

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

September 2010

“Not I” Said the Pig: Who Defends Intellectual Freedom for Librarians?

Jean-Mark Sens

Nicholls State University, jmarksens@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Sens, Jean-Mark, ““Not I” Said the Pig: Who Defends Intellectual Freedom for Librarians?” (2010). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 414.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/414>

“Not I” Said the Pig: Who Defends Intellectual Freedom for Librarians?

Jean-Mark Sens
Ellender Memorial Library
Nicholls State University
Thibodaux, Louisiana

Introduction

I read with particular interest the article “[Who Defends Intellectual Freedom for Librarians](#)” by John Buschman as it came as a very pertinent reflection on a practical issue of freedom of expression and collection development at the Ellender Memorial Library at Nicholls State University where I have been working for the past four years.

Having worked in the academia both as a teaching faculty member and a librarian, I would like to offer some reflections about what censorship represents as infringing on intellectual freedom and freedom of expression—which are not the same, although the former is included in the latter, and I would like to present actual examples, that although modest, are illustrations of an authoritarian attitude underlying censorship.

From the perspective of a library professional, censorship is not only a moral issue, it is also a practical issue, because the practice of censorship puts a real constraint on the selection of materials, and just by the necessity of preserving one's job and avoiding conflicts in a climate of censorship a librarian could decide to avoid acquiring materials that represent a risk. At some point, if not opposed, censorship becomes insidious, part of a practice that generates itself without any further authoritarian intervention and also indicates a submissive obedience to authority that pervades a whole academic institution.

That censorship generates self-censorship is a truism that could be easily verified, as most of us prefer the short-term contentment of a false trouble-free environment to being vocal about intellectual freedom. Maybe there emerges a difference between the liberal arts and the applied field of library science. At the beginning of his article, quoting the major library organization, John Buschman reminds us that “the ALA stated in its endorsement that “academic freedom means for the librarian intellectual freedom,” which was in turn linked to the “practice of [our] profession without fear of interference or of dismissal for... unjust reasons.” (15) One reason for the disappointment Buschman experiences with ALA's weakness in defending intellectual freedom is that over the years the library profession has come further apart from the liberal arts tradition of freedom of expression and intellectual speculations for more vocational and managerial endeavors. Librarians and scholars brush shoulders within the same environment but rarely converse. In fact they are often set apart, and by a lack of genuine communication they share a reciprocal disdain. Examining this pervading phenomenon in “The Librarian-Scholar,” Kenneth Carpenter rightly uses the term “enmity” to describe the divisiveness within librarianship between those playing a scholarly role and those in charge of managerial and technical functions (393). This divisiveness is not only within librarianship but also corresponds to a situation of “estrangement” that I personally encountered when I ventured from liberal arts to library science and which I tried to explain

some years ago in an essay entitled “Familiar Estrangement: The Library Scholar, the Literary Scholar, and the Book.” As fewer and fewer librarians define themselves as belonging to an intellectual profession, it is likely that interest in defending intellectual freedom will not be very strong, and it is little surprise that past the enumeration of principles for academic freedom, the ALA does little to enforce them and regards instances of violations as “local management issues.” (Buschman, 17)

Beyond some sociological differences, librarians, scholars, and librarian-scholars evolve in a similar environment and would greatly benefit from putting aside their differences, but there is also the fact that censorship from an abstract, ethical issue is far more complex when put in terms of acquisition practices and plays into a concrete situation sometimes involving diverging considerations between dire budgetary limitations and giving access to a wide range of materials, both in format and in contents, that expresses different views. For this reason, once put into the uneasy and unpopular position of a censor, it is likely that the censor will adopt the stance of utilitarian considerations, or at least offer some rationalizations phrased in terms of audience appropriateness and context. It is precisely what I saw happening when my library director decided to return *Secrets of methamphetamine manufacture: Including recipes for MDA, ecstasy, and other psychedelic amphetamines* that had been ordered by a newly hired colleague who was not able to challenge the recall. The library director's decision stemmed from fear that the academic dean would hear about the book and register criticism for allowing such material in the collection. The director rationalized this decision in a meeting, explaining that the fact only a handful of libraries carried the book proved it unworthy of acquiring. The very title of the book was a call to break the law. It could only be disapproved of by parents and administrators. A monograph purchased with the taxpayers' money telling students how to manufacture methamphetamine in their dorms had no place on our campus. The library director explained that should we not agree with the decision to return the book, the matter would be referred to the dean—more as a threat than as a way towards fair arbitration and conciliation. With a new librarian who felt unable to stand against this decision, the matter was easy for the censor, who had caved to a perceived pressure although it contradicted the very principles of the ALA endorsed by the library director as a member.

The nature of some materials (pornography, national security, libel, etc.) may indeed in some cases, be deemed inappropriate when dealing with a particular, under-age group, generally not the users of an academic library. In this case, the library director was in fact responding to anticipated pressure, perhaps even more imaginary than real, and directly contradicting the ACRL Intellectual Freedom Principles; specifically that “it is essential that collections contain materials representing a variety of perspectives on subjects that may be considered controversial.” (<http://www.pla.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/whitepapers/principles.pdf>)

Although in itself the removal may seem a small matter, and probably more a form of subservient reaction to authority than a firm belief in censorship, it insidiously dictated a practice to order books that fall within vague and unstated community standards. Such practice does not foster a sense of open dialogue and infantilizes patrons in direct contradiction with the proclaimed “critical thinking” expectation that Nicholls State University claims to promote, as well as making librarians wary about what they should and should not acquire. As Oppenheim and Smith observe, “not to buy a book because of the problems it might cause is still censorship. It is now hidden, self-imposed, and comes from within the library” (163).

Censorship in democratic societies rarely takes the very dramatic forms practiced by storm troopers and zealots of different stripes and creeds. Most often, it comes insidiously through someone feeling supposedly challenged or uncomfortable with beliefs and images that project different notions than what s/he holds. Similarly, the library director's attitude not to offend anybody led to a bitter situation with another librarian, who, in October 2008, put a small display in the library exhibiting government documents about the war. All the documents selected were government documents housed within the library. One book, *War surgery in Afghanistan and Iraq: A series of cases, 2003-2007*, showed a clinical and graphic photograph of a man who had suffered battle wounds with and had stitches on his face. Shortly after the display was exhibited in a public area of the library, the library director had it moved to a location out of the patrons' way and turned the picture of the wounded soldier to an uncontroversial

image. Again claiming it was not censorship, the library director stated that it was a response to someone who had expressed discomfort about the picture. Some students had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some had relatives in the armed forces, and, according to the library director, the exhibited picture had received other complaints as well.

Feeling understandably frustrated in having been castigated and censored for expressing a vision of war that goes against the grain of easy patriotic feelings, the government documents librarian found herself increasingly isolated and ostracized in her work and refused to participate in any future displays and exhibits. A few months later in May 2009, although the library director announced no positions would be lost due to budget cuts, the government documents librarian received a letter of termination. Reconciliation and addressing of grievances are unlikely in a climate of distrust, and the rift between the librarian in question and the library director had increased with internal library matters brought into the situation, the case has moved from an internal academic matter to litigation involving courts and lawyers.

In themselves, the two instances of censorship would be benign, should such matters even happen in a respectful and respected academic institution of higher learning, but as it is often the case with censorship, reported and documented instances are too sadly only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Early in my position, I was solicited to participate along with faculty and staff in a series of meetings about the future of Nicholls State University and ways to improve the institution. I was surprised that when on the matter of transparency I suggested to the library director that we should ask for the university budget, which is a public record, be made available on line, the answer was that such a suggestion would jeopardize, in the eye of the administration, my chances of remaining employed with Nicholls. More recently with drastic cuts in higher education in the state of Louisiana affecting all operations on campus, I emailed the library director and other members of the administration that it would facilitate access to interested individuals and to the Nicholls community to post the 2009-2010 budget online as the previous year's budget had been much in demand. My suggestion received no response, except for an oral acknowledgement from the library director that such a large document would take too much space to be posted online.

Censorship not only deprives patrons of materials when there are already enough economic and practical limits on access. It also marks a form of infantilizing authoritarianism that labels legitimate questions and professional concerns as dissent and threats to the institution. While it is true that censorship is much rarer in academic libraries than public libraries, since academic libraries are geared toward higher learning and freedom of expression, that makes it even more difficult to understand why "librarians (academic or otherwise) are unwilling, through their premier professional association, to shame those involved in the most egregious violations of intellectual freedom when the violations occur within the profession" (Buschman, 17). One reason might be that ALA is a very broad-based organization whose membership serves as a convenient way to show proof of professional development. It may not be infrequent that censors are ALA members. Censorship in a democratic society is not just removal of information, it is also an attitude that is counter to the notion of an open society, as it discourages informed participation, honest dialogue, and criticism, and results in conflict that for the short-term benefit of a false sense of security actually hampers the peace and happiness of individuals and is counterproductive to their institutions.

Works Cited

Association of College and Research Libraries. "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries." Adopted by ALA Council July 12, 2000, retrieved at:
<http://www.pla.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/whitepapers/principles.pdf>

Buschman, John. "Who Defends Intellectual Freedom for Librarians?" *Academe* (September-October 2009) 15-17, online at: <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2009/SO/Feat/busc.htm>

Carpenter, Kenneth E. "The librarian-scholar." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 23.5 (1997): 398. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text*. EBSCO. Web. 26 Oct. 2009.

Doyle, Tony. "Selection versus Censorship in Libraries." *Collection Management* 27.1 (2002): 15. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text*. EBSCO. Web. 25 Oct. 2009.

Moody, Kim. "Covert censorship in libraries: a discussion paper." *Australian Library Journal* 54.2 (2005): 138-147. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text*. EBSCO. Web. 25 Oct. 2009.

Nessen, Shawn Christian. *War surgery in Afghanistan and Iraq: a series of cases, 2003-2007*. Falls Church, Va.: Office of the Surgeon General, United States Army ; Washington, DC: Borden Institute: Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 2008.

Oppenheim, Charles, and Victoria Smith. "Censorship in libraries." *Information Services & Use* 24.4 (2004): 159-170. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text*. EBSCO. Web. 25 Oct. 2009.

Sens, Jean-Mark. "Familiar Estrangement: The Library Scholar, the Literary Scholar, and the Book." *The Centennial Review* 39.1 (Winter 1995)