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Opinion: Freedom to Read: A cornerstone of our democracy

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The Stanley A. Milner library in downtown Edmonton officially re-opened on Thursday September 17, 2020 after being closed since December 31, 2016 for extensive renovations. PHOTO BY LARRY WONG /Postmedia

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This year marks the 40th anniversary of Freedom to Read Week, a crucial reminder of the fundamental right within our democratic society to access information and engage in open discourse. At Edmonton Public Library (EPL), we believe public libraries are cornerstones of a free and democratic society. We champion the fundamental right to read freely, without censorship or limitations. Our diverse collections offer many voices, viewpoints and experiences, empowering individuals to develop their own informed opinions.

With an amazing 34-year career in libraries, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of intellectual freedom. In my graduate studies in library school, this concept felt abstract. But working within libraries, I understood it as the very essence of our mission. We are not merely repositories of books; we are catalysts for exploration, guardians of the right to access diverse perspectives spanning the range of human experience, and champions of critical thinking.

Today, with book challenges, calls for boycotts and social media amplifying public criticism, the role of libraries as bastions of intellectual freedom is more critical than ever. We offer a welcoming space for individuals to encounter challenging ideas, engage in respectful dialogue, and to make well-educated and informed decisions. This is not about endorsing specific viewpoints, but about providing access to tools and resources for independent thought.

At EPL, we take immense pride in our commitment to providing unfettered access to information and ideas that reflect the diversity of interests and beliefs of the communities we serve. We encourage exploration of a wide range of content and ideas, even those that provoke discomfort and disagreement. We strive to let customers know they have choices — they get to decide what books they want to read, movies they want to watch or programs they want to attend.

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In the last eight years, EPL has faced significant censorship challenges, and I think we've done a great job. Whether it's speakers, programs, or items in our collections, we've held fast to our commitment to championing accessibility and intellectual freedom.

The true test for one's commitment to these fundamental freedoms is in moments of controversy. Through it all, we have held firm to our principles. We encourage respectful dialogue around contested materials, prompting critical reflection through a robust challenge process. We also equip staff with the tools to navigate these difficult conversations upholding the principles of intellectual freedom.

Freedom to Read Week serves as a powerful reminder that exposure to different perspectives fosters compassion, learning and understanding. By providing access to diverse ideas spanning a range of viewpoints, we create space for meaningful connections that broaden our horizons. At EPL, we are committed to making room for the full range of human thought, for it is through open dialogue and critical thinking that a truly informed and engaged society thrives.

I invite you to visit your local library to embark on a journey of exploration — find a book, movie, magazine or video game that you normally would not read, listen to or view. Engage in civil dialogue, challenge your assumptions, and consider a new perspective, even one with which you may vehemently disagree. I encourage you to reflect on the tremendous gift we have of living in a democratic society that allows us the right to explore a range of opinions and benefit from the transformative power of diverse perspectives. Together, let us celebrate the freedom to read and the vital role libraries play in fostering a vibrant and informed democracy.