

## 53.1.7

Updating of the content of the policy abstract, and of the parenthetical reference is regarded as housekeeping and does not require a vote of Council. The following was presented at the 2010 ALA Midwinter Meeting by the Council Policy Monitoring Committee for Council's information.

The following is the replacement policy abstract for ALA Policy 53.1.7 Labeling and Ratings System:

Prejudicial labeling and ratings presuppose the existence of individuals or groups with wisdom to determine by authority what is appropriate or inappropriate for others. They presuppose that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine. The American Library Association affirms the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about resources they choose to read or view. Adopted 1951, amended 1971, 1981, 1990, 2005, 2009. (See "Policy Reference File": Labeling and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights: 2008-09 ALA CD #19.7.)

*Amended by the ALA Council  
at the 2009 ALA Annual Conf.*

2008-2009 ALA CD#19.7  
2009 ALA Annual Conference

## **Labeling and Rating Systems** **An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights***

Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections or in resources accessible through the library. The presence of books and other resources in a library does not indicate endorsement of their contents by the library. Likewise, providing access to digital information does not indicate endorsement or approval of that information by the library. Labeling and rating systems present distinct challenges to these intellectual freedom principles.

Labels on library materials may be viewpoint-neutral directional aids designed to save the time of users, or they may be attempts to prejudice or discourage users or restrict their access to materials. When labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes, it is a censor's tool. The American Library Association opposes labeling as a means of predisposing people's attitudes toward library materials.

Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the material, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the material, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users. The prejudicial label is used to warn, discourage, or prohibit users or certain groups of users from accessing the material. Such labels sometimes are used to place materials in restricted locations where access depends on staff intervention.

Viewpoint-neutral directional aids facilitate access by making it easier for users to locate materials. The materials are housed on open shelves and are equally accessible to all users, who may choose to consult or ignore the directional aids at their own discretion.

Directional aids can have the effect of prejudicial labels when their implementation becomes proscriptive rather than descriptive. When directional aids are used to forbid access or to suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement, the effect is the same as prejudicial labeling.

Many organizations use rating systems as a means of advising either their members or the general public regarding the organizations' opinions of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books, films, recordings, Web sites, games, or other materials. The adoption, enforcement, or endorsement of any of these rating systems by a library violates the *Library Bill of Rights*. When requested, librarians should provide information about rating systems equitably, regardless of viewpoint.

Adopting such systems into law or library policy may be unconstitutional. If labeling or rating systems are mandated by law, the library should seek legal advice regarding the law's applicability to library operations.

Libraries sometimes acquire resources that include ratings as part of their packaging. Librarians should not endorse the inclusion of such rating systems; however, removing or destroying the

ratings—if placed there by, or with permission of, the copyright holder—could constitute expurgation (see “Expurgation of Library Materials: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*”). In addition, the inclusion of ratings on bibliographic records in library catalogs is a violation of the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Prejudicial labeling and ratings presuppose the existence of individuals or groups with wisdom to determine by authority what is appropriate or inappropriate for others. They presuppose that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine. The American Library Association affirms the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about resources they choose to read or view.

Adopted July 13, 1951, by the ALA Council; amended June 25, 1971; July 1, 1981; June 26, 1990; January 19, 2005; *July 14, 2009*.

*Amended by the ALA Council  
At the 2005 ALA Midwinter Mtg.*

## LABELS AND RATING SYSTEMS

### An Interpretation of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS

Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections or in resources accessible through the library. The presence of books and other resources in a library does not indicate endorsement of their contents by the library. Likewise, the ability for library users to access electronic information using library computers does not indicate endorsement or approval of that information by the library.

#### Labels

Labels on library materials may be view-point neutral directional aids that save the time of users, or they may be attempts to prejudice or discourage users or restrict their access to materials. When labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes, it is a censor's tool. The American Library Association opposes labeling as a means of predisposing people's attitudes toward library materials.

*Prejudicial labels* are designed to *restrict access*, based on a *value judgment* that the content, language or themes of the material, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the material, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users. The prejudicial label is used to warn, discourage or prohibit users or certain groups of users from accessing the material. Such labels may be used to remove materials from open shelves to restricted locations where access depends on staff intervention.

Viewpoint-neutral directional aids facilitate access by making it easier for users to locate materials. The materials are housed on open shelves and are equally accessible to all users, who may choose to consult or ignore the directional aids at their own discretion.

Directional aids can have the effect of prejudicial labels when their implementation becomes *proscriptive* rather than *descriptive*. When directional aids are used to forbid access or to suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement, the effect is the same as prejudicial labeling.

#### Rating Systems

A variety of organizations promulgate *rating systems* as a means of advising either their members or the general public concerning their opinions of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books, films, recordings, Web sites, or other materials. The adoption, enforcement, or endorsement of any of these rating systems by the library violates the *Library Bill of Rights*. Adopting such systems into law may be unconstitutional. If such legislation is passed, the library should seek legal advice regarding the law's applicability to library operations.

Publishers, industry groups, and distributors sometimes add ratings to material or include them as part of their packaging. Librarians should not endorse such practices. However, removing or destroying such ratings—if placed there by, or with permission of, the copyright holder—could constitute expurgation (see *Expurgation of Library Materials: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*).

Some find it easy and even proper, according to their ethics, to establish criteria for judging materials as objectionable. However, injustice and ignorance, rather than justice and enlightenment, result from such practices. The American Library Association opposes any efforts that result in closing any path to knowledge.

Adopted July 13, 1951. Amended June 25, 1971; July 1, 1981; June 26, 1990, by the ALA Council.  
[ISBN 8389-5226-7]; *January 19, 2005.*

## STATEMENT ON LABELING

*An Interpretation of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS*

Labeling is the practice of describing or designating materials by affixing a prejudicial label and/or segregating them by a prejudicial system. The American Library Association opposes these means of predisposing people's attitudes toward library materials for the following reasons:

1. Labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes and as such, it is a censor's tool.
2. Some find it easy and even proper, according to their ethics, to establish criteria for judging publications as objectionable. However, injustice and ignorance rather than justice and enlightenment result from such practices, and the American Library Association opposes the establishment of such criteria.
3. Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections. The presence of books and other resources in a library does not indicate endorsement of their contents by the library.

A variety of private organizations promulgate rating systems and/or review materials as a means of advising either their members or the general public concerning their opinions of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books, films, recordings, or other materials. For the library to adopt or enforce any of these private systems, to attach such ratings to library materials, to include them in bibliographic records, library catalogs, or other finding aids, or otherwise to endorse them would violate the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS.

While some attempts have been made to adopt these systems into law, the constitutionality of such measures is extremely questionable. If such legislation is passed which applies within a library's jurisdiction, the library should seek competent legal advice concerning its applicability to library operations.

Publishers, industry groups, and distributors sometimes add ratings to material or include them as part of their packaging. Librarians should not endorse such practices. However, removing or obliterating such ratings -- if placed there by or with permission of the copyright holder -- could constitute expurgation, which is also unacceptable.

The American Library Association opposes efforts which aim at closing any path to knowledge. This statement, however, does not exclude the adoption of organizational schemes designed as directional aids or to facilitate access to materials.

Adopted July 13, 1951. Amended June 25, 1971; July 1, 1981; June 26, 1990, by the ALA Council.

[ISBN 8389-5226-7]

## STATEMENT ON LABELING

*An Interpretation of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS*

Labeling is the practice of describing or designating certain library materials by affixing a prejudicial label to them or segregating them by a prejudicial system. The American Library Association opposes this as a means of predisposing people's attitudes towards library materials for the following reasons:

1. Labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes and as such, it is a censor's tool.
2. Some find it easy and even proper, according to their ethics, to establish criteria for judging publications as objectionable. However, injustice and ignorance rather than justice and enlightenment result from such practices, and the American Library Association opposes the establishment of such criteria.
3. Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections. The presence of books and other resources in a library does not indicate endorsement of their contents by the library.

The American Library Association opposes efforts which aim at closing any path to knowledge. This statement does not, however, exclude the adoption of organizational schemes designed as directional aids or to facilitate access to materials.

Adopted July 13, 1951. Amended June 25, 1971; July 1, 1981, by the ALA Council.

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## AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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### Labeling Library Materials

Because labeling violates the spirit of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS, the American Library Association opposes the technique of labeling as a means of predisposing readers against library materials for the following reasons:

1. Labeling is an attempt to prejudice the reader, and as such it is a censor's tool.
2. Although some find it easy and even proper, according to their ethics, to establish criteria for judging publications as objectionable, injustice and ignorance rather than justice and enlightenment result from such practices, and the American Library Association must oppose the establishment of such criteria.
3. Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections. The presence of a magazine or book in a library does not indicate an endorsement of its contents by the library.
4. No one person should take the responsibility of labeling publications. No sizable group of persons would be likely to agree either on the types of material which should be labeled or the sources of information which should be regarded with suspicion. As a practical consideration, a librarian who labels a book or magazine might be sued for libel.
5. If materials are labeled to pacify one group, there is no excuse for refusing to label any item in the library's collection. Because authoritarians tend to suppress ideas and attempt to coerce individuals to conform to a specific ideology, the American Library Association opposes such efforts which aim at closing any path to knowledge.

## Resolutions

### *Labeling*

Recommendations of the ALA Committee on Intellectual Freedom, opposing the labeling of Library materials, were adopted unanimously by the ALA Council on July 13, 1951. The committee's report was presented by Rutherford D. Rogers, chairman. The report and the recommendations appear on pages 241-44 of the July-August 1951 *ALA Bulletin*.

### *Ordinances Banning Direct Selling*

Foster Palmer, chairman of the Subscription Books Committee, presented the following statement which was officially approved by the ALA Council on July 13.

"The American Library Association recognizes the constructive intent of ordinances passed in some communities which prohibit selling directly to homes without specific invitation or request from the householder.

"The Association is deeply concerned, however, over the effects of such ordinances which deprive communities of educational benefits in the form of books, magazines, encyclopedias, and other materials for reference and study. In a democracy it is important that public opinion be informed and that a high educational level among all the people be maintained. It is unfortunate, therefore, that in attempting to correct certain evils blanket restrictions are imposed which work contrary to some of the best

### *Tenure*

As reported in the June 1951 *ALA Bulletin* (p. 190), the ALA Executive Board, on May 11, 1951, adopted a "Statement of Policy" on tenure at ALA Headquarters. This statement replaced the Executive Board's resolution on tenure adopted at the Midwinter Meeting in January 1951.

At the meeting of the ALA Council on July 9, 1951, Ralph T. Esterquest presented the following resolution regarding the Executive Board's "Statement of Policy":

"Resolved, That the Executive Board's May 1951 revised 'Statement of Policy' governing the tenure of professional librarians employed by the American Library Association be referred to the Board on Personnel Administration for study and for an opinion in terms of sound personnel practices; that the Board on Personnel Administration report the results of its study and its opinion and recommendations to the Council; that the Council conduct its own and separate study of possible effects on headquarters operations of the tenure statement; and that any implementation of the headquarters staff tenure policy be postponed until the Council has had an opportunity to consider both the recommendations of the Board on Personnel Administration and the results of its own study."

This resolution was officially approved by the Council on July 9.

*Taken from the ALA Council Minutes, July 1951, Vol. 3, p. 131*

# Labeling—

## A Report of the ALA Committee On Intellectual Freedom<sup>1</sup>

AT THE Midwinter Meeting, the report of the Committee on Intellectual Freedom dealt briefly with five or six cases. This morning, I ask your consideration of only one problem, but it is one which has manifold implications of a rather serious nature. This is the problem of labeling.

What is labeling and how has it become a matter of urgency? Approximately eight months ago, we received a report that the Montclair (N.J.) Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution was exerting pressure on libraries in New Jersey to put a prominent label or inscription on "publications which advocate or favor Communism, or which are issued or distributed by any Communist organization or any other organization formally designated by any authorized government official or agency as Communist or subversive . . .;" furthermore, such publications ". . . should not be freely available in libraries to readers or in schools to pupils, but should be obtainable only by signing suitable applications."

The committee noted that the SAR resolution did not make clear who would do the labeling, who would decide what is communistic or "subversive" or by what criteria such decisions would be made. It would appear that labeling, if done in the local library, would require a member or members of the staff to examine carefully into the contents of, and attitudes in, every item acquired by the library in order to ascertain whether or not there was any communist or subversive slant, espousal or authorship therein. It is fair to assume that a variety of labels or statements would have to be fashioned to apply to the great diversity of shades of opinion or guilt in the light of whatever criteria might be established. It is conceivable that such a project could be handled centrally by the ALA or the government, but the implications of

this sort of politburo arrangement are repulsive to people reared in the democratic tradition.

The committee felt that the practicability and financial problems of such a project were not necessarily relevant to its decision, which should be made on the basis of the principle involved.

As we looked more deeply into the problem of labeling, we found that it is not an uncommon proposal. In addition to the Sons of the American Revolution, we discovered that other groups have tried to use it as a technique of limiting freedom to read. Religious groups sometimes ask libraries to label, if not to ban, publications they find objectionable. There are also indications that so-called "patriotic" organizations other than the SAR are moving dangerously close to similar proposals.

In April, President Graham received a letter direct from the Montclair Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution requesting this Association to adopt the SAR policy. This letter urged, as did the original resolution, that so-called communistic and subversive materials not only should be labeled but also should be segregated in libraries and given out only upon written and signed application.

By this time, members of the Committee on Intellectual Freedom had had an opportunity to study more fully the background of the problem and to submit their recommendations. When the issue was put to them formally, nine out of eleven members voted, and all nine were united against the idea of labeling as proposed by the Sons of the American Revolution. It was recognized by some of us that the committee's unanimity might stem from the fact that we were unusually sensitive to the subject of intellectual freedom. There was also some concern over the fact that, for the most part, we represented large public or institutional libraries; whereas the practical problems of labeling seem likely to develop in smaller libraries. It was therefore con-

<sup>1</sup> This report was presented to the ALA Council on July 13, 1951, by Rutherford D. Rogers, chairman, ALA Committee on Intellectual Freedom.

sidered advisable to seek a slightly broader basis for judgment, and we proceeded at once to obtain the counsel of 24 other practicing librarians in libraries located geographically from Texas to Minnesota and from North Carolina to the state of Washington, the selection emphasizing but not being restricted to small and medium-size public libraries as well as college, university and state libraries.

Twenty out of the 24 to whom we wrote replied to our inquiry and without exception opposed labeling. Despite the smallness of our sample the unanimity among the replies seems impressive.

Although our request suggested possible pros and cons, plenty of leeway was left for individual points of view and the manner in which our colleagues took advantage of their right of free expression indicates that intellectual freedom is not yet dead. Without naming names, I would like to quote

some of their remarks because they put the case more eloquently than I possibly could:

#### I

"Libraries must oppose the practice of labeling if they wish to maintain their positions as *impartial* agencies providing information on all aspects of any question."

#### II

"I am opposed to the idea of labeling books as pro or anti anything, because there can be no reasonable end to such an attempt once it is begun."

#### III

"Personally, I . . . think labelling is as dangerous as the evils it may attempt to correct—and I am aware that some real evils do exist. . . . Recognizing this time as a period of danger, and also realizing that the Soviet Communists do not play under

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### RECOMMENDATIONS UNANIMOUSLY ADOPTED BY THE ALA COUNCIL July 13, 1951

In view of our own convictions and those of other practicing librarians whose counsel we sought, the Committee on Intellectual Freedom recommends to the ALA Council the following policy with respect to labeling library materials:

Librarians should not use the technique of labeling as a means of predisposing readers against library materials for the following reasons:

1. Although totalitarian states find it easy and even proper, according to their ethics, to establish criteria for judging publications as "subversive," injustice and ignorance rather than justice and enlightenment result from such practices, and the American Library Association has a responsibility to take a stand against the establishment of such criteria in a democratic state.
2. Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections. The presence of a magazine or book in a library does not indicate an endorsement of its contents by the library.
3. No one person should take the responsibility of labeling publications. No sizable group of persons would be likely to agree either on the types of material which should be labeled or the sources of information which should be regarded with suspicion. As a practical consideration, a librarian who labeled a book or magazine pro-communist might be sued for libel.
4. Labeling is an attempt to prejudice the reader, and as such, it is a censor's tool.
5. Labeling violates the spirit of the Library Bill of Rights.
6. Although we are all agreed that communism is a threat to the free world, if materials are labeled to pacify one group, there is no excuse for refusing to label any item in the library's collection. Because communism, fascism, or other authoritarianisms tend to suppress ideas and attempt to coerce individuals to conform to a specific ideology, American librarians must be opposed to such "isms." We are, then, anti-communist, but we are also opposed to any other group which aims at closing any path to knowledge.

the same set of rules as does a democracy, I still vote strongly against any labelling program such as the SAR requests."

IV

"I am opposed to such a procedure. . . . Those who read should be able to discriminate—to think for themselves."

V

"You may put me down as opposed to labelling any literature in American Public Libraries, regardless of the 'slant' or the subject. . . . Once labelling is started on behalf of one group or organization, libraries would have to label other material for its slant, political, religious, economic or whatever. (Imagine the book 'You Must Eat Meat' being labeled: 'This book is considered objectionable by the Vegetarians of America.')

VI

"Labeling is not merely an 'attempt to prejudice the reader.' It is surely in the minds of some of its proponents an attempt to control or frighten him."

VII

"How soon after we start labeling books will we begin to burn them?"

VIII

"The suggested action if undertaken would seem to me (1) to invade the privacy of the individual and (2) to deny a democratic principle that people are able to weigh the evidence and to make sound conclusions. The outcome (of labeling) will be that public libraries will purchase only books which will not be challenged, with the inevitable result that the original and experimental will be driven out. . . . The idea of requiring readers to make written application for the use of materials labeled as Communist slanted seems in some ways more frightening than labeling."

IX

"If we wish to live in a free country, we must develop our minds to recognize propaganda and to *think*. A label is merely the thinking of one person or a group of persons."

X

"There is room in America for all people to read and form their own opinions. . . . In a democracy people must have the right to know facts about *everything*. (This) does not necessarily mean they advocate everything about which they know. Maybe quite the contrary. . . . I oppose all efforts to predispose readers for or against any materials. . . ."

XI

"To require labeling of material with any particular slant—such as communism—is to sacrifice the *principle* of free thought and opinion. American citizens of the future are going to be free to consider *all* points of view—or they are not going to have that freedom. Many of us—not only the professional anti-communist—have blind spots. But librarians' must not agree to putting blinders of any kind on their readers. The principle of free inquiry, which is fundamental to American librarianship and American democracy, must be maintained against labelers as against all other censors."

XII

"Every group in the country, with an axe to grind, must be happy in the thought, that if one of them can make an opening wedge to wreck the 'Library Bill of Rights,' the rest of them can all come in, and the Free Public Library will be a thing of the past. . . . Everyone working here is against labeling. Where would the 'Sons of the American Revolution' be today if their great grandpas had been as 'scairt' of different viewpoints as they are?"

"I spent an afternoon asking borrowers what they thought of labeling books (particularly subversive books) so they would not fall into the hands of the easily persuaded. Their answers were obvious, but the *shock* registered in their faces at such an idea, was something to see. Here are some of their comments:

"A well-educated old lady: 'Hitler began by burning the books. Isn't this another form of the same thing?'"

"A college girl: 'It's an idea of old men. We young people are able to make decisions

that are good. Give us credit and the chance to do it.'

"Another college student: 'They talk about the wonderful education we get in America. How are we going to make use of it, and really know that democracy is right if we are only allowed to read what they want us to believe.'

"Housewife: 'Stalin tells only one side of the question. I thought Americans didn't believe in his methods.'

"Man: 'I'm an adult. Sound mind. Good education. Who the hell has the right to tell me what to read or warn me what not to read?'

"Teacher: 'What are you trying to do? Take away freedom of thought and freedom of conscience? The Constitution gives me the right to read and think as I please, regardless of what anyone else thinks. I pay taxes to support the library and expect to find a good selection of books on the shelves. I'll be my own censor.'

"Housewife: 'It violates all principles of freedom of thought. It is treason to the principles on which the country was built.'

"High school senior: 'How can we tell that our way is right if we can't make comparisons. Are they afraid of comparisons? Then Democracy is sure on the skids.'"