

The Undemocratic Reality of Far Too Many Libraries

by [G. Tod Slone](#) (February 2024)



Portrait of Edmond Duranty, Edgar Degas, 1879

In almost all the 45 libraries studied here, and probably hundreds and hundreds more across the country, we have

failed our professional duty to seek out diverse political views. [...] These books are not expensive. Their absence from our libraries makes a mockery of ALA's vaunted 'freedom to read.' But we do not even notice that we are censoring our collections. Complacently, we watch our new automated systems stuff the shelves with Henry Kissinger's memoirs. –Retired Librarian Charles Willett, Founding Editor, *Counterpoise*

When one does not possess experience testing the waters of democracy (i.e., freedom of speech and vigorous debate), one cannot really ascertain the *de facto* state of democracy, regarding, for example, libraries, colleges, museums, cultural councils and centers, poetry festivals, and newspapers like the *Cape Cod Times*. Testing the waters ought to be a prime educational activity. Yet it is certainly not taught at colleges and universities! Why not? Well, it would inevitably imply teaching students to openly question and challenge their very professors and college administrators. And it would certainly not be beneficial to careers (examine my [Curriculum Mortae](#)). However, it could certainly be highly beneficial to real critical thinking and resultant creativity. Indeed, from the dross ineluctably revealed from testing the waters, one could create essays, poems, plays, novels, and cartoons.

Columnist Larry Brown's essay on libraries, "[In the internet age, libraries have become centers of innovation](#)," essentially depicts librarians as saints and their libraries as saintly. Testing the waters of democracy, however, might lead to a different conclusion. The American Library Association's "[Library Bill of Rights](#)" is adopted by many if not most libraries as part of their collection development policy statements and stipulates, amongst other things, that

Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

Sadly, for perhaps most library directors, that ALA statement is nothing but an example of librarian virtue-signaling, as opposed to a democratic reality. As an egregious example, not one library on Cape Cod has been willing to subscribe to the journal I publish on Cape Cod. My neighborhood library in Barnstable, Sturgis Library, even refused a free subscription offer! Yet it subscribes to *Poetry* magazine, which praises poets and poetry, as opposed to the journal I publish. How does that reality possibly jive with its collection-development statement?

Brown needs to somehow find courage, stand up, and actually test the waters of democracy, rather than simply act as a library-PR spokesperson and press pundit for the *Cape Cod Times*. As an example of testing the library waters, examine the lengthy *dialogue de sourds*, "[Notes on the Office for Intellectual Freedom ... Sham](#)," which I had with James LaRue, former director of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom. LaRue's justifications for library rejection, censorship, and banning reflect a certain hypocrisy. *American Libraries*, the ALA's magazine, unsurprisingly, will not publish criticism regarding librarians and would certainly not publish this essay! Read LaRue's numerous circumlocutions. His response to my criticism of that magazine serves as an example:

(Oh, and I don't have the authority to grant you guaranteed column inches in American Libraries, either.)

Yet LaRue certainly had a strong influence to request the magazine publish something critical. On another note, the *Cape Cod Times*, like the bulk of newspapers today, is characterized not only by *Pravda*-like bias, but also hermetically-closed doors to criticism, especially regarding it, its editors and columnists. That certainly is not a sign of openness, democracy, and vigorous debate! Examine some of my banned or rejected criticisms [here](#) and [here](#).

Careerists normally do not bite the hands that feed them. Truth is not the prime concern for them. Climbing the ladder is their prime concern. Brown does that at the *Times* and did that at Cape Cod Academy, where he used to teach. It is his *modus operandi*, which is precisely why he was invited to join the board of trustees of the Hyannis Public Library, and of course obtain a platform at the *Times*. Examine yet another example of my rejected criticism: [Larry Brown Cape Cod Times](#). Does Brown care that his library closed its doors to the 501 c3 literary journal I publish on Cape Cod? Certainly not! It is in his careerist interest not to give a damn.

My experiences dealing with library directors indicate that they can be as undemocratic as autocrat newspaper editors like former *Times*' editor Paul Pronovost and current editor Anne Brennan. That is the reality. Libraries and librarians are not somehow all wonderful, as depicted by Brown. Librarian director Lucy Loomis, for example, had permanently banned me from Sturgis Library w/o warning or due process for the crime of disseminating written criticism of her hypocrisy regarding her collection development statement (see [here](#) and [here](#)). How is that saintly? How does that make Sturgis wonderful? Why did the *Times* refuse to publish anything with that regard? Why does Brown, as a new library trustee, not give a damn about that egregious affront to democracy?

"After 45 years of teaching, I'm a pretty bookish guy," states Brown. "Retired now, I have more time to serve in new ways." To serve? That term should always strike a nerve in the mind

of an independent thinker and evoke political hacks raking in tons of money ... for "public service." Moreover, teaching is a job. Brown got well-paid for it and for his conscious choice to turn a blind eye to the inevitable intellectual corruption of his superiors.

If anything, Brown's entire article carries the odor of somebody—like the bulk of careerist bureaucrats, educrats and bibliocrats—who has never stepped out of line to really question and challenge. Library directors today, like our hack politicians, are well-paid. "To serve" becomes a meaningless term. "To serve modern communities," argues Brown, "libraries have reimagined themselves. First of all, not all information is equal. Whether in print, online or heard over the back fence, some assertions are more grounded in fact than others. So we can ask librarians, 'Where could I find some reliable information on this ... a good book about that ... other sources?'"

Now, imagine if I'd posed the questions: "Where can I find some reliable information about librarian directors as undemocratic gatekeepers of information? Do you have any information about Lucy Loomis and her banning of patrons w/o warning or due process?" "Uhh, no sir!" would be the inevitable response.

Brown praises, "For our elderly, sometimes with failing vision or other disabilities, libraries offer readings, reviews of current events and a unifying companionship in what for so many of us is an increasingly lonely and empty time." But is it not time that people like him stop dissing the elderly, some of whom are quite capable and not wrought with loneliness and empty time!

Brown lauds, "The role of the library as a purveyor of knowledge and wisdom is coming full circle. With information flooding off our screens—often unfiltered for accuracy, impersonal and argumentative—modern libraries offer the

mediation of sympathetic human beings.” But do grown adults need library directors to filter information for them, so that it will not be “impersonal” or “argumentative”? Mind-boggling! And again, NOT all librarians are “sympathetic human beings.” Loomis, for example, is not a sympathetic human being; she is a human being who cannot bear an iota of criticism. Should those like her be mediating information? Certainly not! And so onwards the *dialogue de sourds*:

Larry Brown: "As I think of where the Hyannis Public Library is going, it's a matter of creating civic spaces where neighbors can come to hear authors talk about their process ... teachers and others share their information and expertise ... public forums and presentations."

G. Tod Slone: Well, why doesn't the columnist mention that HPL is perhaps the only library on the Cape that hires a full-time security guard, who sits in front of the check-out table? And which authors do its librarian autocrats accord a platform? ... And which authors, including me, do they not accord a platform?

LB: "It's not just books anymore. Our Hyannis Public Library offers academic programs for area school children for tutoring, mentoring on special projects and just a safe and quiet place to study and hang out."

GTS: If it were so "safe and quiet," why again the need for a security guard?

And the laudation ad infinitum: “In addition, look for nutritional programs, cooking and health, a new Play Oasis for children and outdoor programming (a partnership with the Cape Cod Toy Library), multilingual programs including a series of professional storytellers, a ‘crop-swap’ program with food

available, a book store and programs on Zoom for folks on vacation or unable to visit in person.”

Ah, but what about a program in democracy on the local level and its egregious absence at, for example, the *Cape Cod Times*, Sturgis Library, Cultural Center of Cape Cod (see “[Nasty: Notes from a Protest and an Encounter with the Executive Director of the Cultural Center of Cape Cod](#)” and “[Shielded from Criticism—This Week’s Bouse*](#)”), [Cape Cod Poetry Review \(Corey Farrenkopf\)](#), [Cape Cod Museum of Art](#), [Fine Arts Work Center](#) (Provincetown), [Mid-Cape Cultural Council](#), [Cape Cod Art](#) magazine, and on and on? How about a program in how to build backbone and embrace criticism, rather than knee-jerk censor and/or ignore it?

And more unbridled praise:

In short, libraries are becoming the modern equivalent of the old fireside where knowledge and wisdom are shared in person, face to face. The brains in the building will always be our libraries’ communal gift and unifying mission. And it’s free—a public service. Our Hyannis Library has a new director, Antonia Stephens: sharp, funny, smart and innovative.

Well, taxpayer dollars pay for libraries, so they’re not free. And might HPL’s new director have other traits similar to those of Loomis, including the inability to digest criticism, closed-mindedness, and a control mentality? In any case, Brown concluded in full exaltation: “I joined her energetic and creative board to be part of what happens next. This is the central library for the most populous and urban part of Cape Cod. They’ve got ambitious plans for programming and renovations. More people are about to be served in more ways than ever before. ‘WATCH THIS SPACE,’ the signs say. Better

yet, come round to Main Street and see for yourself.”

Now, how about a highly unusual sign that says,



Test the Waters
of Democracy
in this Space!

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G. Tod Slone, PhD, lives on Cape Cod, where he was permanently banned in 2012 without warning or due process from Sturgis Library, one of the very oldest in the country. His civil rights were being denied because he was not permitted to attend any cultural or political events held at his neighborhood library. The only stated reason for the banning was “for the safety of the staff and public,” yet he has no criminal record and has never made a threat. His real crime was that he challenged, in writing, the library’s “collection development” mission that stated “libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view.” His point of view was somehow not part of “all points of view.” In November 2022, he requested the library [rescind its banning decree](#), which it finally did. He is a dissident poet/writer/cartoonist and editor of [The American Dissident](#).

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