Opposing Censorship in Difficult Times

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to support intellectual freedom under the new administration? How do we uphold our values when many will disagree with the information provided in our institutions? In this short essay I offer a summary of my research on book challengers to better understand why people attempt to censor information. I then argue that, to move forward, librarians and other information professionals must recommit to supporting the principles of intellectual freedom, the code of ethics, and the values of librarianship; review policies; and know their communities—local, state, and national.

As part of my research I receive daily Google alerts on banned books, censorship, intellectual freedom, and book challenges. This helps me remain apprised of what is happening across the country and the world regarding information access. In late January 2017, I received a Google alert that piqued my interest: *Animal Farm*, George Orwell's allegorical novel, had recently been removed from the curriculum at Stonington Middle School in Mystic, CT (Collins 2017). The board and superintendent insisted that the book had not been banned but simply removed from the curriculum. According to Doyle's (2014) most recent bibliography of challenged books, *Animal Farm*, a staple of middle school curricula across the country, has not been challenged in the United States since 1987. However, I was not surprised to see the title in my Google alerts, as I suspect that *Animal Farm*, *1984*, *Brave New World*, and other dystopian and antiauthoritarian novels will be challenged many times over the coming years.

In the wake of the election, librarians and other information professionals have been asking themselves how to respond to the authoritarian tendencies of the new administration. My own research focuses on information access, particularly intellectual freedom and censorship and what I call "the discourse of censorship" (Knox 2014b, 2015). I am especially concerned with how people justify the control of knowledge and how to respond to such demands for control. In the weeks after the election it became clear to me that access to information in the public sphere would be threatened and that it was important that those on the front lines know how to respond to such threats.

Censorship Practices and Models

Censorship is primarily about power and control. The would-be censor has encountered some information that he or she finds upsetting or disturbing and asks, "What can I do to ensure that others don't see this information?" Censorship is generally discussed as a coherent, consistent activity, but in reality, censorship is a constellation of practices. For categorization purposes, these can be divided into active and passive practices. Active practices include what I call the four *Rs*: redaction, restriction, relocation, and removal. *Redaction* is when someone crosses or marks out certain text or images on a page, such as in the anecdote of librarians marking through the baby's penis in Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* when it was first published (Cattrysse 2015). *Restriction* takes place when a limit is placed on who can use a particular item. Age is often the restricting factor, as seen in, for example, the restriction of R-rated movies to those over the age of 17. In a library, restricted items are placed in an inaccessible area so that those who do not meet the restriction criteria are unable to gain access to them. Sometimes this is colloquially known as "behind the desk" so that a member of the staff can monitor who checks out a particular item and ensure that criteria are met before circulating the item. *Relocation* is when an item has been moved from one area where it was accessible to its intended audience to another area that is not readily accessible. A common example of this involves moving a young adult book to the adult section so that teens cannot stumble upon it (Knox 2013). This can also happen when controversial books are moved from open shelving to special collections to monitor who has access to them. Finally, *removal* means that a book is removed either from a collection or, in the case of schools, the curriculum.

Passive censorship practices include self-censorship, or choosing not to select materials because of personal bias or fear of reprisal from one's community. In his classic treatise "Not Censorship but Selection," Asheim (1953) notes that "for the censor, on the other hand, the important thing is to find reasons to reject the book; his guiding principle leads him to seek out the objectionable features, the weaknesses, the possibilities for misinterpretation" (5). Self-censorship is heavily influenced by the passive practice of bias, which would mean, for example, only collecting materials that embody one political view or that do not reflect the diversity of human experiences. I am not arguing that it is always wrong to restrict or relocate material in library collections, as sometimes items are misclassified, are in fact inappropriate for a certain age group, or need to be protected from vandalism. However, it is important to remember that censorship involves an unequal power dynamic, and, in keeping with Asheim, it is always important to interrogate why these are the best courses of action for each item that is moved.

The active and passive practices described intersect with models of censorship that define who is doing the censoring in a particular instance. State-sponsored censorship is familiar to most people and includes the classification of government documents and royal privilege systems. In institutional models, nonstate actors engage in censorship, such as when the Roman

Catholic Church created the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a restriction practice. The individual model is self-explanatory, but it is important to note that individuals and groups often use the mechanisms of the state to engage in censorship. In book-challenge cases, for example, even though an individual or group of individuals might bring the challenge, it is the usually the board or other administrative body that carries out the censorship request. In other cases, state-run institutions, such as public libraries and schools, may impose censorship practices on the public on their own. This is the case with computer filtering, a restriction practice that must be imposed in order to receive the federal e-rate. It should be noted that because censorship requests are not always successful, those who make such requests are more accurately called "challengers" rather than "censors," as this more fully describes their role; they are challenging the current state of access to particular materials, and it is usually the administrative authority that has final say on what will happen to the items. "Censor" is also a highly contested term, and its use can shut down rather than facilitate communication.

The Discourse of Censorship

As noted, my research focuses on why people engage in censorship, especially what might be called the discourse of censorship. Censorship in an age of ubiquitous access seems to be an entirely futile act. What is the point of trying to remove materials from collections when they are readily available online or in the next town? The removal of *Animal Farm* from a school curriculum in Connecticut, discussed at the beginning of this article, provides a good example of this futility. Any of the middle school students could simply go to their local public library and check out *Animal Farm* or, if they have the means, purchase a copy at the local bookstore or through Amazon. So what was the school system trying to do when it removed the book from the curriculum? Through my research, I have found that the discourse of censorship centers on three things: power, identity, and the nature of knowledge. I have discovered several common themes (Knox 2014a, 2014b, 2015) that unite the discourse of those who challenge books in public institutions, and I will discuss those most relevant to the 2016 national election.

First, challengers often are very concerned with the state of society on many levels. They generally see society as a backbone for life, but one that is fragile and easily destroyed. They often sense that society is on the decline and drifting morally. On a more personal level, challengers are particularly concerned with parenting and view it as a boundary-setting role. They are often parents themselves (see LaRue 2007) who are concerned that other parents are falling down on the job and inadequately monitoring their children's media habits. Challengers believe strongly in the power of reading, and they are also an interpretive community (Fish 1982) that argues that a particular text can be interpreted in only one way. This latter theme is what I call "common sense" interpretation of text, as it is based in the foundations of Scot-

tish common sense philosophy of the eighteenth century (Noll 1985; Segrest 2010). They also fear undisciplined imagination (Davidson 2004) and worry that reading certain materials will lead to mimesis where, for example, reading about a character doing drugs will lead the reader to use drugs in real life. They also argue that reading can have short- and long-term effects on the character of the reader by, for example, introducing him or her to values with which the challenger disagrees. Finally, and most importantly for the aftermath of the elections for librarians, challengers tend to see public institutions such as schools and libraries as public symbols of the community. Public libraries, in particular, are seen as embodiments of the First Amendment, but both public libraries and schools are seen as places that should protect children from dangerous knowledge. Challengers argue that public institutions in their communities should reflect their own personal values, whatever they may be. Note that these themes are not based on political beliefs of the challenger. When I conduct my research, all arguments for challenges are in the same corpus, whether they are from the left, the right, or some other viewpoint. Justifications for censorship practices in public institutions are about the control of knowledge, and the institutions themselves are seen as symbolic representations of community values and beliefs. Because these institutions are supported by the community, they are the face of the community to the wider society and should contain only carefully selected knowledge that reflects what challengers believe are the community's values.

Responding to Censorship

In light of this research and with the consideration that this will probably be a time of increasing threats to the circulation and access of information, how should librarians and other information professionals respond? First, it is important to recommit to the principle of supporting intellectual freedom. Second, institutional policies should be reviewed to ensure that they reflect both professional and institutional values. Finally, librarians should know their communities: local, state, and national.

Principles and Values

Elsewhere I have broadly defined *intellectual freedom* as the "right to access the whole of the information universe without fear of reprisal from the 'powers that be'" (Knox 2015, 11). However it should be noted that intellectual freedom is a malleable concept, and, as Oltmann (2016) notes, support for intellectual freedom can be based in various theoretical frameworks. The library profession has considered support for intellectual freedom one of its primary principles since the mid 1930s. The American Library Association's (ALA's) code of ethics (ALA 2008), first adopted in 1939 and updated three times since then, has two articles that relate to intellectual freedom. Article 2 states, "We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources," and article 3 states, "We protect each library

user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted." Along with the code of ethics, the profession provides other guiding documents related to intellectual freedom. The Library Bill of Rights (LBR), also adopted in 1939, enumerates the rights of patrons in libraries and states in its preamble, "The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services" (ALA 1996). The LBR's seven articles cover library resources, users, and spaces. The Freedom to Read Statement (ALA 2004) enumerates the moral obligations that librarians have toward their patrons and society as a whole. Along with these US-focused documents, articles 18 and 19 of the United Nations's (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Federation of Library Associations code of ethics (IFLA 2012) provide additional guidance concerning principles for supporting intellectual freedom. In these difficult times, and as professionals on the front lines of information access, librarians should commit to the principles enumerated in these documents by standing up for intellectual freedom and resisting censorship in their institutions. These guidelines should also be included in libraries' policies, as described next.

Policies

According to Nelson, Garcia, and the Public Library Association's (2003) excellent manual on writing policy, policies have four purposes: (1) they transform an institution's values into action, (2) they give information needed to perform tasks, (3) they ensure that patrons know what they can expect from an institution and that they are treated equitably, and (4) they provide support for legal action. The authors also discuss four parts of policies: guidelines, statements, regulations, and procedures. *Guidelines* do not need to be re-created, as they are the philosophical statements based on best practice and, in the case of libraries, include the code of ethics, the LBR, and the Freedom to Read and View statements discussed earlier. *Statements*, the second part of policies, are similar to mission statements for intuitions and describe why a particular service is provided. *Regulations* are what most people consider to be "policy" and define the statements more fully. Finally, *procedures* are step-by-step instructions for how to carry out a task.

The *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (Magi et al. 2015) recommends five policies that every library should have: one for collection development and resource reconsideration, a second for use of meeting rooms and exhibit spaces, a third for Internet use, a fourth concerning user privacy and confidentiality, and a fifth for a user behavior and library use. One can see how each responds to principles discussed in the code of ethics, the LBR, and the Freedom to Read Statement. Each of these policies is important for protecting both patrons and the library in this time of upheaval. Collection development and reconsideration policies ensure that libraries are selecting a wide range of materials for their communities and also that patrons have a clearly defined process for bringing their concerns to library staff and administration. Next,

as groups of people decide how they want to respond to the new administration, many will need a place to meet, and libraries offer one of the few free or low-cost spaces in many communities. Meeting room and exhibit space policies should be robust and written with consideration for equitable treatment of all community members in mind. In light of the information regarding the manipulation of the election and the persistence of fake news, it is important that all libraries have a policy for Internet use. Many libraries are subject to federal laws concerning the use of filters, but it is important that filters are not overly stringent and do not screen out legal information (Houghton 2010; Oltmann et al. 2015). We do not yet know what changes there will be concerning privacy and confidentiality of information with the new administration, but all libraries should have policies that strongly protect their patrons' privacy. Some libraries may also consider holding cryptoparties or other workshops that teach patrons how to secure their personal information. Finally, user behavior and library use policies ensure that everyone knows who has access to a given library's resources and what is expected of patrons when they use those resources. More information on how to write these policies and how often they should be reviewed can be found in the latest edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (Magi et al. 2015), published by the ALA.

Communities

Librarians and other information professionals should know their communities. This, of course, includes the local community, such as patrons. I also encourage my students to remember that nonusers are just as much a part of an institution's community, and it is important to know both who those people are and why they do not use the library. Often it is the loudest people whose voices are heard the most, but "libraries are for everyone" (Hafuboti 2017), including those who are marginalized in society and those who feel that the library is not for them. Librarians should also know their state and national communities, including lawmakers who craft laws that affect library policy.

Finally, it is important to be aware of organizations that will provide support if there is a challenge to or some other event concerning intellectual freedom in the library. The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (http://www.ala.org/offices/oif) employs expert staff that will provide support with handling any censorship issues that may arise. It is important to report all challenges, as reports raise awareness of intellectual freedom issues and (more selfishly on my part) aid with research. The Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF; http://www.ftrf.org), of which I am a trustee, supports intellectual freedom in court cases and financial support for educational programs. For example, the FTRF is an amicus on the court briefs that are resisting the dismantling of the Mexican American studies program in Arizona (*Arce v. Douglas*), a case that might be a bellwether for the current political climate in the United States.[1] More

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1. *Arce v. Douglas*, 793 F.3d 968, 975–76 (9th Cir. 2015).

succinctly, the FTRF is the legal arm of the librarianship for its ethical principles, including intellectual freedom for all.

The mission of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC 2017; http://ncac.org) is "to promote freedom of thought, inquiry and expression and oppose censorship in all its forms." (I am also on the board of the NCAC.) It is an alliance of several organizations, including the ALA and the American Booksellers for Free Expression, and its programs include the Kids Right to Read and Arts Advocacy. Similar to the Office for Intellectual Freedom, the NCAC will also provide support if there is an incident in your institution. The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund's (http://cbldf.org) mission is to support free access to comic books and graphic novels. These materials are constantly under attack in communities across the nation, and it is my suspicion that such attacks will increase over the next few years. Libraries have only recently started collecting graphic novels, and their subject matter is often subversive and a target for challengers.

Two other organizations do not provide direct support for libraries per se, but it is important that all information professionals be aware of their work. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (https://www.eff.org) is "the leading nonprofit organization defending civil liberties in the digital world."[2] The foundation publishes white papers, participates in legal proceedings, and conducts other initiatives to ensure that digital rights are ensured. The American Civil Liberties Union (https://www.aclu.org) is, of course, the most well-known civil liberties organization in the country. Librarians should be aware of the work of both national and state ACLUs on many issues regarding intellectual freedom.

The Freedom to Read

In sum, it is the responsibility of librarians and other information professionals to be prepared to respond to any attempts to curb information access in their communities. One of my favorite images for Banned Books Week features the Statue of Liberty reading a book and the portmanteau "FREADOM." The freedom to read, along with the freedom to speak, is integral to life in a democracy, and it is librarians who are on the front lines protecting these rights. As of this writing, it is unknown how these rights may be abridged in the new administration, but I believe that, based on my research, threats will come not just from the federal government but also from fellow community members. Research on why people try to control information helps us better understand their arguments, and by recommitting to the principle of supporting intellectual freedom, reviewing institutional policies, and knowing one's community, we can ensure that these threats will not be met empty handed. In this time of turmoil, we must both celebrate and defend the right to read.

2. "About EFF," Electronic Frontier Foundation, accessed April 27, 2017, https://www.eff.org/about.

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