Reading Practices and Intellectual Freedom Research

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Abstract

Based on discourse from 13 challenge cases from 2007-2011, the study argues that studying contemporary reading practices, especially interpretive strategies, is vital to understanding why people attempt to censor books.

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When the Graduate Library School (GLS) at the University of Chicago was established in 1929, the faculty considered reading research to be an integral component of graduate education in library and information science. Under the guidance of Douglas Waples and following the program of the sociology department at the university, several reading studies were conducted in the Chicago area. In a 1999 article, Wayne Wiegand notes that this research ended in 1932 under the auspices of a new dean, Louis Round Wilson. Wiegand states—in no uncertain terms—that GLS and librarianship “walked away from an opportunity” (Wiegand, 1999, p. 10). This study, by drawing on concepts from the interdisciplinary field of book history, demonstrates how our understanding of reading practices can impact research on intellectual freedom and censorship.

Reading is a practice that is somewhat difficult to theorize. Robert Darnton notes that there are no direct routes to comprehending reading—only approaches that can be used by researchers to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. Darnton’s first approach investigates how people learn to read. Researchers can also study reading through autobiographies. This approach explores what people say they read. Another approach to reading research is through literary theory, particularly reader-response theory. A fourth method explores analytical biography. Finally, researchers can examine the “ideas and assumptions underlying reading in the past” (Darnton, 1991, p. 171). For example, attempts to censor reading materials demonstrates not only ideas with which people disagree but also what people believe constitutes “good reading.”

In her article on textual interpretation, Elizabeth Long (1992) demonstrates the social and collective nature of the practice of reading. Even though reading is often seen as a solitary activity (a concept the author vividly illustrates through a series of paintings that show lone readers), Long establishes the collective nature of reading by demonstrating its reliance on both social infrastructure and social framing. By social infrastructure, Long means that reading is an activity that is learned through social relationships and relies on the social base of literary culture. Social framing constructs certain materials as being “worth reading” and is socially defined. It is possible that this concept of “worthy” reading can be linked to the idea of “appropriate” reading that is so prominent in the discourse of censors.

One method that might be used to study reading is to focus on the interpretive strategies that people employ when encountering written texts. Stanley Fish notes that “interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading...they are the shape of reading and because they are the shape of reading they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them” (Fish, 1982, p. 168). Interpretive strategies are defined here as a set of decisions that one makes both before and while one is reading. These decisions have many different influences including social constructions of written texts and the perceived authority of the book.

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This study discusses reading as a social practice that has changed over time and encompasses different physical modalities and interpretive strategies. In order to understand why people challenge books, it explores differing understandings of how reading works, “what it means” to read a text, and especially how one constructs the idea of “appropriate” reading materials. Data for the study consists of discourse from 13 challenge cases to books in American public libraries and schools that took place between 2007 and 2011. Three sources of discourse from the cases were used in the study. The first consisted of documents, obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests to governing bodies, produced in the course of challenge cases. Recordings of book challenge public hearings constituted the second source of data. Finally, the third source of data was interviews with challengers.

The study demonstrates that challenge cases are particularly influenced by what might be called a “common sense” orientation to text wherein there is little room for polysemic interpretation. The meaning of texts is always clear and there is only one avenue for interpretation. This common sense interpretive strategy is coupled with what Cathy Davidson (2004) as “undisciplined imagination” wherein the reader is unable to maintain distance between the events in a text and his or her own response. These reading practices broaden our understanding of why people attempt to censor books in public institutions. The study posits that censorship behaviors, such as challenging or marking through books, are intimately tied to the how one understands the practice of reading and its effects on character development.

References


