

Contested Spaces: A Critical History of Canadian Public Libraries as Neutral Places

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Outline

1. Introduction
2. Research Methods and Limitations
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4. Historical Commentary
5. Library Neutrality?!



1. Introduction

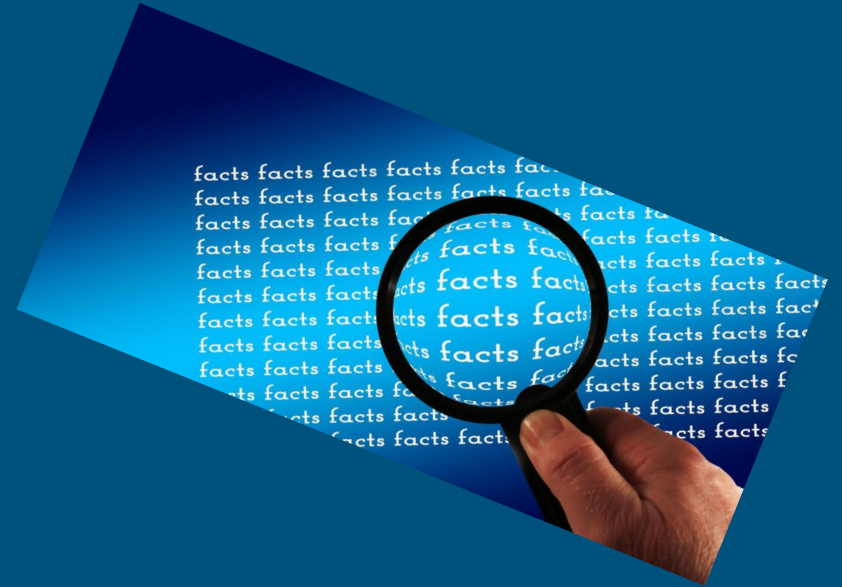
- Content warning
- How I came to the topic
- Who I am, and my lack of neutrality on the topic
- Historical approach



Photo by me Oct 29, 2019.

2. Research Methods and Limitations

- Identifying controversial events
- Types of primary sources I used



[Image from pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com)

3. A Little Bit of History

Research Questions:

- Where and when did the controversies occur?
- What were the controversial event topics?
- Who booked or hosted the events?
- Were the events cancelled or did they happen as planned, and why?
- Who supported the events, and who spoke out against them?
- What positions did library staff unions take?
- What positions did professional library associations take?
- Were there political interventions?
- Were there subsequent library policy changes?
- Did the libraries face any consequences for their decisions to proceed with or cancel controversial events?

3. A Little Bit of History

A small selection of controversial events

- 1978, Mississauga Public Library
A gay film screening - cancelled
- 1990s, Greater Victoria Public Library
Canadian Free Speech League events - happened
- 2012, Belleville Public Library
A book talk about local murders - cancelled
- 2013, Ottawa Public Library
Islamophobic speaker- happened
- 2019, Halifax Public Library
Anti-police film screening - cancelled then rescheduled
- 2020, Grand Prairie and Medicine Hat
An anti-vaccine film screening - happened

4. Historical Commentary

1960-2020:

- 33 controversial events
- 5 planned by libraries, 3 library-third party partnerships, 25 third-party bookings
- 25 events allowed to proceed (76%)
- 6 events cancelled by library (18%)
- 2 events cancelled by organizers (6%)
- 5 events prompted politicians to speak out, with 4 opposed to an event and 1 supportive
- 5 other events prompted more political involvement in the form of discussions and/or motions in city council or provincial parliament.

4. Historical Commentary

What were the controversies?



[Image from pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com)

- For 18 events (54%) public opposition was concerned about hate speech and promotion of discrimination
- Other issues:
 - Communism
 - Homosexuality
 - Assisted suicide
 - Environmental activism
 - Anti-choice politician
 - Indigenous identity appropriation
 - Drag queen storytimes
 - Anti-vaccine propaganda.

4. Historical Commentary

Why 6 events were cancelled by libraries

- Avoid promoting homosexuality (1978 Mississauga)
- Racist views of the speakers (1990 Ottawa)
- Legal risk for the library (2009 Vancouver)
- Topic too hurtful to the community (2012 Belleville)
- Can't operationally manage the protest (2017 Saskatoon)
- Event would violate the library's anti-discrimination policy (2017 Ottawa)

Why 25 events were allowed to proceed

- Protection of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression
 - Often coupled with a lack of criminal hate speech record for the speakers
 - and assertions of library neutrality

4. Historical Commentary

Repercussions:

- 1 legal challenge for a cancellation - the ruling supported Ottawa Public Library's 2017 decision
- Vancouver Public Library banned from participating in 2019 Pride Festival (TPL also likely would have been if Pride weren't cancelled due to pandemic)
- Toronto Public Library lost dozens of events and partnerships in 2019

Rewards:

- 3 intellectual freedom awards from professional associations
 - 1997 Greater Victoria Public Library
 - 2018 Toronto Public Library's Chief Librarian
 - 2019 Okanagan Regional Library's Machum & Stephenson

4. Historical Commentary



Politics of Opposition

- “Progressive” opposition to 24 events
 - 18 of which were issues of hate speech and discrimination
- “Conservative” opposition to 7 events
 - Based on morality/politics, such as communism, homosexuality, environmental activism, pornography, assisted suicide
- 2 events I could not classify either way

5. Library Neutrality?!

- Enlightenment, colonial, white supremacist ideology
- Normativity of whiteness
- Reinforcing the status quo of systemic discrimination and social power imbalances
- Protecting ideas over people
- Competing values
- Community and care
- Safety and social justice

