



CONFRONTING WHITE NATIONALISM IN LIBRARIES

A Toolkit

WESTERN
STATES
CENTER

ABOUT WESTERN STATES CENTER

Western States Center is one of the United States' leading organizations working to combat white nationalism, strengthen inclusive democracy, and assist civil society to effectively respond to social movements that exploit bigotry and intolerance. Based in the Pacific Northwest and Mountain states, Western States Center serves as a national hub for building movements, developing leaders, shifting culture, and defending democracy to help build a world where everyone can live, love, worship and work free from bigotry and fear.

*This toolkit was written by a team of librarians in partnership with Western States Center. It was adapted from *Confronting White Nationalism in Schools: A Toolkit*, written by Jessica Acee, Nora Flanagan, and Lindsay Schubiner, originally published in 2019, and now in its third edition.*

This toolkit emerged from the work of an informal group of library workers who gathered to fight the increasing targeting of libraries by anti-democracy and white nationalist groups. Over the years, this group has included librarians, library staff, and library administrators from academic, K-12, and public libraries. The composition of the group has changed, but every member has contributed in important ways to the examples, strategies, sense of purpose, and practical applicability of this toolkit.

We see this toolkit as a step toward greater efforts to counter white nationalism from libraries, and we hope it prompts new actions, ideas, and shared learnings from these essential democratic institutions. Please consider contacting Western States Center at info@wscpdx.org to share your experiences of confronting white nationalism in your library or to be in touch with the authors, ask questions, and provide feedback.

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This toolkit is designed to help readers counter multiple forms of organized bigotry. This includes organizing that draws on anti-Blackness, anti-Indigenous bigotry, anti-immigrant bigotry, anti-Muslim bigotry, antisemitism, misogyny, and anti-LGBTQ+ bigotry.

On pages that follow, we've expanded on some of these key concepts to clarify their connection to organized bigotry (look for the orange boxes). We've included additional resources at the end of the toolkit to help you deepen your understanding of this complex and nuanced topic.

Introduction

In May of 2019, a group of unidentified protestors flooded the phones of a South King County, Washington, library during Drag Queen Story Hour. While library workers scrambled to field calls, additional protestors rushed into a room filled with children and families, disrupting the Story Hour event in progress.

The protestors later identified themselves as members of a “mother’s group,” and claimed they’d enlisted security services from local members of the Proud Boys. The Washington chapter of the anti-LGBTQ+ group MassResistance also called for a halt to all levies funding libraries that host drag story hours,¹ a tactic used by MassResistance chapters around the country to limit library offerings that include queer communities. These protests were usually coupled with calls to defund the library.²

As public institutions that promote and support democracy, libraries are a favorite target of racist, bigoted, and violent groups. Such attacks not only disrupt our ability to achieve our core mission on a day-to-day basis, but seek to threaten (through attacks on funding

and expensive lawsuits) the very existence of libraries as a public good.

Libraries are community centers for equitable and democratic access to knowledge. When our core services are threatened by white nationalist organizing, we have a duty to take action. Library workers have several key roles to play in the fight against the rise of the social movement of white nationalism and its associated ideologies, and we have the skills to do it.

- With our research expertise, we have unique techniques to expose these secretive groups and their disinformation campaigns.

- As educators, we have a responsibility to our community members to equip them with information literacy skills to decode the white nationalist rhetoric they encounter and sometimes espouse.

- As staff in spaces of learning, community connection, and contemplation, we need to hold strong boundaries against harassment, intimidation, and violence against the marginalized populations that white nationalists seek to subjugate or exterminate.

To this end, we have created this toolkit as a charge for library workers everywhere to confront white nationalism, unite around common knowledge and learning, and unify our strategies. As you read this document, we hope you will see that you are not alone.

During the last several years of political turmoil, government disinvestment in communities, and a global pandemic, white nationalists have turned to libraries as spaces to organize, target marginalized communities, promote bigoted rhetoric, and convert people to their cause.³ The Southern Poverty Law Center explains that “extremists look to capitalize on uncertainty — and historically, they have benefited from moments of economic and political crisis.” A study conducted in 2015 found that “[far-right political parties] give voters scapegoats to blame for economic precarity and hardships,

including elites [often used as an antisemitic dog whistle], immigrants and people of color.”⁴ While writing this toolkit, we watched this happen in real time as white nationalists: took advantage of societal fear by sowing distrust in government COVID-19 procedures; promoted racist misinformation and violence about anti-police brutality protests; attempted to seize power from communities of color by questioning their election returns; and fomented the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to violently prevent Congress from ratifying the 2020 election.⁵ These realities have guided our creation of this toolkit.

As the authors of *Confronting White Nationalism in Schools* wrote, libraries “are hubs of our communities.” Our work provides a critical community service, creates connection across differences, and supports a



WHAT IS WHITE NATIONALISM?

White nationalism is a term that originated among white supremacists in the post-1960s Civil Rights era. While initially used as a euphemism for white supremacy, by the late 1990s, white nationalism emerged as its own distinct ideology with an emphasis on antisemitism and the creation of all-white ethnostates through violence and policies that increase the vulnerability, criminalization and removal of minorities and other targeted communities.

White nationalism is implicitly violent, as its goal of an entirely white nation state can only be realized through violent means. Short of achieving its end goal, white nationalism directly and indirectly influences a myriad of policies ranging from immigration enforcement, voter disenfranchisement and suppression, and state disinvestments that continue to marginalize and repress communities of color. Today white nationalism operates as a bigoted social movement that aims to build political power toward its goal of a white nation. It is distinct from white supremacy, which is a system of oppression designed to maintain control over people of color and the rights of all women.

White nationalists often mask their ideology using positive statements of love for white people rather than overt hate, and they seek to recruit supporters based on disingenuous arguments that white people are victims. They argue that racial diversity and demographic changes are equal to white genocide. Patriot Prayer has disseminated flyers that say “Protect Your Heritage,” or “Our Future Belongs to Us,” for example. White nationalists also use anti-immigrant, anti-Black, and anti-Muslim rhetoric focused on crime or terrorism to appeal to fear and prejudice among their audience. Misogyny, which describes hatred or prejudice against women, is similarly a key recruitment tool for white nationalist groups. These groups also mobilize homophobia and transphobia (bigotry directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people) for similar purposes.

SOURCE: Acee, Jessica, et al. “*Confronting White Nationalism in Schools: A Toolkit.*” *Western States Center*, 2019.



At the Z.J. Loussac Public Library in Anchorage, Alaska, “the hate group Last Frontier Evangelism-Repent Alaska, known for disparaging Jews, Muslims and Catholics, crashed the second installment of Drag Storytime during Anchorage’s PrideFest.... Shouting: ‘You’re sick, you’re perverted, you need to get right with God today... You hate children. Stop hating children. Stop brainwashing them.’”

—BRENDAN JOEL KELLEY, “ANCHORAGE ACTIVISTS FORM ‘QUEEN’S GUARD’ TO PROTECT LGBTQ+ EVENTS”

well-informed, democratic society. This is what makes libraries the target of white nationalists who seek to undermine inclusive, democratic institutions to build political power and advance their bigoted and authoritarian goals.

The core work of our libraries is being disrupted by white nationalist organizing, which is why we came together to write this toolkit. We are a group of working and retired public, school, and college librarians who have written broadly on racial justice through

librarianship. We came together to create this toolkit after forming an ad hoc group — Library Workers Against Racism (LWAR) — in 2018 to respond to a rising number of white nationalist related incidents in local libraries. After reading *Confronting White Nationalism in Schools*, we began working with the Western States Center to use the powerful lessons we learned from that toolkit to build one specific to libraries. This toolkit is a product of that collaboration, which combines Western States Center’s experience countering organized bigotry with the authors’ expertise and commitment to building stronger and more inclusive libraries.

Confronting White Nationalism in Libraries is a resource by and for library workers to use when bigoted groups try to organize in our communities. We believe that sharing common experiences can shed light on the truth and promote learning. Through actual scenarios that our libraries have encountered, we suggest ways in which library workers can use tools we already have at our disposal to resist white nationalism — whatever our position in the library. There is a significant body of literature addressing racism in libraries (and this toolkit is part of that overall work), but the toolkit’s specific focus is on responding to the social movement of white nationalism through our library work.

Because of a misguided dedication to “neutrality,” library workers have not always stood against racism and bigotry when we should have. But we must do so if we want our libraries to be equitable and inclusive spaces — a goal central to our mission. As community hubs, libraries have great strength to push back against white nationalist incursions and to work toward a racially just, connected vision of what libraries can be.

How To Use This Toolkit

Sometimes it can feel like there's not much we can do to fight back against white nationalists if we want to keep our job – or keep our library from getting sued or defunded. The majority of library workers are government employees and, as such, are limited in our ability to take certain actions that could be construed as inhibiting free speech. But we can and should use our own free speech, along with creative actions, to support our values and reject white nationalism.

If our goal is to resist the growth and power of the white nationalist social movement in our communities, we have plenty of tactics at our disposal – from information literacy lessons to community building programs. When one tactic, like deplatforming, isn't available to us in our professional roles, we must imagine new tactics to reach the same goal (more on this in the next section about free speech in libraries).

By reading this toolkit, and sharing the scenarios with your colleagues and community, you can start this conversation and begin building your local toolkit of resistance. If your library is hospitable to these ideas, make working through the scenarios a regular part of your staff meetings. If not, discuss them with a smaller group of colleagues or community members to begin building your own understanding and preparedness.

The scenarios we outline in this toolkit are meant to inspire creative actions, and the suggested approaches

are not definitive. As your library assesses threats, evaluates what actions your community will support, and takes proactive action, you will come up with new challenges and new solutions. But it is essential that, after reading this toolkit and discussing it with your colleagues, you take action based on what you learned: change your policies, write a new lesson plan, stage a community event. In this toolkit, we define success as taking action to increase community strength and safety, while minimizing the opportunities for white nationalists to undermine libraries and their values.

Also included in this toolkit are materials to help you learn more about white nationalism as an organized social movement, proactive steps you can take before an incident happens, and some best practices. Recommendations for further reading in the "Resources" section also provide a starting point for your own research. While much of this work is done in community, we need to be committed to furthering our personal racial justice education and working on unlearning biases rooted in white supremacy in order to be truly effective. Please consider reaching out to Western States Center at info@wscpdx.org to share your experience countering white nationalism in your library. We hope this toolkit is helpful as you strengthen your library community against bigotry.

What About White Nationalism and Free Speech?

Since the mid-20th century, the library profession has taken pride in supporting First Amendment guarantees of the rights to free speech, freedom of the press, religious liberty, assembly, and petition for redress of grievance. Library workers support free speech. Period. Today, this commitment means not only opposing the banning of books but working to support freedom of speech for those community members who might see this right infringed upon by threats of violence from white nationalist groups.

Additionally, our profession's core values and code of ethics commit us to supporting every member of our communities, and to providing reliable information, quality services, and an array of materials, resources and programming to address the diverse needs of community members.⁶

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, libraries had a long history of explicit exclusion based on race, reproducing and perpetuating racist social structures and ideologies.⁷ In 1977 an American Library Association sponsored film, *The Speaker*, ossified an ideological perspective regarding First Amendment rights which privileged white power structures and ridiculed, then sidelined, the perspectives of those who supported racial justice.⁸ In 2018, library workers expressed fear and outrage when ALA explicitly promoted the rights of hate groups to use library meeting space in their updated interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights.⁹ Between these moments, libraries have struggled to balance supporting freedom of speech and intellectual freedom when racist ideology threatens the ability of our libraries to serve our diverse communities well.

This toolkit is not intended to resolve this debate, but we must recognize the everyday dilemmas that it poses for library workers when confronted with the bigotry and power-building of white nationalists. Bigoted and anti-democracy groups and actors like Patriot Prayer, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Ben Shapiro know that free speech debates are ones that resonate powerfully in the court of public opinion and often in our current legal system. They use free speech claims as a strategy to force public institutions to provide them with platforms to promote their political ideologies, or to claim discrimination and minority status whenever they are not provided with a platform. Libraries are vulnerable to this tactic because, as public institutions, we can be legally challenged if we deny space or access to these



The neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* sent a flyer to colleges and universities across the country that read: “White man are you sick and tired of the Jews destroying your country through mass immigration and degeneracy? Join us in the struggle for global white supremacy...”

—ROSE FALVEY, "NOTORIOUS NEO-NAZI HACKER AND WHITE SUPREMACIST WEBSITE MAY FACE FINES FOR ANTI-SEMITIC TROLLING"

groups, and because we have a professional culture that largely claims “neutrality” as a guiding value. In practice, though, white nationalist violence and intimidation chills free speech among those they target and can make libraries unsafe and inaccessible to patrons and library workers.

Writers and legal scholars like Richard Delgado, Stanley Fish, Emily J. M. Knox, Raizel Liebler, P.E. Moskowitz, Jeremy Waldron, W. Bradley Wendel, and R. George Wright have argued that the first amendment protection of free speech has very little meaning when white supremacist systems of power suppress the common person’s speech through lack of money, access, and safety. Some scholars argue that restrictions should be considered on speech used to promote ideologies that demean, intimidate, and otherwise deny the full humanity and rights of targeted individuals or groups. Other thinkers caution against this course. The authors of this toolkit believe that the

profession should explore these arguments critically because we know that white nationalist and other bigoted groups often use speech to encourage violence.

Library workers make decisions every day about what content appears in their libraries based on mission, collection development policies, budgets, staffing, safety, schedules, and our public education responsibility to meet community needs. These decisions are not about censorship or free speech, but about the relationship of the library to community and resources. Nonetheless, speech in libraries and use of library resources has been intentionally politicized by anti-democracy and white nationalist groups to build their power and visibility.

Our efforts to provide accurate, reliable information to the community are, understandably, undermined when white nationalists demand library platforms from which to spread ideas deeply anchored in falsehoods. Efforts to prevent white nationalist ideologies from



WHITE NATIONALISM AND ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism is a racialized form of anti-Jewish bigotry that took root in the 14th century, became a major force in European politics starting in the late 19th century, and was a primary ideological driver of the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In the contemporary United States, antisemitism is a widespread and under-discussed societal problem, leaving an opening for antisemitic conspiracy theories to become mainstream. Antisemitism does not originate with white nationalism, but is a societal problem that 21st century white nationalists have adopted as a core ideological belief. White nationalist conspiracy theories cast Jews in a role that they’ve always filled for antisemites: an absolute other, puppeteers pulling the strings of social movements that are in fact organized by Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, and a driving force behind the perceived loss of white privilege. Antisemitism is also the ideological glue of the bigoted “great replacement” conspiracy theory which

argues that people of color are replacing white people in a concerted, threatening way; white nationalists often hold that Jews are orchestrating this “replacement.”

These antisemitic conspiracy theories are used by white nationalists to explain away the historical successes of the Civil Rights Movement, the increasing rights of women and LGBTQ+ people, and the challenges mounted by organized labor, without acknowledging that Black, Indigenous and people of color, women and LGBTQ+ people, and working people are in fact just as capable of leadership and strategic organizing as white men. In this way, white nationalists exploit mainstream, contemporary misunderstandings or simplifications of antisemitism, often mobilizing potential recruits into believing that antisemitism is a manufactured issue and that antisemitic jokes are especially “edgy” fun, before introducing them to the antisemitic conspiracy theories described above.



“Our right to free speech should not be used to intimidate and scare others,” Idaho’s Republican Gov. Brad Little tweeted in December 2020. During the coronavirus pandemic, white nationalists, paramilitary members, and others claimed to be simply exercising First Amendment rights when they threatened the safety of elected officials in state capitols around the country, eventually building to the insurrection on January 6, 2021, when they attempted to overturn the results of the presidential election.

—REBECCA BOONE, “IDAHO HEALTH BOARD MEETING HALTED AFTER ‘INTENSE PROTESTS’”

garnering the legitimacy they seek by having platforms in our institutions become problematic when the library is accused of infringing on First Amendment rights.

This is what complicates “deplatforming” – a political strategy that denies access to a venue, electronic or physical. Deplatforming can make libraries vulnerable to expensive legal challenges that they might lose, which is a win-win for white nationalists deploying the free speech claim: either they get to promote their ideology publicly, or they get to drain money and resources from democratic institutions and communities that include the marginalized people they target – through legal battles. Deplatforming may also have harmful ramifications for the free speech of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, even when originally aimed at white nationalists.¹⁰

While tactics like deplatforming might be an excellent community solution, libraries should do a risk analysis of what could happen if they employ this approach officially and publicly. An analysis must be made of whether the objectionable use of resources or hosting an event is breaking any laws. The library must ask what impact deplatforming might have on the community, given the library’s local, social, legal, and financial circumstances. If it is deemed too risky, this should not stop the library from working against the messages and violence of white nationalist groups, and this toolkit is meant to support the generation of strategies that library workers and library communities can use to creatively push back.

Proactive Steps and Best Practices

Much of this toolkit is reactive; it lays out options for how to respond when the social movement of white nationalism comes to our libraries' doorsteps. But we can also anticipate potential threats from white nationalism and strengthen our libraries beforehand. What's more, white nationalism interacts with and gains support from existing structural white supremacy in libraries and other democratic institutions. Proactively addressing both white nationalism and structural white supremacy is both possible and essential.

HERE ARE SOME STEPS LIBRARIES CAN TAKE TO STRENGTHEN OUR INSTITUTIONS IN THE FACE OF THREATS FROM WHITE NATIONALISM:

- Increase visibility of symbols that embrace difference in your community, such as signage and material displays of diversity and commitment to racial and gender justice throughout your spaces.
- Design information literacy lessons and programs that address racism and hate and provide tools for analysis through information and research. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices D and F; see also Resources.*)
- Educate the community about the threat of white nationalism by hosting public programs and professional development opportunities.
- Strengthen relationships with community groups, elected officials, and other local institutions. Discuss issues libraries face with organized bigotry so that the library will have vocal political support already in place if it needs to have a strong response to white nationalist activity.
- Using a racial justice lens, review your policies related to space, meeting rooms, collection development, behavior, and protocols for dealing with disruptions. If a scenario mentioned in this toolkit were to occur, would you have administrative language and process for dealing with the issue? Is there racial or other kinds of bias in your incident statistics? Clarify your policies and responses with your staff to elevate racial justice and eliminate room for white nationalist exploitation.
- Review marketing and privacy policies to make sure that library social media accounts and bulletin boards can't be exploited by white nationalists to publicize their ideologies and events.
- Strengthen community connection and wellness by hiring wellness staff and developing relationships with mental health, social services organizations, local schools, daycares, senior centers, faith organizations, and community-liberation groups. Use these services as a basis for responding to library community member needs instead of relying solely on law enforcement. Involve community organizations in library functions, programming, and responses to threats whenever appropriate to foster and maintain local connections.
- Explore restorative justice models and de-escalation training for your library to equip staff to handle incidents safely so that police aren't your sole go-to response for disturbances.
- Take all incidents of hate and harassment seriously by setting up a bias incident reporting system for patrons and planning how to support staff if they are targeted or doxxed (i.e., their private information is intentionally

distributed publicly with negative intent). The whole staff should be involved in creating ways to document and discuss concerns when they identify patrons who may be vulnerable to recruitment or already exploring white nationalist ideology. For both patrons and staff who may be targeted (for harassment or recruitment), the library should record, investigate, and take appropriate action on every report.

➤ Engage in creative scenario planning by evaluating resources your library has to elevate artistic responses and build connections to local elected officials and leaders.

➤ Prioritize hiring practices that promote diversity. Library workers with different identities, life experiences, and skills make a stronger, smarter library.

Best Practices

Before, during, and after a library encounters white nationalism, several approaches remain vital to the wellness of a library community:

➤ Have a clearly articulated plan for responding to incidents. Identify who should be notified, timelines, where information is stored, and how to follow up. Practice this protocol as a staff so everyone feels equipped to carry it out.



WHITE NATIONALISM AND MISOGYNY, TRANSPHOBIA, AND HOMOPHOBIA

One of the central beliefs driving white nationalist movements is the supremacy of white, heterosexual, cisgender men. As explained in *Confronting Conspiracy Theories and Organized Bigotry at Home*, misogyny and male supremacy,

...are dangerous anti-democracy ideologies that have driven many instances of bigoted violence, and that frequently intersect with white nationalism and other forms of racist bigotry.... Male supremacist and misogynist ideology are also highly dependent upon a worldview that enforces a strict gender binary, meaning that adherents often organize around bigotry and aggression towards transgender and nonbinary people. (Saxman, et al.)

White nationalism is an authoritarian movement that uses bigotry to build power. In this bigoted worldview, any movement that fights for gender justice and advocates for the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people is perceived as a threat to the establishment of a white nationalist ethnostate.

One of the ways white nationalists build energy for their movement is by sowing fear and manufacturing

injustices. For example, the term “white genocide” falsely stokes an unfounded and racist fear that white people are in danger of forced extinction (often pushed via the bigoted conspiracy theory known as the great replacement). This bigotry is further exacerbated by those that stoke fears of dwindling white birth rates, enflaming homophobic, anti-feminist, and antimiscegenation beliefs.

These divisive and dangerous ideas rely on the subjugation not only of people of color but also women, transgender and nonbinary people, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Anyone who exists at the intersections of these identities is particularly vulnerable.

In the library world, we’ve seen some of the same white nationalist and paramilitary groups who stage racist events also protest programs like Drag Queen Story Hour at public libraries.

SOURCES: *Saxman, Christine, et al. [Confronting Conspiracy Theories and Organized Bigotry at Home](#). Western States Center, 2022; Manne, Kate. [Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny](#). Oxford University Press, 2017*

- Keep library users and staff central to the conversation, and trust their lived experiences.
- Focus on the values at stake, and use “we” as the default pronoun on behalf of the library community. We shouldn’t take an adversarial approach to assisting users. It’s never the library versus the communities we serve.
- When an incident does happen, avoid an alarmist tone; keep the situation as calm as possible. Always discuss how everyone involved can move forward in a way that centers our community, and follow up on conversations and concerns.
- Closely monitor the library’s social media and other online accounts to ensure harmful conversations aren’t happening in the comments sections.
- Seek holistic community approaches to conflict resolution as an alternative to involving law enforcement when possible. Ask yourself, does your institution have counselors, social workers, or healthcare professionals who can be called upon to help address a mental health issue? Can a teen’s parents or guardians be contacted to deal with a behavioral problem? Create internal resources with contact information for these outside support systems.

SCENARIO A

Anonymous Use of Hate Symbols or Speech

Symbols of inclusion such as rainbow flags in support of LGBTQ+ identities can create a sense of belonging; inversely, the presence of hateful graffiti, like Nazi swastikas or slurs, signal to many library patrons that they are not safe or welcome. Bigoted graffiti, unsanctioned flyering, and concealment of hateful materials in books are all ways in which patrons and library workers can be made to feel unsafe or threatened in libraries. These incidents can erode the psychological well-being of targeted groups, especially if left unaddressed. They can also escalate into more dangerous behavior, including recruitment efforts by white nationalist groups. As suggested in the *Confronting White Nationalism in Schools Toolkit*, a quick and clear response can prevent escalation. While anonymous use of hate symbols is not generally considered an immediate threat to the library community, it is often cited after more serious incidents as an early indicator that went unaddressed.¹¹

Examples

- Library property is vandalized with a hate group symbol or phrase, with no means to identify the culprit.
- Someone anonymously requests the removal of inclusive signage.
- Flyers that promote a white nationalist group, event, or ideology are distributed or hidden among library materials, such as in between the pages of books.
- Books or physical resources promoting racial justice are hidden to make them inaccessible.
- The neighborhood surrounding the library is flyered with signs that use Nazi iconography, confederate flags, or white nationalist signaling like “protect our heritage” or “there’s nothing wrong with being white.”

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

STAFF

- Document the incident with pictures, screenshots, and affected materials. Contact administrators to make them aware of the situation.
- If posting is happening in a virtual space, disable anonymous commenting on platforms and use other moderation tools.
- Check in with targeted individuals and groups, and provide support and care after the incident. If an individual was targeted for harm, take all cues from that

ADMINISTRATION

- Connect widely with your staff about the issue, and be transparent with the steps you are taking to reduce the harm, monitor future appearance of hate symbols in the library, and direct staff and users to helpful resources.
- If available, check security footage to identify patrons responsible for vandalism and identify an administrator who would be willing to have a conversation with that patron the next time they enter the building. If the patron pushes back about their right to believe whatever they want, make it clear that prohibition of vandalism is content-neutral.
- Prepare a clear explanation and protocol to back up signage policies (public bulletin boards, etc.) in case of incidents or challenges brought to you by staff and patrons.
- Use existing policies proactively to promote racial and gender justice. For example, if you have an anti-littering policy, make sure staff knows that this applies to immediately removing unsanctioned flyers.

COMMUNITY/USERS

- Collect evidence when safe and contact library staff and administrators directly to make reports and express concern.
- Attend meetings that are open to community members to express concerns and hold library administrators accountable to diversity and equity statements

person about how to support them.

- Use counterprogramming to show the library's values. Plan programming that honors the history and contributions of marginalized groups and supports racial and gender justice.
- Use the staff's research skills to find out more about the groups promoting these symbols and speech. Communicate what you find out to the wider community. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices A and B.*)

- If you have a behavior/conduct policy, explore adding language regarding hate conduct. (See *Examples for Action, Appendix C.*)

- Implement a confidential or anonymous online reporting system as a way for users and staff to make your team aware of situations like this, and as a way to archive the incidents.
- Open a community-wide conversation to get information and ask questions.
- If your library is in a school or campus, elevate signs of bigotry to a campus Bias Incident Response Team or Diversity Equity Inclusion Council for more discussion. These teams can put the pressure on upper administration to speak out for values of equity, condemn white nationalism, and take action to stop bigotry from undermining the accessibility of the library to all users. The campus Diversity Council should be notified to prepare programming to address racial and gender justice.

that they make.

- Suggest counter-programming to library leadership and library board to center values of justice in the library.
- Help organize community support for libraries that take a stand against white nationalism.

SUCCESS STORY

Due to heightened reports of identity-based hate vandalism on campus, a university implemented a campus-wide Bias Incident Report form. This anonymous form can be filled out by anybody, and when an incident is reported a designated team across campus will respond, including with the immediate removal of vandalism. The form also notifies a Campus Safety Team, and if the reporter would like a response, the team will contact and work directly with the person. This form is not directly connected to any police involvement, and its main benefit is to track hate incidents because we can't effectively tackle the issue if we don't know its scale and impact.¹²

What Not to Do

➤ Don't ignore the incident or dismiss concerns. Do not treat bigoted vandalism as a one-time isolated

occurrence. Ignoring or downplaying the event signals to white nationalists that there is an opportunity to escalate and to the affected communities that they are not being cared for and protected.

➤ Do not delegate the entire response to law enforcement. This misses an opportunity to express values-based and community-centered condemnation of white nationalism. It can also work against goals of inclusion by making the library less safe for staff or community members who have experienced violence from police.

➤ Don't overreact. Punishing the community of users and staff as a whole or fixating on identifying the perpetrator(s) may shut down dialogue and render stakeholders reluctant to come forward with future concerns.



WHAT ABOUT POLICING?

We talk in this toolkit about ways of building safety through community restoration and relationships rather than through a reliance on policing. By policing we mean institutionalized efforts to surveil and intimidate marginalized communities with the disproportionate threat and actual use of force. This can take the form of law enforcement, private security, military, armed paramilitaries or vigilantes, and policies that criminalize some behaviors in order to maintain a sense of safety for a status quo rooted in oppression.

This is important to us for two reasons:

➤ There is significant evidence that white nationalist groups have been targeting police for recruitment for many years, and their numbers among police have been the subject of nation-wide federal investigation twice in the last 15 years. Also important to note is that white nationalist and other authoritarian movements have relied on pro-police messaging despite being responsible for increasing

numbers of attacks on law enforcement personnel in recent years.

➤ Even without an explicit white nationalist presence, many policing efforts in and out of libraries have — whether through unconscious bias or not — served white nationalist ends by disproportionately targeting the same groups that white nationalists are looking to control. This provides an opportunity to explore creative alternatives to policing in our own spaces, so that libraries do not become unconsciously complicit in the violence and repression of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.

SOURCES: *Speri, Alice. "FBI has Quietly Investigated White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement." The Intercept, 31 January 2017; "Extremist Related Shootouts with Police Soar in 2020." Anti-Defamation League, 2 February 2020; "Fatal Force: Police Shootings Database, 2015-2021." Washington Post, 24 February 2021.*

SCENARIO B

Invocation of White Nationalist Ideology

The rhetoric of white nationalist ideology has reached mainstream public discourse to the extent that students and library visitors sometimes use these ideas in assignments and discussions without even knowing the origin of what they are saying.

Teaching information literacy can be a powerful antidote in these situations. (See “*Information and Media Literacy*” resources and *Examples for Action, Appendices D and F.*) Informed information seeking, alongside source evaluation grounded in critical thinking, can help community members recognize manipulative disinformation sources for what they are, and equip themselves with credible and verifiable information in its place. In cases where the information environment is being intentionally manipulated, having robust, well-articulated standards for research and information can help you hold a boundary against hate and misinformation.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

STAFF

- Collaborate with coworkers to set policies and procedures that establish community standards of reliability and accuracy for cited materials. Use those standards when working at a reference desk.
- Plan programming that helps library users understand the spread of hateful misinformation and racist, sexist, transphobic, and homophobic ideology through sources that masquerade as legitimate. For example: an assignment and lesson about racist misinformation, a game to identify trustworthy online sources, or a handout about misinformation and disinformation.

Examples

- A patron requests sources to support anti-democracy ideology in a paper they’re writing.
- Patrons challenge collection items, objecting to texts that include feminist, queer, or critical race theory topics, because they think the texts are “biased.”
- A library patron is having a loud conversation either with staff or another patron that promotes white nationalist ideology.
- A young person in your library class session makes anti-immigrant arguments.
- Students are promoting white nationalist podcasts, YouTubers, or websites promoting disinformation through learning management systems.

(See “*Information and Media Literacy*” resources and *Examples for Action, Appendices D and F.*)

- Hold boundaries in discussion with library users and coworkers by naming the source of the ideology being espoused and using research and examples to back up your explanation. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices A and B.*)
- As incidents occur, make administrators aware of your concerns and provide documentation. (See *Examples for Action, Appendix E.*)

- Build relationships with other departments, support staff in the library, or city workers to address incidents of white nationalist ideology being espoused to plan

responses that reach beyond the library (like public statements from officials, information or educational campaigns, etc.).

ADMINISTRATION

- As appropriate, meet with users who cited or promoted this material to gain more information. Understanding your library community will help you to create informed responses.
- Ensure that your collections policy describes the standards used to select materials; this will provide some protection against challenges to individual resources.
- If your collections policy states that library boards or other authorities are required to hear resident objections to materials, ensure it also states they are not required to act if they find no reasonable basis for the objection.
- Offer professional development to make sure all staff are comfortable with using racial justice frameworks in their teaching and on the reference desk.
- Validate the concern and listen deeply to any library

worker who is facing white nationalist ideology from a patron or student. Help the library worker brainstorm and practice ways to turn the conversation around in the classroom and on the public service desk. Reassert that if library staff members feel uncomfortable, they can immediately reach an administrator to help discuss the issue at hand with the library user.

- If promotion of white nationalist ideology becomes a common occurrence, inform the Bias Incident Response Team, Diversity Equity Inclusion Council, or any other support teams to plan a more systemic response.
- Reach out to local elected officials and community leaders to share what you are seeing. Proactively build support to address the issue, and ask them to speak out publicly as needed.

COMMUNITY

- Advocate for increasing full-time library staff who teach research skills, and request sessions in your library on the subject of credible sources and misinformation.

- Consider seeking election or joining advisory boards or panels that help make decisions about budgets, collection policies, and goals.

SUCCESS STORY

After a semester when a professor received several assignments in her composition class with white nationalist messages and disinformation, the professor worked with the librarian to create a library session on news literacy. The lesson helped students distinguish between the definition and connotation of words and phrases, facts and opinion, and to identify the sources of quotations in news stories. Students were then able to assess sources for the use of emotional language, the variety of the stories' sources, and their factual value. The ability of students to identify bias measurably increased after the

lessons, and the professor was able to address any troubling student sources using this shared classroom framework. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices D and F.*)

What Not to Do

- Don't treat all sources as equal; they're not. Validating white nationalism is not the same as valuing diverse viewpoints. Rather, it concedes credibility to rhetoric that demeans members of our communities.
- Don't allow for false equivalencies; opinions and research are not the same and should not be treated as such.

➤ Don't ignore the incidents or take a neutral stance. As research experts, we should take every opportunity to help users understand their information environment and become skilled researchers. Addressing hateful

misinformation from this perspective does not contradict free speech, and is consistent with our charge as professionals upholding educational institutions.

SCENARIO C

White Nationalist Iconography and Group Identifiers

Overt expressions of white nationalist ideology or identification — like t-shirts, tattoos, bumper stickers, or hats — reflect an urgent problem. Patrons openly displaying their allegiance to white nationalist beliefs or groups feel some combination of frustration and alienation, along with the confidence to reveal their stance to the community. Often, these large and blatant symbols suggest a more confrontational approach to promoting white nationalism, making spaces uncomfortable and hostility palpable for targeted patrons and library workers.

These identifiers are constantly changing and so is their usage. For instance, the incorporation of white nationalist identifiers into required face coverings during the pandemic reflects increased visibility that seeks to

grab attention, unsettle others, and recruit more members. If left unaddressed, this can have the effect of undermining libraries' core mission of providing services to the entire community.

Examples

- Patrons or students displaying white nationalist symbols or slogans overtly through clothing, tattoos, hats, or masks worn during the coronavirus pandemic.
- Patrons distributing white nationalist materials openly, including buttons, stickers, pamphlets, or other visual representations to the library community.
- Patrons using white nationalist phrases or images as avatars or group names in online community forums.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

STAFF

- Document the incident with evidence, if possible and safe to do so, and share with other staff and administrators.
- Research the threat of the ideology being promoted as well as evidence of the dangers these groups

pose to the library or community at large; share this research with coworkers and administrators.

- If the patron is a regular and you have a relationship that makes this option safe, share your concerns with them and ask questions. Consider having this conversation in

a place or at a time where other patrons won't overhear what you're saying; this is more of a call-in approach rather than a public call-out. This is an especially useful tactic if you work with teens or children, who might be testing out different identities as they mature.

- Increase the visibility of symbols of diversity in your library, including pride flags and culturally affirming posters. However, don't rely on this as your only strategy; it needs to be paired with programming, policies, staff training, and other material actions that support patrons and staff from targeted groups in order to be effective.

ADMINISTRATION

- Gather evidence of the nature and threat of the ideology being promoted to present evidence for any community or board meetings that may arise in response. Publish a statement drawing a line against bigotry and anti-democracy groups. Reach out to state and local officials to do the same.
- Reach out to civil rights and community organizations, locally or nationally, for resources, suggestions, or protection.
- Examine your institution's policies. Do these activities fall under any existing library policies? Can they

be considered disruptive to the work of the library? If such policies don't exist to cover these contingencies, start the process to create them. (*See Examples for Action, Appendix C.*)

- In the case of children and teenagers, talk to their teacher or counselor to gain context for why the student is displaying these symbols now, and consider voicing concern to their parents. By informing a larger group of folks, brainstorming an intervention will be more feasible.

COMMUNITY

- Connect the library's efforts to other community organizations you belong to, like neighborhood or faith-based groups, and collaborate to confront the issue and brainstorm community-based solutions.

- If you feel the library staff isn't confronting or working on the problem, voice your concerns. Formal patron suggestions (written or submitted online) are often seen by administrators.

SUCCESS STORY

In response to two organized white nationalist groups called Patriot Prayer and Atomwaffen distributing flyers across campus saying "It's ok to be white" and "the race war is coming," a group of library workers created a prominent Black Lives Matter display at the entrance of the library. Accompanying the display were events about Afrofuturism and information literacy lessons about the role of research in contemporary movements for racial justice.

What Not to Do

Don't settle for a solely punitive response. While legitimately invoking policies that forbid the presence of hate symbols and rhetoric in the library removes the visible

indicator, it doesn't resolve the conditions that brought these elements into the library. Continue to seek and facilitate dialogue with patrons, staff members, wellness staff, and administrators to understand how this ideology gained currency in your community and what each stakeholder can do to address the problem.

SCENARIO D

Evidence of White Nationalist Groups Organizing

The public spaces of libraries, schools and campuses are popular places for white nationalist groups to recruit new members, hold events, distribute materials and increase visibility. These are often touted as free speech events while having visible indicators of white nationalist allegiances among members. If these events become frequent and disruptive, they can lead to libraries, and even whole campuses, being shut down while the events occur. This activity disrupts and destabilizes local communities, creating unrest and limiting important services.

Examples

➤ Anti-democracy groups and speakers with subtle or outright white nationalist messages are allowed to

hold events on a college campus, because the campus is a free speech zone.

➤ At a white nationalist rally outside of a college library, the police show up and arrest counter-protesters, while making a safety barricade around the white nationalists. This creates a situation in which many patrons are unable to safely access the library.

➤ An anti-democracy group requests to set up an information table in the library's common area.

➤ Members of white nationalist and anti-democracy organizations approach patrons in library spaces in an attempt to recruit.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

STAFF

- Document evidence of events and recruitment efforts, and share with fellow staff and administrators.
- Research these groups to clarify what they are advocating for and if they present a threat to members of the community. Use this research to educate students, patrons, colleagues, and administrators so that everyone is equipped with an accurate understanding of groups that often obscure their true purpose. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices A and B.*)
- Develop talking points to decode these groups for patrons, fellow staff, and administrators who might not understand the seriousness of the threat.

- Be aware of existing library policies and mission statements that can be used to promote pro-democracy values. Proactively review library policies to establish behavior guidelines that prohibit hateful or intimidating behavior, so staff can intervene when these groups cross a line. Policies might include prohibition of soliciting of any kind, unauthorized tabling in common areas, or religious or political promotion in public libraries. All tabling and events requests should be reviewed by library staff and adhere to values focused on ensuring the library is accessible for all users, including those who may be intimidated by white nationalist activity. (See *Examples for Action, Appendix C.*)

ADMINISTRATION

- Acknowledge the concerns of any staff or community members who have brought this to your attention.
- Proactively review your conduct policies with staff to clarify how they can intervene in white nationalist recruitment activities that interfere with the library's work or patrons' enjoyment of the library. Provide time and space for staff to practice their responses based on those policies, including rehearsing specific phrases and what to do if the situation escalates. Acknowledge that not every worker is equally safe in these interactions, depending upon their identity.

COMMUNITY

- Communicate with library staff and administrators how organized white nationalists in your library affect you and your community. Write letters, make phone calls, and attend library board meetings to voice your opinion.
- Work with the library to create flyers or fact sheets you can distribute to raise awareness about specific bigoted and anti-democracy groups operating in your community.

SUCCESS STORY

In response to Patriot Prayer hosting numerous events at a local university campus, librarians created a Patriot Prayer Fact Sheet that was distributed across campus before, during, and after the event. This fact sheet included information on common defenses of white nationalism and what they actually mean. (See *Examples for Action, Appendix A.*)

After observing the state-wide uptick in book review requests and challenges, San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg and San Antonio Public Library Director Ramiro S. Salazar launched a campaign affirming the city's commitment to "Freedom to Read." In a statement, Nirenberg said, "We want to make it completely clear that the City of San Antonio combats censorship in all its forms and fully supports complete access to information within our public library system."¹³

- Reach out to civil rights organizations and larger city or institutional administrators. Explain the concern for user safety created by white nationalist activity. Frame the concerns in the context of shared community values and the core goals of the library. Ask for their outspoken support in ensuring the library can continue to robustly fulfill its mission.
- Make a public statement clarifying and denouncing the ideologies of groups that are organizing in and around the library.

- Go beyond your library and reach out to local leadership officials to take a public stand against white nationalist organizing. Explain that white nationalists pose a threat to the safety and wellbeing of their constituents and reflect poorly on the official's ability to maintain community safety in the very place they govern.

What Not to Do

- Don't let white nationalist groups frame the conversation. Stay focused on the values and needs of your community. White nationalist groups will co-opt language about free speech and cultural identity to steer the dialogue away from the hateful nature of who they are and what they do.
- Don't ignore the needs of the community as a whole. At this level, a community may experience bystander trauma among patrons, staff, and students encountering these recruitment efforts, and the visibility of white nationalist groups in the area may introduce additional complications outside of the library. Keep wellness staff engaged and responsive, check in with patrons and staff, and reach out to the community.
- Avoid shutting down the library or vital resources to the community because of white nationalist recruitment

activities. This sends a message to white nationalist groups that you will not hold a boundary against them, and a message to users that it is not a safe space for them.

➤ Consider the patrons in the area before calling the police. Presence of uniformed security or police can be

unsafe for people who are already regular targets of police violence. Are there other responses that are more community-oriented?

SCENARIO E

Meeting Room Bookings to Organize or Antagonize

As an organizing strategy to disrupt public space, white nationalist groups have booked library rooms to host their meetings and controversial events. This creates hostile environments in libraries — sometimes to the point of armed conflict. Many libraries are not able to deny the use of their meeting rooms to hate groups based on their policies. Others can't afford to battle or lose a lawsuit should a patron claim the denial infringes on their freedom of speech or intellectual freedom. Some libraries have done the risk analysis and decided to explicitly change their policy language in service of safety for targeted patrons and staff. Because Canada has stronger hate crime laws that include hate speech, Toronto Public Library Board banned hate groups from booking space at city libraries in their usage code in 2019.¹⁴

The U.S. does not have similar legal prohibitions on hate speech, and requests from white nationalist groups to use library facilities can pose ethical dilemmas for library staff. For example, in 2018, the American Library Association (ALA) considered adopting changes to their interpretation of Article VI of the Library Bill of Rights¹⁵ to explicitly state that hate groups had the right to access library meeting space.

The new interpretation of Article VI appeared to many ALA members as an open invitation to violence-prone groups to organize in libraries. An outpouring of protest prompted ALA Council to revise the wording, but the use of library space remains a source of concern.¹⁶ To support ongoing conversations, the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom and Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services issued a guide called "[Hateful Conduct in Libraries: Supporting Library Workers and Patrons](#)" as an additional resource.

Safety and inclusion rely on proactive efforts to safeguard library spaces in the interests of marginalized communities. So, despite legal constraints to the outright exclusion of hate groups, libraries can think broadly about other ways to create safety when their space is being used by dangerous white nationalist groups.

Examples

➤ An "immigration reform group" requests to use a meeting room. A community member presents research to the library that the group has ties to white nationalists, but the group's request doesn't violate any library policies.

➤ An anti-trans group requests the use of a meeting room to organize and strategize future events and recruitment. The Proud Boys have volunteered to provide informal security for the event, and local white nationalist groups are promoting attendance.

➤ A student group meets weekly in the library. It becomes evident they are establishing a white pride group.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

STAFF

- Get to know users of the library. The more you know about who is organizing with these groups and booking rooms — and which patron groups and staff that is likely to affect — the better equipped you will be as a staff to stay safe and alert.
- Familiarize yourself with your policies and be ready to take action if a group crosses the line into a conduct violation. The ALA makes it clear that hate speech stops being just speech and becomes conduct when it targets a particular individual and includes behavior that interferes with a patron's ability to use the library.¹⁷ Make sure this distinction is made clear in your policies.
- Even if hate groups hold their meetings in your library, it doesn't have to be a hospitable space for their ideas. Counter-organize by:
 - Using your collection to create displays near the booked rooms that highlight the

accomplishments and history of marginalized groups.

- Providing space and resources for community organizations that elevate the concerns of marginalized groups. Find money in the library budget to support those events.

- Providing educational resources, such as flyers or programs, that deconstruct and explain the systemic oppression targeted groups experience. These resources can be passed out before, during, and after the room bookings to any patrons who might see or hear about the hate groups.

- Work within your library to develop racially just and anti-oppressive values and public statements. Don't stop at diversity. Push toward clear, racially just positions that the whole staff understands and upholds.

ADMINISTRATION

- Proactively review your meeting room policies right now, even if you haven't faced this issue yet. Ask yourself: Can you prohibit usage if a white nationalist organization booked a space in your library?
- Perform a risk analysis about whether changes to your policy might have unintended consequences for marginalized groups or could leave you open to costly legal challenges.
- Consider proactive revisions to policies to increase safety for users and staff of color and that align with the library's mission and goals. Citing the library's mission may be straightforward if it addresses

accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and equity, but make the connection explicit if it does not.

• Use multiple communication channels, like open board meetings and outreach, to hear from users who are impacted and targeted most by the organizations using the meeting room spaces. Through this process, find out what you can do to ally the library with marginalized users.

• Show actionable responses that align with what impacted users are asking for. For example, take the opportunity to publicly dedicate resources or programming time to issues that the impacted group

needs or cares about. Partner with local civil rights organizations to develop ideas and campaigns that will benefit the targeted group.

- Use your free speech to speak out publicly about the danger of white nationalist groups, even if you have to allow them to meet in your library. Recruit public officials like city council members or the local mayor to

speak out against these kinds of groups and in support of the library.

- If you can't prevent a booking, speak with your employees about when these groups will be present in the library and offer rescheduling options to vulnerable library workers whose physical and emotional safety are threatened by their presence.

COMMUNITY

- Organize and show up in support of the group that is being targeted and denounce the bigoted group that is using the library's resources. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices A and B.*) Community members can often go further in their resistance than state employees of the library can in their professional capacity. They might, for instance, organize a fundraiser for a racial justice education program in the library system, in which community members donate \$1 per minute that a white nationalist event occurs in the library.

- Book the meeting rooms for affirming events that promote the voices, needs, and accomplishments of

marginalized groups in your community. This is a positive community-building step that uses the library's resources to build power for those who are threatened.

- Partner with local organizations and businesses to raise money and awareness in response to white nationalist organizing in the library's space. For instance, you might convince local businesses to donate money to a civil rights organization for every white nationalist that shows up to a local rally or meeting. That way, their organizing becomes a *de facto* fundraiser for the group that they intend to harm.

SUCCESS STORIES

➤ In response to a memorial event around a white nationalist organizer being held in a public meeting room, Toronto Public Library Board changed their meeting use policy. Under the changes approved by the board, library staff will be able to deny or cancel bookings when the library reasonably believes the purpose of the booking is likely to promote, or have the effect of promoting, discrimination, contempt, or hatred of any group. Under this policy, the Women's Liberation Front (WoLF), an anti-transgender group, was denied ability to use the facilities. The board added that while the public library supports free speech, that support "does not translate into tolerance for hate speech."

➤ When a white nationalist group booked a public library meeting room for their public event, a group of community activists used the opportunity to fundraise for Black Lives Matter organizations in their community. The organizers got commitments from a number of

businesses around the library to donate all of their proceeds from the time period that the event was occurring. Protestors got friends and family to make a donation for every person who entered the white nationalist event — so the more people who showed up for the racist event, the more money was raised for Black Lives Matter. After the event was over, racial justice organizers held a press conference to show how much money they raised during the event, and committed to doing the same every time a hate group used the library for a public event.

What Not to Do

➤ Do not remain neutral when a hate group attempts to infiltrate the library. There are many legal and social challenges to barring certain groups, ideologies, and individuals from using public spaces, and those challenges can seem daunting. However, there are many

ways to resist depending on the level of risk your administration is willing to take. Just because this fight is challenging doesn't mean you're powerless to make it more difficult or less desirable for bigoted groups to use your library's resources.

➤ Do not make false equivalencies to justify serving hate groups. Some library workers argue that we are obligated to value a diversity of thoughts, opinions, and

positions and that limiting access to hate groups is a "slippery slope." While this is a real danger that should be acknowledged through a risk analysis of policies and practices, we shouldn't conflate resisting bigoted anti-democracy groups with systemic discrimination of marginalized people. We serve the underserved.

SCENARIO F

Protest of Programs that Promote Inclusion

Homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and anti-abortion positions are often used by white nationalist and other bigoted and anti-democracy groups to attract new members and build political power. Libraries around the country have seen an increase in frequency and intensity of protests of popular programs that celebrate or recognize marginalized identities, like drag story hour and teen pride events, by white nationalist-affiliated groups. While opposition to these types of programs isn't new, the threat of violence from bigoted and anti-democracy groups has significantly increased in recent years. Patrons and library workers need help researching these activities to fully understand who is involved and how to respond.

Examples

➤ A group shows up at drag story hour and intimidates patrons and staff by taking pictures of children on their way into the event, recording the license plates of patrons in attendance, and disrupting the event inside the library.

➤ A coalition of anti-democracy organizers petitions the library system to cancel Pride Month programs, fills up public comment periods at a library board meeting, and falsely claims that these programs pervert children or are "grooming" opportunities for predators.

➤ In response to a library photo exhibit highlighting Black student experiences on a college campus, the College Republicans repeatedly call and petition the library to take down the photos, even physically blocking the photos from view of other students.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

STAFF

- Conduct research on the groups and individuals that are protesting the programming. Sometimes otherwise innocuous sounding groups have been infiltrated by extremists or allied themselves with racist and sexist paramilitary groups like the Proud Boys. It is important to know who you are dealing with and their organizing and communications strategies. (See *Examples for Action, Appendices A and B.*)
- Share your research with colleagues and administrators. These protests have been known to get very intrusive. In one instance, a group protesting drag story hour overwhelmed the phone lines so that staff were occupied and protestors could rush the building

ADMINISTRATION

- Designate ample staff time for researching your community, including groups that support and protest programming.
- Speak up about the value of diverse programming for the health of the community. Vocalize publicly that pressure from bigoted groups won't prevent the library from supporting its community.
- If staff report concerns or threats, take them seriously and collect evidence about the nature and threat of the ideology being espoused, especially for any community meetings that may arise in response.
- Work with staff to create safety plans in case protests intensify. Include both physical and emotional safety in this discussion, since individual library

COMMUNITY/USERS

- Attend library board, city, and county council meetings, and speak about the importance of inclusive programming. This will counteract negative pressure that these entities may be receiving from anti-democracy groups.
- Show up in support of this programming. Attend the events, but also consider planning a positive event at a safe distance if the bigoted group is rallying outside of your local library. Think through a plan to

and disrupt the event. The full library staff should be on the same page about how to respond in situations like this.

- Solicit feedback from the community about why inclusive programming is so important. This will give you evidence to defend and build community around the program if it gets formally challenged.
- Attend library board meetings to describe the success of this programming and what it means to the community. This can counteract the negative pressure the board may be getting from anti-democracy groups.

workers may be targeted by the nature of the protest depending on their identities. Include in the discussion plans to keep library workers safe if they are personally targeted or even doxxed (i.e., private information revealed publicly as a means of intimidation).

- Contact external groups for support and expertise regarding safety planning and digital security, such as Western States Center and Equality Labs.
- Make it clear to staff and patrons that disrupting library sanctioned events is a violation of library policy and will be treated with escalating action on the part of the library. Make sure it is clear to library staff what the steps of escalating action entail.

provide safety for patrons who wish to attend the event but are afraid of being singled out.

- Ask public figures to speak out clearly in favor of the events that are being challenged and against hate groups and the positions they represent. Support them visibly when they do. The voices of library leadership, the city council, mayors, and other public leaders carry weight in communicating that a community draws a hard line against hate.

SUCCESS STORY

A group of library workers learned of a protest against Drag Queen Story Hour, which intimidated patrons and staff when protesters took photos of children on their way into the event, recorded the license plates of patrons in attendance, and disrupted the event inside the library. The library workers (who were not employees of the library system experiencing the threat) later attended a board meeting to support Drag Queen Story Hour and give testimony. The white nationalist groups took up the majority of the comment period, and were identified as known organizers for local white nationalist groups, making explicit ties between anti-trans and white nationalist groups. The ultimate result of the library workers participation in this board meeting was to raise consciousness among the regional group of library workers for racial justice, allowing the group to be more proactive in organizing against white nationalist groups in the area. Drag Queen Story Hour continues as a successful event at this library.

What Not to Do

- Don't let white nationalist and extremist groups frame the conversation. Stay focused on the values of your community and the needs of your patrons. Extremist groups will co-opt language about the safety of children and teens to steer the conversation away from the hateful nature of who they are and what they do.
- Don't underestimate the organization of anti-democracy groups. Libraries have been caught off guard by how sophisticated these pressure campaigns can be. These groups seek to build power based on spreading bigotry, and they organize strategically (activating their base, crafting talking points, showing up early with signs and t-shirts) toward their goals. You will have to be at least as organized as they are.
- Don't rely on police or armed security as your only option for managing a situation. Involving police can have a chilling effect on patrons and students of color, and may make those you want to protect feel unsafe. Plan ahead for community responses.
- Don't overreact. Punishing the community of users and staff as a whole or fixating on identifying the perpetrator(s) may shut down dialogue and render stakeholders reluctant to come forward with future concerns.

Five Common Defenses of White Nationalist Ideology

Below are some common arguments made to defend white nationalist ideology or other bigoted and anti-democracy views. When you hear these, you will have to decide, based on the speaker and the context, whether it is worth responding. Sometimes the best response is to build power in your community toward racial justice rather than wasting energy arguing with someone who has bigoted views. At other times, you will hear one of these ideas from a patron or student who may not understand the ideology that underlies their statement, and it is worth talking to them about how to use research to understand what is behind their statement. Alternately, if someone shares bigoted views in a public setting, you may feel obligated to respond so that your silence is not taken as agreement by others who hear those statements. We include these to help you clarify what you are hearing and how to respond if it is appropriate.

ONE: "IT'S ABOUT PRIDE, NOT PREJUDICE."

This argument is often invoked when white nationalist efforts are identified as hostile and discriminatory, sometimes going as far as equating "white pride" with Latinx pride or Pride Month in support of LGBTQ+ communities. This is a false equivalence. Historically marginalized groups gather to celebrate as a way to stand against long histories of discrimination and violence against them; white nationalists attempt to justify their organizing by claiming the same. The truth is that hateful rhetoric is never far from assertions of "white pride."

TWO: "THIS IS A FREE SPEECH ISSUE."

Access to speak freely and safely should be a right for all. The bigoted, hateful, and threatening speech of white nationalists can chill the speech of community

members who belong to the groups they target. Free speech rights protect against persecution by the government, but not from social, economic, or institutional consequences. These rights are also not absolute: shouting "fire" in a crowded theater is not protected speech, for instance. Such rights may also vary in different types of libraries. For instance, white nationalist rhetoric is not protected speech in schools (and school libraries). A range of legally upheld policies support the rights of schools to keep bigoted language out.¹⁸

THREE: "THIS IS ALL JUST POLITICAL CORRECTNESS BY SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIORS."

Political correctness and *social justice warriors* are two terms that have been co-opted and redirected by anti-democracy figures. Challenge those who mock terms like these in defense of bigotry to replace the first with "basic respect for others" and the second with "people

who are against racism.” The term “antifa” is also sometimes used to attack those who speak out in support of democracy. Instead, try replacing the term with “people who support inclusive democracy instead of fascism.”

FOUR: “WHAT ABOUT REVERSE RACISM/RACISM AGAINST WHITE PEOPLE?”

Claims of reverse racism fly in the face of data that demonstrates systemic advantages for white people in access to education, economic opportunity, the application of criminal justice, and life expectancy. While members of any group may commit acts of bias against any

other, these acts do not add up to systemic, historically-rooted racism (also called institutional racism or white supremacy) that disproportionately produces negative outcomes for people of color.

FIVE: “RACISM IS OVER.”

Unfortunately, it’s not. Recent years have seen sharp increases in hate crimes against marginalized groups, including racial, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as immigrants and members of LGBTQ+ communities. We have work to do together, and we need to listen to one another’s experiences instead of denying reality.

Conclusion

“**America is on a precipice. Whether we go over the edge into the abyss of a full-blown authoritarian state or find firm ground on which to construct an inclusive democracy depends on what we do right now. We need to be clear: Every word and every action has consequence.**”

— ERIC K. WARD ¹⁹

Bigoted and anti-democracy groups are increasingly targeting libraries and schools with book bans and protests of inclusive programming. This builds on the gains that these groups made by exploiting the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic.

With the shutdown of libraries across the country in an attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19, white nationalists adjusted their organizing and agitation tactics to a new set of conditions. Deprived of library meetings rooms, university auditoriums, school classrooms, and indoor public spaces as amplifiers for their messages, they turned to online meetings, social media, the steps of state capitol buildings, and to the wave of Black Lives Matter protests triggered by the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020. They were egged on by then-President Trump who, infamously, invited the Proud Boys to “stand back, and stand by” during the first presidential debate with Joe Biden. Then, with Trump’s refusal to accept defeat in the 2020 election and his dogged attempts to force the courts to overturn election results, he continued to feed the flames of white nationalism among his supporters, resulting in violence and the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

White nationalist, paramilitary, and other anti-democracy groups continue to adjust their tactics. However, they show no signs of abandoning their support for authoritarianism and use of threats, intimidation, and violence to promote their agendas.

As workers in some of the few remaining trusted

community institutions, this means that library workers must immediately take up our responsibility toward racial and gender justice and against white nationalism in every way we can.

To promote the mission of libraries as inclusive spaces of learning for our communities, we must:

- Counter systemic racism within our institutions.
- Reject bigotry, especially when it masquerades as free speech.
- Support every member of our community who is targeted, directly or indirectly, by white nationalists.
- Serve as reliable sources of information as our communities grapple with the essential task of cultural transformation.
- Reveal and counter white nationalist strategies to expand their political movements and to normalize authoritarian practices into mainstream politics.
- Continue (or begin) the personal work each of us must do, as members of society rooted in white supremacist ideology, to become capable, competent, compassionate actors in the fight for racial justice.

Many of the scenarios and strategies in this toolkit are reactive. They help us think about how to respond to a specific white nationalist threat once we’ve become aware of it. But, in the urgency of responding to threatening situations, we cannot lose sight of the everyday racial justice work that is our community’s best defense. In fact, we should proactively look for those opportunities as part of the important work that will strengthen us

against attack while we further our goals of racially just libraries. As adrienne marie brown says, “We move at the speed of trust, and building trust takes time.”²⁰ There is no better time than now to begin that work.

Finally, *Confronting White Nationalism in Libraries* has been a collaborative effort between academic, public, and school librarians. As such, it represents our collective strengths and shortcomings, and, like all tools,

these will be revealed as it is used. Critiques, suggestions, additional scenarios from readers are encouraged and welcomed. Please contact Western States Center (info@wscpd.org) with your comments and concerns. Our hope is that this toolkit will evolve as our communities and librarianship continue working toward a more inclusive, equitable, and just world.

Examples for Action

Below are six examples demonstrating the type of actions library workers are particularly well-positioned to take to inform our communities of white nationalist organizing and how to counter it. These are not Western States Center work products and do not necessarily represent Western States Center views, but were created by librarians organizing on a volunteer basis over the past three years. The organizers have kindly given permission to share these documents, which are not intended for direct use, but as inspiration for the types of activities that are possible.

Understanding Patriot Prayer (A Research Guide)

A community library worker saw students at a public university listening to representatives of Patriot Prayer at an outdoor gathering. Frustrated that she could verbally counter the claims Patriot Prayer was making with only a very few students, she created this flyer, organized other library workers, and flyered the campus in advance of the next Patriot Prayer event. The flyer appeared on social media prior to the event. (For full text, see [Appendix A.](#))

Understanding WoLF (A Research Guide)

Regional library workers supported community resistance against this exclusionary event held at a local public library. They distributed this handout they had created at a protest outside the event. (For full text, see [Appendix B.](#))

Addition to the Behavior & Conduct Policy (Hate Conduct)

This is an anti-hate policy that is in the process of being adapted for a community college library as part of its overall behavioral policy. Having a policy written up and communicable to library users can enhance library workers' ability to immediately address incidents of oppression. (For full text, see [Appendix C.](#))

Lesson Plan on News Literacy

This lesson is used in a community college research writing class, but can be adapted for other contexts. Through close reading and critical questioning, students will be able to detect political influence and bias in news sources through the language that is used, characterization of participants in the news event, and facts that are included or excluded. While this can be used generally as a lesson for evaluative techniques and news literacy, it can also be used to help students understand dog-whistles, anti-democracy rhetoric, and ultra-right influence on mainstream news media. (For full text, see [Appendix D.](#))

Understanding WoLF (A Follow-Up Letter)

Addressing the same event as the WoLF Research Flyer, a group of library workers attended a series of library board meetings to continue holding the library accountable to community demands for greater support for trans community members. (For full text, see [Appendix E.](#))

Teach Your Students How to Tell Fact From Fiction Online

This flyer announces the availability of an online curriculum designed to help students develop critical thinking and research skills in a climate of mis- and disinformation. The curriculum was designed by teachers and librarians affiliated with the group Teachers for an Informed Public. (For full text, see [Appendix F.](#))

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