

# Covert censorship in libraries: a discussion paper

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## Abstract

Librarians, through their professional associations, have long been committed to the social justice principle of free access to information. External censorship challenges to library collections threaten this principle overtly. However, censorship can also occur in libraries in various covert and often unconscious ways. This discussion paper raises concerns about current librarian practices and library processes which can effectively censor library collections from within. The paper concludes by highlighting specific areas of practice in which librarians need to be vigilant for such covert censorship.

## Introduction

*'Whatever its starting point and expressed intention, the end of the censor's road is repression of 'dangerous' ideas - not only about sex but about morals, politics, art and life. Opposition to censorship must inevitably involve us in defending things and people whom we may dislike and disapprove of (sometimes passionately). Voltaire's well known saying that 'I detest what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it' may seem trite to us but is as apposite as it ever was.'*

Antony Grey, 1995

This paper considers the various points at which covert censorship may occur in the book selection and classification processes within First World libraries. The main focus of this paper will be on non-internet resources, although many of the issues raised here apply to both print and electronic materials. Similarly, while the discussion is likely to be of primary importance to public and academic librarians, it is hoped that the issues raised will also be of interest to school and specialist librarians.

As the formal positions of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) are both opposed to censorship, this paper will not discuss the pros and cons of censorship itself. Rather, this paper will adopt the stance that censorship in libraries is undesirable. From this position, the paper will explore the less overt, sometimes even unconscious forms of censorship which can occur in libraries.

## What is censorship?

Censorship is a difficult term to define. Its meaning, like its practical application, to an extent changes over time in line with changes in the attitudes of the communities in which it operates (Curry, 1997). Censorship encompasses those actions which significantly restrict free access to information. This can take many forms – some are overt, such as the classification scheme required under the Australian *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995*, but some are less obvious. Some forms of censorship are so unconscious that even the individuals perpetrating them have no idea that they are in fact censoring. Still other forms are systemic and can only be mitigated via deliberate librarian actions. It is these, more subtle forms of censorship in the library context that this paper aims to explore.

## Professional standards and the contemporary LIS environment

IFLA clearly opposes censorship in libraries, as is highlighted in the following extract from its Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom:

'IFLA supports, defends and promotes intellectual freedom as defined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.  
IFLA asserts that a commitment to intellectual freedom is a core responsibility for the library and information profession.'

IFLA therefore calls upon libraries and library staff to adhere to the principles of intellectual freedom, uninhibited access to information and freedom of expression and to recognize the privacy of the library user.' (IFLA, 2003)

ALIA maintains the same sentiment in their Statement on Free Access to Information, which is underpinned by the principle:

'Freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have unrestricted access to information and ideas.' (ALIA, 2001)

This principle is supported by seven specific responsibilities for libraries to uphold:

1. Asserting the equal and equitable rights of citizens to information regardless of age, race, gender, religion, disability, cultural identity, language, socioeconomic status, lifestyle choice, political allegiance or social viewpoint;
2. Adopting an inclusive approach in developing and implementing policies regarding access to information and ideas that are relevant to the library and information service concerned, irrespective of the controversial nature of the information or ideas;
3. Ensuring that their clients have access to information from a variety of sources and agencies to meet their needs and that a citizen's information needs are met independently of location and an ability to pay;
4. Catering for interest in contemporary issues without promoting or suppressing particular beliefs and ideas;
5. Protecting the confidential relationships that exist between the library and information service and its clients;
6. Resisting attempts by individuals or groups within their communities to restrict access to information and ideas while at the same time recognising that powers of censorship are legally vested in state and federal governments;
7. Observing laws and regulations governing access to information and ideas but working towards the amendment of those laws and regulations which inhibit library and information services in meeting the obligations and responsibilities outlined in this Statement.' (ALIA, 2001)

The reality of the contemporary library environment is that all libraries have budget limitations which impact on their collection development process. Lee notes that while library budgets have been reduced in recent years, the volume of available informational items has increased, so that now 'we are certain to exclude a lot more material than we add' (1998, p.25). Choices must be made: not all publications can be afforded by all libraries. So how are these decisions made? And when do they become censorship?

### **Possible sources of censorship**

The following sections will explore a number of common library practices that can contribute to covert censorship in libraries.

#### **Vendor bias**

Lee (1998) notes that in the USA, many if not most librarians rely heavily on industry review journals for identification of new materials. Recent exploratory research into selection processes by Australian public librarians indicates that this may well be the case in this country also (Moody, 2004). Lee believes such publications are inherently biased, with products from large publishing houses being given more advertising space and possibly even more favourable reviews than those from smaller publishers (1998, p. 25). Anderson estimates that by relying primarily on such review journals, librarians would be aware of no more than 10 percent of publishers publishing today (1999, p.11). Particularly invisible in such selection tools are materials produced by independent and alternative publishers (McDonald, 1997). Importantly, such alternative items can often be the only published sources of non-mainstream or controversial topics.

A recent example of the bias within the book publishing industry which highlights the above points relates to the US distribution of Michael Moore's book, *Stupid White Men: And Other Excuses for the State of the Nation*, the content of which is considered anti-U.S. government. As Sisson (2002) explains, Moore's book was due to be distributed on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. In light of the attacks on the New York World Trade Centres that day, the publisher, Harper Collins, told Moore they wished to delay release of the book. Moore agreed. In November, Moore contacted the publisher to find out when his book would be distributed, and

was offered a variety of censorship options under which the publisher would consider releasing the already-printed book, such as the omission of any sections which criticised the U.S. President. When Moore rejected these options, he was told the books would be pulped.

As it transpired, the book was in fact released, following action by members of the American Library Association, who pressured Harper Collins into releasing the book. This case highlights the difference between the core values of the publishing and distribution industries and those of the professional librarian. In this case a just result was achieved due to the awareness of the situation within the library profession, and to the high profile of the author. But how many items are censored well before distribution point?

The real issue here is, how can librarians learn about such items at all? Clearly some level of regular environmental scanning of new releases needs to be carried out by acquisitions librarians to address this issue. Such scanning would need to be at least partially independent of traditional vendor resources, perhaps incorporating internet searches, alternative vendor and publisher catalogues, and direct contact with independent publishers and independent bookstores.

### **Acquisitions outsourcing**

The phenomenon of acquisitions outsourcing also raises concerns about vendor bias. The most extreme form of outsourcing employs a particular vendor to undertake material selection, acquisitions and processing activities, with selection based on library profiles (for example, lists of preferred subjects, genres or authors). Given the vendor bias concerns raised in the previous section, some important considerations with outsourcing are: How broad is the scope of the vendor? How are items selected for inclusion in vendor preference categories? Are items released by vendor-preferred publishers given greater prominence within the preference categories?

Vendors are not required to uphold the professional standards that a librarian is required to uphold (Lee, 1998, p.32). If outsourcing significantly narrows the range of sources from which library materials are selected, it flies in the face of the ALIA *Statement on Free Access to Information*, which charges libraries with 'ensuring that their clients have access to information from a variety of sources and agencies to meet their needs...' (ALIA, 2001).

Those who point to high circulation statistics as evidence that outsourcing is successful are missing one of the key points of information provision: people do not know what they don't know. The controversial and unique nature of many topics covered by independent and alternative materials are unlikely to be requested at the desk or via inter library loan, due to ignorance of their existence in the first place, or due to confidentiality concerns. In other words, the popularity of the items within your collection does not tell you anything about the need for items not in your collection.

### **Citation rates for periodical selection**

The use of citation rates for the selection of periodicals can occur in academic libraries. This method involves using the rate at which available publications are cited in existing research to justify acquisitions and weeding decisions. Marinko & Gerhard (1998) believe that this use of citation rates can lead to a narrowing of library collections, for several reasons.

Firstly, the less frequently a title is held, the less available it is to be used in research. This results in a low citation rate, which leads to the title being held by fewer libraries, and so on. In this way, citation rates are like self-fulfilling prophecies.

Secondly, citation rates do not give a true indication of the quality of a particular journal. For example, indexed periodicals are not necessarily of a higher quality than non-indexed titles, but they are certainly more easily accessible. They are therefore more likely to be used in research, and to attain higher citation rates as a consequence.

Finally, for a library trying to include a variety of viewpoints within its collection, a periodical that brings a particular viewpoint – for example an alternative journal – has a value that cannot be measured by the frequency with which it is cited (Marinko & Gerhard, 1998).

## Pressure from funding bodies

Lee (1998) identifies one of the basic ironies of the public library: on the one hand, public libraries are built and paid for by the government. On the other hand, a core tenet of the library profession is the support of intellectual freedom, which must include those ideas which are anti-government. Therefore, governments, through libraries, must support the very thing which could be their downfall. A classic example is the political and economic writings of the famous communist Karl Marx, which were researched largely from the collections of government-funded British libraries (Lee, 1998).

Are all governments likely to be happy about this situation? Can librarians continue to afford, in this climate of shrinking resources and budgetary competition, to bite the hand that feeds by including resources within their collections which challenge government attitudes? An anecdote shared with me recently related an instance where librarians in a Queensland public library were directed by local councillors to remove a book from the collection following a patron complaint. What is the legal position for the librarian in this case? Refusal to remove the item will uphold the professional ethos of the librarian concerned, but may well lose them their job, or any opportunities for future advancement within that organisation. Further clarification is needed on this issue.

Further afield, the 2001 USA-PATRIOT Act has impacted on the operations of U.S. public libraries, particularly with regard to patron confidentiality (Dawson, 2003; Kaser, 2003; Pike, 2002). American librarians continue to lobby for amendments to this legislation. In the tense post-September 11 political climate, ALIA will need to monitor any proposed Australian legislative changes closely. In the event that 'national security'/'anti-terrorist' legislation is introduced which limits the capacity of Australian libraries to uphold the responsibilities outlined in the ALIA Statement on Free Access to Information, the industry will need to mobilise to oppose such censorship.

## Self censorship and 'community standards'

Possibly the most insidious form of censorship is the self censorship of librarians. Even librarians who consciously do not agree with censorship of library collections may in fact censor subconsciously, or even consciously when potential personal threats are perceived, such as conflict in the workplace or community (Evans, 2000). If individuals are conscious of their own personal values and prejudices, they may be able to minimise the censorial influence of these biases on their professional role (Lee, 1998 & Schweinsburg, 1995). However, if the librarian is unaware of their own biases, self-censorship decisions can often be justified via claims of 'inaccuracy' or misguided concerns about 'balance' (Moody, 2004).

Librarians may also be tempted to censor their collections, not based on their own personal references, but rather along the lines of 'community standards'. The community standards argument is one commonly advocated by conservative pressure groups. Lee (1998) suggests that the aim of community standards appears to be to reduce the library collection down exclusively to items which could not possibly offend anyone. This issue is commonly heard originating from the U.S., where items on topics such as evolution and sex are frequently the subject of debate. However, it must be remembered that here in Australia we have our own lobby groups who publicly endorse censorship practices, as these policies highlight:

'Remove all immoral, anti-family, anti-Christian books and courses from school libraries and curriculum.' (Christian Democratic Party, 2003, web page 'Policy Summary, 2003 [NSW] State Election')

'Family First will work to achieve government commitment to establish a Mandatory Filtering Scheme at the ISP Server Level in this country.' (Family First Party, 2004, web page 'Family First Party Policy Statement: Internet Pornography and Children')

The following quotes from U.K. and Canadian public librarians offer some explanation of the pro-community standards perspective:

'Of-course you uphold the community standards, why would somebody knowingly buy something he [sic] knows is going to be totally provocative? We do ourselves more harm than good when we make statements like this about purpose and philosophy. We should try to make libraries welcoming places for the community and just get on with it.' (Curry, 1997, p.65)

'If this community feels that something should not be here, then I feel my job is basically to serve that community that is paying for my services and salary and knowledge. If I don't like it, I should go somewhere else where I'm happier with my values and knowledge.' (Curry, 1997, p.65)

But which sections of the community are these librarians hoping to make 'welcome'? The loudest sections? The best-resourced sections, who can mount the most impressive opposition? The real question here is whether the librarian's allegiance is to the stated intellectual freedom standards of their profession, or to specific individuals or pressure groups within their communities.

To avoid covert censorship of contentious issues in our libraries, Atton suggests that it may be appropriate to 'consider providing information and knowledge on topics from as wide an array as possible' (1996, p.95-96). To this end, where one side of an argument or debate is represented in the collection, the various alternative sides should also be represented. As new issues emerge, Internet scanning may assist with this, providing insights into non-mainstream views. Alternative literature may well be another important source, as will networking within the alternative publishing communities, particularly where mainstream literature and media fails to provide the required variety of opinion, such as occurred in the mainstream representations of the Gulf War, or the so-called 'McLibel' Trial against fast food giant McDonald's (Atton, 1996). Alternative literature is further discussed below.

### **Reduced visibility of independent publications**

Another consideration associated with library acquisition policies is the independent publication of literature which Selth (1993) refers to as 'alternative'. Selth notes that works of a 'radical' or 'alternative' nature, such as publications of the radical left, or 'zines, are often published by small companies or even individuals, who cannot afford the promotion that a large publisher can afford. Atton notes that reduced promotion makes these works less visible to the book distribution and library industries, and that they are consequently likely to be underrepresented within libraries. He quotes Duncan Turner of James Askew & Son, a major British library supplier, as saying the exclusion of alternative literature from their catalogue represents only 'a few titles by obscure experimental publishers' (1996, p.100). Without touching on the inaccuracy of this comment, if the attitude expressed is at all representative, clearly libraries are unlikely to receive alternative literature from their standard acquisitions vendor. Is it the role of the librarian, then, to seek out such items for inclusion, in an effort to promote intellectual freedom? In the interests of intellectual freedom, the answer must be 'yes'.

Atton (1996), writing of the British and U.S. alternative publishing sectors identifies a number of publications, such as *Alternative Press Review*, which can be used to get a feel for this section of the publishing industry. The Internet is another obvious source of information on this ever-changing sector. It must be remembered, however, that new publications, especially in the case of 'zines, can emerge over night. An effective long-term strategy for inclusion of alternative literature in the library collection may involve the development of professional but friendly relationships with local alternative publishers and 'zine networks, with the aim of being informed of new publications, and of informing newly emerging alternative publishers of your interest in their work. Atton (1996) also notes that such networking will improve your awareness of newly emerging issues, and ensure that your library collection is able to include these in a timely manner.

### **So we're anti-censorship, but what about hate?**

'If you believe in freedom of speech, you believe in freedom of speech for views you don't like.'

Noam Chomsky (as cited in Atton, 1996, p.57-58)

An American survey, conducted in 1981, asked public librarians whether 'public libraries should carry literature put out by the KKK and the Nazi Party' (Bundy, as cited in Curry, 1997, p.83). Fifty percent of respondents thought that these items should be included in library collections. The remainder of respondents were split between disagreement and indecision.

The issues around such 'hate items', be they racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-semitic, etc, may indeed be the toughest for librarians to work through. It may be a relatively easy decision, in our own fairly liberal society, to include positive representations of homosexuality, Islam, etc, but what about negative representations? What about items which are outright offensive to you as a person, such as racism or Holocaust revisionism? What about books which advocate violence?

This is a difficult area, ethically. Many such publications may in fact only be available from extremist organisations, involving risks to library staff in sourcing them (Atton, 1996). Legally, with regard to material which could be said to advocate violence, the situation is complex and unclear in Australia, depending on the specific situation, and the state in which it occurs. When contacted, a spokesperson for ALIA explained:

‘What one’s legal responsibilities are...depends on the situation and the context. ..Library policies would generally not encourage the acquisition of information advocating violence. But, there are cases where libraries have a duty to acquire it...[such as] where libraries support the students of law enforcement... [or]... Parliamentary libraries...’  
(personal email communication with Colette Ormonde of ALIA, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2003)

### **It’s not just about what you buy: cataloguing**

So far censorship has largely been discussed as it pertains to library acquisitions. But it is possible to censor items even after they have made it into the collection. There are two key ways that such censorship can occur: cataloguing bias and labelling.

As recently as the late 1980’s, such censorship occurred in the Dewey classification of John Pope’s *The Hellions* by LC. This book is a critique of television evangelists. As Lee (1998) describes, the book was initially classified, seemingly appropriately, by an OCLC participating library at 269.2, for Evangelists and Evangelism. However, the book was later reclassified by LC at 200, which is the broadest possible classification for religion.

The primary consequence of this reclassification is that library patrons browsing the Evangelist section of the library or library catalogue would not locate the book. A secondary consequence could be that the book will be used by patrons less often, as it cannot be readily found, and it is therefore more likely to be deselected when weeding is conducted.

Another cataloguing issue relates specifically to alternative publications. Alternative titles can often have non-standard formats, they typically do not include cataloguing in publication (CIP) data, and are also unlikely to be available via existing cataloguing networks such as OCLC or Kinetica. Lee (1995) notes that this makes them difficult, or at least time consuming to catalogue, meaning they can end up being catalogued last. A large part of the value of many alternative titles lies in their immediacy, particularly when they deal with controversial social and political topics. This immediacy is clearly lost if they are not processed for several months.

The issue of labelling is also raised in the censorship literature. Labelling refers to the practice of attaching a warning or rating label to an item. Evans (2000) states that labelling is ‘prejudicial and creates bias’ (p.546). Prejudicial or not, in Australia such labelling is required by law on certain items, under the *Federal Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995*, and therefore lies beyond the scope of this report. However, non-legislated labelling may be demanded by public pressure groups. It appears clearly within the responsibility of the librarian to refuse such labelling on the grounds of intellectual freedom.

However, this issue can become more complex, such as in the area of children’s literature. If an item aimed at children contains potentially distressing content which would not be apparent from the title and cover of the book, should readers and guardians be warned with labelling? If so, how would we define ‘distressing’? Would this simply include violence? What about representations of homosexual relationships? What about the death of a main character? At what point does censorship conflict with education? Again, the complexity of censorship issues is apparent.

### **Conclusion**

Censorship operates by both overt and covert mechanisms. In the contemporary library environment, the professional stance is one of anti-censorship. However, battling the covert forms of censorship in the real-world context of a resource-limited library may be more difficult and complex than is initially apparent.

Some specific areas in which librarians need to be vigilant for covert censorship include:

- Vendor promotional, classification and selection bias
- Use of citation rates in periodical selection and weeding
- The exclusion of independently-published materials

- Pressure from funding bodies
- Self-censorship of librarians
- Adherence to 'community standards'
- Labelling of controversial items
- Inaccurate or slow cataloguing and classification
- Exclusion of socially unpleasant materials, such as 'hate items'

It may be helpful to remember that these are not minor issues. In the present global climate of political tension and terrorism, civil liberties are currently being eroded in some countries of the West. Where these liberties involve uncensored access to information, they impact directly in the role of the librarian.

An informed public is the very foundation of a true democracy. To quote again the ALIA Statement on Free Access to Information:

'Freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have unrestricted access to information and ideas.' (2001, para 2)

Librarians therefore have an important role to play in the maintenance of a democracy, because when librarians do their jobs properly, they connect people with the information they want and need.

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