

CENSORSHIP

Who are the Censors?

One never has to look far to identify the censor. The censor is rarely an unrecognizable person from a distant place whose intention is to take away freedoms. Most often, the censor is a friend, or a neighbor, or a community group or even, on occasion, your friendly librarian.

A brief review of current literature reveals that the most common group of people wanting to censor materials are parents wishing to remove books from libraries. These parents are horrified by particular words, descriptions, topics or points of view in the materials assigned or available to their children. These are, for the most part, well-meaning people who believe they are guarding the innocence of their own children. However, by censoring certain items, these parents would be denying the material to other children, thus restricting the free flow of essential learning that takes place in libraries.

In addition to censoring parents, there are other groups bound together by religious, patriotic or other common belief structures. Often these groups feel threatened by a particular ideology or belief with which they do not agree and they target libraries that provide books, displays or other materials about the issue. A common example in libraries today is the topic of homosexuality. Some groups would remove most or all materials about the issue from library shelves, displays and even electronic portals. Out of fear, these groups might even censor materials which discuss, for instance, the struggle for civil and human rights that homosexuals have engaged in over the last two centuries. If these censoring groups were successful in their purging intent, other interested community members would be denied free access to such materials for their own edification.

And yes, there are even censoring librarians. These individuals may have been challenged, by a person or a group, one too many times regarding their choice of library materials and, as a result, are now self-censoring in their selections. Perhaps a particular author was a communist at some time in his/her life and a patron might object to seeing the material on the shelf. Maybe there is a risky word in that children's book. Perhaps the sexual innuendo is a bit graphic or a singer/artist is too over-the-top for someone's taste. The self-censoring librarian may decide that it is better to play it safe and not buy an item before someone can lodge a complaint.

We all have peer groups that influence our behaviors; groups that may guide what clothes we wear, which movies we watch and even the general ways in which we behave. However, as librarians, we are called to be leaders by setting the example. We must often be the risk takers as we support First Amendment rights. When we say freedom of speech we have to mean it and we have to mean it for all people, the ones we do not know, the ones who seem strange to us and even the ones we disagree with.

What to do Before the Censor Comes

One of the best ways to deal with a censorship crisis is to be prepared for one to happen. A great place to start is by reviewing, and perhaps formally adopting, the American Library Association [Library Bill of Rights](#) and [Code of Ethics](#). These documents can be reprinted, with permission, within your library's service and collection development policies. Alternatively, library administrators may use these documents as guidelines for drafting and adopting their own policies.

The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) pages on [Selection Policy](#) review the steps needed

to create a selection policy and examples of how to deal with challenges. Important preventative measures previously recommended by ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom are listed below. Following these measures will not necessarily prevent complaints and inquiries, but will assure your library's preparedness.

1. Maintain a materials selection policy

Your library's materials selection policy should be in writing and should include a notice that it has been approved by the library's governing authority (Board, University, etc.). It should cover all types of library materials and should be revised periodically to ensure that it reflects current policies.

2. Maintain a library service policy

Your library's written service policy should cover registration policies, programming, free distribution of materials, bulletin boards and displays and all library activities and services that could have an impact on access to materials or facilities.

3. Maintain a clearly defined procedure for handling complaints

Keep a copy of the complaint procedure at every public service contact point. Be sure to specify that the complaint must be filed in writing and that the name and contact information of the person filing the complaint must be included.

4. Maintain in-service training

Conduct regular training sessions for staff, administration and the library's governing authority to ensure that all are familiar with the materials selection policy, the service policy and the procedures for handling complaints.

5. Maintain open lines of communication with civic, religious, educational and political bodies of the community. When members of the library's board or its staff address local civic organizations, they should emphasize the library's selection process and be prepared to describe and explain the principles of intellectual freedom.

6. Maintain a vigorous public information program on behalf of intellectual freedom

The library should keep the news media informed of activities pertaining to intellectual freedom, as well as library policies concerning resource selection and use.

7. Be aware of current municipal and state legislation about intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights

What to do When the Censor Comes

The following list is suggested steps for dealing with oral complaints or expressions of concern. These steps are recommended by the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom in the document, [How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources](#). These guidelines apply whether the concerns expressed are about book selection or about other resources and services, such as programs in the library, free distribution of materials or bulletin boards and displays. The same

principles apply in dealing with the frequent suggestions concerning the labeling of materials to indicate content.

These guidelines apply to complaints from library staff members as well as complaints from library patrons. A library administrator who receives a suggestion or a complaint from a staff member should handle it as seriously as one from a patron, and with equal respect.

Keep these guidelines handy and review them with staff regularly.

1. Acknowledge that every person has the right to question library resources, and a library user with a complaint should feel confident that her concerns will be taken seriously. Listen thoughtfully and respectfully. Try to elicit the specific reason for her concern, whether she has read the entire work or only parts, and the specific action she would like library staff to take.
2. Do not make promises of taking action or appear to agree with the individual. Instead, offer assistance in finding something else that would better meet the person's needs.
3. If the person requests the item be removed from the library's collection, explain that although the individual may be offended by the library resource, others may not have the same perspective. Describe how library materials are selected. Libraries have diverse collections with materials from many points of view, and a library's mission is to provide access to information for all users. All library users have the First Amendment right to borrow, read, view, and listen to library resources.
4. If the individual is concerned about a children's or young adult resource, explain that parents and guardians play the major role in guiding their children's or wards' reading and library use. Often a person's concern about a children's or young adult book involves a desire to "protect all children" by removing that item from the collection or restricting access to it. Explain that each family has the right to determine which library materials are acceptable for its children and must accord the same right to other parents.
5. Avoid giving personal opinions.
6. Many expressions of concern end after the individual has had an opportunity to express personal feelings about a library resource. The person only wanted to be heard and have his opinions acknowledged. No further action is needed. If this is the case, thank the person for his interest, make notes about the conversation, and file them for future reference. Additionally, report the conversation to the library director or principal.
7. If the concerned individual is not satisfied during the discussion and wants the item removed, explain the formal reconsideration process and its time line. Often persons who have a concern would like immediate action and are not aware of the length of time this procedure takes. State what your policy says about the availability of the material during the reconsideration process. Best practice is that the material under reconsideration will not be removed from use or have access restricted pending completion of the process.
8. Provide a copy of the library's collection development policy and reconsideration form. Stress that no action is taken unless the form is fully completed, signed (identifying the individual or group), and submitted. Explain that the submission of a completed form will trigger the formal reconsideration process, and that the document will become part of the public record.

9. After the conversation, make notes about the conversation, date them, and retain the information to provide background in the event that a request for formal reconsideration form is filed. Remember that all such notes become part of the record of the reconsideration process and may become public records.

10. Keep your director or principal informed of any concerns expressed, whether you feel they have been successfully resolved or not. Knowing that a concern was expressed helps that individual respond knowledgeably if the concerned person contacts her. You can contact the MLA Intellectual Freedom Panel and the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (oif@ala.org) to inform them of the complaint and/or to enlist their assistance.



Works Cited in this article:

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Further Reading:

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