

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION



CHALLENGED BOOKS

With the new year just beginning, the LIANZA Standing Committee on Freedom of Information has already been asked for advice on responding to challenges to books in a library collection.

These books are published by Tross Publishing and cover the topics of the Treaty of Waitangi, Treaty settlements and Māori history from a perspective that the colonisation, discrimination and racism of the past has been overplayed, and Māori are getting away with greater entitlements by using the Treaty settlements unfairly.

This is not the first time books about Māori have been challenged for content that is inaccurate, racist and mis-informative leading and to harm for Māori exposed to it or to the people who have read and believed it. Last year there were also questions to the standing committee about books in libraries with mis-information about Covid-19 and vaccination, and about gender identity.

LIANZA IS TALKING ABOUT IT

At the LIANZA Conference in 2021 there was a panel discussion on Freedom of Expression and the limits of inclusivity, with a range of opinions presented on what libraries should do, for example with anti-vaccination resources. The panelists acknowledged that the conversations around this issue can be uncomfortable, that libraries are not neutral, but that we need to be prepared to lean in to the discussion, listening to the range of opinions being offered and providing a space for these conversations to happen.

One panelist remarked that many of those listening would have studied and learned our practice about freedom of Information some years ago and that the context and debate has changed, partly driven by the rise of social media and how people use it. They talked about organisations deliberately using mis or dis-information as a tactic to achieve their aims, using the 'authority' of the library to 'validate' their opinions by its inclusion in the collection. They warned that we cannot allow libraries to be weaponised against marginalised communities by this practice.

A few years ago challenges to books were often conservative in nature, trying to restrict access to books with sexual content, particularly what some religious groups saw as 'deviant sexuality.' Recent challenges are coming from a social justice and inclusivity perspective, to books on gender identity, end-of-life choices, Māori history and politics. And to topics that generate some dispute such as the use of 1080 in pest control, climate change denial, and anti-vaccination.

Are different approaches to different topics required? Or is that a slippery slope? An audience question asked whether different approaches were needed between dealing with historical content and newly-produced publications. Other comments suggested public libraries have a different role than research or academic libraries in holding disputed content, and in particular ensuring health information is accurate and current, to avoid harm to consumers of the information.

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Be prepared

One thing that emerged as a key point was that libraries need to be clear themselves about their policy and approach. Having the discussion and debate and articulating a clear policy and practice assists staff, customers and communities in knowing what they can expect and how they might engage with the discussion. Have the conversation and record the conclusion in a proactive way, so that libraries are ready when books are challenged or promoted for inclusion.

Libraries should have a clear findable collection development policy including what they will and will not collect and why. These policies can refer to national and international statements and guidelines such as those from LIANZA, IFLA and UNESCO. Policies and practices should be regularly reviewed.

Libraries should also pre-plan and document how controversial material is managed in the library including what collection it will be in, how it will be classified and described to provide context,

and the steps the library will take when content is challenged. They should document any challenges and decisions and be very clear about why the decisions were made.

Promote critical thinking skills

The role of libraries in strengthening the critical thinking skills of those who use them was also highlighted. People will find misinformation in or outside the library – help them develop the critical skills to evaluate resources. Libraries can provide programmes, resources and staff training around assessing both print and on-line resources and encourage 'lateral reading' to determine an author's credibility, intent and biases.

The conference panel discussion was lively, informative, interesting and sometimes humorous. Playing on the name of one critical analysis tool the '**CRAAP_test**', panelists presented two different approaches to policy and practice. 'Just don't buy the crap!' or 'contextualise the crap (and highlight the quality)'

Huge thanks to the people on the panel – Rob Cruikshank from the LIANZA standing committee of freedom of information who chaired the session, Catherine Leonard from Auckland Libraries, Laurinda Thomas from Wellington City Libraries, and Mandy Henk from Tohatoha.

Further reading and resources

- [LIANZA-Statement-on-Freedom-of-Information-2020](#)
- [IFLA background paper Freedom of Expression and Inclusion](#)
- [IFLA Statement on Censorship \(2019\) – IFLA](#)
- [Understanding mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand \(tepunahamatatini.ac.nz\)](#)

Summaries, reviews, and user tags can help provide context. Here is an example of a user review on a library catalogue.

- https://discover.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/iii/encore/record/C__Rb2748468



NEW LIANZA MEMBERS

*Welcome to all our new
LIANZA members!*

HIKUWAI

Eileen Sione
Melani Waanders

IKAROA

Emily Clough

MURIHIKU

Susanna Elliffe
Giorgina Rocco

OVERSEAS

Dana Murphy

TE WHAKAKITENGA AA

KAIMAI

Christine Lewis