
The Problem of Holocaust Denial Literature in Libraries

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ABSTRACT

LIBRARIANS HAVE TAKEN ESSENTIALLY three philosophical positions concerning the problem of including Holocaust denial literature in library collections: (1) that such materials must be included to uphold the precepts of intellectual freedom, (2) that they should be excluded because they are false, and (3) that they should be included but labeled as inaccurate. Librarians in different types of libraries face different issues when deciding whether to collect denial materials. The nature of evidence is such that it is difficult for librarians to judge objectively the accuracy of all materials, and they should not undertake the role of arbiters of truth. Librarians' responses should be to responsibly and intelligently build collections that provide access to the views of the deniers and to those who refute them.

"Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation" (American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom, 1992, p. 3).

This is the second tenet for libraries enumerated in the *Library Bill of Rights*, the statement of guidelines on intellectual freedom endorsed by the American Library Association (ALA). It calls upon information professionals subscribing to these policies to include in their collections a wide variety of materials on a wide variety of issues and implies that librarians would be wrong to buy materials that presented only one side of the debate on a current social issue such as euthanasia. Likewise, librarians

who only purchased materials that presented Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal in a positive light would be guilty of ignoring other historical interpretations of this period in American history.

Now suppose that a new book was published by a historian who claimed not that the New Deal was merely misguided or ineffective, but that it never really happened. Suppose a new book claimed there was never a Social Security system or a Civilian Conservation Corps, and all of Roosevelt's alleged social programs were just fabrications of a bunch of liberals that were invented to justify the existence of a welfare state. Would librarians be free to dismiss such a perspective as inaccurate and absurd, or would they be obligated to include the book in their collections as an alternative point of view on a historical issue?

Preposterous as such a scenario may look on the surface, it represents a reality. For the past fifteen years, the library profession has actually faced a similar situation in the form of a growing body of literature that challenges the notion that European Jews were systematically exterminated in German death camps during World War II. Those who hold and promote these views call themselves "historical revisionists" (Shapiro, 1990, p. 1) and claim that historical accounts of the Holocaust are a myth, invented by a conspiracy of Zionists to further the cause of the state of Israel (Lipstadt, 1994, p. 9). This has raised complex and troubling questions for many librarians about the nature of truth and whether professional codes and ethics oblige librarians to provide access to information that a mountain of eyewitness and documentary evidence shows is utterly false. It has caused some to suggest that limitations on the *Library Bill of Rights* and the concept of intellectual freedom might be necessary to combat the spread of these hateful and inaccurate views.

Essentially, librarians have taken three philosophical positions on this thorny issue. The first reaffirms the sanctity of intellectual freedom and relies on a strict interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*. According to this argument, librarians can make no distinctions about what they will and will not accept as truthful, for to do so is to cross over the line of censorship. The first book they deem untrue, and therefore unworthy of inclusion in library collections, sets a precedent for excluding other materials and places librarians in the dangerous position of gatekeepers for what society can and cannot read or think. The concepts of intellectual freedom and free speech, this argument continues, have no value if they do not apply equally to all ideas, however bizarre, misguided, or unpopular they might be. To include such views in library collections does not mean librarians endorse them, but they must not make any value judgments about providing access to the ideas themselves.

Swan (1986) argues passionately for this position in defending the role of librarians as providers of access to ideas rather than as arbiters of truth:

It is our job to provide access not to the truth, but to the fruit of human thought and communication; not to reality, but to multiple representations thereof. Truth and reality must fend for themselves

within each of the complicated creatures who uses the materials we have to offer. We can and do learn a great deal from bad ideas and untruths. (p. 51)

The second philosophical position argues that librarians have a professional duty not to mislead the people they serve. Proponents of this view say librarians should not feel compelled, for example, to include materials that advised parents to pour boiling water on their children as a remedy for illness or that claimed the Earth was the center of the solar system. Books like this would not be selected at all because they are inaccurate or even harmful, the argument goes, and no one would think of calling such exclusions censorship. Why, then, should the exclusion of Holocaust denial literature, which can easily be called both inaccurate and harmful, cause librarians to feel any remorse whatsoever?

Peattie (1986) goes so far as to argue that a qualitative difference exists between two false statements like “the Earth is flat” and “the Holocaust is a myth.” Although both are untrue, the first is “morally weightless, while the second is loaded with moral, social, and political implications,” he says. “To put them in the same category, as the utterances of kooks whom we may tolerate because in the ‘free marketplace of ideas’—both concepts will (probably) be discarded—is to not think clearly” (p. 13). Peattie calls the flat-Earth assertion an untruth but the Holocaust denial a *lie*, which he defines as “a deliberate falsehood uttered to deceive and hurt people” (p. 14). As far as he is concerned, most libraries should have no room in their collections for lies.

A closely related pro-exclusion position simply states that providing a forum for such views is morally wrong and, while the First Amendment protects the right of individuals to hold and express these ideas, nothing obligates libraries “to go out of our way to facilitate their efforts” (Burns, 1986, p. 79). The crux of this argument is expressed rather eloquently by Burns:

What is more moral, braver, more in keeping with real democratic principles—to let a representative of vile ideas have his or her public say without interruption, or to speak up in accusation and argument? Sometimes, in the service of truth and justice, we must do what...in other circumstances would be a genuine violation of First Amendment precepts....It is easy not to speak up. It is attractive not to make yourself a target for recrimination by the crowd or by the object of your protest. All you have to do is keep silent. You can even publicly justify your silence, and privately your cowardice, under the banner of “Free Speech.” This is the sort of “free speech” that all tyrants and would-be tyrants encourage: free speech that gives them the right to tell you what they want you to hear, while you exercise your right to clench your teeth and take it. (p. 80)

Peattie (1986) sounds a similar note when he suggests:

Truth cannot simply endure the presence of a lie. It has to fight it and overcome it. The lie behind slavery led to the Civil War; the lie behind segregation led to the Civil Rights movement. The Reverend

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was moved to oppose the lie of racism with his truth. (p. 14)

Those who agree with Burns and Peattie would argue that however much any culture tries to promote a pluralistic and neutral society, certain common values (some would say truths) bind people together; that in fact such commonly held ideals—justice and equality, for example—are largely what define the social fabric and are even what makes it possible for people to coexist at all (Neill, 1988, p. 36). Peattie even points out a bothersome paradox inherent in a strict interpretation of the notion of free speech, a paradox that threatens free speech itself. If a society allows some of its people to believe there should be *no* free speech (as librarians must if they are intellectual freedom purists), that society runs the risk of that idea becoming popular and actually destroying the right to freedom of speech. Yet, if that same society singles out that one idea for exclusion, it destroys freedom of expression while seeking to protect it (pp. 16-17).

The third philosophical position, offered by Pendergrast (1988), argues that an appropriate way to deal with false materials or those which reflect outdated attitudes is to affix an explanatory note to them which warns the reader about their dubious content (p. 85). This position would allow librarians to retain certain materials in their collections that may have some historical value in documenting the existence of false views and repugnant attitudes but, at the same time, alert users to the fact that these ideas are not widely subscribed to and violate the common values of society at large. This position would also be an outright violation of the ALA's *Statement on Labeling*. Pendergrast admits that advocating such a position is in strong conflict with his ethical training as a librarian; he rationalizes that "although 'Thou Shalt Not Steal' generally applies, there are circumstances—starvation, for instance—that certainly justify breaking the rule" (p. 85).

The pitfalls of the labeling solution are thoughtfully explained by Sowards (1988), who writes about the general problem of dealing with historical fabrications:

once begun, [labeling] requires us to conclusively weigh the worth of every book in the collection, lest we imply approval of those left without warnings. This is not only a gigantic task, but a controversial one: it asks librarians to come to unequivocal judgements where subject specialists and expert scholars have often been unable to do so. Moreover, it begs the question: librarians capable of such evaluation might more easily solve their problem by weeding, or simply forestall the whole issue by omitting to select "objectionable" items in the first place. (p. 85)

The idea of making such judgments about the factual accuracy of materials is further decried by Curley and Broderick (1985) in their stan-

dard and authoritative text on collection development. If two authors disagree with one another over a point of fact, they say, it is surely not up to librarians to decide which to believe, nor should they use that decision as a selection principle (p. 40).

Whichever of the three philosophical positions librarians may take on the issue of Holocaust denial literature, different kinds of libraries must address inclusion or exclusion differently. For academic research libraries with exhaustive collections, it is easy to make a case for inclusion since scholars must have access to the entire range of academic discourse. Indeed, research by Hupp (1991) found that over 19 percent of OCLC-member academic libraries own at least one Holocaust denial title and indicated that academic libraries are the most likely holders of these materials (p. 167).

Although Hupp found no significant difference between the collection patterns of research libraries and those of academic libraries at primarily teaching institutions (p. 171), Pendergrast raises a concern that may be more applicable to libraries that predominantly serve undergraduates. Although he would like to include inaccurate historical materials for their value as primary sources, he worries about the possibility that some students "may unfortunately be naïve enough and ill-informed enough so that if they find a book in the library, they might automatically assume the views expressed in it are accurate" (p. 84). Many librarians (and undergraduates) would doubtless take Pendergrast to task for assuming such a protective role on behalf of his patrons, but his concerns do point out legitimate differences between the service populations of research and teaching institutions that ought to be taken into account in collection development.

Although little, if anything, has been written about this issue vis-à-vis school libraries, Pendergrast's argument might make even more sense in this context. It could be argued without much rationalization that such materials do not support a school's curriculum or are not age-appropriate and could thus be excluded on the basis of legitimate selection criteria. Of course, every school library collection and every student is different, so it is certainly conceivable that this would not apply in all cases. Unfortunately, Hupp's research did not include school libraries, so we have no indication of how widely these materials may be held in such libraries.

Perhaps the most difficult dilemmas are faced by public libraries. Do they have an obligation to acquire Holocaust denial literature if there appears to be no demand for it in their communities? As government sponsored institutions, do they have First Amendment responsibilities that require them to represent this position in their collections regardless of lack of demand? If people use a public library to meet their personal information needs, do they have a right to expect that the information they find there will be as accurate as librarians can reasonably ensure is possible?

For most public libraries, answers to the first two questions would be negative, to the third affirmative. Hupp's study found that just under 14 percent of OCLC public libraries own any Holocaust denial materials (p. 167). Since many public libraries are not OCLC members, the percentage of all public libraries is likely to be much lower. This figure does not necessarily, of course, reflect either actual demand, or the judicious application of selection criteria, or the high moral principles of public librarians, or even self-censorship.

Baldwin (in this issue of *Library Trends*) is right to suppose that the interests of the community need to be taken into account when making selection decisions. Few would argue that large portions of a limited budget should be used to provide materials for which there seems to be no demand. But collections are fluid and dynamic things, and librarians have a professional responsibility to be not only reactive but proactive in their collection-building work. If they order only those materials for which there is a known or perceived demand, their collections will stagnate. They must remember that just because no one has ever requested a certain type of material does not mean no one is interested in it.

Although Baldwin says government is not obligated to provide citizens with reading material that espouses a particular viewpoint, he also cites legal decisions that require librarians to apply their policies equally and in a nondiscriminatory fashion. If this is the case, it follows that librarians must make a reasonable attempt to provide access to objectionable materials for patrons who request them. This argument does not require libraries to actually purchase Holocaust denial materials, but they surely must make the same attempts to locate the materials through interlibrary loan that they would make for less controversial items. While librarians must exercise their professional judgment when deciding which materials to purchase for their collections, they cannot be in the business of approving or rejecting interlibrary loan requests based on content. Baldwin does not suggest that librarians should do this, but it is the logical result of a stance that absolves them from their responsibility to provide access to all viewpoints.

Perhaps some of the problems associated with these controversial materials could be alleviated by the way they are cataloged and classified. The current Library of Congress subject headings commonly assigned to Holocaust denial materials are "Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)—Errors, inventions, etc." and "Anti-Semitism." Some would call this labeling, while others would applaud the attempt to distinguish such disreputable scholarship from more credible sources while still maintaining access. The Library of Congress Classification scheme assigns works on the Holocaust the number D804.3, while works denying the Holocaust are classified under D804.35. While this does not completely address the concerns of those who feel that an unmistakable distinction must be made between

the two, it does serve the purpose of collocating both kinds of materials on the shelves while making a nominal distinction between them.

A major problem with the current subject headings for many is that books that refute the claims of the deniers are also assigned the same subject headings. Donnelly (1986) suggests that there is a real need to distinguish between “scholarly works *about* ethno-racial prejudice as opposed to books that *promote* prejudice [italics added]” (p. 247). One could make the argument, however, that linking these materials in some way makes it more likely that patrons seeking the works of the deniers will be exposed to the refutations. If the subject headings were completely different from one another, or the books were far apart on library shelves, patrons might never even find the more legitimate works unless they were specifically seeking them. If the goal of a different cataloging or classification solution is not to mislead users, then separating the two types of materials may not be the real answer.

Abstract philosophical arguments notwithstanding, it does seem to many people that the factual accuracy of certain historical facts simply cannot be disputed, which renders the entire discussion moot. There are thousands of people—fewer each year—with numbers tattooed on their arms who were firsthand witnesses to the events denied by the self-styled revisionists. There are films and photographs and documents and the accounts of the people who liberated the camps. There are the now empty camps themselves, with their defunct gas chambers and silent crematoria. In the face of such evidence, how can any reasonable person claim that the Holocaust never happened? And how could any librarian afford such a blatant lie the dignity of representation?

It might be instructive at this point to reflect on the nature of evidence, and how it is that humans “know” things with which they lack any direct experience. No one alive today can claim to have been an eyewitness to the American Civil War, but the events of that time are generally accepted because Americans choose to believe scholars’ interpretations of the historical evidence, which include personal accounts that may not always be independently verifiable. As one travels further back in time and the historical record becomes less complete, points of historical “fact” become less universally accepted. People who consider the Bible to be an entirely factual historical document need no further evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, although not everyone on earth would readily accept this as an inarguable point of fact. It would seem that how truthful something from the past is depends upon the value that people collectively and as individuals place on particular pieces or certain kinds of evidence that support the event.

Then there are matters of scientific evidence. Today the vast majority of people “know” that the Earth rotates around the sun, yet very few have ever directly observed this phenomenon. In fact, if people were to

believe only what they saw with their own eyes, they would be compelled to state that the sun quite literally moves across the sky while the earth stands still. But contemporary society rejects this notion because it places a greater value on the theoretical evidence of physics, mathematics, and astronomy over what individuals seem actually to observe. Yet because some people from some cultures place a higher value on what they see with their own eyes, they may believe the sun moves across the sky. Given different contexts for different cultures, who "knows" better?

In the same vein, a majority of Americans "know" that life on Earth gradually evolved over billions of years from one-celled organisms swimming in the primordial soup. Yet not everyone accepts the scientific evidence that is, for most, overwhelming in its volume. This is less a matter of opinion than it is an issue of what kinds of evidence have validity for different people. It is not possible to reject the theory of evolution while accepting the evidence that supports it. And if anyone personally has enough evidence to satisfy himself/herself that something like the theory of evolution is true, he or she can hardly demand that others accept the proof as sufficient to support other beliefs. Many people think they have enough evidence to believe that people are routinely abducted by space aliens or that evil spirits exist and can possess unsuspecting children. They are free to believe these things and free to try to persuade others of them, but they cannot *insist* that anyone else accept their evidence. Individual "facts" may not be subjective, but that which people will accept as evidence most certainly is.

The point of this discussion is not to suggest that evidence is utterly relative, so librarians should therefore look with tolerance upon the deniers as benign proponents of an innocent alternative viewpoint. It *does* suggest, however, that claiming to know the absolute truth about anything is a very risky proposition indeed. And once librarians take on the role of Judges of Truth, even on such painfully clear-cut issues, there is absolutely no philosophical barrier to them passing judgment on the truthfulness of all ideas.

The philosophical arguments for the whole spectrum of library responses to the deniers are passionate, thoughtful, and compelling. Any of the positions could legitimately be called principled and courageous, either for violating the currently held ethical principles of librarianship in defense of a greater good, or for risking the wrath of many outside the profession in defense of a repugnant idea. Whatever position one wishes to take, that position cannot be arrived at without due consideration of the implications, both for one's specific professional situation and for the limits of one's conscience. The correct decision today may well be the incorrect one in the future, and it would be hard to accuse those who change their minds of waffling on this emotional and agonizing issue.

Intellectual freedom must include the freedom to believe in a lie. Surely librarians do not believe such lies will stand up to scrutiny in the

full light of day. Librarians *must* have faith in the ability of society to respond to lies in a forceful and reasoned way, and there can be no response if the lies go untold. Librarians most assuredly have a role in that response but not through the suppression of hateful ideas. Although Peattie would justify such suppression because of the moral, social, and political ramifications of the lie, it is precisely those implications that make quashing it so dangerous. Swan (1986) makes this point with eloquence:

Someone has said that the truth may be simple, but *we* are complex, and therefore our paths to the truth must be complex. Our road map is a bewildering maze of smudged and partial truths thoroughly enmeshed in falsehoods. To stumble upon a whole truth is a rare and lucky event, and we're usually not equipped to appreciate it. In this state of affairs, bad ideas and untruths are a necessary part of the search. Like mosquitoes—nasty, sometimes fatal malaria mosquitoes, if you will—they may be utterly detestable, but they are a vital ingredient in the overall ecology. To suppress them is to affect the ecology of the whole system of discourse. (pp. 50-51)

The reasoned response to those who deny the Holocaust must come from many quarters, and the scholarly community has responded swiftly and with vigor. Works by Lucy Dawidowicz (1975, 1992) and Deborah Lipstadt (1994) are only a portion of those that have challenged the claims of the deniers with sound scholarship. Librarians should respond by responsibly and intelligently building collections that provide access to the deniers and those who refute them. As Handlin (1987) notes, "a collection is evidence of a mind at work, making choices....The fruit of such effort is the collection—not a random agglomeration, but a coherent selection" (pp. 213-14). Such coherent and thoughtful selection is the professional librarian's contribution to this modern dilemma.

Baldwin (in this issue) is correct, of course, in stating that the decision to collect the literature of denial is ultimately a local one. The *Library Bill of Rights* supports that decision but does not mandate it. However, librarians must undertake exclusion of materials with great care, for if no one ever buys these materials, no one will have access to them.

The denial of the Holocaust is not legitimate historical revisionism but rather a manifestation of the vile social phenomenon of bigotry. Should librarians hide their heads in the sand and pretend that anti-Semitism did not or does not exist? To do so would be to fail to acknowledge its place in contemporary discourse, however repulsed or ashamed by it librarians may be.

Holocaust denial literature should not be suppressed—not because the views it represents are of equal stature with others, not because it claims to be just another side of the story, but simply because it exists. And through the simple fact of its existence, it has much to teach about the past, the present, and the future.

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