

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON LABELING AND RATING SYSTEMS

Preamble

Librarians employ objective professional judgment through selection, cataloging, classification, and readers' services to make available the information that library users want or need. Cataloging decisions, labels, or ratings applied in an attempt to restrict or discourage access to materials or to suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement is a violation of the First Amendment and the *Library Bill of Rights* [*Labels and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*].

Definitions

What is the difference between a viewpoint-neutral directional aid and a prejudicial label?

Labels and rating systems produced by libraries, publishers, and organizations can be valuable and convenient aids for assisting library users and staff in finding and selecting desired materials.

These tools are not de facto viewpoint-neutral directional aids or prejudicial labels; they become so only according to their implementation.

Any existing or proposed rating systems should be examined in light of intellectual freedom principles.

Genres

What are examples for determining whether a genre label is a viewpoint-neutral directional aid or a prejudicial label?

Fiction genre labels such as romance, mystery, and science fiction are used by many libraries as viewpoint-neutral directional aids. While there may be some differences of opinion about which titles fit within specific genre areas, the choice of genre is viewpoint neutral and does not suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement.

On the other hand, some public libraries label Christian fiction with a cross as a symbol. This practice, especially when other religious fiction is not designated, communicates a message of preference for Christianity, a violation of the separation of church and state that is prohibited by the establishment clause of First Amendment as well as the *Library Bill of Rights*.

People of all persuasions and traditions have sincere, heartfelt concerns when their government addresses religious issues, fundamentally different from an interest as to

whether a library item bears a “Mystery” or “Western” sticker. In recognition of this, some libraries seek to avoid entanglement with religion by using a label to identify “inspirational fiction”, including material that does not have religious-based content. As long as both the selection of materials to be so labeled and the label used are viewpoint neutral and inclusive, this practice would not violate the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Enhanced Content in Catalogs

Does the practice of bundling bibliographic records with databases and other electronic informational resources including book reviews, book covers and other evaluative materials violate the Library Bill of Rights?

Some vendors provide bibliographic records enhanced with databases and other electronic informational resources including book reviews and other evaluative materials.

The *Interpretation* on “Labels and Rating Systems” should not be construed to preclude provision of resources and information useful to users as they make their choices from the library’s catalog as long as the criteria for inclusion is viewpoint neutral.

Libraries should seek the broadest spectrum of informational and evaluative materials as possible. Furthermore, the library profession should advocate to vendors for the inclusion of diverse viewpoints in the products they develop for libraries.

Is it appropriate to add movie, game or music ratings to the bibliographic record?

No. These rating systems are devised by private groups using subjective and changing criteria to advise people of suitability or content of materials. It is the library’s responsibility to prevent the imposition or endorsement of private rating systems. Including such ratings in the bibliographic record, library records, and other library authored finding aids would predispose people’s attitudes toward the material and thus violate the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Rating Systems and the Library.

What if a group develops a rating system? What would ALA advise?

Any private group’s rating system, regardless of political, doctrinal or social viewpoint is subjective and meant to predispose the public’s attitude, and therefore violate the *Library Bill of Rights*. Libraries should remain viewpoint neutral, providing information users seek about any rating system equitably, regardless of the group’s viewpoint.

What if a library board is asked to use movie, video game, music or other ratings to restrict access?

A variety of private organizations including the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Canadian Motion

Picture Distributors Association, PSVratings Standards Board (PSV), Parents Television Council (PTC), Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board, and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) have developed rating systems as a means of advising parents concerning their opinions of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books, films, recordings, television programs, Web sites, or other materials.

None of these organizations are government agencies and as such their rating systems cannot be mandated or enforced by any government or agency of government, including a publicly funded library. A library can, however, make information concerning these rating systems available to library users.

For more information on this topic see: Deborah Caldwell-Stone, "Movie Ratings are Private, Not Public Policy", *Illinois Library Association Reporter* 22:2 (2004):10–13 (<http://www.ila.org/pub/reporter/vol22no2.pdf>).

Is it prejudicial to describe violent and sexual content? For example, would including "contains mild violence" on bibliographic record of a graphic novel violate the Library Bill of Rights?

Yes. In any community there will be a range of attitudes as to what is deemed offensive and contrary to moral values. For some the issue is sexually explicit content, for others the concern is with violence, for still others it is language. Including notes in the bibliographic record regarding what may be objectionable content assumes all members of the community hold the same values. No one person should take responsibility for judging what is offensive. Such voluntary labeling in bibliographic records and catalogs violates the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Age, Grade, Reading Level, and Computerized Reading Programs

I would like to organize sections of the library using reading level designations, such as those supplied by Accelerated Reader. Is this okay?

While knowing the reading level of a book can assist library users, organizing a library via these labels can pose a psychological barrier for users who do not know their reading level. Many will feel that they should not utilize those resources.

Users who do know their reading level may feel compelled to only select resources from their reading level. This will result in users not utilizing the full scope of the library collection.

Is it okay to restrict certain sections of the collection based on the patron's age or grade level?

Restricting access to library materials based on age or grade level does not respect the individual needs, interests, and abilities of users and violates the *Library Bill of Rights*.

All students in my school are required to participate in a computerized reading program that assigns reading levels and point values to book and tests students for reading comprehension. Parents and teachers want library books placed on the shelves by reading level so that students can easily access and be limited to books that meet their individual needs. This would be easy to do since the vendor sells pre-printed labels for grade level and point value designation. Is this acceptable?

No. A student should have access to all materials in a school library.

The chronological age or grade level of students is not representative of their information needs or total reading abilities. If collections are organized by age or grade, some users will feel inhibited from selecting resources from sections that do not correspond to their exact characteristics. If the library limits users from checking out resources from sections other than those that match the patron's characteristics, the library will most likely not serve the needs of users.

While some parents and teachers may find housing books by grade level helpful in guiding developing young readers, a library should not use such labels as a classification system, or to promote any restrictive or prejudicial practice. Most computerized reading programs list books by grade levels on their Web sites if parents and teachers wish to seek such direction.

My library users participate in the Accelerated Reader program, and we feel pressured to purchase books that are on the reading lists. Some of the books on these lists are recommended for reading levels that match the abilities of my users, but I question the emotional and maturity levels of the themes of the books. What do I do?

While lists from programs like Accelerated Reader may be helpful in selecting books for a school or public library in school districts where such programs are a prominent part of the curriculum, it is important to remember that emotional and maturity levels do not necessarily correlate with reading level. A library or school district should have a selection policy that specifically outlines how materials are selected and what resources are used. This may include specific review journals and other professional collection development tools. Librarians should advise teachers and administrators that their responsibility is to practice good selection, and to follow the selection policy of the institution. This may mean that some books on the Accelerated Reader lists that are recommended for high achieving young readers may not be selected because of the maturity level.

Recommended Book Lists

A local school has a required summer reading list. Our library pulls them from the general collection and places them together. Is that considered viewpoint neutral?

Yes. Assembling materials that will be in high demand for a limited period of time helps library users find them. Such selections should be accessible to all users and not limited to the target audience.

Labeling Based on Ethnic or Language Group

We have a large population of a specific ethnic/language group in our service area and we would like to create a section of the library and a collection to recognize that. Is that acceptable and how may we go about it?

When there is a large population of a specific ethnic or language group in an area, it often creates a large demand for items relevant to their experience in the library. To meet that demand and make it simpler for the users to locate those resources, libraries sometimes choose to create a special collection and/or area devoted to those resources. As long as these collections represent diverse points of view within the parameters of the collection and are designed to help patron find resources relevant to their experience and not to restrict them to a certain section of the library, this practice would be acceptable.