sedition. With the abundance of information available to use, it is easy to forget how crucial it is to protect this unfettered access to ideas. Instead of trying to protect the citizenry from these ideas, it is the librarian's duty to protect our resources from the machinations of paternalistic meddlers.