Reflection on Intellectual Freedom and *The Speaker*

Austin Spiller

University of Denver

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The topic of intellectual freedom pertains to several conflicting but related issues that have played or will play key roles in my transformative path to librarianship. In this essay I reflect on the timely viewing of the American Library Association (ALA) produced 1977 film *The Speaker,* the discussion guide included with the film, and responses to the film from 1978 and 2014.

I call the viewing of this film timely because the film attempts to address intellectual freedom and the relationship to freedom of speech in the context of whether to allow someone who is essentially an academic white supremacist to hold a talk- a familiar event in our contemporary world of incendiary, antagonistic talking heads being broadcast nonstop under the guise of equal representation.

The film certainly tries to address the importance of free speech and the complexity of “tolerating unpopular opinions” (*The Speaker*, 2014). I admit to being impressed with the rich diversity of stakeholders and individual rationales presented- the filmmakers boiled down a surprising amount of perspectives to consider. The response from the Black Caucus members of the American Library Association (BCALA, [1978]) reported that many librarians at the screening “sensed there was something fundamentally wrong with the film, even if they could not immediately identify all the reasons” (p. 3), which my experience mirrored. Something about the way Victoria Dunn became so bogged down in her repetition of protecting free speech by giving the white supremacist an audience struck me as overly orchestrated and a signpost that something may be amiss.

The BCALA response (1978) summarizes the foundational problem in the film:

The First Amendment pledges to protect freedom of expression but not to supply an audience. If the film’s interpretation of the First Amendment were applied, it would follow that wherever Dr. Boyd’s name is suggested there would be no choice but to invite him, for otherwise he would be deprived of his freedom of expression. (p.2, emphasis in original)

Both the film and the included discussion guide (1977) fail to address the issue of free speech without guarantee of an audience, instead focusing on the consequences of denying racist ideas a platform after an invitation has been extended. This kind of action is mirrored by society today- media outlets are significantly increasing exposure of racist and hateful ideas by inviting those speakers on their platform in the first place, something they have the right to but are not required to do. They also are selectively held fast to the social contract during periods of public outrage that can accompany granting such a platform, as seen in the New Yorker Festival’s decision to remove Steve Bannon as their headliner (Deb & Peters, 2018).

Not even concepts like the social contract or equal representation of viewpoints requires the provision of a platform for hateful views, especially platforms that increase the perceived legitimacy of those views and likelihood of their proliferation. Indeed, if the social contract had better withstood the intentional pitting of regular people against each other and instead placed value on holding those who created and fueled social divisions consequentially responsible, the hateful people would be required to create and maintain their own platform and labor under the social consequences of their views.

As President of the BCALA, Jerome Offord, Jr (2014) issued a statement regarding BCALA supporting *The Speaker* being a key conference topic and said “It’s time to talk! … Let’s work together to make a positive change so the next generation isn’t afraid to look at historical moments/challenges such as this and shy away from discussing something their grandparents couldn’t” (p.2). It’s well past time to talk. That doesn’t mean providing platforms or an audience. It means having intentionality, being engaged in creating the kind of society one wants to live and be in, and the breaking down of barriers.

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