



RAMAPO CATSKILL LIBRARY SYSTEM
LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST and ANNUAL MEETING
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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REMARKS

A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone. –Jo Godwin was an Editor of Wilson Library Journal

Libraries have existed for at least 2,722 years.

The history of libraries in this country dates back to before its founding with Benjamin Franklin's first public lending library in 1731.

As we moved from an agrarian to industrial society the need for continuing education –lifelong learning – further established the need for public libraries. People could no longer learn everything from their parents and grandparents, but rather needed to learn how to adapt to the age of machines.

Public libraries have always adapted to the needs of their communities and the changes in society and will continue to do so.

Over the centuries, libraries collected and made available information in all types of media – clay tablets, scrolls, books, photographs, audio recordings, films, videotapes, CDs, DVDs, digital content. We will continue to adopt whatever medium comes next to serve our communities.

But libraries have been and are so much more.

We offer community spaces for social interaction; cultural programs; learning crafts; supporting early childhood education; helping new immigrants integrate and assimilate while supporting our cultural differences; helping people upgrade skills and learn how to engage the digital society and as always, we are a safe haven in times of crisis – be it for one child or an entire community.

Public libraries are not just buildings or virtual presences. They are the staff who help people navigate the ever expanding and changing world of information and devices.

As staff and Trustees of libraries you are the gatekeepers of our collective information, but gatekeepers with a difference! Your role is to assure that the gate is wide open for everyone to come in; you are the guardians of Intellectual Freedom and defenders of the First Amendment.

At a time when some people feel public libraries are obsolete I say “you ain't seen nothing yet!!!”

One of the key roles of librarians and library workers has been and continues to be, helping people find and evaluate information. Over the last three decades this has meant that we are seriously engaged in guiding people toward digital literacy – a set of competencies required to fully participate in the “knowledge society”.

In this era of “fake news” libraries are an essential institution in our democratic society. But let me be perfectly clear “fake news” has always been part of the communication and media landscape.

In an 1807 letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Norvell, a young man who had asked how to best run a newspaper, Jefferson wrote, “It is a melancholy truth, that a suppression of the press could not more completely deprive the nation of its benefits, than is done by its abandoned prostitution to falsehood. Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.”

What is different now is that we are inundated with social media that make it possible to disseminate “fake news” easily and rapidly. In the past “fake news” was used as propaganda to isolate individuals or groups of people, destabilize governments and foment anarchy. It appears that this continues to be its intent.

Although “fake news” may be inaccurate, dishonest, misleading, intentionally untrue and may be intended to damage the paradigm of factual information, is it illegal? Is it protected by the First Amendment? Can “fake news” undermine our democratic way of life?

Let us keep in mind that “fake news” can originate from anywhere on the political spectrum from left to right. We need to be able to differentiate between satire, propaganda, ‘infotainment’, opinion and ‘dog-whistling.’

Librarians and library workers can help people learn how to evaluate information to determine the who, what, where, when, why and how. While that will not eliminate “fake news,” it may help to make people less susceptible to its effects.

However, the issue does not require us *only* to assess information and filter the “wheat from the chaff.” No amount of inoculation against “fake news” will protect our civil society. We *also* must continue the conversation with those with whom we disagree.

In 2005 Stephen Colbert coined the phrase “truthiness” which he defined as – “truth that comes from the gut, not books.”

In 2006 the American Dialect Society defined “truthiness” as – “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one *wishes* to be true, rather than concepts or facts *known* to be true.”

Perhaps “fake news” satisfies the need of some people for “truthiness.”

The only real defense we have as citizens of a democracy against “fake news” is our vigilance to protect our Bill of Rights; to maintain the integrity of our electoral process and to ensure that our libraries are protected *and* nurtured.

“Plain decay of libraries is like Alzheimer’s in the nation’s brain” – Ted Hughes.
Libraries are beacons, lighting the way for our citizens in this messy, difficult, fragile information-dependent experiment called Democracy.

The work you do every day as librarians, library workers and Trustees by keeping the doors of your libraries open is invaluable, and absolutely essential to the health of our democracy.

I thank you all for it.

Robert Hubsher