

Something to Offend Everyone:  
The Importance of Keeping Censorship out of Libraries

Nicholas Westbrook

Southern Connecticut State University

Intellectual Freedom is “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction” (American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom). It is, therefore, the libraries ethical duty to provide an uncensored catalog of resources for their patrons to protect this right. By giving patrons the right to Intellectual Freedom, libraries are given the responsibility to present every view of a subject. As a rule, they should avoid having to remove materials for the sake of pleasing a few individuals. Libraries protect intellectual freedom by resisting censorship efforts of challenged or questionable material.

According to *The Portable MLIS: Insights from the Experts*, part of the library Code of Ethics is to “uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (American Library Association). Libraries have an ethical duty to resist censorship of challenged materials. The New York Public library in the late 1940s charged themselves with defending materials from “redhunters’ intent upon rooting out library materials and staffers deemed un-American and politically subversive.” While the library “did not hesitate to acquire materials considered subversive by pressure groups, but the library frequently struck a course that sought to avoid controversy when possible” (Francoeur, 2011). While controversy is generally good to avoid, materials should not be left out of a collection to comply with those who disagree with materials. As put by Michelle Leigh Jacobs in her article, “with the current increase in attempted censorship of academics it is clear that librarians need to take an active role in protecting academic freedoms for themselves as well as their collections” (Jacobs). It is the duty of the librarians, not just the patrons, to protect other patron’s rights to learn and discover as they please.

There are many reasons for why people demand censorship of challenged materials. The most common reason being that people believe the materials in question are “so offensive, or present ideas that are so hateful and destructive to society that the simply must not see the light of day” (American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom). The material in question can be offensive in a variety of ways, be in political content, sexual content or offensive language to a variety of backgrounds (be it racial, cultural, gender, political, etc.). Views of subjects change over time, so materials that were once acceptable can become very easily being removed, in a worse case scenario. There are many examples of books being challenged or effectively banned from schools and public libraries, especially books that are considered classics and not written for every audience. A rather ironic example is the book *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury has received much scrutiny and in some cases removal from required reading lists at schools for using “God’s name in vain” as well as burning of the Bible (Wrigley). In a college English class, I found out that there have been movements to ban *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from libraries due to language, this time focusing more on racially derisive language. John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* has been put on trial for “falsely implying that many our fine people [the people of Kern County, California] are a low, ignorant, profane and blasphemous type living in a vicious and filthy manner...” (Lingo). This attack on a specific cultural group led to the effective banning from the book in the local library. Many things can offend people, but it is the duty of the library to provide those who wish to read these materials the option, regardless of their offensiveness. While there are bans on some offensive material in each library, it is the discretion of individual libraries to decide what material is suitable to be on the shelves.

There are fair reasons that people would want books removed from shelves or other materials taken away from patrons, but it is important for libraries to protect these materials. Libraries are obligated to protect these works for their cultural significance, even if there are those who are offended and wish to see the book removed. If that happens, viewpoints important to understanding history could be lost.

The importance of intellectual freedom is rooted in our right to learn. The library has a duty to protect patron's right to gain information. In an article by Albert Arko-Cobbah, "Intellectual Freedom is one of the most closely held core values of librarianship. The right to think what we please and to say what we think serves as a bedrock principle upon which we base all other freedoms" (Arko-Cobbah). From the right to obtain information come all other freedoms. Intellectual freedom includes the ability to obtain information from more than one point of view. History, for example, should come from a series of viewpoints, not just one ethnic, gender or cultural group. While that is often the case, there are also sources that give perspectives from other viewpoints. Slave narratives, for example, offer a drastically different viewpoint of history to that of the slaveholders. By allowing people, patrons of the library in particular, to retrieve what information that they choose the library is upholding one of their most important duties. Intellectual freedom gives patrons the right to research information from all possible sources. Libraries have to fight against censorship or entire sections of history could be easily removed.

In a conversation with my aunt, a professional children's librarian, we got on the subject of censoring materials in her library. The philosophy in her library was "there had to be something to offend everyone" (Sandy Westbrook, personal communication

2012). This should not be taken to mean that the library should specifically find offensive materials. It means that the library should not be afraid of putting a book on display simply because it may offend a patron, since any given patron could react negatively to almost any material. Library patrons have very different beliefs on a variety of subjects, but it is the library's obligation to protect intellectual freedom by allowing access to materials that others may challenge because it conflicts with their personal point of view.

## Resources:

- American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom (2012). Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q & A. *American Library Association Website*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/offices/oif/basics/ifcensorshipqanda>
- Haycock, K.m Shedlon B. E. (Ed.), (2008) *The portable MLIS: Insight from the experts*, (pgs. 218-219). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Arko-Cobbah, A. (2011). Intellectual freedom and academic freedom: Some challenges and opportunities for academic libraries in Africa. [Abstract] *Mousaion*. 29(1) 76-95). Abstract retrieved from Academic Search Premier via Southern Connecticut University Library Website
- Francoeur, S. (2011). Prudence and controversy: The New York Public Library response to post-war anti communist pressures. [Abstract]. *Library & Information History*. 27(3). 140-160. Abstract retrieved from Academic Search Premier via Southern Connecticut University Library Website.
- Jacobs, M. L. (2008). Ethics and ethical challenges in library instruction. [Abstract]. *Journal of Library Administration*. 47 (3/4). 211-232. Abstract retrieved from Academic Search Premier via Southern Connecticut University Library Website.
- Lingo, M. (2003). Forbidden fruit: The banning of the Grapes of Wrath in the Kern County Free Library. *Libraries and Culture*. 38(4). 351-377) Retrieved from Academic Search Premier via Southern Connecticut University Library Website
- Wrigley, D. (2006, Oct. 03). Parent files complaint about book assigned as student reading. *ABCNews13*. Retrieved from <http://abclocal.go.com/ktrk/story?section=news/local&id=4625303>