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Clashing Ideologies, Disrupting Services:  
Implications of the Library as a Public Meeting Space

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**\*The names of actual people have been changed for the purposes of this case study. Please do not share this case study outside of LIBR 204.**

**Introduction:**

A public library's management team faces the problem of how to handle controversial group meetings on its premises after an incident in which the library was closed to the public for the day while police protected a white supremacist group from protestors. The white supremacist group in particular has an alarming track record of throwing library property and bringing weapons to other libraries where meetings have been held. Management must find a solution that does not impose on freedom of expression but also allows for a safe environment for controversial groups and other patrons who use the library.

**Background:**

The Williams Public Library, located in Massachusetts, was established as Williams' first public library in the 1850s. The library building itself has changed locations and experienced additions and renovations with the support of the town several times during its history to facilitate growth, but the institution itself has been a fixture of the town for over a century.

According to the library's website, the Williams Public library serves "as an education and cultural center and as a meeting place." The library has won numerous publicity citations, and it has also been a forerunner in a number of services and programs. In the 1980s, Williams became one of the founding members of the state's first automated library system. It was also the first library in the state to sponsor a town-wide reading program. The staff is also "active on state and regional library committees and prides itself on excellent public service."

The town of Williams is a quintessential New England town, and one that is proud of its history, long-standing community, and quality of life. It is a town filled with families with a focus on community involvement, education, and outdoor recreation (Town, 2009). Its residents are primarily middle to upper-middle class and almost half of the work force resides in professional, management or other similar positions. The population's ancestry derives mostly from Irish, Italian, English and other European countries, and a large segment of the current community has lived in Williams or nearby areas their entire lives. Still, the area is within a short distance from the larger, metropolitan area of Boston, and indeed, nearly half the working force commutes nearly 30 minutes to Boston and surrounding areas for their employment (US Census Bureau, 2000).

**The Case:**

In the summer of 2002, the Williams Public Library accepted a booking in one of its three lecture rooms from a group calling itself the Emigration Party. The booking, at the time, didn't garner much notice; the library's meeting rooms averaged 800 bookings a year from all different types of groups (Sardella, 2003), and the individual who booked the room filled out all the appropriate paperwork. That the man who booked the room was from a neighboring town, which was not uncommon – the library often hosted regional groups. Nor did the fact that the group invited an outside speaker for their meeting raise any concerns.

It was not until the FBI contacted the town that the full picture began to emerge: The Emigration Party, whose stated mission was "...to educate those in the community about the cost and the negative effect of immigration" (Gilley, 2002), was a white supremacist organization. The outside speaker the group had invited was the leader of a fast-growing white supremacist

group from Illinois. Further, this group had a history of inciting violence wherever they met, and were often shadowed by protesters who organized counter-demonstrations, creating further disturbances (Sardella, 2003).

Library Director Sarah Gerald recalled that her first response upon learning of the group's nature was “to grasp for any means possible to prevent [the group meeting at the library]” (Gilley, 2002). After discussing the matter with a town counsel member, however, she concluded that the library had no choice but to uphold the group's First Amendment rights to free speech and free assembly in the public spaces offered by the library.

Further research indicated that the controversial group utilizes libraries as meeting places because “they are quite familiar with their rights” (Gilley, 2002). Earlier in 2002, the group had successfully taken legal action against a library in Illinois after the library's commissioner denied the group's application to use the library's facilities for a meeting, citing the group's disruptive nature.

Having determined that the library had no choice but to host the group, however, Gerald was faced with a difficult conundrum: how could the library continue to serve its own community while upholding the rights of the white supremacist group?

The library weighed several options, consulting staff, trustees, and other town officials. One proposal was that employee presence on the day of the meeting be strictly voluntary: no employee would be required to remain in the building during the meeting, but any personnel willing to come in and provide extra coverage would be welcome. Many staff members were amenable to the idea. “I wanted to work,” recalls one employee. “We had a chance to show [the

white supremacist group] that we were committed to their rights, to everyone's rights, and that they couldn't shut us down” (J. Klapes, personal communication, March 2010).

But many saw the group as a threat to both the library and the town. At the heart of the problem was the violence and demonstrations that shadowed the white supremacist group. The local police chief met with Gerald, the library's Board of Trustees, and other town officials to show footage of past meetings, including confrontations between police and communist and anarchist groups that regularly protested appearances by the white supremacist group's leader. The library's location next door to the town's post office raised concern, as police believed a federal building might become the target of anarchist groups. The police chief expressed concern that weapons – or even bombs – could be hidden inside the library and accessed by the controversial group's members or counter-protesters during the meeting.

Ultimately, the library's Board of Trustees decided that there was no way to secure the building for the group's 1 P.M. meeting unless the library, usually open from 9 to 5 on Saturdays, closed for the entire day. The trustees published a notice in the local newspaper the Monday before the group was scheduled to arrive, stating that after much consideration, the Trustees had concluded that their “first obligation is to protect our patrons, staff and neighbors,” and encouraged townspeople to utilize libraries in neighboring towns on September 14th (Shatz et al, 2002).

The decision, one library employee recalled, “didn't make anybody happy” (G. Sawyer, personal communication, March 2010). One patron wrote in a letter to the newspaper's opinion page that he was “dumbfounded” that “paying patrons” were being kept from the library by “a meeting of some racist, utterly abominable, detestable hate-mongers!” (Hodgkins, 2002).

Another wrote that “we are empowering this group by denying the citizens of [Williams] their rights” (Carriere, 2002). Others sided with the library. “One of the prices we pay for living in a democracy,” an Op-Ed in the newspaper published the day before the meeting noted, “is that we have to let people express their views, no matter how vile and disgusting most feel those views are.” Given the library's obligation to allow the group to meet, the piece noted, “If the directors have erred, they have erred on the side of caution” (“Beebe Trustees made the right decision,” 2002).

On September 13, the library closed early, and was swept for weapons, bombs, and anything else that might compromise security during the meeting. The next day, six hundred protesters, accompanied by two hundred police officers, many on loan from nearby communities, gathered outside the library. Protesters clashed with police outside the library and with the white supremacist group members inside, shouting “Smash the Nazis, we must unite.” The white supremacist group leader’s speech made use of the chaos, noting that he must be “doing something right” (InfoSpace, 2002). All in all, the cost to the town for additional security totaled \$32,000. But, Gerald noted, “The government is responsible for upholding our civil liberties. When Dr. Martin Luther King spoke in Alabama, the disruption and the expenses were considerable, but the responsibility to maintain the peace was the government's.” (Gilley, 2002).

In the days following the incident, however, the library trustees and staff began to discuss how the incident could have been handled differently. Though all agreed that, as far as the First Amendment was concerned, the library had no option but to host the group, they began to discuss what steps could be taken to “minimize the chance of this happening again” (Sardella). Discussions included changing the library's meeting room policy, either to exclude all but town

residents, or to require groups to provide proof of insurance on demand to cover any injuries or damage to library property. Throughout the discussions, however, several questions remained.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How can the library create a safe environment for patrons, protestors, and the group that doesn't limit services to other patrons nor inhibit user's rights to assemble or speak freely?
2. Are there any possible legal ways to limit or bar library meeting usage by groups with past histories of violent and disruptive behavior? And if there are, does use of these legal avenues fall in conflict with, or support library the library's core policies and mission?
3. In allowing such groups, who should be responsible for paying any damages to the town and library? Where would liability fall if someone were injured on the grounds due to the activities taking place?

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