Pressure Groups and Library Collection Development: Attempts to Influence Library Collections, and Best Practices for Library Response

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Abstract

An examination of various United States pressure groups’ messages regarding how to influence or censor library collection content. Looks at the beliefs and goals of several different groups that have web presences and who wish to challenge and change the material holdings, collection development and Internet policies of school and public libraries. Describes what libraries can do to resist attempts of control and censorship by these groups and how libraries can maintain intellectual freedom standards and First Amendment rights for their library patrons.

Keywords: pressure groups, censorship, First Amendment, collection development policy, intellectual freedom
Orchestrated attempts to censor or influence library materials are not new. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how long groups have organized for the purposes of library influence and censorship, but it is highly likely that such pressures have been occurring since there have been libraries or collections of information. Without a doubt, the moral and political views of both fringe groups and those with governing interests have made impacts on countless library collections throughout time and many geographies.

Attempts to censor libraries will undoubtedly continue and it is unlikely that libraries will ever be immune to challenges regarding material selection and usage policies, and to litigation concerning First Amendment rights. While the first section of this manuscript will focus on the pressure groups and their control messages pertaining to library content and policy, the second section will address what libraries and policymakers can do to stem the efforts such groups make against the rights of library users.

**But First, What Censorship Really Is**

Here a pause is required to examine what censorship actually is. Pressure groups and individuals are rarely capable of censoring the contents of a library. Censorship is something that can easily be done in the home and only slightly less easily in the private institution. There are no laws against a parent telling their minor child that certain library material is off limits. Additionally, the laws are limited regarding what a private institution can do about media content within its boundaries. Therefore, in the cases of pressure groups trying to influence a library, censorship specifically is a request to the state, or an agent of the state (publicly-funded libraries and schools are government institutions and thus agents of the state) to do the censoring. The group cannot do it on its own: It is asking the government to do the censoring.

**A Very Brief Historical Sketch of Organized and Inherent Library Collection Censorship and Influence**
Some scholars, such as Harris (1986), would go so far as to argue the point of Italian Marxist and political dissident, Antonio Gramsci: that because libraries are funded by the State, they are and continue to be inherently biased by the ruling class and the social norms which created them into existence (p. 222). Harris (ibid) would argue that only material permissible through the channels of white, male, capitalists were on any United States’ public libraries’ shelves whatsoever until possibly a few decades into the twentieth century (p.241-244).

In a narrower, more practical and recent scope, one need only to place the word ‘groups’ in a database such as the *Intellectual Freedom Issues in Oregon: A News Database*, (created by the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the Oregon Library Association and Pacific University and currently available at: http://commons.pacificu.edu/iforegon/), to see that the early 1950’s were fraught with groups’ attempts to censor and in some cases destroy library material on the bases of both moral (Those terrible comic books and pulp novels!) and political (Burn the works of communist sympathizers!) concerns and complaints. During the McCarthy era, Eastern Oregon College president Rod Langston (1952) headed up a committee to have all library material suspected of being “communist propaganda” plainly labeled as such and placed in a special section of the library (La Grande Observer).

Pressure group exertion on U. S. libraries has waxed and waned over the years. Donald Davis (1998) writes that the 1960s and 1970s were “halcyon years” in respect to their being only minor attempts at library censorship (p.41). The Reagan era 1980s were neither quiet nor rabid in regard to library challenges but there is not good national tracking of challenges in this decade. It was not until 1990 that the American Library Association published its *Banned & Challenged Books Database* (ALA website, 2013) (See Appendix C for the ALA’s graphs regarding *Number of Challenges by Year, Reason, Initiator & Institution* (1990 - 2010) ). Because of this, one can see tracking of challenges for only a little over two decades.
However, it is certain that library challenges and censorship issues were given a modern day jumpstart on April 15, 1999 when the then very popular and influential (at the time, Schlessinger had a North American listenership of 20 million) radio host Laura Schlessinger announced: “The ALA is boldly, brashly contributing to sexualizing our children. And now the pedophiles know where to go.” (DiLucchio, 1999, para. 1). Although Schlessinger has since implicated herself in multiple scandals and hypocrisy, and has moved her show from a national radio network to one that is strictly cable and subscription based, there is little doubt that the damage she did to libraries’ collective reputations was impactful. Likely due to the broad dissemination of her original accusation that libraries were unsafe for children, many new pressure groups sprung up over the last decade.

Censorship is Old But Pressure Groups are Freshly Organized and Far-Reaching in the Age of Technology

Historically, group efforts to censor or control library collections, not much has changed except for the breadth of the action, or, more accurately, the speed in which electronic communication allows it to travel. The pre-Internet McCarthy era spread its fear-mongering and censorship via the available news outlets of television, radio and newspapers. McCarthyism targeted high profile Hollywood celebrities to garner more attention for its message and punitive behaviors. All of those media forms are still powerful and influential today but the Internet allows anyone with even limited resources to disseminate any kind of message (including those that are inaccurate, incomplete or downright hateful) for anyone to see.

Internet connectivity for average citizens became more commonplace in the mid-1990s and no one can argue that the world wide web allowed information to spread at unprecedented speed. News of material challenges in libraries were therefore more likely to spread as well. And news of a particular book being challenged or banned in
one place could easily inspire the idea to do the same in another location. The advent of Web 2.0 provided web users new tools to communicate and create content. It is around this time that one can see the rise of a growing web presence against libraries and their “problematic” material holdings and policies.

There are currently multiple, national pressure groups who dedicate all or part of their missions to censorship advocacy in United States school and public libraries. Some of the national pressure groups with web presences are named as follows: Family Friendly Libraries (a subgroup of Citizens for Community Values); Gateways to Better Education (Their byline is: Keeping the Faith in Public Schools); Parents Against Bad Books In Schools (PABBIS); Plan2Succeed; Safe Libraries and, Safe Schools Safe Libraries Project (An organization under the umbrella of Morality in Media (MIM)). (A list of current URLs for these sites appears in Appendix A). Each of these groups espouses protection of youth as its prime objective. Similarly, each group states that today’s school and public libraries fail at protecting youth by providing access to inappropriate books and through inadequate measures to filter Internet content.

While in no way intending to be exhaustive, what follows are some of the web-based messages about libraries that these online pressure groups espouse:

• The first 2 points of a 14-point charter statement from Family Friendly Libraries states:

  1. Increase awareness in the community of the need to protect children from harmful or age inappropriate materials in public libraries.
  2. Increase awareness in the community that taxpayer funded public libraries belong to the local taxpayers and their local libraries should reflect their needs and values.

• On the Gateways to Better Education website, the following is found in the Questions and Answers section:

  Q: My child's school library is putting up a display promoting "Banned Books Week." What do you think about this?

  A: The ALA performs an intellectual slight [sic] of hand by interchanging the words challenged and banned. Their reasoning is that if the challenges were successful the books would be banned, so "Banned Books Week" really highlights books that some people want banned.
They also do not distinguish between public libraries and school libraries. Most challenges involve school libraries and classrooms where parents do not accompany their children and have little or no ability to keep them from undesirable books. These challenges have to do with educational discernment - a point lost in the ALA literature.

- From the “Bad Books” page of the Parents Against Bad Books In Schools (PABBIS) website:

  As we investigated objectionable reading material our children might unexpectedly encounter we found its use was not necessarily confined to a few classes. It is on our counties [sic] suggested Summer Reading List. It is in the school libraries.

  In some of the books there are vividly described scenes of oral sex, brutal rapes, gang rapes, two men raping a woman at once, pedophilia, masturbation, extremely graphic violence, torture,... and on and on and on. To us some of it is pornography weakly disguised as literature. Unbelievably foul stuff. With all the books available, why do teachers select these?

- On their “Library Porn Removal” page, the Plan2Succeed has quite a sampling of the horrors that occur in libraries, including this scathing assessment of the American Library Association:

  The ALA believes children should have access to pornography because it would be age discrimination to keep them from seeing it. Furthermore, they seem to have a sort of affirmative action program for children deprived of pornography their whole lives that they implement by producing lists of books including pornographic books for children of different grade levels.

- On the SafeLibraries blogspot the page heading states:

  Educating people and politicians about who controls public libraries. Citizens should, not the American Library Association. If your local library is applying ALA policy instead of local law/policy, learn what can be done to reverse that.

- And from the homepage of the Safe Schools, Safe Libraries Project, the group offers its (undocumented) opinions of the ALA and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU):

  The American Library Association (ALA) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) regularly advocate for access to pornography in schools
and libraries. They fought a losing battle all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court advocating for access to pornography. They lost, yet continue to bully libraries and schools into not using filters.

How These Groups Attempt to Influence Libraries, Library Policy and Collection Development

Much of the activity of the aforementioned groups focuses on efforts to remove material from a library or to advocate for policies that decidedly narrow the scope of a library’s collection development policy. Furthermore, although not the focus of this manuscript, such groups also concentrate efforts on pressuring libraries to filter Internet computer stations - most certainly for youth and often for adult users as well.

Beyond the far-reaching abilities gained through their web presences, the most unnerving behaviors exhibited by these pressure groups are as follows: An utter disregard (or advantageous misinterpretation) of the First Amendment; a disrespect for or ignorance of the law regarding “pornography” and obscenity, particularly the Miller test (see Appendix B for full text of Miller v. California), and an outright objection to most of the tenets set forth in the American Library Association’s key documents - particularly the Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read Statement. Furthermore, such groups push for entirely local (parental, religious) control of school and public libraries, eschewing library professionals’ expertise in lieu of their own biased form of community standards. Each of these behaviors present potentially serious challenges towards library collection and access policies.

An April 2013 SafeLibraries blog post announced that the “Chicago Public Library Openly Allows Porn Despite the Law and Chicago Sun-Times Gives One-Sided Report to Maintain Status Quo”, and that furthermore:

Many libraries allow porn viewing despite the law,(sic) so many that the American Library Association has been called out for misleading a third of American communities by the author of the Children's Internet Protection Act, and, as a result, ALA has been named as one of the nation's leading porn facilitators (“SafeLibraries”, 2013).
Such a statement shows an ignorance of the First Amendment and the Miller test (See Appendix B, point 2, a,b,& c). Additionally, declarations such as this twist the words of professional staff, and, perhaps equally importantly, they unwittingly yet blatantly advocate for an abdication of parental responsibilities regarding the library usage of minors in their care.

The vehement opposition towards the ALA is clear on every pressure group site mentioned herein. On the Family Friendly Libraries website (2013), one of the 10 Ways to Create a Family Friendly Library states:

Persevere. In the battle to restore decent limits and common sense to public libraries, remember that you are protecting your children, your tax money, and your community. Public libraries are supposed to answer to you – not to the American Library Association. The moral and cultural down slide of the American public library system has occurred gradually but steadily over nearly three decades of ALA political and cultural activism... (Gounaud, “Family Friends Libraries”, point 10)

In the late 1990s, Family Friendly Libraries groups in Florida and Oklahoma “attacked the ALA and its Office of Intellectual Freedom and called for local collection development in children’s services at public libraries” (Davis,1999, pg. 62). The library board said ‘no’. The Oklahoma groups kept pushing for intervention from the City Council (who had no jurisdiction over the library) and got the newspaper behind them as well. However, after much harassment and negative attention, the libraries were ultimately able to rebuff these attempts (ibid).

Although pressure groups expend great effort on attempt to discredit and dismantle ALA-backed policies (including collections and collection development policies) in school and public libraries, most of them also give some effort to the advocacy of adding their own biased materials into the libraries’ collections. Books that offer strong Christian religious values, titles that promote creationist theory over evolutionary theory, and tomes denouncing homosexuality as an aberration, are what are most often offered to libraries by pressure groups. Kertesz (2001) wrote that “would-be selectors...” are “more troubling...than would-be banners” (pg. 34). Such “self-appointed collection devel-
opment specialists...are sure they have found a shortcoming in the library and intend to see to it that it is rectified”(ibid).

On the *Gateways to Better Education* site, the following story, titled *Bibles Stocked in School Library* is reported:

Gateways Campus Partner Tammy Huba was successful in convincing the school to accept Bibles in the school library and make it a part of the Accelerated Reader program (in which students receive rewards for reading library books). Now, at Shadeville Elementary in Crawfordville, Florida, 664 children can get rewarded for reading the Gospels, all the New Testament books, and most books of the Old Testament! (“Gateways to Better Education”, 2013)

Other pressure groups’ websites elaborate on methods and talking points for challenging schools and libraries to eschew controversial books and to question why more wholesome titles weren’t selected in their place. The *Parents Against Bad Books In Schools* website beseeches those concerned to ask teachers, administrators and librarians: “Is this particular book necessary? Are other books without bad content equal or better in doing the job? Which ones were considered?” (2013). Having answers in place for such questions is essential, for as civil libertarian Nat Henthoff (1992) pointed out in his seminal work, *Free Speech for Me - But Not for Thee*, “Many (school) principals...yield immediately to complaints rather than have to deal with the controversy that comes with review committees and public hearings” (p. 375).

**How Libraries Can Best Prepare for and Respond to Pressure Groups**

Libraries should resist and counter the efforts of such pressure groups and have two primary best practices methods they can utilize in order to do so. The first exists within the creation and maintenance of library policy in general, and library collection development specifically. The second best practice is proactive and ongoing education regarding intellectual freedom.
There is no better insurance against the actions of pressure groups than a well-crafted policy. If a policy is worth little else to a library (and that should not be the case of a good policy or a good library) its ability to hold ground or push back from the influence or actions of censorial individuals or pressure groups may be the primary objective that makes its existence worth any stress or trouble to create it. Librarian and author Helen Adams (2008) states, “The selection policy contains the seeds for defense in case of a challenge. When selection criteria are consciously considered while identifying resources to be purchased, those same criteria can be used to justify the acquisition if a formal challenge is filed” (p. 28). Getting a well-crafted policy in writing, (preferably one that encompasses a key ALA document such as the *Library Bill of Rights* or the *Freedom to Read Statement*) and having it adopted by the library’s governing board, is a fundamental best practice for a library to uphold intellectual freedom standards and to maintain a robust and balanced collection.

There is an abundance of quality help and resources for libraries needing to draft or revise collection development policy. Many libraries now post their policies on their websites and it is not difficult to find a library whose demographic reasonably matches one’s own in order to get an idea of policy wording, scope and flavor. Formally, there are many good print and online resources for creating a collection policy. Some of these include the ALA’s online template called the *Workbook for Selection Policy Writing* and Hoffman and Woods’ 2005 print resource, *Library Collection Development Policies: Academic, Public and Special Libraries*. For school libraries, Bishop’s 2007, *The Collection Program in Schools: Concepts, Practices, and Information Sources* (4th ed.), is a good source for policy creation that takes into account the special, age-appropriate collection development issues faced by educational institutions, their boards and service population.

A final word about library collection development policy is that in order to be optimally effective, it needs to be maintained. It may be written in a broad enough manner
to incorporate new formats that have not even yet been imagined. Such a policy written in, say, the 1980s, can easily incorporate new or current formats such as Playaway®, Blu-Ray™ or e-books, because no specific formats were named in the initial policy. Some libraries however will have their reasons for wanting to name individual formats and for being specific in other ways that can make a policy intermittently become dated. Such policies will have to be tended more frequently but that is not a negative thing as long as a schedule is set and adhered to in order to actually do such updating. Another very good reason for updating the policy, if only to change the adoption date on it for a new board or trustee member, is to use communication about the policy to inform new board members and governing officials of the policy’s existence, purpose, and importance. This is a proactive, educational, communication opportunity to keep key players informed regarding the crucial concept of library intellectual freedom. Fine-tuning a word here or there can keep the policy alive in the minds of all who are affected by it.

Education about intellectual freedom issues is the other best practice for preparation and response to library collection challenges. Angela Maycock, Assistant Director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, writes, “Being prepared for questions and concerns if the first and most important step to defusing challenges before they become crises” (2011). The ‘Communication Guide’ chapter in Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read (2010) is one of the best educational resources for libraries, their staff and their boards to utilize in order to effectively counter censorship and collection control issues (Doyle, pp. 114-121). Questions about how parents can protect their children, how libraries can communicate to media about intellectual freedom, as well as how they can respond to challenges, are all covered excellently and thoroughly in just 7 information-packed pages. This is a quintessential best practices guide-within-a-guide. Additional valuable educational resources for responding to pressure groups can also be found in The Library’s Legal Answer Book, (Minow & Lipinski, 2003) and The Intellectual Freedom Manual, 8th edition (ALA, 2010).
The Constitution and the First Amendment are Still the Bottom Line

“In this nation, intellectual freedom is, for the most part, protected through the First Amendment.” (Cooper, 2010, p. 218). The U.S. Constitution, and specifically the First Amendment, is still the most powerful counter to pressure groups’ and individual’s attempts to control materials and access policies in libraries. Constitutionally protected speech is very broad, despite the fact that school libraries must deal with the burden of in loco parentis and often the amplified concerns regarding the safety of children in relation to what they are exposed to in terms of library material.

One pressure group tactic is to undermine libraries’ professional authority. A method of doing this is to attack the American Library Association and its key documents. For example, Family Friendly Libraries encourages concerned citizens to petition their libraries to keep library policy and governance local, and to not apply “blanket sets of policies” such as those offered by ALA (The Mission of Family Friendly Libraries, 2013). The Plan2Succeed (2013) site dedicates most of its page space to discrediting and attacking the ALA and consistently makes statements that the ALA is in defiance of the law. It’s section titled “Stopping the ALA from Endangering Children” is a long list of ways Plan2Succeed believes (or at least states) that the ALA is responsible for peddling pornography to children, putting librarians themselves at risk, and defying Supreme Court rulings by refusing to filter Internet access. Plan2Succeed’s site ignores the fact that only libraries who receive government E-rate funds must be in filtering compliance with the federal Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA).

There are two good answers to such tactics: One is to make certain that a library’s governing board adopts the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read Statement into their actual policy. Such an action gives these key ethical guideline documents “the force of law” (2003, Minow, pg. 129). The other best response is to know what qualifies as constitutionally protected speech. Speech which fails the three-
pronged “Miller Test”(1973)(See Appendix B, point 2, a,b,& c) for obscenity, slander and libel, and speech that is made to elicit illegal, action are essentially the only forms of speech that do not fall under protection of the highest court of law of the United States. Sadly, this does not mean that a local library board, nor a local governing board will see it this way. It also does not mean that the harassment will cease once the pressure group is informed that they are attacking protected speech. In fact, a library’s funds can be compromised, its staff harassed or even dismissed, and its sidewalks picketed, to name just a few pressure tactics. In a particularly contentious situation, pressure groups can make a library, its board and employees utterly miserable and under threat. Although few cases go so far, it is sometimes only when such incidences are litigated and taken to a court of law (and sometimes a court that is higher than a local one) that such groups will back off of a library when told they have no legal standing for their demands or allegations.

In Conclusion, and a Closing Tale

Pressure groups are out there and their activities aimed at libraries wax and wane with political and economic cycles. (Angela Maycock (2011) noted that “economic hard times, can lead to greater challenges to intellectual freedom” (pg. 9).) Their reach is unharnessed by the power of the internet but it is not often that they get a spokesperson such as a Laura Schlessinger to propagate their messages of intolerance and control. That is not to say that library staff should not be versed on how to speak to the media should a pressure group or individual find a way to create a controversial, media-attractive event involving challenged material or some other intellectual freedom issue. Someone on staff should be delegated to speak to the media and must be well-prepared (for great suggestions on how, see Doyle, 2010, pp. 116-117) to speak accurately and clearly about intellectual freedom.
If a library establishes a policy, as well as ongoing educational efforts to promote and protect patron access to diverse ideas and opinions, it has the best prescription for being able to effectively uphold the ethical and democratic principles of intellectual freedom. A library that implements these best practices will be on the side of current constitutional law, something that any pressure group, despite its attempts to interpret and claim the law on its own side, does not have.

In the early 1990s (before such pressure groups did their promotions via the web) the Idaho Library Association was under fire from the Idaho Citizen’s Alliance (ICA). The ICA wanted to make certain that school and public libraries in the state would not have any materials on their shelves written from a gay-positive perspective. They wanted this badly enough that they went forward with a ballot initiative for the state to vote on in the November 1994 election. With a lot of help from the American and Oregon Library Associations (Carr & Greever, 1995, p. 136), the Idaho Library Association (ILA) worked tirelessly to educate the voting public and the ballot did not pass. When it was all over and the ILA was victorious over the ICA, media strategist Susan L. Silk (1995) said:

> It is important for professionals fighting to preserve very basic and important rights to remember that being a spokesperson is a ‘do something every day’ assignment, not just a crisis-to-crisis task. We need to remind ourselves that being visible, ‘speaking up and speaking out’ becomes easier the more we do it. And it is always easier to persuade when the persuasion occurs consistently over a long period of time” (Carr & Greever, p. 139).

How to respond to pressure groups who challenge libraries cannot really be said better than Silk’s summary unless of course one quotes Thomas Jefferson when he stated, “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.” Such as it is with libraries.
References


Appendix A

URLs of Pressure Groups’ Websites Referenced in the Manuscript


Gateways to Better Education - http://www.gtbe.org/

Parents Against Bad Books In Schools (PABBIS) - http://www.pabbis.com/

Plan2Succeed - http://www.plan2succeed.org/


Safe Schools, Safe Libraries Project (operate within the organization Morality in Media) http://www.safelibraryproject.com/
Appendix B

Miller v. California - 413 U.S. 15 (1973)

U.S. Supreme Court

No. 70-73

Argued January 18-19, 1972

Reargued November 7, 1972

Decided June 21, 1973

413 U.S. 15

Syllabus

Appellant was convicted of mailing unsolicited sexually explicit material in violation of a California statute that approximately incorporated the obscenity test formulated in Memoirs v. Massachusetts, 383 U.S. 413, 383 U.S. 418 (plurality opinion). The trial court instructed the jury to evaluate the materials by the contemporary community standards of California. Appellant's conviction was affirmed on appeal. In lieu of the obscenity criteria enunciated by the Memoirs plurality, it is held:

1. Obscene material is not protected by the First Amendment. Roth v. United States, 354 U.S. 476, reaffirmed. A work may be subject to state regulation where that work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex; portrays, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and, taken as a whole, does not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. Pp. 413 U.S. 23-24.

2. The basic guidelines for the trier of fact must be: (a) whether "the average person, applying contemporary community standards" would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, Roth, supra, at 354 U.S. 489, (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. If a state obscenity law is thus limited, First Amendment values are adequately protected by ultimate independent appellate review of constitutional claims when necessary. Pp. 413 U.S. 24-25.

3. The test of "utterly without redeeming social value" articulated in Memoirs, supra, is rejected as a constitutional standard. Pp. 413 U.S. 24-25.

4. The jury may measure the essentially factual issues of prurient appeal and patent offensiveness by the standard that prevails in the forum community, and need not employ a "national standard." Pp. 413 U.S. 30-34.

Vacated and remanded.
BRENNAN, J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which STEWART and MARSHALL, JJ., joined, post, p. 413 U. S. 47.

Appendix C

Number of Challenges by Year, Reason, Initiator & Institution (1990 - 2010)

These figures are pulled from our Challenge Database, which currently has 10,676 challenges on record. You will notice that if you add up the numbers of challenges by reason or initiator, the total will be greater than 10,676. This is because many challenges have multiple reasons or initiators.
Challenges by Initiator, 1990-2010

Challenges by Institution, 1990-2010

All data retrieved April 16, 2013 from the American Library Association website: http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/stats