
Censorship in Libraries: A Management Tightrope

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MANY library directors maintain that management of censorship issues is one of the most difficult aspects of their jobs, and some have characterized it as «walking a tightrope» (Curry, 1993, 298). Research studies confirm that dealing with censorship issues requires great skill, including indepth understanding of the reasoning and motives behind the censorship attempt and a solid commitment to the principles of intellectual freedom agreed upon by one's library association and/or one's individual library (Malley, 1990; Brown, 1994).

A number of factors affect the relationship of the censorship phenomenon and libraries: these factors influence the management process and may determine whether censorship attempts succeed in removing material from the library. The following paper discusses aspects of the censorship/library relationship in North American and European libraries in the context of specific subjects and titles wich have been challenged.

What are the roles of a library?

People may have very different ideas about what roles a public or academic library should assume, and this variance in perception is one of the most important factors in the censorship/library relationship. Linked

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closely with this factor is the question of who really *owns* the library building and the collection. Citizens in the same city can view institutions, books, and events in very different ways, attributing to them very different purposes and significance.

Perceptions about the role of a library may depend on one's education, one's politics, and sometimes one's economic status. Academic and public library users may have one idea, politicians have another idea, and, most distressingly, surveys have shown that librarians have still another idea about what roles libraries should fulfill (Birdsall, 1985; White, 1990; Quinn, 1992).

In Canada it is common for public libraries to state that they strive to serve the cultural, educational, informational, and recreational needs of the community. But problems arise as all these roles are pursued, particularly if the library is supposed to serve all age groups.

The primary problem comes with the educational role of the library, which most people associate with children and young adults. When people assume that the educational role is paramount, they become very angry when material is discovered within the library which they feel will subvert a child's education. These people do not want material in the library which may introduce a child to concepts which the parents consider too advanced for the child's age. Because many school libraries lack adequate materials and staff, people may believe that the public library should act as a surrogate school library. As a consequence, they want the public library to tailor its collection to the school curriculum, both in subject matter and in discussion level of subjects as sexuality. Adhering to this philosophy means that the library has little of interest to adults, because nothing is above the understanding and maturity level of a school child. This problem has occurred in several places in Canada, most recently in British Columbia with regard to biology classes. In this instance, parents are demanding that children be taught the creationist view of how the world began rather than the evolutionary view. Teachers are told to instruct students about how God created the earth and how Darwin was wrong. In accord with this curriculum view, school libraries and public libraries are expected to carry materials which support the Biblical view rather than the scientific view of how the world evolved. In this situation and in others, when a public library is primarily an educational institution for children, alternative or mature views on subjects such as religion, race, and sexuality are not welcomed, and the library ceases to have relevance for adults.

The educational role of a university library is subject to debate in this area as well. Some professors believe that the library collection should

closely follow the subject matter and the points of view expressed in their lectures, while others maintain that the collection should be more comprehensive and include books which may contradict established views in subjects such as history and sociology. Specific subject areas where concerns have been expressed about particular university books include historical texts on Stalin's role in the 1930's Ukrainian famine and on revisionist views of the Holocaust.

A public library is sometimes hailed as an institution which supports democratic ideals. This is a laudable role, but one must be wary of this honour because perceptions about what constitutes «democracy» vary widely. Major problems can occur because elected politicians often have quite different views from defeated politicians. According to some elected officials, democracy means that public employees and public institutions strictly adhere to the beliefs of the government in power. Government buildings and services, including libraries, are essentially «owned» by the politicians during their term of office. This political connotation of democracy is not uncommon in Britain and Canada (Curry, 1994, 216). For example, politicians have protested when library collections include books which are critical of their political philosophy, e. g. pro-gay rights, anti-nuclear weapons, anti-EEC. Politicians have condemned libraries which mount book displays whose subjects offend their moral beliefs, e. g. safe sex, the abortion debate, or even vegetarianism. When librarians protest that public libraries are there to serve ALL citizens, a politician may counter with the argument that he has been elected to represent the people, and therefore speaking for the people, he doesn't want particular items or displays in the library. This viewpoint raises questions about democracy in action. Does democracy mean rule of the majority? Should the public library collection reflect the views of the majority? Do members of that majority have the right to exclude minority views from the library, in the same way the defeated minority is excluded from power in society? John Stuart Mill in his book *On Liberty* calls this the «tyranny of the majority» (Mill, 1974, 62).

A contrary view asserts that democracy means giving everyone a voice and letting all opinions be heard. Following this view, the public library is «owned» by everyone in the community, not just the elected politicians and their supporters. A public library should strive to fulfill this democratic role. It should not be a tool in the hands of politicians to shape and withhold information for their own ends. After all, a politician is often elected with fewer than 50% of the votes... so in reality he may be trying to impose the will of the minority, not the majority.

An additional problem arises when the public library is considered the epitome of a democratic institution because different opinions exist regarding «protection» in a democratic society. Some people (including the author) believe that the price of living in a democracy includes being confronted by beliefs, words, and images with which they disagree. These confrontations may be deeply offensive. However, that is freedom's tariff, the price for being free to express one's own ideas (which may be offensive to others) and the price for having the opportunity to refute the ideas of others. As Thomas Paine once wrote, «those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must undergo like men the fatigue of supporting it». Others, however, believe that a democratic system should shield citizens from that offense. They value the opportunity to live free of offense above the goal of freedom of expression. Their foremost aim is a kind and caring society where remarks about race, sexual orientation, and religion are not made, and they want laws to create this society. Those with this aim lobby for legislation which bans information offensive to them. As a subsequent move, they often attempt to remove offensive material from the library. They feel that, as a «democratic» institution, the public library should not have material which offends them personally, and sometimes they extend this view to advocating that the library should not have material which is disagreeable to anyone. Expressing a contrary view, Oscar Wilde once said «It doesn't work, you cannot make men moral by law». But many people do try through legislation to impose their morality on others and try to make the public library «moral» as well by shaping the collection to conform to their view of democracy.

In the censorship/library relationship librarians should be cognizant of the different perceptions held by both politicians and library users of what roles libraries should fill. These perceptions often hinge on beliefs about democratic ideals and responsibilities and may have dramatic impact on this volatile relationship.

National laws on information

Legislation also has an impact on what libraries have in their collections and what librarians *think* they should have. In the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution clearly protects freedom of religion, speech, and the press. In contrast to this sweeping approach to freedom of information, the Canadian government in the past ten years has enacted legislation which more closely regulates information. This regulation

springs from the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms, made law in 1982. According to the Charter, Canadians do have freedom of thought, opinion, and expression, but these freedoms are «subject to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society» (Constitution Act, 1982). What does this mean? In subsequent case law decisions, it has meant that judges justify limits on information in accord with their own ideas of how Canadian society should be shaped: what sexual information we should have, what information about racial groups should be available (R. V. Butler, 1992). Another recently passed Canadian law focuses on control of illegal drugs, but includes prohibition of information about drugs. This has prompted many academic and public librarians to withdraw books describing production and use of marijuana and heroin from their shelves, even when these books are scholarly texts. In Britain, the passing of a law prohibiting municipal authorities from «promotion of homosexuality» (Section 28, Local Government Act, 1988) has prompted debates about what legally constitutes «promotion». No case law decisions are yet available, but according to some municipal lawyers, having a book about homosexuality on a library shelf may indeed constitute «promotion».

Legislation which restricts information dissemination causes librarians to be very cautious about ordering material for their collections. These laws may concern subjects such as hate literature, drugs facts, hetero or homosexuality, and pornography, and in some cases involve literature not generally found in university or public libraries. Of primary concern, however, is that librarians may interpret these restrictive laws too broadly, and therefore be too cautious about ordering controversial material. Librarians should of course be law abiding, but avoidance of subjects entirely «just to be safe» means a censored collection of limited use.

Library associations

Another factor influencing the library/censorship relationship is the degree of importance placed by a nation's library associations on this relationship. Do the associations consider the topic to be an important one and they prepared to defend a librarian who is being compelled to remove material from his/her library? Have the associations formulated policies about censorship? Research has shown that open discussion about censorship and the appropriate actions to counter it are more easily achieved when an association has a national intellectual freedom policy and when the association fa-

miliarizes member librarians with that policy (Curry, 1993, 427). Individual libraries can incorporate the national policy into their local policies and librarians can quote the policy when the censorship demands are made. The Canadian Library Association has a *Statement on Intellectual Freedom** which is prominently promoted on posters and bookmarks. This Statement makes clear to librarians, politicians, academic professors and administrators, and to members of the public that the Association considers censorship to be a serious matter which violates the librarian's professional code*. With national statements, censorship becomes part of the professional agenda; without them, politicians and pressure groups feel much freer to demand censorship, and librarians may bow much more quickly to those demands.

Individual library policies

As noted above, incorporation of national policies against censorship into the policies of individual libraries is an important phenomenon. It has been demonstrated in many studies (Hopkins 1991; Schrader 1992; Curry 1993) that having policies formulated for a specific institution strengthens the library in its attempt to defend its collection. Recommended policies include those which clearly explain the library's goal of having all sides of an issue represented, the library's selection criteria, and the library's method of handling complaints about its collection. Librarians with selection policies are more willing to select material which they suspect might be controversial, and they are better able to defend the material which they have selected (Curry 1994, 208). Creating effective policies is a challenge, particularly in this controversial area, but the effort is usually well-rewarded.

The news factor

Another element which influences the censorship/public library relationship is the «news factor». Receiving news about censorship attempts in other parts of the country and hearing how librarians handled those attempts alerts librarians to the extent of the censorship problem and to methods they themselves might employ to overcome censorship attempts. Without this news network, librarians may feel isolated and alone in their efforts to provide comprehensive collections. Many librarians use the net-

* O texto vem publicado mais à frente neste número dos *Cadernos (N. do Ed.)*.

work as a type of «early warning» system which alerts them to titles which have prompted complains: if complains are received in one part of the country it is likely that a complain may be lodged in one's own library. Association newsletters and journals can report censorship incidents, but the most admired and comprehensive censorship news system in the American Library Association's *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* which reports incidents throughout the United States. Other countries would benefit greatly by establishing similar national newsletters.

Education of library workers

The education of library workers, including librarians, library assistants, and library clerks is a crucial factor in this area. If discussion about ethics, intellectual freedom, and rights to information have not been part of staff training either in school or on the job, library workers are far less committed to the goals of intellectual freedom and are less willing to defend its principles. Removing a book from the shelf to satisfy an angry customer may be an very insignificant act to someone unaware of the importance of having a collection which represents all views. Library staff without information and training about censorship may refuse to order material which offends their views on religion or politics. They may see nothing wrong with shaping the collection to reflect their own prejudices. In addition, library clerks may disagree with some of the material they are returning to the library shelves, and see nothing wrong with removing that material. Acquainting *all* staff levels with the library's intellectual freedom philosophy is crucial to the effective advancement of that philosophy.

Selected censorship subjects and incidents

The following is a selection of subjects which have prompted challenges in school, public, and university libraries in North America during the past five years. Specific titles are given to further explain the topics.

1) Religion

- a) Fundamentalist Christians often fear books portraying the occult and witchcraft, which they consider to be a promotion of the devil's

work. Books containing spells and incantations are frequent censorship targets.

Example: *The Witches* by Roald Dahl, *No Place for Me* by Barthe DeClements, and *The Impressions Series* (a school textbook series).

- b) Materials which provoke a feeling of insult or offensive among a particular religious group are often labelled «blasphemous» by that group. In previous centuries Christian groups often made this charge; in the 1990s, Moslem groups are in the forefront.

Example: *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie.

2) *Sexuality and children*

- a) Parents may wish to censor books which mention or explain homosexuality so that this information is not available to their children. Example: *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (this book received the highest number of censorship challenges in the US in 1994).

- b) Parents are also concerned about their children obtaining knowledge about sexual intercourse and pregnancy.

Example: *Mummy Laid an Egg!* by Babette Cole.

3) *Descriptions of «illegal» acts*

- a) Books in which crimes are described are characterized as «how to» crime books by those who wish to censor them. They fear the books will influence children or «weak-minded» individuals to commit the crimes.

Examples: *Crazy Lady* by Jane Leslie Conly (shoplifting); *The Anarchist Cookbook* by William Powell; *Marijuana Hydroponics: High Tech Water Culture* by Daniel Storm.

- b) Materials which describe how to commit suicide.

Example: *Final Exit* by Derek Humphry.

4) *Holocaust revisionist materials*

- a) Materials which challenge the commonly accepted information about the Jewish Holocaust may be censored in university and public libraries.

Examples: *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* by A. R. Butz; *The Leuchter Report* by Fred Leuchter.

5) *Politically sensitive materials*

- a) Materials which describe or promote one side of a politically sensitive argument are often controversial. In Canada at present, these subjects include abortion, crime, environmental regulations, and Indian land claims.

Examples: *Maxine's Tree* by Diane Leger-Haskell (environment-logging).

6) *Appropriation of voice*

- a) Members of a particular group may believe that only a group member may tell the experiences or the legends of that group. Anyone outside the group (race, ethnic origin, gender, or sexual orientation) is accused of «appropriation of voice» if he/she writes a book about the group. This issue has been of most concern to Canadian Indian groups.

Example: *How Raven Freed the Moon* by Anne Cameron.

7) *Portrayal of violence*

- a) Books and videos which portray violence acts have been targeted for censorship, particularly when the violence is linked with sex.

Example: *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis.

8) *Material about racist or obscene material*

- a) Materials which describe or condemn obscenity or racism may have clearer and more powerful arguments if verbal or pictorial examples of these subjects are given. However, these examples may be offensive to some people.

Example: *Against Pornography: The Evidence of Harm* by Diana Russell.

9) *Controversial materials on the Internet*

- a) The most recent censorship controversies in North America have involved racist and sexual material in various internet discussion groups. Access to these groups may sometimes be obtained through computers in university and public libraries.

Examples: Discussion groups such as alt.sex.bondage and alt.sex.lesbian.

Conclusion

Many factors influence the censorship/public library relationship, making management of that relationship troublesome, complex, and volatile. In my research, librarians have often described dealing with censorship as «dealing with a grenade» or «walking on a tightrope». Maintaining a balance between the competing interests of politicians, administrators, professors, special interest groups, and concerned parents is very difficult, particularly when those interests involve such emotional topics as politics, sex, race, and religion. These subjects are far from trivial: wars continue to be fought over these subjects, and most librarians desperately do not want their libraries to be mini battlefields. To manage this area effectively, we need all the information we can gather about censorship and its consequences. We need to draw strength from our fellow professionals, and we need a clear vision of the library's role in society. We *can* walk the information tightrope if we are prepared and resolute.

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ABSTRACT Management of censorship issues is a very difficult aspect of library and information science practise. It is complicated by a number of factors, including conflicting opinions about library roles. As examples, should university and school libraries contain a wider variety of materials which support teacher's ideas or should these libraries contain a wider variety of materials which may challenge the curriculum? Should public libraries contain only non-controversial titles representing the best literature or should they provide a wide variety of popular materials, including those offensive to many adults and those unsuitable for children? Differing ideas about democracy also affect librarians: some members of society believe that democratic institutions should protect people from offensive words and ideas, while others believe that protection of free speech, even when it contains insulting racial and sexual content, is the basis of democratic government. These opposing views about democracy are evident in the differing human rights legislation of Canada and the United States. The emphasis which a country's national library associations place on censorship and intellectual freedom also influences the ability of librarians to manage this issue. Librarians draw confidence and support from a strong national association policy on intellectual freedom, while censors feel much freer to demand that materials be withdrawn from library shelves

when no national voice of rebuttal is present. At the local level, management of censorship issues is facilitated by the adoption of clear library-specific policies which state institutional objectives and collection parameters and by the training of staff at all levels about the library's intellectual freedom roles. Overall, the management of censorship issues in all types of libraries requires strong administrative skills enhanced by in-depth cognition of the task's complexities.

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