# Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

Libraries, no matter their size, contain an enormous wealth of viewpoints and are responsible for making those viewpoints available to all. 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 catalogs or discovery systems present distinct challenges to these intellectual freedom principles.

Many organizations use or devise rating systems as a means of providing advisory information regarding the content and suitability of materials. Rating systems assume that individuals or groups exist who can determine what is appropriate or inappropriate for others. Rating systems also assume that individuals want or need direction in making up their minds about the materials or resources they use. The creation and publication of such systems is a good example of the First Amendment’s right to free speech. However, the American Library Association also affirms the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about the information that they consume.

Libraries’ explicit or implicit adoption, enforcement, or endorsement of any of these rating systems violates the *Library Bill of Rights* and may be unconstitutional. If enforcement of rating systems is mandated by law, the library should seek legal advice regarding the law’s applicability to library operations.

Libraries often acquire resources, such as DVDs, that include ratings as part of their publication materials. Library workers should not endorse the inclusion of such rating systems; however, removing or destroying the rating placed on the original item by the publisher, distributor, or copyright holder could constitute expurgation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Because cataloging standards 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 best practices to provide this information. If they choose to do so, for whatever reason, they should cite the source of the rating and indicate that the library does not endorse external rating systems.

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

If libraries include information about rating systems on items or records, this information should not be used to restrict access to those materials based on the age of library users. Such a restriction may violate minors’ First Amendment rights.[[2]](#footnote-2)

That libraries do not endorse or advocate for the use of of rating systems does not preclude them from answering questions about such systems. It is appropriate to provide access to sources containing information on rating systems in order to meet the specific information-seeking needs of individual users. The American Library Association affirms the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about resources they choose to read or view.

Adopted on June 30, 2015, by ALA Council. Revisions proposed for ALA Annual Conference 2019.

1. “[Expurgation of Library Resources: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/expurgationlibrary),” adopted February 2, 1973, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; January 10, 1990; July 2, 2008; and July 1, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Enghahl v. City of Kenosha*, 317 F. Supp. 1133 (E.D. Wis. 1970); *Motion Picture Association of America v. Specter*, 315 F. Supp. 824 (E.D. Pa. 1970); *Swope v. Lubbers*, 560 F.Supp. 1328 (W.D. Mich. 1983) and *Rosen v. Budco*, 10 Phila. 112 (1983) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)