

Reflections on evidence-based policy, professional responsibility and the Marriage Law Postal Survey



By Elizabeth Smith and James McGoran

Australia has recently been thrown into a divisive and harmful postal survey on Marriage Law. For many of us, it's just a glimpse at some of the rhetoric LGBTQIA+ Australians have had to deal with on a daily basis for decades.

As the official survey period ends, we as information professionals should reflect on the facts and ramifications of the process so that we can better support and serve our communities moving forward.

We're going to reflect on two points here that are relevant for ALIA members and go to the heart of ALIA policy and values: our professional advocacy for evidence-based practice (a FAIR issue), and the free flow of ideas (one of ALIA's core values).

Evidence-based policy and the postal survey

It is important that we have a rigorous, evidence-based approach to policy making in Australia... Good policy making processes can ensure that public policy achieves a desired objective in a cost-effective manner. [\[ALIA FAIR website, 2017\]](#)

Evidence-based policy making is all about removing the guesswork and politics from decision making, and using authoritative, trusted resources to make policy decisions. At least, we say so, as it's one of the issues on the Freedom of Access to Information and Resources (FAIR) website.

So, what about the policy to hold a postal survey on changing the Marriage Act? This decision was not evidence based. It was a political decision by the current Federal Government to hold a non-binding and [expensive](#) survey. There is no legislative requirement for an Australian plebiscite on marriage equality (unlike in Ireland, where the constitution needed to be changed and a plebiscite was unavoidable). The Marriage Act could be changed in an afternoon by Parliament.

It could be argued that the opinion poll is evidence gathering. This ignores the [evidence that](#)

[has already been gathered](#), by media and social research outlets, through countless polls and surveys conducted on this same issue. The postal process itself is not a modern or efficient way to conduct an opinion poll, especially considering the margin for error from the multiple agencies involved (and [there have been multiple errors](#)). Conducting a postal survey in 2017 shows a disregard from lawmakers for evidence-based policy, and highlights the political motivation behind the process.

This continues a [trend of policy makers across Australia failing to use evidence and research in their decision making](#). Look at climate change and energy policy. Look at decisions made by governments concerning Adani and the Great Barrier Reef. Look at the repeal of Gonski funding, and the arts. Look. At. Libraries. Policy makers in Australia have consistently and systematically ignored evidence that contradicts their agenda, or they have cherry picked what they wanted to hear.

Furthermore, basing the granting of civil rights on the opinion of the majority is a dangerous precedent to set. Whatever your views on marriage, legalising same sex marriage only affects those who enter into that relationship, and anyone outside that union can not, should not be able to deny them. There is no evidence, after all, to support bigotry.

Where does this leave us as information professionals? How do we advocate for evidence-based policy making when the policy makers don't want to see the evidence? Tell us what you think.

The free flow of ideas

A thriving culture, economy, and democracy requires the free flow of information and ideas.
[\(ALIA core values statement, 2007\)](#)

Our second discussion point is about the free flow of ideas and information. The free flow of ideas is an ALIA core value. But what do we mean by that in the context of a country where the Government has told us we need to debate the civil rights of others?

Librarians and information professionals should be thinking hard about this, and be wary of groups citing “freedom of speech” or “fair and balanced” dialogue as a smokescreen for promoting views that seek to denigrate or discriminate against others.

The marriage equality survey is one example of this trend: look at attempts by the Federal Government to change 18C to include the phrase [“reasonable member of the community”](#), or One Nation seeking [“fair and balanced” reporting](#) to be added to the ABC's charter, that in reality is neither fair nor balanced.

We need to continuously discuss what a “free flow of ideas” means in a LIS context. Do we give space and time in libraries to the all sides of the marriage equality debate, when some of the arguments will cause harm to our LGBTQIA+ patrons? Should a librarian purchase material written by “no” campaigners to appease outspoken members of the community? What do we do if groups that are homophobic or racist want to use library spaces? [These issues are already being discussed in the US](#), as the profession grapples with the rise of the far right to power.

The National Library of Australia, as well as other archival and historical special libraries, are actively collecting material from both sides of the campaign in an effort to capture the moment for future use and historical analysis. In a more immediate time frame, ALIA points out that showing what's out there can actually contribute to conversations around real discrimination and prejudice.

How can libraries support and promote respectful community debate on potentially divisive topics? How can librarians respond to a potential call for censorship of materials based on a divisive debate? We're fans of the [marriage equality statement by the Australian Medical Association \(AMA\)](#), which supports doctors and the public by offering referenced, professional opinion on the issue. We would love to see similar thought leadership from Australian library organisations and institutions about our professional responsibility to our communities.

The [ALIA statement on free access to information](#) was last revised in 2015. Do you think this statement adequately supports library workers in 2017? Revisit the statement and let us know what you think.

We want encourage discussion about our professional responsibility when it comes to potentially divisive social debates. The free flow of ideas is central to the LIS profession and to Australian society. But encouraging debate and "hearing all sides" is a fine line to tread, and where civil rights are concerned giving encouragement to the voice of hate only harms our communities. To hate speech, our response will always be for equity, social justice, and equality.

Have a response to share? Contact us on Twitter: ALIA NGAC (@aliangac), Elizabeth (@jinglefrisbee) or James (@jamesmcgoran).