

## **FREEDOM OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION – THOUGHTS, ACTIONS AND CULTURE OF LIBRARY STAFF IN FIJI**

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Research in developed countries highlight a discrepancy between the attitudes and behavior of librarians towards the principle of free access to information though such results cannot be assumed to be the same for Fiji, a less developed South Pacific country.

In response, this research used a quantitative approach in the form of survey questionnaires to then assess the effect of cultural values on the professional attitudes and resultant behavior of library staff in Fiji towards the principle of freedom of access to information.

The research contributes to the knowledge base on aspects of intellectual freedom that primarily concern freedom of access to information in the less developed country of Fiji. The results provide immediate implications for understanding the reasoning behind the application of free access to information within the cultural context of Fiji. The research revealed similar findings as those from developed countries, in that a divergence exists between the attitudes of library staff towards freedom of access to information as a professional concept and their behavior towards this philosophy as an activity. The study also showed that while there is general agreement of the principle, operationalizing it necessarily involves a consideration of existing community values and standards.

### **Introduction**

Numerous professional and non-government international institutions publicly support the principles of freedom of access to information and intellectual freedom. In spite of this, research such as those conducted by Busha (1972), Immroth (1986), McDonald (1993; cited in Maminski, 2001) and Moody (2004) in various western affluent countries show that a disparity exists between librarians' attitudes and their resulting behavior towards free access to information. While there appears to be an absence of similar research in less developed countries, research findings from developed countries in this field cannot be generalized to those of less developed countries, perhaps because of differences in cultural values between such groups.

In Grubb and Bond's (1999, p. 38) words, "anti-censorship, or intellectual freedom, is an ideal that is upheld in the [library] profession and tempered by realism in practice". In light of this observation, this research seeks to examine the degree to which library staff in Fiji reconcile the effect of cultural values on their attitudes and behavior towards the principle of free access to information.

### **Literature Review**

Intellectual freedom is fundamental to the library and information profession, as evident in the associated international and professional statements. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA] promotes intellectual freedom as expressed in the IFLA/*Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression* [FAIFE] mandate, drawn from Article 19 of the United Nations [UN] Declaration of Human Rights (IFLA, 2004, p. 60; Seidelin, 2002, p. 181). By promoting intellectual freedom policies within IFLA, FAIFE is recognized as one of IFLA's most important core activities (Sturges, 2005, p. 301).

Additionally, respect for human development and its basic values are reflected by the principles and professional values fundamental to librarianship and library services. The formulation of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) *Public Library Manifesto* and IFLA's statement on intellectual freedom is proof of this. The manifesto relates to UNESCO's (2005) belief in the public library as a living force for education and information dissemination. With similar conviction, IFLA (2002; 2004) commits to the fundamental right of human beings to both express and

access information without restraint through the *Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom*. Thus, these international organizations through their public statements are strong supporters of the fundamental value of ensuring free access to information.

Yilmaz (1998) nonetheless conclusively postulated that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, developing and less developed countries in the world will still not be able to exercise their right to information. While the problems hindering the right to information in less developed countries have been acknowledged, at least since 1975, the issue has been anecdotal in comment only with little research basis if any.

Globally, over seventy countries have passed Freedom of Information (FOI) laws. In the Pacific region, Australia and New Zealand have passed such laws some 25 years ago and recently in February 2008, the Cook Islands was the first Pacific Island country to legislate this essential democratic right (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2008). Under the Pacific Plan, a 'living document' guiding long-term development of the Pacific region, FOI promotes greater transparency and accountability in the current political uncertainty faced by several Pacific Island countries, particularly Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.

In Fiji, freedom of access to information appears in the Fiji Constitution as the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas", which forms part of the right to freedom of expression as stated in Section 30 of the constitution (Fiji Islands Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1997). This section clearly reflects Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With Fiji experiencing political coups in 1987, 2000 and 2006, restriction on media freedom was periodically imposed although its integral partner, free access to information, was not been given much attention. Furthermore, there has been no known awareness raising activities about free access to information by the Fiji Library Association (FLA) until recently. Funded by UNESCO, the FLA launched its *Freedom of Expression* campaign in July 2005 and an *Information for All National Symposium* in September 2006 in attempts to promote the role of libraries in free expression and access to information.

In the literature, Curry (1997) suggested that librarians' general lack of commitment to intellectual freedom and the exclusion of materials due to pressures, such as community standards, facilitates librarians' personal influence on the library collection. Her findings support studies conducted by Fiske (1968), Busha (1972) and Immroth (1986), and replicated by Cole (2000) which revealed that librarians frequently avoided complaints from external parties by self-censoring materials.

While research focuses on censorship when discussing librarians' attitudes towards freedom of access to information, community pressures from cultural values and librarians' personal beliefs play a large part in determining these attitudes. The transition between adopting intellectual freedom principles in theory and adhering to them in the face of real world situations has more often than not been difficult. Studies by Immroth, Busha, McDonald and Moody show that behavior is not always in line with attitudes when considering intellectual freedom principles.

Okada (2005) explored the notion of libraries as agencies of culture and how libraries both reflect and shape the culture or society it serves. Research by Curry (1997), England (1974) and Moody (2004) have only briefly highlighted the impact of existing cultural values on the attitudes and resultant behavior of librarians when considering principles of intellectual freedom and freedom of access to information.

Official and formal cultural values in the form of a nation's legislation are somewhat less complicated since they are formalized and sanctioned as authoritative. On the contrary, the issues surrounding the unofficial or non-formal standards that comprise the notion of cultural values are far from that. Issues of how closely a library should follow the standards of a community when managing its library collection involves a consideration of numerous cultural features which exist in that particular community.

Cultural values are not set at the lowest level of interest or habit of mind and neither are they set solely at a level of conservativeness, rigidity or austerity. Instead, the cultural values comprised of informal or unofficial standards are more likely than not to be set at a level approaching a general average of community thinking. It is apparent then that ascertaining the standards of a particular community is no easy feat, since the quantity sought is intangible, subjective and subtle in nature.

However, the effort must be made in order to possess at least a fair idea of the existing community standards when thinking about intellectual freedom and particularly freedom of access to information. This is because true freedom depends on a series of checks and balances.

### **The Research Project**

The nature of the relationship between the practice of librarianship and the philosophy of intellectual freedom provides the conceptual framework for this study.

Librarians do not operate within a vacuum. Libraries are social agencies and each one of them reflects the society in which it operates (Curry, 1997, p. 1; Ramachandran, 1975, p. 327). Accordingly, the degree of acceptance or rejection of the concepts of freedom of information varies from society to society. This variance is because a library will respond to its staff and clientele's cultural patterns, social values, national goals and government policies. Therefore, while the overarching goals of libraries towards freedom of access to information may be universal, the interpretation and emphasis given to its practice will be unique in different countries and amongst different societies.

The primary purpose of the research then was to gain a better understanding of the impact of cultural values on the professional attitudes and behavior of library staff in Fiji towards freedom of access to information. This research was conducted with the following objectives:

- Objective One: To determine the professional attitudes of library staff towards the principle of free access to information;
- Objective Two: To determine the intended behavior of library staff towards free access to information;
- Objective Three: To assess the extent to which library staff are influenced by cultural values present in Fiji when they are considering the principle of free access to information.

### **Research Methodology**

By means of survey research, the study sought to quantify the effect of cultural values existing in Fiji on library staff's professional attitudes and their resultant behavior. Utilizing Likert-type scales, mailed questionnaires with fixed alternative responses were used to collect the required data. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections, with each section in turn focusing on professional attitudes, behavior and cultural values.

The current FLA membership listing was used as the sample, thereby offering an acknowledged best-case perspective of the current situation as perceived by library staff in Fiji.

Five fixed alternative responses permitted the expression of various degrees of agreement or disagreement with each question. Additionally, three fixed alternative answers for the hypothetical situation determined behavioral tendencies. Numerical weights were used for scoring purposes. These quantitative values were consistently reversed among the items in order to obtain more flexibility in stating the questions. Therefore, questions were stated either positively or negatively.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on three library staff whereby the pilot study allowed feedback on the structure of the questionnaire, permitted phraseology alteration to clarify item or single-word ambiguities and allowed elimination of additional items shown to be irrelevant.

### **Analysis and Interpretation of the Data**

The sample size was approximately 86% of the population size. Approximately 57% (49) of the survey instruments were returned and deemed usable. That number represented approximately 49% of the total population of library staff in Fiji.

There were no occurrences whereby a respondent repeatedly assigned the same fixed response for each statement in each of the three main sections and there were no incomplete or improperly filled questionnaires.

For each of the objectives, findings are graphically presented in column-chart format. Using the legends that are associated with each of the figures as guides, colors and patterns of the columns differentiate the results for the various fixed alternative responses.

#### ***Data Analysis and Interpretation for Objective 1***

In the first section of the survey questionnaire, participants were informed that Section A specifically asked for their professional opinions. While reasons for suppressing free access to library

materials are likely a result of a library staff's personal convictions, the aim of this section was to elicit information regarding the impact of an individual's professional role only.

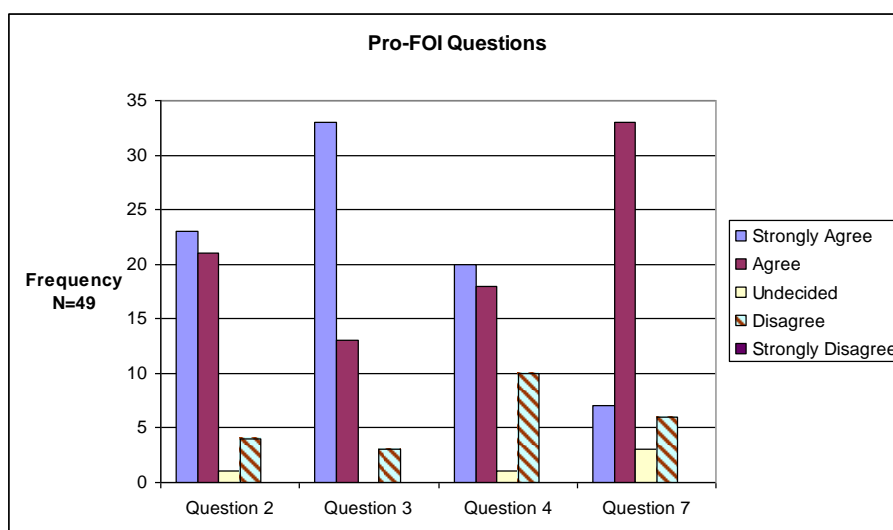
Encouraging was the finding that over 75% of respondents had positive views about free access to information, particularly with regards to Question Numbers 2, 3, 4 and 7. In these questions, there were no respondents who chose the option 'strongly disagree' to statements about equal access to a variety of information presenting varying points of view. As such, a total disregard for freedom of access to information principles was not observed.

Somewhat paradoxical were the findings for Question Number 8 in which 69% (34) tended to 'agree' that people should have the right to be protected from material which they personally perceived as offensive. A score of that nature indicates attitudes with a general agreement towards censorship.

The most positive findings were the results obtained for Question Number 3. Sixty-seven percent (33) of participants 'strongly agree', the highest in the 'strongly agree' category, that age, gender, race, religion, nationality and social or political views should not hinder an individual's right to have access to materials available in a library. In promoting intellectual freedom, library staff in Fiji are predominantly aware of the fundamental need to provide fair and equitable access to information for all, irrespective of age, gender, color or creed.

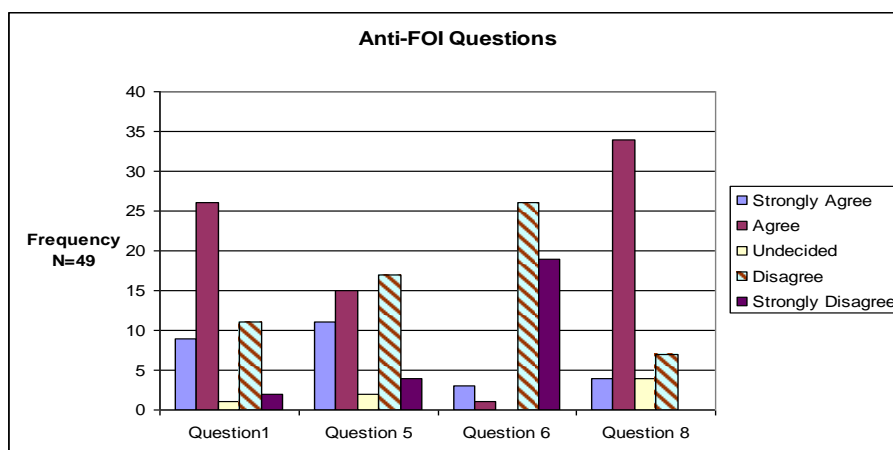
Immediately apparent from an examination of Figures 1 and 2 is the fact that attitudes of library staff in Fiji tended to be more favorable towards freedom of access to information principles than they tended to be favorable towards censorship.

Figure 1: Questions Worded to Assess Support for Freedom of Access to Information



- Q1. No matter how much library staff talk about intellectual freedom and free access to information, there are just some controversial library materials that should not be kept for circulation.
- Q2. Libraries should provide their users with access to information from a variety of sources which present different points of view and reflect the diversity of society. This information includes materials which are unusual and unpopular with the majority.
- Q3. The rights of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied because of age, gender, race, religion, nationality or social or political views.
- Q4. It would conflict with the public interest for library staff to establish their own personal values as the chief standard for determining what materials should be included in the library's collection.
- Q5. High demand should be the library staff's primary criterion for determining what materials should be included in the library's collection.
- Q6. Library staff should avoid purchasing materials dealing with social, psychological and sexual problems, and concentrate more on building collections of non-offensive literary works.
- Q7. It is appropriate for a library collection to include material which is acceptable under the law but which people may find offensive, for example, graphic pictures in medical, war or horror works.
- Q8. People should have the right to be protected from material which they personally consider to be offensive.

Figure 2: Questions Worded to Assess Support for Censorship of Information



### Data Analysis and Interpretation for Objective 2

Participants in the research were asked to contemplate a hypothetical situation whereby they were in charge of acquisitions in a public library. The library was situated in the community in which they work, with no financial or spatial restrictions and no existing rules or regulations about the types of materials to include in the public library's collection.

The initial hypothetical situation presented in the pilot study centered on the library in which the respondents currently worked. It was discovered that these respondents in the pilot study answered the questions based on the academic library in which they worked. Because the individuals in the sample work in different types of libraries, the challenging issue of interpreting data from a variety of workplace contexts was overcome by deciding to use only the public library setting as the hypothetical scenario.

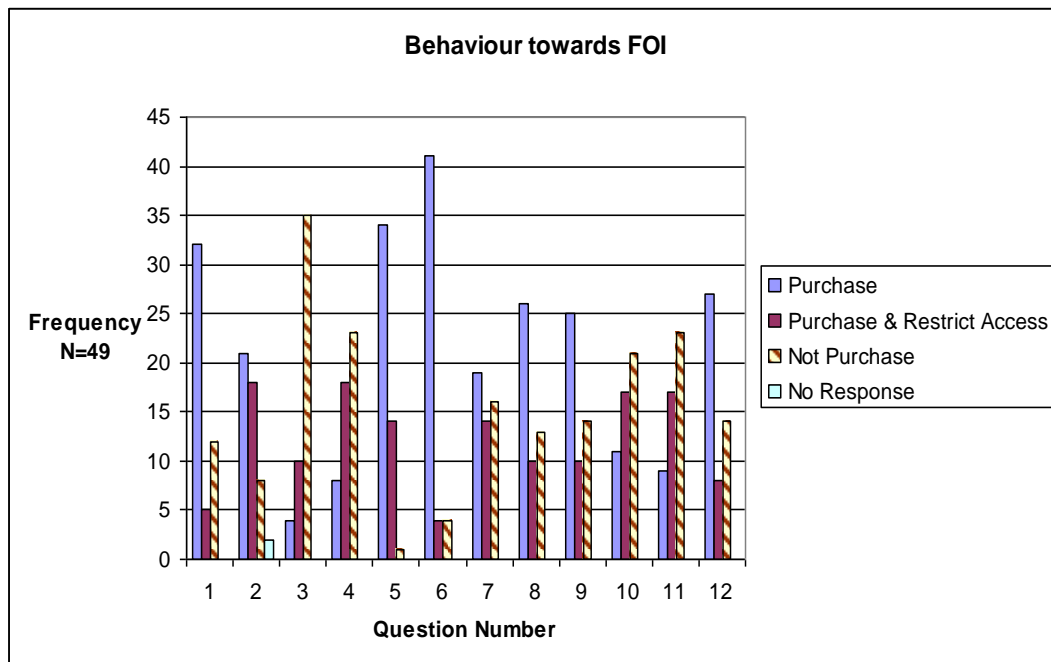
Respondents were presented with a list comprising a variety of library materials ranging from books, videos, guides, journals to magazines. A brief description of the contents of each of the 12 materials was provided and respondents were asked how they would treat each of the items.

The results were used to determine a rating of behavioral tendency towards freedom of access to information. Rather than using the total scores for each participant, average scores were calculated in order to overcome the issue of eliminating all the responses for the two questionnaires which had missing values.

Additionally, the results enabled comparisons between individuals as well as the overall intended behavior of library staff towards free access to information. The higher an individual's average score, the more likely they were to employ behavior favoring the principle of free access to information. The combined results are presented in Figure 3.

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- Q1. Popular materials of little literacy merit which receive wide publicity.
  - Q2. A video which depicts early colonial settlers to Fiji in a stereotypical manner.
  - Q3. A book about the creation of life which is known to contain inaccurate scientific quotes to support its argument.
  - Q4. A 'how-to' guide on destabilizing a national economy.
  - Q5. A report by a respected Fiji academic, criticizing the current legislation on land ownership and tenure.
  - Q6. A journal about alternative forms of medicine, such as yoga, tai-chi, acupuncture, or aromatherapy.
  - Q7. A novel which contains graphic descriptions of disciplinary measures on children using physical punishment.
  - Q8. A non-fiction book which is critical of Christianity.
  - Q9. A non-fiction book which is critical of Islamic fundamentalism.
  - Q10. A 'how-to' manual about the practice of traditional methods of witchcraft.
  - Q11. A magazine about the production and use of traditional poisons for mass harvesting of marine resources.
  - Q12. A magazine, aimed at teenagers, providing assistance and advice to homosexual people in 'coming out'.

Figure 3: Participants' Behavior towards the Principle of Freedom of Access to Information



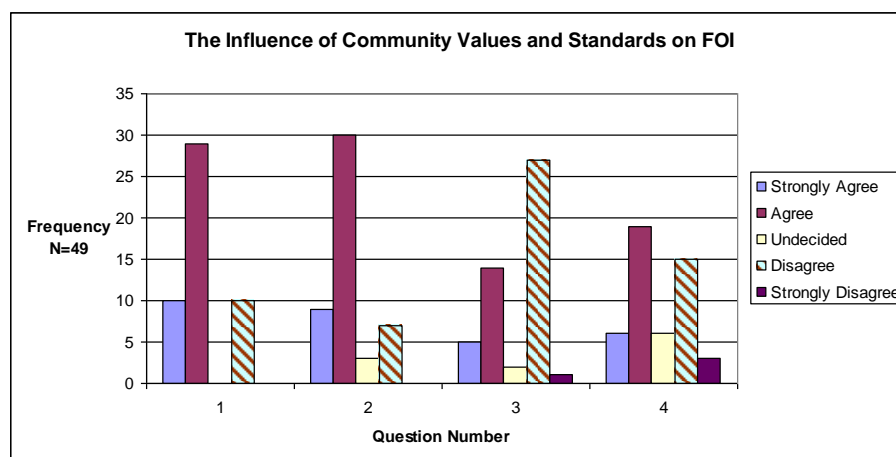
Suppression of freedom of access to information was encountered in all the responses to questions that were presented in Section B. There were no instances where there were nil responses for the option 'I will not purchase the material'.

Ideally, should library staff adopt intellectual freedom principles in practice, the majority of respondents should have opted for the statement 'I will purchase the material'. By putting forward a hypothetical situation, more than 50% of the respondents were shown to be favorable towards the practice of free access to information in only six of the 12 questions. The results of the remaining half of the questions show that refusal to purchase and imposing restricted access to purchased items outweighed the option for free access to information.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation for Objective 3**

In assessing the influences of cultural values that exist in Fiji, both legislative and unofficial standards are examined. Part I, presented in Figure 4, focused on the informal standards subset of cultural values by paying particular attention to community values and its standards. Formal standards in the form of legislative values and standards were examined in Part II and are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 4: The Influence of Community Values and Standards present in Fiji on Attitudes towards Freedom of Access to Information



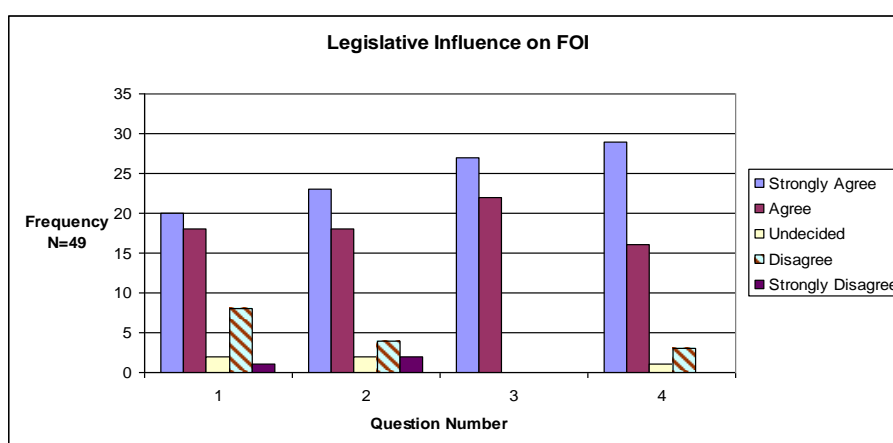
The results for Question Number 2 evidently show that over 75% of respondents supported the notion that community values and standards must be considered in acquisitions procedures.

In response to the statement regarding the inappropriateness of including materials about women in a stereotypical manner, it is of interest to note that 57% (28) demonstrated negative views towards Question Number 3.

Library staff in Fiji are divided when it comes to agreeing or disagreeing with the statement in Question Number 4. Interestingly, 12% (6) were undecided with their approach to this issue regarding drug manufacture. When comparing the data for the option 'undecided' for the remaining questions in the survey, the largest number of participants who chose this option was observed in Question Number 4.

Additionally, comparisons can be made with regards to the results obtained from Question Numbers 1 and 2. The majority of respondents chose the 'agree' response alternative to these two statements, with fewer participants selecting 'strongly agree', and no respondents choosing the option 'strongly disagree'.

Figure 5: *The Influence of Legislation present in Fiji on Attitudes towards Freedom of Access to Information*



In Part II, the results of Question Number 2 demonstrate that library staff in Fiji generally consider the importance of maintaining free access to information during the implementation of laws and regulations as they are set by government.

The most encouraging finding drawn from the cultural values test is seen in the results obtained for Question Number 3 of Part II. Fifty-five percent or 27 participants ticked 'strongly agree' to the statement that the right to free access to information is fundamental to a democratic society. Forty-five percent (22) 'agree' to the same statement and there were nil responses for the alternatives 'undecided', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. Such strong data supporting the notion of free access to information aptly demonstrates that library staff in Fiji are unanimously aware of the essence of intellectual freedom, and in effect freedom of access to information, in a free society.

Part I: Cultural Values

- Q1. Local community values should be taken into account when selecting materials for libraries.
- Q2. When choosing library materials, library staff have a professional responsibility to uphold accepted values and standards existing in their community.
- Q3. It is inappropriate that a library collection includes materials which portray women in stereotyped roles.
- Q4. It is inappropriate that a library collection includes materials on the growing or manufacture of narcotic or hallucinating drugs.

Part II: Legislation

- Q1. Libraries should resist attempts by individuals or groups to restrict access to information and ideas, whilst observing the legal requirements of government.
- Q2. Library staff should be active in challenging attempts by government to pass laws which restrict access to information and ideas.
- Q3. The right to freely access information is fundamental to a democratic society.
- Q4. As an institution for democratic living, libraries should cater to public interest issues without suppressing minority beliefs and ideas.

## Conclusion

Because the principle of freedom of access to information is inextricably linked to the library and information profession, members of the FLA were selected as research participants. As such, the responses were regarded as a best-case scenario of the current situation in Fiji.

Results from this research indicate that while respondents had favorable views towards freedom of access to information, instances of suppression of this principle was encountered in all the statements that were presented in the second section of the questionnaire which tested behavioral tendencies. Such a speculation is supported by the trend already noted by previous research conducted in several developed countries in that professional attitudes concerning free access to information are not always indicative of behavior that deals with the same issue.

The most significant results of this study, in the opinion of the investigator, is that the data indicate a majority of library staff in Fiji consider existing cultural values and standards in their society when thinking about freedom of access to information. The evidence collected also signifies an overwhelming degree of acceptance and approval for selecting library materials in accordance with local community values and legislation.

The fact that the Fiji findings surpass similar research findings about the effect of cultural values on attitudes and behavior from developed countries suggests that while the overarching goals of libraries towards freedom of access to information may be all encompassing, the variances in interpretation, acceptance and emphasis as well as the degree to which it will be operationalized will be distinct in different countries. That this is the case is most probably due to the fact that libraries and librarians both reflect and reveal the culture and society they serve.

Results from the Fiji study highlight that there is a discrepancy between the attitudes of many library staff towards freedom of access to information as a professional concept and their behavior towards this philosophy as an activity. In theory, it is expected that library staff generally support intellectual freedom and freedom of access to information in particular. While this study revealed that there is unanimous agreement of the statements concerning these principles, operationalising them necessarily involves a consideration of existing community values and standards.

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