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## Talking About Censorship and Publishing

The NCAC’s executive director says conversation is needed to bridge divides

BY CHRISTOPHER M. FINAN

Can we talk?

In last week’s *Publishers Weekly*, I summarized the principles of “The Freedom to Read,” a statement essential to the ethical foundation of the library and publishing community since 1953. The statement did more than expound principles: It committed the signatories to fight for them.

Today this commitment is being questioned by people within the library and publishing communities. Many do not believe that publishers should release books that express dangerous ideas or books that are written by bad people. They reject the idea that the best answer to a bad book is a good one.

**H**ow are we to resolve these differences? So far, there have been Twitter debates. Petitions have been circulated. There has been a lot of talk about harmful books, but much less about how demands for suppression conflict with the commitment to publish a broad range of ideas. There has been little dialogue and almost no give-and-take. Yet there is strong evidence that conversation works, if not to fully resolve differences at least to build greater interpersonal understanding and lower the temperature of conflict, opening the way to further communication.

The National Coalition Against Censorship has some experience in this area. In 2017, building on groundwork by the American Booksellers Association, we launched a pilot program, the Open Discussion Project, that sought to bring liberals and conservatives together in independent bookstores to discuss the issues that divide them. This seems even more foolhardy today than it was four years ago, but we did our homework. We learned that political polarization was not new. Researchers had identified the problem in the 1970s, and nonprofits have been trying to find a solution ever since.

There were some encouraging results from experiments with groups that were small enough to let the members get to know one another. They developed empathy, making it possible for them to discuss their differences.

We were surprised by the large turnout at the initial meetings in the six stores participating in the pilot. We had hoped that the groups would be small, but 80 people showed up at the first meeting at Gibson’s Bookstore in Concord, N.H. The pilot established that many people are eager to engage with those who hold different views—not to punish or convert them but to find

a place where they can discuss their differences.

While we were unable to proceed with a national rollout of the program, two of the stores continue to hold meetings and others are considering restarting their groups. The Bipartisan Book Club, which began at Politics and Prose in Washington, D.C., includes liberals, conservatives, and libertarians. Now operated by its members, the club meets every six weeks to discuss books that present different perspectives. The topics include policing, gender identity, social cohesion, capitalism, antifa, and diversity.

More evidence of success is the response to Nadine Strossen’s book *Hate: Why We Should Resist It with Free Speech, Not Censorship*. As the president of the ACLU from 1991 to 2008 and a prominent defender of civil liberties, Strossen has always had a busy speaking schedule. But between the publication of her book in May 2018 and the beginning of the pandemic, she made more than 300 appearances, mostly to talk about hate speech.

Though Strossen often speaks to junior high and high school students, many of her events were on college campuses where activists were organizing against racism. Instead of fearing the wrath of students, she urged those who had invited her to actively reach out to students who disagree with her. Many did attend speeches and rejected her argument that restrictions on hate speech are ineffective, but other students were convinced by her argument that the best way to fight hate is to continue to organize and protest against it.

There is so much that is encouraging about our new age of protest and its promise for eliminating the injustices suffered by people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ community. Inevitably, this has put pressure on all of our major institutions to change. It is particularly difficult for publishers, who must balance their desire to be more inclusive with a commitment to promote free expression.

To maintain this balance, we must commit ourselves to talking about the problem. NCAC is ready to do whatever it can to help. My email is [chris@ncac.org](mailto:chris@ncac.org). ■



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