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## **Libraries, Censors, and Self-Censorship**

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### **Introduction**

Censorship is a concept that has a close association with libraries. A Google search of the two words resulted in 1,260,000 hits as of June 2009. While censorship also has a history that is not connected to libraries, this article focuses on the relationship between them. It poses the question of when, where, and why library censorship began. Have these key censorship issues stayed the same over the years? Have we changed as a society in our views on censorship, or have the people who are doing the censoring changed through time? To get a better picture of censorship in America, it is important to take a look at our past and compare it to our current practices.

Public libraries go back a little more than 150 years in the US. The Boston Public Library, which opened in 1854, is often described as America's first official public library. Before that, however, there were other notable lending libraries that had been established in the early 18th century, although the Boston library was the first to have state legislation passed which enabled its creation. There are a few newspaper articles on libraries and censorship that go back to the mid-19th century.

### **Librarians as Censors**

One short article states that, "The Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association of Philadelphia, have excluded the Westminster's view from the library because

it is not sufficiently orthodox in religious matters." (The Ohio State Journal, 1859). Another article mentions that a pro-slavery book, *Cotton is King* is being burned along with *Appleton's Encyclopedia* (The Ohio State Journal, 1860). In March of 1883, an article from the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* points out that the Boston Public Library is censoring books that present "false ideas of life" and "ultra sensationalism of plot." Books with a romantic nature are also under fire as well as high adventure books specifically for young boys. There is worry that these books may cause danger to young readers and concern that tax payers should not have to support the purchasing of such "trash." There is also mention that some would like the head librarian to decide who can check out which types of books (Cincinnati Daily Gazette, 1883).

An article from 1913 focuses on how publishers are playing a role in censorship by not publishing books which at the time might have been censored by libraries. The author points out that over time the definition of "morality" changes and since the key role of a company is to make money, it only makes sense to listen to what society wants (Wells, 1913). This implies that publishers were waiting until the subject matter of the book was more socially acceptable before publishing it, basically censoring what the public has access to.

It is fascinating to see that not only did censorship of books occur right from the start of our public library system, but that some of the leading people in promoting the censorship issue were librarians and publishers. Politics, religion, and morality were key reasons to censor books in early libraries.

For a period of time, censorship was a key responsibility of the librarian, along with trying to persuade the public that reading was not frivolous or harmful. In the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, when small libraries were popping up all over the country, due in part to Andrew Carnegie's endowment, many were concerned that this money could have been used elsewhere to better serve people. Lord Rodenberry claimed that "reading would destroy independent thinking." Librarians were also coming under attack because they could not prove that libraries were having any impact on reducing crime, improving happiness, or assisting economic growth, areas of keen importance during this period. In fact, significant role for public libraries was helping to "Americanize" the many new immigrants (Geller, 1984).

This understanding of the environment makes it easier to understand why librarians could not take on the challenges of fighting censorship. If they were to persuade the public of the benefits of a public library, they needed to support the moral values of the community and not allow books that could cause conflict to be in their libraries. After World War I, members of the press, writers, and the public were starting to protest censorship in newspapers and in libraries, and courts were hearing cases from writers about how their freedom of speech was being limited. Librarians who favored censorship began having to defend their views against other librarians and ALA.

## **New Values**

It would be almost 100 years after the creation of the first public libraries that the Library Bill of Rights would be developed and adopted. The first draft appeared in 1939, defining the librarian as the champion of the freedom to read (Geller, 1984). In 1948, when McCarthyism was a significant issue, the ALA Council revised the Library Bill of Rights and librarians defended its guidelines and principles (American Library Association, 1996). This important document states the following.

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment. (American Library Association, 1996).

Librarians could now use this document to support book selection, and it served as a reminder of their responsibilities to the public, regardless of their personal feelings. Nevertheless, the practice of censorship continued. Article called "Do-it-yourself Censors Strike," describes the case of a high school student who checked out a book and refused to return the book because it contradicted the school's teaching of abstinence. Another woman checked out all copies of a book from the town's two libraries because she felt they were too graphic and sexual for young readers. She did pay a fine for each book and filled out a reconsideration slip for the books but would not return them (*American Libraries*, 2007).

### **Pro-Censorship Organizations**

There are a number of contemporary organizations that favor censorship. One is Family Friendly Libraries, whose main goal is to create citizen action against libraries who do not filter Internet access, or who put "questionable" books on the shelves. This wants libraries to give parents the rights to limit their child's borrowing. When libraries that do not meet these requests and standards, members of these communities are encouraged to take political action by attending board meetings, speaking about their concerns, and lobbying elected officials and candidates (Family Friendly Libraries, 2007). While Family Friendly Libraries encourages accepted methods of political action, the National Socialist Movement encouraged its members to bring books to the Great Minnesota Book Burning with a concert to follow (National Socialist Movement, 2007).

The ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom has documented nearly 8,000 book challenges since 1990 (Gibson, 2007). A *Weekly Reader* article reported that 405 books were challenged in 2005 (Weekly Reader Corporation, 2007). Another article listed 546 book challenges in 2006 (Kennedy, n.d.). That article goes on to explain that books are challenged most often based on the belief that the content would be harmful to readers. Challenged books tend to be those intended for younger readers and are often challenged by parents, because of differences in values, religious beliefs, and political views. An organization called Parents for the American Way says that in 1995 there was a 37 percent increase in the number of book challenges (Goodale, 1996). Bruce Coville is a writer whose works have come under fire. He says that parents are trying to protect or shield their children from the real world by moving them to the suburbs, but there are books in the libraries about drugs, sex, and violence.

### **Authors and Publishers**

Author Judy Blume agrees with Coville, and says that parents jump on the censorship bandwagon as a way to stay in control of their children's lives. She recalls a childhood memory when her mother told her she could not read a particular book until she was in high school. When she tried to check the book out from her high school library, the librarian would not allow it. She goes on to say that in the 1970s, authors had a great deal of freedom in what they wrote and in being able to find publishers who believed in her work.

In the 1980s, the tide turned and censorship seemed to be everywhere. Blume was surprised to find her books censored and removed from shelves. She gave in to pressure from her publisher and removed some controversial material from a book to have it published. Blume goes on to say, "I mourn the loss of books that will never be written. I mourn the voices that will be silenced: writers voices, teachers' voices, student's voice and all because of fear" (Blume, 1999).

While librarians seem to have a professional code for guidance, publishers have profit as a way of knowing which books to publish, and this can lead to censorship. Diane Ravitch describes how books are censored before they even reach the public, outlining a set of silent rules applied by writers so that their works are not rejected. She sees writers, publishers, illustrators, and others as having been brainwashed over the years into creating only what publishers will publish. She states that, "educational materials are now governed by an intricate set of rules to screen out language and topics that might be controversial or offensive" (Ravitch, 2004).

Publishers were also criticized by the late Eli Oboler, who was well-known for his devotion to intellectual freedom and freedom of expression. Oboler's book *Censorship and Education* (1981) speaks out against textbook publishers, school boards, teachers, and the community, which allow censorship to occur by editing the text and choosing to not teach certain parts of history or literature because it might be controversial.

Along with writers being censored by publishers and communities, some authors self-censor. In an article in the *New Statesman* in 2003 we learn that writers who are already "struggling to find their voice" face new challenges as government censorship is practiced through the Patriot Act (Paretsky, 2003). Writers may be silenced out of fear of seeming "anti-American."

### **Librarian Self-Censorship**

This review of the literature shows that the issues have not really changed. In the past, religion, politics, safety, and the depiction of a race or culture were motives for banning or removing books. Those same topics are still controversial and will probably remain so. Some may find it surprising that, in the history of censorship, librarians were sometimes censors, before this trend changed with the Library Bill of Rights and other powerful intellectual freedom documents. The strong role now played by the community in censorship issues may be part of the general levels of distrust of governments and professionals. The necessary profit motive that publishers have makes their continuing role as censors unsurprising. The most surprising thing may be that some librarians still quietly practice censorship as "self-censorship," in selecting books for their collections. With so many support organizations and accepted policies, we might expect that librarians would have such a strong base to stand on that they would feel confident in purchasing books that might not reflect the beliefs or ideas of their community. Nevertheless, self-censorship is an issue for the profession.

In an article called "A Dirty Little Secret: Self-Censorship," (2009) we learn about an author who has written a young adult book which will probably be considered controversial by some adults. He is prepared to defend his book but finds that no defense is necessary because he is not hearing about any complaints. In fact, the book is receiving recognition and is on several well-known booklists and has rave reviews in professional journals. At some point, the author realized that the book was not being purchased by school libraries or was being put in the adult section of bookstores and public libraries. One librarian even wrote to let him know that she thought the book was amazing, but decided not to make it

available to her students because it might cause controversy. Barry Lyga, the author, realizes that librarians are self-censoring his book. He says, "It's sort of a soft, quiet, very insidious censorship, where no one is raising a stink, nobody is complaining, nobody is burning books, they're (librarians) just quietly making sure it doesn't get out there " (Whelan, 2009).

Author and former librarian Susan Parton says, "In a way self-censorship, it's almost more frightening than outright banning and removal of challenged material, because these incidents tend to slip under the radar" (Whelan, 2009). Parton has also had first-hand experience with librarians banning her books and pulling them from elementary shelves. In 2007 she won the Newbery Medal for one of her books. The book contained the word "scrotum," and some libraries who had bought the book withdrew it because of the word. This became a public debate brought to the public's attention the issue of librarians practicing self-censorship.

Can we judge an entire profession with just two examples of librarians practicing self-censorship, and is it really self-censorship or were there other reasons that these books were not purchased? The head librarian for White Settlement Independent School District, Ken Coley conducted an experiment to gage the self-censorship in Texas high school libraries. Coley created a list of "potential controversial books which had received supporting reviews, awards or recommendations for inclusion on reading lists." He selected a sample of schools that are part of the state's union catalog, and searched their catalogs for titles from the list. He found that more than 80 percent of schools showed signs of self-censorship. He also found that no school had all titles on the list, and the largest number held by a single school was 17. Only eighteen of the 100 schools sampled had 50 percent of the titles, and 18 schools had none. Coley is confident that, " criteria normally relied upon during the collection development process, (i.e., number and quality of reviews, reputation of the author, recommendation lists, awards won by the work itself and so on), are ignored when a work might prove controversial enough to provoke a challenge " (Coley, 2006).

Librarians argue that there are many reasons why a book is not selected, such as limited budgets, lack of interest or demand, inadequate shelf space, or lack of relevance to curriculum. It can be hard to determine what is selection and what is censorship. ALA states that, "It is important to keep in mind that selection is an inclusive process where the library affirmatively seeks out materials which will serve its mission of providing a broad diversity of points of view and subject matter" (American Library Association, n.d.). Collection development policies should be firmly grounded in these selection practices. Some argue that since the librarians write selection policies, these too can become "tools for precluding the purchase of entire categories of books" (Tomeboy, n.d.). Organizations that favor censorship notice this too, and point out that when they ask for a book to be removed it is called "censorship," but when a librarian removes a book it is simply deselecting or part of the weeding process, which may appear to be a double standard (Goodale, 1996).

It appears that librarians do not self-censor because they personally disagree with the content of the book, but because they are leery of having to defend their choices to hostile parents and community members. Joel Shoemaker, a librarian in Iowa City, says the process is incredibly stressful because of the potential for challenges. "I literally think about it every day" (Whelan, 2009). Pressure from administrators to make sure that schools do not come under criticism makes librarians more cautious. The New York Library Association is trying to help librarians and bring awareness of self-censoring by creating a "Self-Censorship Checklist" (New York Library Association, 2003). Henry Reichman argues that if schools set up policy with a clear plan for dealing with censorship, most issues can be "resolved without undue controversy" (Reichman, 2001). No matter how one justifies it or

how good the intentions of the library are, self-censorship is still choosing for others what they can and cannot have access to. Reichman compares this self-censorship to the Nazi burning of books that were "un-German" in 1933, and urges librarians to "stand up publicly for your convictions. Come out of the censor's closet. Burn some books" (Cronin, 2003).

## Conclusion

Topics like sex, violence, politics, religion, and race have triggered calls for censorship in the past and present. Publishers have contributed to this problem. Librarians' role has shifted over the course of the last century-and-a-half. They have moved from being "head censors" to being the key advocates of freedom of speech, freedom to read, and the values of the Library Bill of Rights. As we push into the 21st century with increasing pressure from library boards, hostile community members and administrators, librarians may slip back into self-censorship, reminiscent of the early library years. Awareness of this tendency can help us fight the urge to self-censor and continue to champion the values of our profession.

## Annotated Bibliography

American Libraries (2007, November). Do-it-yourself censors strike. (Censorship). *American Libraries* 38, 10. p. 19(1).

This article demonstrates the lengths to which some people will go to censor books for others, recounting incidents of patrons checking out books they found controversial and refusing to return them. Books with sexual content or information are frequent targets of this kind of censorship.

American Library Association (n.d.). Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q & A. Retrieved June 5, 2009, from:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/basics/ifcensorshipqanda.pdf>

ALA takes some of the most pressing questions concerning censorship and intellectual freedom and walks through the answers. The article speaks to obscenity and pornography, but mostly focuses on who the censors are, what materials are censored, and whether or not librarians practice censorship. The topic of selection versus censorship is also addressed.

American Library Association (1996, January 24). Library Bill of Rights. Available:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/statementsif/librarybillrights.cfm>

ALA has a vast amount of information on their website to support the librarians and media specialists. There are many articles on trends in librarianship and documents that can assist librarians in staying on the right path. The Library Bill of Rights is one of these documents. It can be used to support collection development policies.

Blume, J. (1999, June). Places I Never Meant to Be: A Personal View. (Cover story). *American Libraries* 30 (6), 62.

Judy Blume is a talented writer of young adult novels whose books have been challenged and banned in some schools and public libraries. She tells of her experiences with censorship.

*Cincinnati Daily Gazette* (1883, March 18). Library Censorship. [Letter to the Editor], pp. 6. The director of the Boston public library is leading the charge in book censorship! The issues presented in this article are still being debated today, although are unheard of. The author is very concerned that so many female writers' works seem to be on the list of authors whose books should be banned. Adventure books for men are also under scrutiny. People

are concerned that these books may cause a danger to younger boys. There is a call for the chief librarian to decide who can check out which kinds of material.

Coley, K. P. (2006, September 27). Moving Towards a method to Test for Self-Censorship by School Library Media Specialists. Available: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume52002/coley.cfm#review>

This reports on a study of self-censorship in Texas school libraries. The results of the study clearly show that self-selection or self-censorship is occurring.

Cronin, B. (Feb 15, 2003). Burned any good books lately? (The Dean's List). *Library Journal* 128, 3. p.48(1).

This article talks specifically about book burning and asks the reader to remember previous instances of book burning and recognize that this is not the path we want to walk down. The author reminds us that usually book burning does more to help the anti-censorship movement in the long run than to promote censorship of questionable materials. The article closes by criticizing misguided librarians who may not have created bonfires for destroying books, but who practice a quiet censorship by purging collections of materials they find offensive.

Family Friendly Libraries (2007). Available: <http://www.fflibraries.org/index.html>

This is a pro-censorship website organized in 1992 to counteract uncensored Internet access and books on public and school library shelves that were not considered age-appropriate. The site contends that "There are many serious problems emanating from public library policies crafted by the American Library Association, defended by the American Civil Liberties Union, and implemented in communities across the country. The site states that the ALA Library Bill of Rights is not law and that community members, through their library boards, can make changes to their libraries

Geller, E. (1984). *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939: A Study in Cultural Change*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

This book is a wonderful tool for understanding the role of the librarian at the beginning of the public library system. There were so many other issues in getting libraries started, that the librarians practiced censorship to keep community support for the public library. Changes in society helped bring about the Library Bill of Rights.

Gibson, J. (2007, November). Championing Intellectual Freedom A School Administrator's Guide. *Knowledge Quest*, 36.

The author is speaking to school administrators about the times when there is a conflict between students' rights and parents' requests. Administrators do not always know how to sort out these issues. This document provides examples of other censorship cases in other schools and how they were handled. It provides the administrators with recent data on the trends in censorship as well as encouraging them to look to the school media specialist for assistance and to visit the ALA website for assistance with intellectual freedom and the Library Bill of Rights.

Goodale, G. (1996, December 5). Who Decides Which Books a Child May Read?

*Christian Science Monitor*.

Book challenges are increasing. Several authors of banned books comment on this increase. Bruce Coville says that local schools and libraries become an easy target for people to feel that they can have an impact on what their government does, especially if they feel disconnected from the federal government.

Kennedy, E. (n.d.). Banning and Censorship of Children's Books. Available:

<http://childrensbooks.about.com/cs/censorship/a/censorship.htm>

Censorship is not a thing of the past but is very much among us in the present. The author uses the Harry Potter books to illustrate the issue. There is an increase in the number of books being challenged and several organizations have banded together to help counteract the censoring of literature in schools. The areas that most often come under fire for censorship include minority issues, politics, values, and religion. She provides readers with links to lists of challenged books.

National Socialist Movement (2007).

This site shows us that censorship is still alive and well and so is book burning. This site shows the extreme end of the pro-censorship spectrum, as compared to other pro-censorship sites mentioned above. This site helps to remind us that if individuals keep others from reading the views of others that this is what can happen.

New York Library Association. (2003, March 3). Self-Censorship Checklist. Available:

[http://www.nyla.org/index.php?page\\_id=444](http://www.nyla.org/index.php?page_id=444) (38)

This simple but thorough checklist walks through situations that librarians face when purchasing materials for their collection. It asks them to answer yes or no as they work through the checklist. The questions focus on their purchasing habits and review procedures for developing their collection. Then it points out that "If you answered yes to any of these questions, it's time to review your intellectual freedom practices!"

Oboler, E. M. (Ed.). (1981). *Censorship and Education*. New York: H.W. Wilson.

This book provides a broad view of educational censorship and the advantages and disadvantages of intellectual freedom in the school curriculum, textbook choice, and library systems of the American school system. An overview of different types of censorship as well as the history of censorship is discussed in the book. The book goes into detail about censorship during the textbook selection process, by publishers, school board, teachers, or community..

Paretsky, S. (2003, June 2). The new censorship. (Cover story). *New Statesman* 132 (4640), 18.

This article talks about censorship's effect on writers who already struggle to find their voice. The author compares the situation where writers' voices were silenced by publishers and libraries to a new form of censorship, self-censorship, because of provisions of the Patriot Act. She references two occasions where library patrons were arrested, held for questioning, and released, for viewing foreign websites in a public library.

Ravitch, D. (2004). *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*. NY: A. A. Knopf.

This book talks about how books and other materials are censored before they even reach the American public or our students. It describes a set of rules that have been silently applied to all media. The author contends that "educational materials are now governed by an intricate set of rules to screen out language and topics that might be considered controversial or offensive. Some of this censorship is trivial, some is ludicrous and some is breathtaking in its power to dumb down what children learn in school."

Reichman, H. (2001). *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*. 3rd ed. Chicago: American Library Association.

This book helps prepare school libraries for book challenge cases by being prepared with both a selection policy and a reconsideration policy. An overview of school censorship is presented as well as some key court cases regarding censorship.



*The Ohio State Journal* (1859, January 18). Literary Censorship. pp. 2.

This short news article states that "The Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association of Philadelphia, have excluded the Westminster's view from the library because it is not sufficiently orthodox in religious matters," showing the support for censorship by early librarians.

*The Ohio State Journal* (1860, February 22). [Letter to the Editor].

"The present literary censorship at the south is a marvelous and fearful thing. At Enterprise, Mississippi, a rash pro-slavery book *Cotton is King* has been burnt as incendiary and *Appleton's Encyclopedia* has shared the same fate."

Tomeboy. (n.d.). *tomeboy*. Available:

<http://webpages.charter.net/tomeboy/censorship.html>

This personal webpage maintained by a librarian is very critical of ALA. This article on censorship is from self-professed "libertarian" point of view. The author asserts that it is harder for librarians to keep books out of the hands of patrons because there are now so many shared consortium libraries who lend books to each other's patrons. He points out that both the liberals and conservatives have produced their fair share of literary "trash" and not including this material in the library collection may be self-censoring.

Weekly Reader Corporation (2007, March 5). Books on the Hook. *Weekly Reader* 106(20): 7.

This article is written for a younger reader as a tool to encourage talking about censorship with a group of students. It provides some basic facts and the number of book challenges in 2005. It also talks about why books in schools should not be censored and how students should be exposed to controversial material in schools where they have access to adults with whom they can discuss the books.

Wells (1913, October 19). With Writers and Books Latest Victim of Censorship English Firm's Ideas of Humor Strained. *The State*, pp. 29.

This article questions libraries' rights to censor and set standards for morality. A publisher is interviewed and says that just as fashion changes over the years, so does the definition of morality. He points out that if several books have been published 50 years earlier they would have been "suppressed" by the public libraries and possibly never read. He adds that since his business is to make money and that task is only accomplished when people buy the books, it is a good idea to wait to publish books until society has become more accepting of the ideas in the book.

Whelan, D. (2009, February). A Dirty Little Secret. (Cover story). *School Library Journal* 55 (2), 26-30.

This article mostly focuses on the self-censorship that occurs in the libraries of public schools. In a survey by *School Library Journal*, media specialists stated that they would not buy certain controversial titles because they are terrified of how parents will respond or are afraid of backlash from the administration or the community.



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