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**Rating Systems**

An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

Even the smallest library contains an enormous wealth of viewpoints for consideration by its users. However, libraries do not advocate or endorse the content found in their collections or in resources made accessible through the library. Rating systems appearing in library public access catalogs or resource discovery tools present distinct challenges to these intellectual freedom principles.

**Rating Systems**

Many organizations use or devise rating systems as a means of advising either their members or the general public regarding the organizations’ opinions of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books, films, recordings, websites, games, or other materials. Rating systems presuppose the existence of individuals or groups with wisdom to determine by their authority what is appropriate or inappropriate for others. Rating systems also presuppose that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine. The creation and publication of such systems is a perfect example of the First Amendment’s right of free speech. However, The American Library Association also affirms the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about resources they choose to read or view.

The adoption, enforcement, or endorsement either explicitly or implicitly of any of these rating systems by a library violates the Library Bill of Rights ~~or~~ and may be unconstitutional. If enforcement of labeling or rating systems is mandated by law, the library should seek legal advice regarding the law’s applicability to library operations.

Libraries sometimes acquire resources that include ratings as part of their packaging. Librarians should not endorse the inclusion of such rating systems; however, removing or destroying the ratings—if placed there by the publisher, distributor, or copyright holder—could constitute expurgation (see “Expurgation of Library Materials: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*”).

Because AACRII, RDA and the MARC format provide an opportunity for libraries to include ratings in their bibliographic records, many libraries have chosen to do so – some by acceptance of standard records containing such ratings and others by a desire to provide the maximum descriptive information available on a resource. Libraries are not required by cataloging codes to provide this information. However, if they choose do so, whatever the reason, they should add a disclaimer to their catalog or discovery tool displays indicating that the library does not endorse any external rating system.

The inclusion of ratings on bibliographic records in library catalogs or discovery tools may be interpreted as an endorsement by the library. Therefore, without a disclaimer, inclusion of such ratings is a violation of the *Library Bill of Rights.*

The fact that libraries do not advocate or use rating systems does not preclude them from answering questions about such systems. In fact, providing access to sources containing information on rating systems in order to meet the specific information seeking needs of individual users is perfectly appropriate professional behavior.

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