
Intellectual Freedom— That Neglected Topic An Introduction

Gene D. Lanier, Guest Editor

Librarianship, as a profession, according to Eli M. Oboler¹ who was one of our strongest proponents of intellectual freedom, is as much based on the freedom of the mind as the profession of medicine is based on its responsibility for the care of the body or the profession of law for equitable determination of the relative rights of individuals and society. He felt that if universal health is the proper goal of the doctor and universal justice the appropriate aim of the lawyer, then, equally, universal intellectual freedom is unquestionably the right target for the librarian.

Librarians have had to deal with censorship and related issues for as long as there has been a recognized profession. Censorship is defined in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* as

... the policy of restricting the public expression of ideas, opinions, conceptions and impulses which have or are believed to have the capacity to undermine the governing authority of the social or moral order which that authority considers itself bound to protect.²

It is conscious policy and may be enforced without the assent of the majority; indeed, it may be instituted by a small group or even by an individual who feels strongly concerning a certain issue. Though such issues may fall in any sphere of human interest, the practice of censorship has been most frequently invoked in three areas, namely, politics, religion, and morals. Therefore, it is in these areas that the problems of censorship as they impinge on library administration are most often encountered.

There are currently several trends that have caused concern if not problems for librarians, authors, and publishers alike. The threat of regional and national movements to "Christianize" American education is ominous. As a nation we tend to be confronted with crises; we tend to

be disoriented, feeling unrepresented and helpless. While in this frame of mind, there are individuals and groups in our midst who have arisen with what they say are all the answers to our problems. They are doing this in the name of God, the family unit, the flag, and patriotism. A number are using the ill-defined term secular humanism as the reason for their actions.

Although a large percentage of reported censorship incidents appears to have been initiated by an isolated parent or school official, the reasons cited for these censorship attempts consistently follow the philosophy of nationally organized pressure groups such as the Liberty Federation, the Eagle Forum, Citizens for Decency, the National Coalition Against Pornography, the National Council for Better Education, and the John Birch Society. The educational philosophy of such groups is succinct in that they feel children should be exposed to a slanted set of "facts" that in no way conflicts with either the censor's point of view of history or their visions of the future. A book is easier to burn than to explain.

Current state and federal legislation has also played a role in limiting access to information. There has been a growing restriction of governmental information according to documents librarians due to the crucifixion of the Freedom of Information Act. The "chilling effect" of the *Attorney General's Commission Report on Pornography*³ has been voiced by librarians, university professors, and classroom teachers. This unscientific treatise has resulted in librarians practicing "silent" censorship by not choosing titles which meet the criteria for selection or by removing titles before the censor comes because they might be considered controversial. In the classroom, professors and teachers have changed their instruction or avoided certain sensitive topics due to the same reasons. In North Carolina, anti-obscenity legislation (N.C. General Statutes, Article 26, 14-190.1 - 14-190.20) and a proposed bill called the "Parent and Pupil Rights Act" patterned after

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the Hatch Amendment, have had the same effect, along with debates on the Basic Education Plan. The Tennessee and Alabama court decisions also added to the intimidation. All of these have given librarians pause in the selection process, and have encouraged moral vigilantes resulting in attempted censorship.

Technology has brought on its share of problems in this area involving access and copyright. The 1986 report from the Commission on Freedom and Equality of Access to Information⁴, chaired by Dan M. Lacy, indicates that some technologies of communication tend to lock information in computer systems and data banks which cost thousands of dollars to access. This along with the information explosion and copyright infringements has resulted in an onslaught which is going to make it difficult for intellectual freedom and access to survive. It can become very easy to fall into the trap of assuming the servant role and to lose the storage and retrieval battle. Many have forgotten that our whole constitutional system is based on the theory that we regulate action, not ideas or attitudes.

Excesses must be tolerated even though we may personally disagree with certain issues and topics in today's world.

Having served as Chairman of the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the North Carolina Library Association since 1980, and having dealt with over two hundred requests for help, as well as being on the same committee in the Southeastern Library Association and American Library Association, this writer has witnessed and been involved in a number of censorship attempts around the country. There have been numerous occasions when knowledge and understanding of intellectual freedom principles by librarians could have changed the whole sequence of events.

Cases have failed in protecting the freedom to read, view, and listen first of all when the librarian and/or advisory committee have not had a solid philosophy of intellectual freedom. They casually agree they subscribe to the First Amendment, the Constitution, the Freedom to Read Statement, and the Library Bill of Rights, but when censorship attempts and problems come home, they begin to back down, hedge, and their

stand falls apart. There is no in-between when it comes to the freedom to read, view, and listen. Excesses must be tolerated even though we may personally disagree with certain issues and topics in today's world. There seems to be a growing misconception that a librarian taking a purist stand on intellectual freedom must go out on a limb when any materials are being attacked. If a title meets the criteria for selection identified in the written, approved selection policy and helps the library work toward its identified goals and objectives, a defense is not necessary.

Intellectual freedom expert Lester Asheim as far back as 1953 made a clear distinction between censorship and selection.⁵ Too often, librarians in this writer's experience feel they are censoring simply by not selecting a title or by not defending every single title that has been added to the collection through the years. This is a fallacy. Other cases have failed because (1) there was no written, approved selection policy; (2) the advisory/reconsideration committee was inactive; (3) the selection policy had received little publicity and administrators and governing authorities had not been reminded from time to time that the policy existed; (4) the complainant had not been informed of the selection policy and procedures for handling complaints or the policy and reconsideration form were not readily available; or (5) the hearings for reconsideration had not been well organized and publicized.

It is critical that librarians plan ahead to ensure due process and the protection of intellectual freedom. Emphasis should be placed on the positive elements of intellectual freedom rather than the negative connotations associated with censorship. This issue of *North Carolina Libraries* examines these problems from different perspectives. It is hoped it will stimulate North Carolina librarians to examine their personal philosophies concerning intellectual freedom and help them prepare before the censor comes.

References

1. Eli M. Oboler, *Defending Intellectual Freedom: The Library and the Censor* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).
2. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 356.
3. U.S. Department of Justice, *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography: Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986).
4. *Freedom and Equality of Access to Information: A Report to the American Library Association* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1986), 5.
5. Lester E. Asheim, "Not Censorship but Selection," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 28 (September 1953): 63-67.

When there are anticipated problems or you are faced with a censorship attempt, you should contact one of the following IFC members for aid and suggestions:

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The First Amendment

*Congress shall make no law respecting an
establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free
exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech,
or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably
to assemble, and to petition the Government for
a redress of grievances.*