Almost exactly thirty-seven years ago, library school professor David Berninghausen gave his name to a question of modern library professionalism so important that it is still argued about today. On November 15, 1972, the professional periodical Library Journal published his article “Social Responsibility vs. The Library Bill of Rights.” His chief contention: that as vital as the public issues are that American Library Association (ALA) conferences had begun to debate in place of librarianship topics, “it is not the purpose of ALA to take positions as to how men [sic] must resolve them.” This trend, he said, was strongly against intellectual freedom. (Berninghausen, 1972.) This opinion was no small matter. In the 1950s Berninghausen had worked with Broadway actors, directors and producers on the Stop Censorship Committee. Having also been the chairman of the ALA’s Committee on Intellectual Freedom during both the McCarthy era and in 1967-72, Berninghausen was among the country’s and ALA’s foremost authorities on opposing censorship. (Berninghausen, 1975.) In its issue of New Year’s Day 1973, Library Journal published a follow-up article consisting of nineteen short opinion pieces reacting to and critiquing Berninghausen’s position. It named the article—and with it the controversy—“The Berninghausen Debate.”

Berninghausen’s Position

Berninghausen’s core position was that the ALA must remain officially a neutral organization with regard to public issues. He argued that recent trends in librarianship endangered intellectual freedom. He cited the replacement in ALA Conferences of issues of librarianship with “social responsibility” issues, and described a trend he saw in the three main library journals of the time of objective news reportage being replaced with “what seem to be news reports, a mixture of description of facts and the writer’s personal value judgments,” likewise slanted in favor of activism to remedy issues of “social responsibility.” The proposal
put forward by the Subcommittee on Social Responsibility of the ALA’s Activities Committee on New Directions for ALA (ACONDA) at the 1970 ALA Conference in Detroit may have been what motivated him to point out the trend he saw. The proposal redefined social responsibilities as the relationships that librarians and libraries have to non-library issues, and stated that “…ALA should be willing to take a position for the guidance and support of its members on current critical issues and should endeavor to devise means whereby libraries can become more effective instruments of social change.” (Subcommittee on Social Responsibility, 1970.) Though this proposal was ultimately not adopted, it spurred Berninghausen to write his critique.

Berninghausen gave several examples of the trend that he was arguing existed. Some had to do with points of fact in scientific inquiry. He cited two decades’ worth of various and contradictory scientific opinions about cholesterol, for example, and a 1962 book about environmental degradation, *Silent Spring*, against the widespread popularity of which serious scientists stood in sharp contrast.

Berninghausen went farther in his argument against the danger of populism in truth-seeking, citing an article published by Berkeley professor Arthur Jensen in 1969. Despite not coming to any firm conclusions, Jensen’s article provoked near riots among left-wing student organizations at Berkeley for even asking whether differing results among black people and white people in economic and educational competition in some settings might be a result of differences in inherited intelligence rather than only of racism. “Evaluations of studies such as Jensen’s cannot properly be made in the streets by [Students for a Democratic Society] or on the floor at ALA membership or council meetings,” wrote Berninghausen. Then he drew his key link between issues advocacy and intellectual freedom: “If scholarly inquiry in this subject is taboo, then academic freedom does not exist.” (Berninghausen, 1972.)

Another of Berninghausen’s arguments was the need for ALA to maintain not only unity in response to would-be censors of any kind, but credibility. “Even if ALA were able to survive its divisions,” he wrote, “its credibility as a defender of intellectual freedom would be destroyed”
by taking sides. “[A]ll that any censor would need to establish [to validate their own attempt to
censor] is the fact that librarians themselves do not even claim that libraries maintain neutrality
and provide the full picture of reality.” (Berninghausen, 1972.)

Berninghausen argued for the inclusion of materials in libraries supporting all positions
on these issues and declared himself to be strongly in favor of searching for solutions to the
problems cited. He did not claim that intellectual freedom and social responsibility were then in
such strong conflict as active, out-and-out censorship would demonstrate. (Berninghausen,
1972.)

Berninghausen’s argument could have been more clearly made, but in essence it was
based on trends. The first trend he saw was in the general intellectual similarity of the left as he
saw it in the Berkeley protests against an unpopular idea. The second was in the ideological
homogeneity of the new topics at ALA conferences and in library journal articles. To
paraphrase, he believed that the enthusiastic proponents of “social responsibility” had in their
public choices—of bias in the library journals, of ALA conference topics, of the positions on
social issues the language of ACONDA’s Subcommittee made it clear it wanted ALA to begin
taking, and to neglect to condemn a prominent example of intellectual stifling of a position he
believed many in the social responsibility movement found repugnant—demonstrated no such
sense of restraint as a true commitment to intellectual freedom would require. And therefore that
there was no such commitment. He appears to have believed that without such restraint, “social
responsibility” would inevitably grow to the point of regularly clashing with intellectual freedom,
and that when that occurred, the degree of vigilance in defense of intellectual freedom which he
believed was required of librarians by the Library Bill of Rights would not be present. He
assumed as incontrovertible and apparently not in dispute the proposition that lesser forms of
infringement on intellectual freedom than are reflected in out-and-out book-banning are still
similarly repugnant in proportion to degree.

Responses to Berninghausen
The arguments in response to Berninghausen’s essay can be divided roughly into three camps. Some respondents firmly agreed with him and some disagreed strongly, though the reactions of extremists in each camp, like Col. James M. Hillard, librarian at the military academy The Citadel and Patricia Glass Schuman, “former Coordinator of the Action Council of the ALA Social Responsibility Round Table,” who predictably took far opposite sides, tended to add almost nothing to the debate. Most critics held some form of opinion that there was no real conflict between the Library Bill of Rights and “social responsibility.” The no-real-conflict camp in turn was divided between the argument that there was no conflict as a result of degree, and that there was no conflict by virtue of the arguer’s definitions of the terms. Some held both views, and some in the no-real-conflict camp were also among his opponents.

**Berninghausen’s opponents**

Those who opposed him ranged from Schuman, who penned a shaking and incoherent jeremiad, and Jane Robbins, who spent about half her response trying to establish the truth of something she called “mobilization of bias,” to Katherine Laich, the calm and rational chairman of ACONDA during the period in question. Peter Doiron saw no problem with comparing the idealism of the social responsibility movement with the idealism in religion: “Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, despite governmental modifications and DDT bans, remains basic in environmental literature; keep in mind the Bible when reviewing Christianity’s progress.” Clara S. Jones was perhaps Berninghausen’s opponent who disagreed most clearly and directly with his central point, saying, “Librarians have an obligation to join the democratic forum *as librarians*, and would be remiss if their profession failed to make its contribution.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.)

A balancing of values was the implicit characterization of the Debate by a large number of those arguing against Berninghausen, to judge by the high number of arguments which amounted to pointing out or even taking as granted how bad the social ills in question were.

Some issues that were discussed were not even in dispute. Berninghausen’s critics talked about the societal issues within libraries. Betty-Carol Sellen said that Berninghausen
should acknowledge “the propriety of ALA acting as a forum for debate, or taking a stand, on social issues when they involve behavior within the practice of the profession” as for example by active discrimination. Sellen defined service not in terms only of whether someone might be refused assistance but in terms of what subjects were collected, as for example about homosexuality. “The literature on this subject has not been collected, unless the content was medical or disapproving. … Libraries have published numerous lists of books on ‘marriage and the family,’ but seldom, if ever, on the ‘gay world.’” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.) Despite his use of the now-quaint phraseology “homosexualism as a life-style,” Berninghausen did not dispute the legitimacy of any of these points, for they were about librarians as librarians.

In many other areas of controversy over what is the proper demesne of “librarians as librarians,” however, Berninghausen and his critics genuinely clashed. Robert Wedgeworth made the vague claim that libraries were “entities in the political process,” making it “more difficult to separate nonlibrary issues from library issues than the author implies.” Betty-Carol Sellen’s arguments exemplify this line of thought even better: “If it can be shown that a vital institution such as libraries…is being damaged because resources are expended on killing people rather than on books and libraries, then that war is relevant to librarians as librarians.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.) In this regard, however, she played into Berninghausen’s hands, who had predicted: “Librarians who believe that the ALA and libraries themselves should be used as ‘instruments to effect social change,’ in this case would be likely to argue that all issues are related to librarianship, hence a speech on any subject is relevant.” [Emphasis in the original.] The diverted-resources argument of relevance was unsustainable, he said, unless the saved money would necessarily go to libraries. (Berninghausen, 1972.)

**The No-real-conflict Arguments**

Some saw no real conflict because of how they defined the terms. Milton Byam said, “Intellectual Freedom itself is a social responsibility,” but most others defined only social responsibility. Doiron, for example, argued that librarians’ judgment about which purchases
were worthwhile were an example of it, and that to fail to exercise that judgment would be unprofessional. Clara Jones argued that the Library Bill of Rights actually evolved from “the profession’s developing commitment to the concept of social responsibility.” She saw no distinction between its stand against the illegitimate supporting of the status quo by infringements on intellectual freedom and the challenge of the status quo by activism. Citing no documents to support her assertion of this kind of trend, she nevertheless saw the LBOR as a universally radical document. Dorothy Bendix made much the same historical argument as Jones, writing that, “the basic goal of a library is to serve as an instrument of social change.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.) She disappointed the curious reader, however, by not citing any work in support of this interpretation.

The foremost argument of the no-conflict-because-of-degree camp was that there was no evidence that ALA members had ever gone so far as to engage in censorship in the name of “social responsibility.” A related argument was that “social responsibilarians”—not a derisive term, despite its unwieldiness—had never urged ALA members to do so. “There is no indication, open or implied,” Laich wrote, “that by taking a position on current critical issues, ALA thereby binds its members to purge their library collections of materials which espouse opposing points of view.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.) This was true. Berninghausen did not present examples of actual censorship in libraries, though his arguments were also not based on any claim that ALA possessed any binding authority over its members.

Degree always changes, however, and those responding to Berninghausen all showed that they knew that. To Berninghausen, wrote Betty-Carol Sellen, “the concepts of social responsibility and intellectual freedom are antithetical because those who advocate the first must, by his definition, ultimately advocate censorship.” Not only was this unproven, she thought, but “strictly imaginary.” Dorothy Bendix called it “mere conjecture.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.)

None of Berninghausen’s critics disavowed the argued intellectual intolerance by
activists as reflected in the actions of the Berkeley students. Clara Jones, the only one to mention the point, clearly had no intention of doing anything of the sort: “The author’s open scorn displays insensitivity to even the possibility of any true inspiration behind young people’s protests.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.)

Berninghausen’s Supporters

His supporters among the respondents in “The Berninghausen Debate” added little of substance. Col. Hillard’s response was typical, consisting mainly of further illustration of the trends Berninghausen’s supporters also saw as real. But the existence of many of those trends had not been disputed by his opponents anyway. Berninghausen’s supporters did make two serious arguments about the trends’ significance, however.

Allie Beth Martin’s main focus was the erosion of the credibility of libraries. She saw that as the inevitable result of librarians voicing opinions as librarians. This, she wrote, contributed to “an ever widening credibility gap between citizens and their institutions.” Ervin J. Gaines made the other serious analytical argument. He took a philosophical approach unique among the early commenters, by asking which greater value librarians were serving or should. He saw the matter as a clash between two of America’s most prominent values, freedom and equality. “[I]t has been to me a source of amazement that…earnest and well meaning librarians could have beguiled themselves into believing that there was a higher mission than freedom.” (The Berninghausen Debate, 1973.)

The Debate Since 1973

Neither the hopes of the ACONDA Subcommittee on Social Responsibility for mainstream ALA adoption of their ideas nor Eli Oboler’s suggestion in the initial round of responses that “the present ‘social responsibility’ movement of the 1970s may itself be only a temporary phenomenon” were vindicated.

Since then, there has been far more exploration of implications by and for the denizens of each camp, than there has been direct debate. Balanced collections of pieces on the broader
subject of freedom of speech and thought appeared in 1984 (Downs and McCoy, 1984) and in 2001 (Kranich, 2001). The former included the published form of the most direct and interesting form of the debate, in which at the 1982 ALA conference a conservative and a liberal engaged in a civil point/counterpoint panel on the subject. (Thomas and Hentoff, 1984.) But mainly the two sides retreated to their camps. Berninghausen, undaunted, published a collection of essays on his position. (Berninghausen, 1975.) So did the proponents of social responsibility; books of essays appeared the following year (Schuman, 1976), in 1989 (MacCann, 1989) and in 2008 (Lewis, 2008). The contents of these volumes go far beyond the space available in this paper, but largely explored the implications for various fields of activism of the social responsibility movement in libraries (how bad the problems are, how librarians can help) but rarely did much more than to touch on the core of Berninghausen’s arguments in passing. The last-named comes closest to addressing the philosophical and historical points Berninghausen was making, but in the end dismisses them, perhaps not a surprising result for a volume composed of essays not written specially for it but for *Progressive Librarian* magazine. In it, for example, Steven Joyce recounted the debate but dismisses Berninghausen’s central argument: “Berninghausen’s assertion begged the question: if it were not the purpose of ALA to take a stand on social issues such as those mentioned above, then just whose purpose was it?” (Joyce, 2008.) To which Berninghausen, who died in 2001, would probably have replied that that was the purpose of librarians as private citizens, activism he himself strongly advocated, or of groups composed of precisely the same individuals, formed expressly for the purpose of activism on these issues.

An example Berninghausen, were he alive today, would no doubt cite as strong evidence for his position was what some have termed “Climategate”: emails attributed to prominent American and British climate researchers, hacked from a British university’s computer, were last month revealed to have included debate about whether certain scientific data not supportive of the case for manmade climate change should be released. Further, “[i]n a 1999 e-mail exchange about charts showing climate patterns over the last two millenniums, Phil Jones, a longtime
climate researcher at the East Anglia Climate Research Unit, said he had used a ‘trick’ employed by another scientist, Michael Mann, to ‘hide the decline’ in temperatures.” (Revkin, 2009.)

My Position

The core of the social responsibility movement in libraries, as I see it, is that the causes argued to be underrepresented in library collections are legitimate and worthwhile and that by bringing into collections materials about these causes the social responsibility movement only balances things as they ought to be. This is sometimes true. But proponents then extend the idea to causes in general: neutrality is not actually neutrality, but a failure to act for the patently good which thereby serves what is obviously bad. Or, that which does not serve me, obstructs me.

The problem is that this begs the question. If it is possible *sua sponte* to grant one’s own ideas equal legitimacy, merely by treating and speaking of them as such, then one can attack anyone as biased for failing to accommodate them on an equal basis with others. This is a chain of logic whose basic structure is not changed if the opposite values are plugged in: imagine that conservative librarians arise in the ALA, arguing libraries have gone too far to the left. They argue they are not opposing the Library Bill of Rights by advocating that ALA take conservative positions on public issues, but supporting it by merely attempting to move the point of “balance” to the rightward point that their own self-referential logic has just “made” the center. Try plugging in anything. A chain of logic that can be applied to anything in this way amounts to intuition in intellectual clothing. The only variable that then has any effect on the outcome is what the core intuition is. This may explain why all my research never turned up anyone who changed his or her opinions on this subject.

If this chain of logic does not help, what does? The simple question which this library consideration may turn upon is this: are librarians dispensers only of fact, or of truth as well?

Fact is fact. But by truth I mean accurate conclusions about the world and us based upon less obvious connections, more subtle motivations, longer trends. Truth in this sense is the
purest form of knowledge as power, which is why it is so fought over. It seems clear the proponents of “social responsibility” sincerely believe in what they see to be truth, and that this faith is the foundation of their longtime challenge of official library neutrality. But the phenomenon of perceived truth is not new. From religion to communism, from the I Ching to Dianetics, human beings have tried to improve outcomes using systems. And every time they have tried to make a system standard, safeguarded from the need for constant reexamination and competition with other ideas, which is what keeps ideas as much as institutions vital and relevant, it has gone off the rails. People walk away or are prevented from doing so by force. The rise of Fox News and homeschooling, in response to a perception of ideological bias in the media and in public schools, respectively, should be a cautionary tale. The absence of any such competition to the ALA stands in sharp contrast.

Therefore, I stand with Berninghausen. Human opinion about truth does not grow well in captivity, arguments about the desperation of the public problems its energy is required to solve notwithstanding. It can never be made subject to intellectual pressure, even for the best of causes, without ceasing in proportion to root as deeply.
Bibliography


