



*Evidence Summary*

**Public Librarians Reflect Belief in Intellectual Freedom through Collection Development Activities**

**A Review of:**

Oltmann, S. M. (2016). Public Librarians' Views on Collection Development and Censorship. *Collection Management*, 41(1), 23-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2015.1117998>

**Reviewed by:**

Melissa Goertzen  
Collection Development Analysis & Support Librarian  
Columbia University Libraries  
New York, New York, United States of America  
Email: [mjg2227@columbia.edu](mailto:mjg2227@columbia.edu)

**Received:** 23 May 2016

**Accepted:** 26 July 2016

© 2016 Goertzen. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 4.0 International (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

---

**Abstract**

**Objective** – To examine public librarians' perspectives on censorship and intellectual freedom in relation to collection development activities.

**Design** – Survey combining questions from previous studies by Moody (2004) and Harkovitch, Hirst and Loomis (2003) with additional questions regarding intellectual freedom and demographics.

**Setting** – Public libraries in the State of Ohio.

**Subjects** – 251 directors and librarians responsible for collection development.

**Methods** – The researcher created a survey in Qualtrics, a software that supports online data

collection and analysis. It contained thirty-two structured and open-ended questions and took approximately 15-25 minutes to complete. To recruit participants, an explanatory letter and survey link were sent to every public library director in the State of Ohio. Directors were also asked to share the survey with librarians under their leadership who were responsible for collection development. To analyze the data set, cross-tabulations were run to identify statistically significant correlations between demographic and community variables.

**Main Results** – The response rate was 43% (108 out of 251). Participants agreed with the American Library Association's (ALA) definition of intellectual freedom, and to build collections that neither promote nor suppress specific ideas or beliefs. Only 3.7% of respondents reported decisions not to

purchase materials due to fear of negative feedback from the community. Nearly 40% of participants reported conflict between personal and professional values at some time. All said that this dilemma had no bearing on professional collection development decisions. Contrary to anecdotal evidence that suggests librarians in rural or conservative communities are less likely to purchase controversial materials, the researcher found that community and political variables were not statistically significant; across the board, participants were most concerned with building balanced, well-developed collections. Gender, however, was statistically significant in terms of pressures felt to restrict access to materials; male librarians reported a higher number of instances where they felt internal or external pressures of this nature. However, as the number of male respondents was relatively low (15 out of 108 participants), the researcher did not draw concrete conclusions as to why this discrepancy exists.

**Conclusion** – Study findings demonstrate a strong professional allegiance to intellectual freedom as defined by the ALA. In a practical sense, the participant group applied the principles of intellectual freedom to collection development activities regardless of demographic, community, or political variables.

### Commentary

Intellectual freedom is a core value of the library profession. It is defined as “the right of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment” (ALA, 2016, para. 1). The study at hand documents public librarians’ perspectives on intellectual freedom and censorship, and how these concepts are applied in branch libraries. While this is not a new topic of discussion, the researcher highlights a number of findings that contradict what was previously known anecdotally regarding the impact of community or political variables on collection development decisions. Her conclusions add to a growing body of research that documents how concepts of intellectual freedom and censorship inform

professional activities and the development of well-rounded collections (Downey, 2013; Moody, 2005; Whelan, 2009).

Strengths of the study include the suitability of the methodology to the central research question, well-defined criteria for the selection of participants, and the thorough discussion of study findings. The presentation of both quantitative and qualitative data produced thought-provoking results. It is interesting how many participants agreed with statements about intellectual freedom, felt pressure to restrict access, and so on, and the author supports this finding with specific examples from participants regarding how these issues impact collection development activities. The discussions brought a human element to the work and challenged the reviewer to consider what decisions she would have made in similar situations.

The uneven distribution of male and female librarians in the participant group limits the implications of the study. Oltmann states that gender is a statistically significant variable in terms of pressure felt by professionals to restrict access, but does not draw concrete conclusions as to why this is the case due to a low number of male participants. A second limitation is the fact that the survey focused exclusively on physical collections. It would have been interesting to discover if perceptions of intellectual freedom and censorship differ when public librarians work with non-physical collections, as online resources are their own beast. Oltmann acknowledges both of these limitations and suggests them as areas for future study. Because of the potential for future work in this area, it was unfortunate that the survey was not included as an appendix. While the tables included in the article report on findings from specific questions, the reviewer was also interested to view the survey in its entirety.

Despite these limitations, the study brings value to the library profession. Oltmann developed a tool that effectively captures attitudes and perceptions that exist within the public library system in the State of Ohio. Because some findings contradict what was

previously thought or observed within the library profession, it would be of value, as Oltmann suggested, to distribute the survey across other states, and perhaps even other countries, to compare and contrast results.

## References

- American Library Association. (2016). *Intellectual freedom*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom>
- Downey, J. (2013). Self-censorship in selection of LGBT-themed materials. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 53(2), 104-107. Retrieved from <https://journals.ala.org/rusq/index>
- Harkovitch, M., Hirst, A., & Loomis, J. (2003). Intellectual freedom in belief and practice. *Public Libraries*, 42(6), 367-374. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/pla/publications/publiclibraries>
- Moody, K. (2004). Censorship by Queensland public librarians: Philosophy and practice. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 17(4), 168-185.
- Moody, K. (2005). Covert censorship in libraries: A discussion paper. *The Australian Library Journal*, 54(2), 138-147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00049670.2005.10721741>
- Whelan, D. L. (2009). Dirty little secret: Self-censorship is rampant and lethal. *School Library Journal*, 55(2), 26-31. Retrieved from <http://www.slj.com/>