

What a Tangled Web: Navigating Between Theory and Practice Regarding Censorship in Academic Libraries

Looking at historical events such as the Red Scare of the mid-twentieth century, it is obvious that libraries in the United States have long acted as lightning rods for various forms of political controversy. The modern iteration has parallels to both the Red and Lavender scares of the previous century, with public and school libraries currently drawing the most lightning. The American Library Association (ALA) reported 1,247 censorship cases in 2023. Of these, 54 percent came from public libraries, 39 percent from school libraries, and 2 percent from academic libraries (Zetty). The percentages may be smaller for academic libraries, but they are by no means immune. Consider a situation where a faculty member lodges a complaint about a new book about a politically controversial topic in the selection, claiming that the book is biased and even harmful to students. The instructor pushes for the book's removal even though it aligns with the library's collection development policy. As characters in the movie *Speed* (1994) so famously asked: "What do you do?" The obvious answer is to keep the book, and while policy and ethical support are helpful, the matter is not quite so easily resolved. A collection development librarian facing such a conundrum has to balance a web of competing internal and external pressures, including personal and professional ethics, collection development policies, institutional and community concerns, and faculty relationships. This complex web of priorities and influences reflects a common scenario where the decision to keep materials in the collection may be straightforward in theory, but reality greatly complicates the matter.

A Question of Freedoms & Ethics

On paper, keeping the book on the shelf seems a simple decision from a professional point of view. The ALA takes a hard stance against censorship in all its forms. The

organization's principles prohibit exclusion of materials due to personal beliefs or others finding it controversial or offensive, maintaining that removing or refusing "to add resources due to potential controversy is censorship," and libraries have a duty to "defend against challenges that limit the diversity of the collection" ("Diverse and Inclusive Collections"). Private interests, such as one faculty member's personal objections, cannot come at the expense of the rights of library users ("ALA Code"). Censorship of libraries runs into free speech protections guaranteed by the First Amendment, something that "is deeply ingrained in America's culture" (Antelman 461). The fact is that speech that some find offensive, even hate speech in many cases, remains protected under the First Amendment. American culture historically puts a high "value on free speech, and that value underpins librarianship's opposition to censorship" (462). Despite this perceived value, various forms of speech have "become an increasingly contentious issue on university campuses in recent years, with observers and advocates across the political spectrum arguing that free speech and discourse are being hindered" (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 3). This hindrance affects not only universities and colleges, but their libraries as well.

Intentional or not, the attempt by a faculty member to remove a book due to political objections is a form of censorship, one that threatens the institution's academic and intellectual freedoms. Academic freedom can be defined as a "professional standard protecting the pedagogical and research rights of teachers and students, that is, protecting their capacity as experts and knowledge seekers in a professionalized capacity" (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 6). Closely related is the idea of intellectual freedom, which "means that the library itself takes no moral or political position regarding the ideas expressed within its collections or what books a reader chooses to read" (Antelman 462). The ALA Code of Ethics calls for librarians to resist "all efforts" at censorship in defense of intellectual freedom ("ALA Code") and to give

intellectual freedom priority in developing collections and services, which “supports efforts to ensure that information and resources are provided fairly and without bias or restriction, supporting education and research” (“Intellectual Freedom”). The U.S. principle of freedom of speech is generally considered a bulwark of its democracy, and a “healthy democracy must have a robust exchange of ideas and opinions” (“Politics”) as well as “strong and trusted public purpose institutions” (Antelman 478). Library policies that support academic freedom can help defend against challenges (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2). However, challenges are seldom as simple as a single person’s political opinions.

Under External Pressure

If the ethical principles of librarianship were the only concern, the question of how to address the faculty member’s demand to remove the book would be easy indeed. However, there are several other strands in the web pulling at the hypothetical collection development librarian. As professionals, librarians have a duty to “provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests” (“ALA Code”). They are trained to understand the distinction between selection and censorship. They understand the communities they serve and “should know that if our collection offends no one, we have probably done something wrong in our professional judgment” (Buchanan and Henderson 96). Part of a librarian's professional obligation is to mediate between conflicting mores and ideas, such as when “there is a collision point between what is called the inalienable right to information...and questions (justification) of restrictions on these freedoms” (Kulenović 14). Academic librarians serve an institution in an institute of higher education as well as a community of faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding area. As a result, they frequently find

themselves having to balance “commitments to different groups with sometimes differing values or perspectives” (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2). Even the ALA’s guidelines, despite the organization’s staunch anti-censorship position, acknowledge that personal beliefs cannot “interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources” (“ALA Code”). While this particular section specifically refers to the librarian’s own beliefs, it reflects the broader issue of conflicting responsibilities.

One such conflict arises from the library’s own policies, such as those that govern collection development. In the scenario presented here, policy aligns with a decision to retain the material in question. Policies and procedures help to remove subjectivity from such decisions, provided that there is “a clear, fair process for handling all requests to remove or add resources, exhibits, or services” that prioritize the “research and academic needs of users inside and outside of the institution” (“Intellectual Freedom”). Such policies should be open and transparent for everyone involved as librarians use them to determine whether a challenged resource meets the mission and guidelines of both the library and its parent institution. The ALA states that compatible materials should be retained and that during the review, access to materials “should not be restricted, even for a short time” (“Challenged Resources”). Although policy can aid in making such decisions, they cannot foresee all complications that may arise.

Other strands tugging at the librarian in this scenario often come in the form of institutional and community obligations, which may override ethical guidelines and practices. The library exists in a multifaceted world, not a vacuum, and they “must consider other viewpoints or local standards of behavior and respond to the expectations of...funding sources, whether those sources are taxpayers or private corporations” (Buchanan and Henderson 98). A librarian cannot simply rely on “the policy says” or “the ALA Code of Ethics says” in many

situations. The actions one takes is “part of a professional discourse, which contributes to the larger social discourse” (98). While it is true that no single “person should take responsibility for judging what is offensive” (Antelman 463), the offended faculty member may well reflect political and social concerns that are part of that discourse. In this case, they may see the censorship as a more benign “instrument for suppressing potentially harmful and socially unacceptable content” (Kulenović 15). Often such calls for censorship arise from a belief that “education cannot critically review key power relations in society” because the very act of “posing such questions is considered too disruptive and unpatriotic” (Dreiling and García-Caro 1). This kind of scenario shows how academic libraries may not face the same levels of censorship and book bans as public and school libraries, but they still deal with the fact that “indirect pressures from policy and politics are affecting their collecting practices” (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 20). In addition to institutional and community pressures, the collection development librarian also may well face more personal considerations.

Another important piece to the puzzle is the librarian’s professional relationship with faculty members. Professional ethics and library policy stand firmly in favor of rejecting the instructor’s demand to remove the material. Pressure may arise from the institution and community the library serves – or it may not. But library staff will have to work with the faculty in the future, and one must ask whether this particular resource is worth friction later on. Part of the issue is a matter of perspective. Librarians live with the relevant ethical and philosophical guidelines as part of their profession, and one can easily forget that others outside the field do not share in that knowledge. Dogged protection of the collection can give rise to any number of accusations, such as “ helping terrorists because we endeavor to protect user privacy or that we approve of pornography or fail to protect children from harmful materials because, as

professionals, we choose not to censor or label works” (Buchanan and Henderson 97). The best path forward lies in the same ALA Code of Ethics that helps to create the conundrum. The code mandates that librarians “treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions” (“ALA Code”). In this scenario, that translates to relying on policy and professional ethics to support the decision to keep the book on the shelf while simultaneously explaining to the faculty member *why* the library needs to do so. A patient explanation goes a long way toward ameliorating disappointing news.

Conclusion

The proper answer is to say that the “library will not remove the ‘offensive’ book because that offense resides in the reader and not the book itself” (Antelman 464). However, that answer is not necessarily an easy one. While this discussion has relied upon a hypothetical scenario, it is far from merely academic. College and university libraries might not be as likely to face book challenges as “public or school libraries, but that doesn’t mean academic librarians should become complacent” (Landgraf). They can expect to find themselves navigating this web more often in the future rather than less. Academic libraries exist to “provide and preserve collections in support of their institutions’ research and teaching priorities and to support long-term access to cultural, historical, and scientific works,” but the current political environment has placed “both libraries and universities have been at the heart of controversy” (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 1). This is not altogether unexpected. Books and knowledge are powerful symbols of free speech, which puts libraries as “the foremost institution charged with upholding the values of intellectual freedom and anti-censorship that a free society associates with books” (Antelman 478). That places libraries in a key position to zealously guard freedom of speech as well as intellectual and

academic freedoms. Both professional ethics and library policies support “such decision-making and [force] us to understand our roles as members of a profession and as members of a larger society” (Buchanan and Henderson 96). The old library adage is that every collection should have something to offend everyone. This may be slightly tongue in cheek, but it is certainly true that collections should be diverse and inclusive across a variety of works with “content by and about people from different backgrounds, cultures, and viewpoints” and they should also “reflect many ideas, stories, and experiences” (“Diverse and Inclusive Collections”). This hardly seems like an extreme view, but practically everything has some sort of political association today, even traditionally nonpartisan institutions like libraries, colleges, and universities, which means that “anything those institutions do is prey for those who use politically motivated reasoning, thus quickly diminishing our institutions’ authority and influence in society” (Antelman 478). Unfortunately, this likely means that such “encroachments into the autonomy of institutions of higher education...will haunt the United States for decades to come” (Dreiling and García-Caro 1). The webs get ever more complex, but navigating the various strands are nothing new for librarians.

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