

Back Talk — Freedom to Read, Speak and Listen

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By the time this *Back Talk* is published, the invitation of Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**'s visit to **Columbia University** will be old history, but it got me to thinking about freedom to read sorts of issues.

The basics it seems are fairly simple: A very controversial actor on the world political stage comes to New York and is asked to take the ride up to **Columbia University** to speak. That **Columbia** would invite such a speaker should be no surprise. It may be an Ivy League university but it is anything but sleepy. It is in New York City, the capital of in-your-face and cutting-edge everything.

The reaction to the President's speaking at **Columbia** was, however, anything but simple. Here is but a smattering of the un-profanane reactions:

- "At the same time **President Ahmadinejad** will be addressing the **Columbia University** audience, Iranian agents will continue smuggling weapons across the Iraqi border with one goal in mind: arming insurgents to attack and kill U.S. military..." Representative **Duncan Hunter**, California.
- "**Mr. Ahmadinejad** is a hate-mongering extremist who has sponsored terrorism, denied and mocked the **Holocaust** and called for Israel to be wiped off the map." *The Washington Times*, September 26, 2007.
- "**Abe Foxman**, national director of the **Anti-Defamation League**, called **Ahmadinejad**'s planned visit 'a perversion of the concept of freedom of speech!' *Daily News*, September 21, 2007.
- "**John McCain** noted that **Columbia** has refused to allow military recruiters on campus since 1969 but has no problem welcoming **Ahmadinejad**, who arrives Sunday to address the UN." *Daily News*, September 21, 2007.
- "GOP presidential hopeful **Mitt Romney** said it's disappointing 'when our academic institutions can't draw a line between people who bring legitimate differences in perspective versus those who are completely out of touch with reality.'" *Daily News*, September 21, 2007.

The reactions after his speech were equally colorful. Here are some of the comments by **Columbia** alums:

- "The result? The global dissemination of the genocidal and otherwise morally disgusting viewpoints of a powerful but petty thug, terrorist and ignoramus." *Columbiaspectator Online edition*, September 27, 2007.
- "Since when [has] insulting the invited guests at **Columbia** become an acceptable norm?" *Columbiaspectator On-*

line Edition, September 27, 2007.

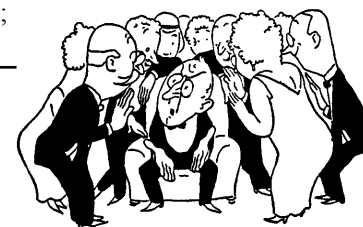
- "**Mr Ahmadinejad** responded exactly how I hoped he would: he demonstrated to America what an absolute lunatic he is." *Columbiaspectator Online Edition*, September 26, 2007.
- "What if this were an American politician who advocated the nuclear destruction of all Indian reservations and the elimination of all Native Americans? Would THAT person have been given a forum?" *Columbiaspectator Online Edition*, September 26, 2007.
- "The last person in history to propose that the death of the Jewish people deserved to be debated was also appeased for a while, **Adolph Hitler**. **President Bollinger** was out sophisted, by a madman. And worse, he made a great university a party to it." *Columbiaspectator Online Edition*, September 26, 2007.
- "If you are going to invite someone to your campus, you treat him or her with respect." *Columbiaspectator Online Edition*, September 26, 2007.

My own favorite reaction is the suggestion that the **Republican National Committee** was behind the whole thing in attempt to bolster **President Bush**'s approval rating by giving the American people a president, who was even less erudite, with whom to compare their president.

So, what has this to do with freedom to read/listen? For me it is fairly simple: What was being debated was:

- Should a person (recorded communication in any media) whose views are repugnant to most people, be allowed to speak (be read, listened to, etc.)?
- What are the limits of "freedom of speech?" — Let nice guys (recorded presentations) whose opinions the group sponsoring the talk agree with (legitimate) talk or let anyone with a point of view speak/be read, etc., (including thugs, terrorists, and ignoramuses)?
- If you decide to invite such a person (add the recorded communication to your collection including adding a link from your catalog or library Webpage), how should he/she/it be treated?

For me, the answer to the first question, should libraries acquire and provide access to recorded communications no matter how repugnant, is YES — but of course it depends upon the nature of the library. PUBLIC libraries should do so since they are charged with meeting the reading needs of all the people. Of course how this is done is open to discussion. With the Web, libraries can link to all sorts of discourses from their catalogs easily, or they can obtain encyclopedic treatments of a broad range of different points of view on a particular topic. In some countries here in



Asia this course of action is not yet possible. Yet progress is being made. The memory of visiting one of the two largest public libraries in China during 1979 still sticks in my mind. During the **Cultural Revolution** virtually all but a few books were banned, particularly those published in non-Chinese languages and those published earlier because of the "poisonous weeds" they might contain. Yet, to protect these books, long strips of yellow paper with words like "counter revolutionary literature" had been pasted cross-wise on the shelving to identify these were corrupting materials and to save them from destruction. In 1979 the scraps of the paper strips were still visible. Now, the strips are long gone with open stack libraries the rule and a very wide range of materials to read. Yet, there are still some sensitive topics for which no books are acquired, e.g., Taiwanese independence, Tibetan independence, etc.

For the second question, which overlaps with the first one, are there any limits even for a public library or a university, I think the answer is NO, but again I would suggest that the librarian managing the collection should be allowed to exercise flexibility in how this is done. A theological library of any bent should provide access to "opposing points of view" even if its only purpose is to give its users an understanding of what they are up against. This is still a problem in many parts of the world. Librarians are not always free to build balanced collections. An acquaintance of mine back in the 1960s went to a Communist bookstore in one country only to be called in to explain what he was doing when he returned to his home country and the security police noticed his face among the photographs taken of all customers leaving that bookstore. This sort of activity has no place in a free society.

As for the third question, I don't think there are any libraries which introduce the books in their collections from their online or card (any still left?) catalogs using subject headings like Thug Authors, Ignoramus Authors, and Terrorist Authors. Yet, putting non rare books in a locked case for reasons other than preservation or value does send the reader a signal that something is awry — especially if the book is controversial within the social/cultural milieu of that library. In America, during the **Cultural Revolution** period of China, readers were subject to a mild form of "poisonous weed" labeling. When we bought books from stores like **China Books and Periodicals** (founded by the son of China missionaries but who embraced the New China) each one had a stamp on the title page indicating something like

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“Published in Communist China, etc.” Were I in America I think I could still find some of those books in the stacks to find the exact wording of what was stamped in the books but since this was not the practice in Hong Kong, I can’t. In any event, the reader was reminded that these were politically suspect; that they were published in a country declared to be an enemy of the American people, and the reader was to be aware of the poisonous nature of the contents.

Hopefully most libraries will continue to be places where different points of view can be read and heard, where readers are allowed to read broadly and develop their own conclusions, and where calls for this or that point of view to be censored will be rejected. This should be the goal; unfortunately it is still not a universal reality. 🐼