Adelaide Tracey
Université de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Anton Boudreau Ninkov
Université de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

CYCLES OF BIAS: SOFT CENSORSHIP IN LIBRARIES

Abstract
Library professionals, often without knowing, can indirectly reduce access to information, a phenomenon known as soft censorship. This research-in-progress conceptualizes key aspects of soft censorship and identifies conditions conducive to soft censorship in libraries. The individual and systematic biases that form the cycles that facilitate soft censorship become evident through this conceptualization, including content warnings, neutrality, subject headings, hiring, and publishing. In future work, we will analyze other areas where soft censorship has the potential to proliferate, including acquisitions, weeding, and reference, to obtain a fuller picture of soft censorship.

Introduction
When parents took to the libraries to submit thousands of requests to ban books in the post-pandemic years, librarians were among the most outspoken advocates against such forms of hard censorship. Yet what happens when librarians are the ones who censor? In positions of authority over information, library professionals, often without knowing, can indirectly reduce access to information, a phenomenon known as soft censorship. Due to the implicit nature of soft censorship and thus difficulty identifying it, research on soft censorship is quite nascent. To develop a greater understanding of a phenomenon prevalent in every library, this research-in-progress conceptualizes key aspects of soft censorship and identifies certain entry points for the biases that create conditions conducive to soft censorship in libraries.

There are important contrasts between hard censorship, the actual removal of information, and soft censorship, defining it as actions that indirectly result in the restriction of information (Al Ashry, 2023; Panievsky, 2021). For example, journalists who receive threats from authorities may alter or limit information they publish as a form of self-defence (Panievsky, 2021). Soft censorship therefore resembles a defense mechanism, motivated by a desire to reduce backlash from publishing certain information. As professionals in the field information science, Cooke and Harris (2023) relate soft censorship to implicit bias. Claiming that while "book banning is an obvious and purposeful act…soft censorship, which is rooted in implicit bias, is equally detrimental and even more insidious" (Cook and Harris, 2023, p. 5). They highlight two integral aspects of soft censorship. Firstly, it is unintentional, meaning an individual may not realize how their biases impact their actions, nor how their biases may contradict declared beliefs (Cooke and

Harris, 2023). Secondly, library professionals may restrict information due to the "fear of retaliation" (Cooke and Harris, 2023).

Although Cooke and Harris's analysis offers an important perspective on the concept of soft censorship, one could argue that certain ideas are permeated by the very biases of which they warn. Take the statement that soft censorship is "equally detrimental and even more insidious" than hard censorship. The emotions driving this unsupported claim further demonstrate the pervasiveness of implicit bias, thus underscoring the importance of studying its impacts in information science contexts.

Content labeling

Libraries are increasingly embracing the application of content warnings to label certain materials as offensive, which raises the question of who is really offended—the reader, or the librarian (Antelman, 2023). Offense is a subjective experience, not a universal one, and using this label assumes that all members of the community share the labeler's values (Antelman, 2023). Instead of allowing the reader to come to their own interpretation of a document's content, the librarian who applies a content warning assumes that their personal understanding of what is offensive is objective knowledge (Antelman, 2023). The improper application of content warnings reduces the user's intellectual freedom by priming their understanding of the material (Langan, 2021). At the same time, most librarians applying a content warning wouldn't claim they are enacting censorship. Harm reduction is a key motivator of content warnings, stemming from either paternalistic motivations to protect the reader from the document's content or pre-emptive measures against hard censorship—calls for the document's removal (Antelman, 2023).

There are, no doubt, instances when advisory information about a document's content is merited, which brings up the important distinction between offense and harm. Content warnings may be appropriate for materials that could truly cause psychological harm to a person. For example, hate speech is often equated to words as violence, where the speech specifically aims to evoke fear in its targets (Antelman, 2023). That being said, library professionals should scrutinize any decision to apply one in order to reduce the likelihood of restricting users' intellectual freedom (Antelman, 2023). Other research suggests that content warnings applied to triggering materials can reduce the harm they cause as well as facilitate healing through the collective visibility of harm (VandeBurgt et al., 2021). Acknowledging genuinely harmful content validates the harmed individual's experiences, whereas labeling it as merely "offensive" would imply that any negative reaction to it is based on personal opinion (Antelman, 2023).

Neutrality

Since implicit bias holds a strong link to soft censorship, making unbiased, or neutral professional decisions would seemingly be a solution to this entire discussion. However, neutrality masks an alignment with dominant values which uphold the status quo of white

supremacy and Western norms (Cooke and Harris, 2023). Librarians cannot realize their professional goal of social responsibility while also adhering to an "egalitarian commitment to not favour one entity over another," as this fails to account for existing inequities (Macdonald and Birdi, 2020, p. 334). Striving to be neutral leads to a lack of awareness, which can recreate censorship through the exclusion of marginalized voices (Macdonald and Birdi, 2020). Though seemingly motivated by a desire to remove oneself from biases, neutrality reinforces institutionalized inequities by giving equal treatment to voices that harm historically marginalized populations.

Structural Biases in Subject Headings

Discourse on neutrality brings to light the importance of critical analysis of the infrastructure within which librarians work. Bullard et al. (2022) argue that biases within Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) infrastructure remain invisible when the system is able to accommodate documents that align with the white, male, Christian status quo under which LCSH was created. These biases come to light when the system "fails"—when applied to documents with "perspectives outside white heteropatriarchy" or in "new or emerging disciplines" (Bullard, 2022, p. 600). This raises the question, what is the extent of bias in library infrastructure and how does it relate to soft censorship?

Bestowing a label, such as a content warning or a subject heading, has the power to convey a reality about that document (Spyers-Duran, 2022). LCSH subject headings are built through literary warrant, meaning "the terminology used in published works should be the terminology used in the subject fields" relating to a work's topic (Bullard et al., 2022, p. 602; Barité, 2018). Through literary warrant, subject headings often reflect the biased society in which authors live (Spyers-Duran, 2022). The goal of literary warrant is to reduce librarians' personal interpretations of documents all while keeping the system up to date as terminology evolves in a given field (Bullard et al., 2022). It is effectively a mechanism of harm reduction built into LCSH reminiscent of neutrality, whereby impartiality is achieved by avoiding any contextualization.

Bullard et al. (2022) use the case of the subject heading "Indians of North America" to illuminate numerous failures of literary warrant in LCSH. Firstly, professional discourse on Indigenous People does not use "Indian," and introductory statements in books and articles often outline the inappropriateness of the term (Bullard et al., 2022). However, the term "Indian" persists within the LCSH framework for labeling works on Indigenous Peoples, indicating that literary warrant does not result in the timely evolution of LCSH to reflect the terminology of modern discourse (Bullard et al., 2022). Furthermore, "Indian" generates ambiguity between Indigenous Peoples and people from the country of India (Bullard et al., 2022). Ambiguity results in a lack of discoverability for these works while also forcing people to search using outdated terminology.

Hiring and publishing practices

Just as literary warrant feeds bias into LCSH via the works it represents, larger societal biases that influence hiring decisions and the field of publishing feed into a cycle of biases in libraries. Although hiring managers often state a desire to hire diverse candidates, studies show significant bias in application screenings (Leonard, 2019). Injustices to the community can also occur during collection building, which starts with a publishing industry overwhelmingly dominated by white leadership and white authors. White domination in publishing can lead to favoritism of white professionals in hiring decisions and in turn favoritism of white authors (Price, 2022). When a library does not reflect the community with a broad range of identities and experiences in its staff and collection, it will reduce the library's capacity to determine appropriate situations and language for content labels, identify outdated subject headings, and point out the structural biases that come to light when systems fail to accommodate certain subjects. Bias in hiring and publishing can thus reproduce conditions conducive to soft censorship by limiting the heterogeneity of library staff identities and experiences.

Discussion

In this paper, we establish that content warnings, neutrality, subject heading systems, hiring, and publishing are pathways for bias to cycle into soft censorship. We find that individual biases and institutional biases feed into one another, creating conditions conducive to soft censorship. On the individual level, the subjective experience of offense can lead library professionals to unduly apply content warnings; author biases channel improper subject headings into LCSH through literary warrant; bias in hiring decisions can lead to homogeneity in staff identities, where staff are less likely to recognize undue content warnings and improper subject headings. On the institutional level, adherence to neutrality reinforces the existing biases of the status quo; biases in subject heading systems reduces discoverability of collections pertaining to subjects that do not fit the status quo; white dominance in publishing silences an unquantifiable number of diverse voices, a silence then reflected in library collections.

This flux allows us to solidify four key characteristics of soft censorship. Soft censorship: (1) is enacted by a person, knowingly or unknowingly; (2) is motivated by harm reduction; (3) is facilitated by a cycle of individual and structural biases; (4) indirectly reduces access to information.

The most provocative case is arguably the library professional who unknowingly enacts soft censorship, as is a librarian unduly applying content warnings. Their best intentions working against them, they see their actions as reducing harm, not an infringement on intellectual freedom. Although harm is ideally an objective notion, in contrast with offense as a subjective one, it is possible for individuals to disagree on what constitutes a violent affront. What is harmful lies within an individual's value system, which is influenced by the value system of the individual's community.

A concrete example of these different perspectives furthers the opacity of harm, and therefore soft censorship. In her 1997 book, Ann Curry details findings from interviews with public library directors across Canada and the United Kingdom. One of the questions Curry asked the directors is as follows: "Is it appropriate that a public library collection include material containing soft pornography photographs such as those in Playboy or some photography magazines?" (Curry, 1997, p. 81). Of the Canadian library directors surveyed, 90% agreed while only 30% of their British counterparts agreed. One argued that librarians "place values on things" when they restrict them (Curry, 1997, p. 80). The other stated, "soft pornography is just another sort of literature and the current fare on television shows that it is an accepted sort of thing" (Curry, 1997, p. 80).

With this added perspective, harm is starting to look more and more like an opinion. However, libraries agree on some necessary forms of censorship. No library circulates illegal materials, DVDs of hard pornography, videos of ISIS beheadings, or propaganda for cult recruitment. With the exception of pornography, to which libraries sometimes turn a blind eye when accessed via a library Internet connection, these are all forms of information that the library censors. Yet librarians and communities largely agree that libraries should not circulate those categories of information listed above because they are harmful. Freedom of information does not mean libraries are charged with providing access to all information.

This research-in-progress analyzes prominent pathways for bias to cycle into soft censorship—content warnings, neutrality, subject headings, hiring, and publishing—and the way these pathways interconnect. While existing literature on these areas has allowed us to develop a certain comprehension of soft censorship in libraries, numerous other entry points require further study to understand the role they play. In future research, we will begin to analyze other areas of librarianship where soft censorship has the potential to proliferate, including acquisitions, weeding, and reference. The findings from these future studies will help us paint a fuller picture of soft censorship.

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