Access to Information: Professional Responsibility and Personal Response

The library community devotes much attention to outsiders who attempt to impose their views on the collection development process. The library community expects that insiders will rally and, with profound indignation, resist efforts by outsiders to censor library resources. Actual happenings illustrate that this does not always occur. In fact, well-publicized challenges seem to result in restrictive practices by some librarians.

A school librarian declares that she will not purchase a Judy Blume book because Blume's books cause too much trouble (Hentoff, 1983, p. vii). A secondary school librarian states that "we are somewhat selective in our choice of library resources" (McDonald, 1983, p. 10). A public librarian, after a successful young adult Dungeons and Dragons program, vows not to repeat the program because of isolated community reaction.

There is no indignation at these events, just understanding. There is no outcry, just a recognition that the librarian was acting to survive and that it could easily have been any librarian. The rationale for these actions explains the difference between the motivations of the outsiders and the motivations of the librarians. They say: "I disapprove of the ideas in this book." Librarians say, "the book has no literary merit," or "my budget has been cut and I can't buy everything." The outsiders mean that they fear the ideas in the book. Librarians mean that they fear the results to themselves, and they fear the outsiders.

While virtually all of the voluminous writing on censorship focuses on the actions of outsiders, much of the actual censorship is done by librarians. Quietly, under the guise of selection, spurred by rumors of controversy, or the tainting of an author because of continuous efforts to remove her books, a librarian removes a book, creates a restricted shelf, or neglects to buy a potentially controversial title.

These incidents are not publicized; they never reach the collective consciousness. Librarians do not report their self-censorship to the press.
In effect, librarians erect more barriers to information in their day-to-day activities than are imposed from the outside. Persons in the library community need to examine their reasoning and beliefs and face the fact that the most serious threat to access to information comes not from those outside but, in fact, results from the fears, values, and actions of librarians.

The library community has known that librarians have censored materials since the fifties and sixties when Fiske (1959) and Farley (1964) reported their research. During the 1970s, Busha (1972) affirmed earlier findings and added significant information about the characteristics of librarians who exhibit censorious inclinations. Pope (1974) and Woods and Salvatore (1981) provided more evidence that librarians are not purists in defending intellectual freedom. Recently, Hopkins (1984, pp. 9-22) reported a trend toward more self-censorship by librarians. The formerly secret plague of librarians—self-censorship, safe selection, restricted circulation—is out of the closet.

Hopkins (1984) asked: "How widespread is precensorship by library media specialists and what can the profession do about it at whatever level" (p. 18)? This presentation represents one person’s answer to that question. It is time for the profession of librarianship to stop focusing on challenges to resources and begin to examine why knowledge of intellectual freedom, as expressed in the Library Bill of Rights and the Interpretations, is not enough to ensure that librarians will uphold freedom-to-read principles. Why do librarians who subscribe to a Code of Ethics (American Library Association, 1985-1986, p. 226), violate its principles? Why do librarians who know the value of selection policies and procedures, fail to follow them? The library profession must examine why librarians are able to articulate the values of the profession and yet act contrary to those values. Is it the preparation programs? Is it personal characteristics, levels of adult development, or the cognitive development of librarians? Is it a combination of factors?

The commitment to the public's right to read must go beyond the verbalization stage where many librarians readily give lip service to the library user's right to inquiry. A true commitment to freedom of access to books and information should progress from the realm of abstract conceptualization to functional operation in the day-to-day activities of the librarian, especially when a library is confronted with censorship pressures. (Busha, 1972, p. 4)

Based on observations of current professional practice and the limited research available, it is possible to speculate about what factors affect the inclination of librarians to act in a manner consistent with principles of freedom to read. Three personal components appear to influence reactions to censorship pressures: first, personal characteristics of the librarian; second, level of commitment to a professional ethic; and third, the professional preparation of the librarian. Three external components appear to
shape the personal components: first the milieu in which the librarian works—institutional expectations, the authority and management style of supervisors, and the characteristics and professional commitment of coworkers; second, actual community response to access to information, including press reactions to First Amendment freedoms for children and young adults; and third, perceptions of community values and likely tolerance of intellectual freedom. This presentation focuses on the personal components.

Personal Characteristics

Librarians talk about censorship as something being done to them. They identify the censor as the irate parent who calls the principal, or stops at the office of the head librarian, or contacts the library trustee. However, definitions of censorship make it clear that government authorities or their agents are the censors, not parents or other citizens. In spite of Fiske’s (1959), Farley’s (1964), and Busha’s (1972) findings, librarians refuse to accept the term for themselves. Librarians compromise, librarians hold procensorship attitudes, and librarians censor. Yet librarians profess belief in the intellectual freedom principles in the Library Bill of Rights.

Downs (1984) speculated that perhaps there was something in the psychological makeup or personality of librarians which led to their differing approaches to the selection and restriction of library resources (p. 8). Discussing parental reactions to young adult books, but applicable in the context of the librarian as censor, Broderick (1984) said “it is unclear (because we have no real psychological research into the characteristics of censors) whether the censors have never achieved the formal operations stage in their cognitive development or do not understand the process that must be gone through to achieve this level of thought” (p. 44). Fiske (1959) concluded that school and public librarians do not feel strongly enough “as individuals or as professionals to assert” intellectual freedom values in the “face of public disapproval” (p. 110). Busha (1972) showed a correlation between authoritarian beliefs and procensorship attitudes in public librarians (p. 336). Farley (1964) found that more than half of the secondary school librarians interviewed expressed “weak, wavering, uncertain, or contradictory” (p. 122) attitudes toward library censorship and concluded that “librarians censor books because of a pressure which they cannot identify” (emphasis added) (p. 325).

It may be suggested by this research...that the school librarian who contemplates the censoring of a book against his better judgment and because of “pressure” has a professional obligation to take thought and to attempt to identify this pressure to his own satisfaction, if indeed any real pressure actually exists. (p. 335)

Donelson (1981) said: “I have no idea how many people preach
Managers restrict community, comprehend efforts who family ethic. Professional sion that issues, freedom and education while stocking only those books that please the community, placate the censor, ignore modern problems, eschew moral issues, and therefore avoid controversies’ (p. 12). The Office for Intellectual Freedom (1983) described four factors which motivate the censor—family values, political views, religion, and minority rights—and added that no citizen and no librarian can properly assume the duty or right to restrict or suppress legally protected expressions of ideas (pp. 173-74).

The library profession does not know the characteristics of a librarian who firmly espouses and practices intellectual freedom principles. Also, the profession does not know whether librarians, who successfully resist efforts to restrict information, exhibit similar characteristics. The profession does not know what life stages or passages lead to the ability to comprehend the concepts of intellectual freedom. It is not as simple as age and experience. These qualities do not guarantee upholding the Library Bill of Rights or only first- or second-year librarians would be practicing self-censorship. We know that this is not the case.

**Professional Ethics**

The next component influencing the librarian’s reaction to censorship pressures is the librarian’s level of commitment to a professional ethic. Behavior in a challenge situation or a self-censorship situation cannot be predicted from a librarian’s verbal report of valuing an ethical standard. People who travel around the country speaking to librarians about intellectual freedom issues report instances of rapt audiences, nodding in agreement at every intellectual freedom platitude uttered, with apparent understanding and acceptance of the principles being expounded. But, invariably, the first remarks following the presentation illustrate that librarians are able to justify self-censorship by the unique conditions in which they work. “Everything you say is right, but I live in a conservative community (or state),” or, “my principal has said I must keep the community in mind when I select.” Nat Hentoff illustrates the point with descriptions of the personal reactions of several librarians. Two Minnesota librarians told Hentoff they would not order Judy Blume books because her books are “‘too much trouble’ to have in a library.” An Illinois high school librarian, convinced that abortion is murder, will have no books “that may...encourage students to commit murder.” In Massachusetts, there will be no antiabortion books because a school official is convinced that these books promote religion (Hentoff, 1983, p. vii).

Reading a Code of Ethics or the Library Bill of Rights does not tell the librarian how to apply the principles contained in the documents. Deciding what to do, while balancing conflicting claims and loyalties, marks the application of a Code of Ethics. Fully subscribing to the Code of Ethics
Access to Information

means librarians need to be active in shaping the world in which they work and not remain passive and be molded by it. If the people the librarian works with do not understand freedom to read concepts, the librarian will experience great difficulty in exercising ethical behavior. Confronted with conditions in the workplace antithetical to intellectual freedom, the librarian can work to change those conditions or reject the ethics of the profession and compromise. Rather than accepting the view of the principal, the library trustee, or the vocal citizen, the librarian has a professional responsibility to proselytize about the only issue on which there are no opposing viewpoints. If librarians do not explain, exhort, and teach the importance of the principles governing librarianship, who will do it?

Professional Preparation of Librarians

The third component which shapes the personal responses of librarians is their professional preparation. No one disputes the fact that intellectual freedom receives attention during library school. Students in library media education courses spend considerable time studying the principles of selection. Students learn to develop and apply criteria for the selection of resources. Librarians are taught the importance of following approved policies and procedures when resources are challenged. Freedom of access to information is promoted as a professional value. However, in spite of passing tests on principles of selection, writing drafts of selection policies, and being able to apply valid criteria to the selection of resources, librarians' professional practices do not always reflect what was learned. Library educators appear to believe that if students are presented with a Library Bill of Rights during their professional preparation, they will have learned what it means and will transfer its principles to behavior at the reference desk, the circulation desk, or when selecting resources. Apparently library media educators expect that if cognitive objectives are met, there will be a corresponding development of appropriate behavior. The expectation is unfounded because self-censorship suggests that library education has not been effective in teaching students to apply the Library Bill of Rights in the workplace.

The Proposed Agenda

Solving the problem of the conflict between professional responsibility and personal reactions requires efforts on the part of the entire library profession including library media educators, professional organizations, and librarians themselves. A threefold agenda is being proposed: first, an education which includes affective development as well as cognitive development; second, a profession willing to work to foster community understanding of the First Amendment and the principles of freedom to read and
to create a climate of intellectual freedom among the persons with whom the librarian works—e.g., supervisors, teachers, administrators, library trustees, and school board members; and third, a research agenda to identify the factors which contribute to the willingness or reluctance of librarians to act on intellectual freedom principles.

**Library Education**

Clearly, an entrance requirement that incoming students demonstrate the right personal characteristics before admittance to library school is not being suggested. Granted, the task would be easy if all students arrived with an understanding of the First Amendment learned in eighth grade civics class. They do not. The suspected amount of self-censorship indicates that current teaching strategies have been unsuccessful in helping librarians apply freedom to read principles. Library media educators must examine current methods and revise them. Library school faculty must develop learning strategies designed to help students learn to transfer the principles of the First Amendment to professional library practice.

Educators are beginning to understand how to accomplish the type of learning needed to prepare library media specialists who are willing to act on their expressed beliefs. Educational psychologists tell us that there are three domains in the learning environment—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Since the psychomotor domain deals with physical skills, it does not apply here. The cognitive domain represents information—i.e., knowing the norms of the group. The affective domain concentrates on attitudes and values, which lead to behavior consistent with the norms of the profession (Bloom, 1956; Krathwol et al., 1964). Both knowing and valuing are essential to create First Amendment activists.

Library education, as most of education, emphasizes knowing, specifically the lower levels of cognitive learning. But cognition goes beyond knowing and comprehending, to what are commonly called higher order thinking skills—application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It is these higher thinking skills that will provide the librarian with the ability to analyze actions, to consider the implications of actions, to weigh competing values, and to make judgments consistent with the values of the profession. Educational activities designed to help students apply and evaluate intellectual freedom principles in the context of professional practice might help librarians transfer knowledge to the workplace. However, educating the mind and hoping that appropriate behavior will follow is not enough.

Behavior has a cognitive component and an affective component. Learning about intellectual freedom will only lead to action if the student has an opportunity to participate in activities also emphasizing affective
learning. Affective learning begins with awareness, moves to attitudes and valuing and, if effective, results in actions. Library education must not merely focus on attitudes in the abstract but must present concrete situations, real and simulated, to help students examine how committed they are to their expressed values and how their values must translate to behavior. When actions do not reflect stated values, the librarian rationalizes in terms of competing values in an attempt to explain the discrepancy. Library students need to have an opportunity to analyze these competing pressures and examine the implications of actions. While raising awareness alone will not change attitudes or values, creating dissonance by allowing students to experience the conflict between theory and practice does contribute to a clarification of values and might prepare students to respond to the pressures they will face. The cognitive and affective components in a response to a censorship incident or an inclination to self-censorship are illustrated in Table 1.

The message for library educators goes beyond what has been proposed in curriculum reform. Library school faculty must also model intellectual freedom behavior and activism. All facets of professional preparation must be couched in the spirit of intellectual freedom. Selection courses are not the only place where principles of intellectual freedom are taught. Discussions in reference, administration, cataloging, and other courses must illustrate practices that enhance or create barriers to access information. A total library school curriculum, viewed as the forum for the education of intellectual freedom activists, enhances the likelihood of success.

### Table 1

**Process of Response to Intellectual Freedom Incident**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Affective</th>
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<tr>
<td>Perceiving of a censorship situation including recognition of how actions might affect others.</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrating of various considerations in order to formulate what course of action would best fulfill an ethical ideal.</td>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Responding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding, calculating, weighing, and considering other values.</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Valuing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing and executing a plan of action, evaluating competence, and expected difficulties.</td>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Acting</td>
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Creating a Climate of Intellectual Freedom

Efforts of library school faculty will not accomplish all that is needed. Librarians do not work in a vacuum. The institution in which they work provides one key to whether librarians will act on their intellectual freedom beliefs. Many librarians find themselves working in hostile environments where avoiding controversy and compromise are the predominant values. Creating an intellectual freedom climate under these circumstances presents difficulties. The concepts of intellectual freedom must be translated to institutional values for teachers, administrators, and city and county officials. Skills of persuasion will enable librarians to counter the censoring efforts of coworkers, supervisors, and the community. Members of governing boards need orientation to understand the importance of protecting access to information. The library profession, through public education, lobbying, and forming coalitions with other groups, needs to participate in fostering a climate in which access to information will flourish and individual librarians will feel secure in acting on their professional values and beliefs.

Professional Organizations

Professional organizations share the responsibility for promoting a climate of intellectual freedom and for the continuing professional development of their members. Programming that focuses on exchanging information about the evils the censors are doing will not accomplish the task. In fact, librarians might be frightened into increased self-censorship with this information. Programming at professional meetings must focus on the attitudes and behavior of librarians. Exercises like the ones provided by YASD (Young Adult Services Division) and AASL (American Association of School Libraries) force librarians to examine their practices in the light of association policy. This consciousness raising might cause some librarians to reexamine their commitment to intellectual freedom (American Library Association, 1982; American Library Association, 1986). Programs featuring case histories demonstrate how censorship pressures can be resisted and provide encouragement to wavering and uncertain librarians. Professional organizations contribute to the continuing education of their members by providing opportunities to acquire and sharpen skills. Librarians do not need to hear about numbers and the titles that have been censored, but they do need to practice skills and see examples of successful resistance to censorship efforts.

Research

Current research only hints at factors contributing to the discrepancy
between professional beliefs and professional practices. The library profession needs to examine studies that have been completed and verify or reject the findings. Do the personal characteristics of individual librarians determine their responses to censorship pressures? Is it authoritarian beliefs as Busha hinted? Is it lack of commitment to a professional ethic as Fiske charged? Is it a personal belief system as Hentoff illustrated? Is it something in the personality or psychological makeup of librarians as Downs speculated? Is it personal values as Krug intimated? Or, is it lack of cognitive development as Broderick suggested? Or is it none of these factors but some as yet unknown variable? Ignoring the hints will not solve the problem, but continued investigation might. Research could provide a scientific base for curriculum revision, for continuing education activities, and for a professional plan to eliminate the self-censorship that seems so pervasive.

Conclusion

The task is formidable, but supporters of the First Amendment number in the millions. The library profession must identify its allies, enlist their aid, and launch a massive intellectual freedom effort. This effort could provide librarians with a sense of community as well as professional support thereby encouraging integrity in selection and access decisions. Further, librarians must assume personal responsibility for their professional practices. They must stop using real or assumed outside pressures to excuse or to avoid facing their violations of professional ethics. Librarians must consciously examine the values that lead to restrictive library practices. Through library media education, continuing education, and programming at professional meetings, it is possible to create generations of intellectual freedom missionaries courageous enough to act on the belief system they all profess. Only this will ensure information access for children and young adults.

NOTES


American Library Association. Young Adult Services Division. (1982). Does your library violate the library bill of rights...and not know it? Unpublished questionnaire, American Library Association, Young Adult Services Division, Chicago.


Donelson, K. L. Shoddy and pernicious books and youthful purity: Literacy and moral censorship, then and now. *Library Quarterly*, 51, 12.


