

**Heather Hill**  
**Faculty of Information and Media Studies**  
**Western University**

**Marni Harrington**  
**Faculty of Information and Media Studies**  
**Western University**

## **Too Taboo? Examining Sex in LIS Education Texts**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the LIS teaching literature to understand how sexually-related materials are framed. The definitions utilized in the teaching literature provide a unique perspective on which to examine the treatment of controversial materials written for library education. Our findings indicate that, in many resources, sex is conspicuously absent.

### **Résumé:**

Cette communication examine la littérature utilisée dans l'enseignement des BSI afin de comprendre comment le matériel sexuel est présenté. La définition utilisée dans la littérature pédagogique offre une perspective unique pour examiner le traitement de documents controversés rédigés pour la formation bibliothéconomique. Les résultats indiquent que, dans plusieurs ressources, le sexe est manifestement absent.

### **1. Introduction**

Censorship and controversial materials are issues often addressed in the LIS literature and in texts created as LIS educational tools. Collection development texts and other professional materials advocate for preventing censorship and for providing multiple viewpoints on controversial issues. Even with these espoused ideals, it can be difficult to remain neutral on certain issues.

Collecting controversial materials, particularly those of a sexual nature, cannot be viewed as a choice between right or wrong. In this century, the cultural shift of sex into the mainstream enables us to readily interact with controversial information. Without dispute, sex has become more visible and explicit as demonstrated by the increased access to representations of sex and sexuality, and products and services of sexual nature (McNair, 2002). The language and explicitness of what was once viewed as controversial, is now part of popular culture. Since 2002, Feona Attwood has been writing about the paradigm shift in pornographic research. Attwood (2006) identifies the change in the study of sex in our culture over the last few decades by investigating the emerging academic approaches to sexualized culture, including the increase in sexual texts. Because sex is one of the most highly cited reasons for challenges to materials in libraries, an increase in attention should also be reflected in LIS education.

LIS education should not reflect a society in which we turn away from educational and professional guidance when talking about controversial topics, and instead turn to filtering,

prohibiting and shielding (Kuipers, 2006). These cultural biases trap us in our own cultural constructs of what is appropriate. Rather, a more deliberate attempt should be made to understand the intricacies of controversial collections and not defer to pre-conceived societal norms. Students should be pushed to critically analyze their own perspectives and biases as well, those of the potential communities in which they will practice in the future, and those of the profession as laid out in LIS professional associations' documentation and texts used in LIS graduate programs. What kind of discourse is being encouraged in LIS programs?

This paper critically examines the cultural biases that are inherent in LIS education texts in respect to materials of a sexual nature. It also provides a basis for a broader critical discussion of cultural biases in the field that includes exploring issues of self-censorship in the library profession.

**2. Literature** The library literature examining pornography, erotica, and other sexually themed materials in LIS centers on examining collections, cataloguing and classification, and the social and cultural pressures on librarians. The shifting nature of definitions, terminology, and social acceptability has been explored by examining the tools of use by the LIS profession and the changing nature of the pornography industry itself. Pierce (2005) examined the changing nature of language used for sexual and reproductive health in *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to show the changing nature of social mores.

Dilevko and Gottlieb (2002) provide a broad analysis of pornography including an overview of the business, the categorization of materials used by stores and catalogs that sell porn, and how these categories might be adjusted for the library environment among other topics. They discuss the notion that community standards shift over time and are dependent on class and other social structures, thus definitions for sexual materials are impermanent and subjective. Dilevko and Gottlieb argue that as the pornography industry grows it is becoming more mainstream. Because of this growth, pornography will become increasingly of interest to researchers, like those in popular culture studies and anthropology among many other fields and is thus something to be addressed in academic library collections.

Crook (2001), discusses the possible self-censorship existent when such a large topic is neglected on a national level. While the United States has the Kinsey Institute and Germany has the Archiv fur Sexualwissenschaft that preserve publications of a sexual nature on a national level, other nations such as Australia have no similar institution to publications unique to their nation (e.g. Australian editions of US magazines such as *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, *Playboy*).

Other literature focuses on developing an understanding of the pressures librarians face in addressing sexual materials including the legal challenges (Morgan, 2001; McLean, 2003) as well as pressures from inside and out. Cornog (1991) provides one of the few direct examinations in her study asking public and academic staff about *Playboy*. She found that *Playboy* seemed to be held to a different standard than other library materials (e.g. financial magazines and children's materials) that have similar theft and mutilation rates.

**3. Project** To date, the treatment of controversial materials of a sexual nature in the LIS teaching literature has not been examined. For this study, we use discourse analysis to examine LIS

educational texts. We look at the usage and definitions used in the teaching literature to provide a new perspective for considering the treatment of controversial materials in LIS.

Works chosen for this study include both current and previous editions of English-language texts used by LIS students and practitioners. Included for analysis are textbooks on collection development and reference, LIS encyclopaedias, glossaries, dictionaries, and professional association publications like the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*.

Specifically, our research questions include:

- Are sexual topics defined or articulated mainly in a pejorative context (e.g. in relation to internet filtering and child porn)?
- Is there an understanding of the broad ranging nature of the multiple genres and perspectives available in porn when considering library collections?
- In texts with multiple editions, are there changes in how these concepts are defined?

**4. Findings** Our findings indicate that, in many resources, sex is conspicuously absent. Some texts include little to no coverage of any sexual topics. Texts that do include definitions for such terms as ‘pornography,’ ‘erotica,’ and ‘obscenity’ are in many cases narrow and conflicting. In the case of ‘obscenity,’ for example, the legal definition is not provided. In texts where multiple editions are available there seems to be an increasingly conservative perspective on pornography. Where earlier editions provided at least some coverage of sex, newer editions have omitted references to it or have tended to focus exclusively on negative and illegal sexual content like child pornography. Pornography seems to be used as a catch-all term to encompass all material of a sexual nature and seems to be automatically lumped into the ‘obscene’ category. Few texts provide distinctions between different types or genres of sexual materials, but even those that do fall far short of truly tackling the topic. One text consulted provides a definition for ‘pornography’ and distinguishes it from the milder term ‘erotica,’ but its sole example of the erotica genre is *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, a 263 year old text.

Results of this study will be of interest to researchers, practitioners, and LIS students who want to engage in a critical examination of their own biases and develop a stronger understanding of the cultural constructs that fashion our approaches to controversial topics.

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