

# Censorship and Reflection: Praxis Prior to the Library Bill of Rights

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*What did librarians prior to the writing of the LBR think about censorship in libraries? Lists and bibliographies (especially selective ones) demonstrate self-reflection and awareness of a problem as well as acknowledgement of a professional ethos in conflict. Librarians held a deeply ingrained sense of obligation to protect the public from books that could damage morals and sensibilities, but rising voices show that there was a sense of futility in doing so. Others condemned censorship. This research highlights this conflict and places it within the broader context of the professions of education, health, and journalism. All were fighting a similar battle that is emblematic of modern ethics of neutrality, science, and shifting moral authority.*

## Background

The original Freedom to Read (FTR) Statement (1939) begins, "Today indications in many parts of the world point to growing intolerance, suppression of free speech, and censorship affecting the rights of minorities and individuals."

ALA Council recommended three basic policies:

- 1) books should be chosen because of their value, not because of any political or religious views of the writers;
- 2) all sides of questions in which differences of opinion exist should be represented fairly; and
- 3) library meeting rooms should be available to all groups on equal terms.

The LBR was crafted to guard against propaganda, political, and religious censorship, but prior to the LBR, more concern was devoted to aesthetically and morally objectionable books. Censorship was acknowledged and questioned, and was a topic of discussion at ALA meetings (i.e., Bostwick, 1908; Wright, 1911). By the time the LBR was written, censorship was *officially* condemned, but librarians widely admitted that they engaged in it (see Feipel, 1922). Practice did not always match up with ideals.

Were there other professions that were asking similar questions, or struggling with censorship? This project aims to produce a wider view of professional views of censorship between 1880 and 1940, looking at the sources of conflict over what and who was being censored.

## Method

A variety of sources were used in order to gather different views on censorship in different professions from the period from 1880 – 1940. The following sources were used:

- 1) Young's (1928) Bibliography of Censorship and Propaganda
- 2) Drury's (1930) textbook on book selection: 14 books and articles on censorship
- 3) JStor's Data For Research (DFR) and Google's n-gram viewer
- 4) Historical newspapers from Chronicling America

Drury's textbook provided the inspiration for this project: it lists articles that library school students should read about censorship. Drury's stance regarding censorship is neutral, presenting censorship as necessary yet problematic. Other, more comprehensive sources representing thinking of the time were sought to present a wider picture of censorship. All entries in the chapter "Censorship of Literature" from Young's comprehensive bibliography on censorship were entered into a spreadsheet according to date of publication. Other readily available sources (listed above) provide different ways to gain a broader view of censorship. This produced a mixed method project that utilized a combination of document and text analysis, text visualization, and historical methods. Textual excerpts illustrate and contextualize findings.

## Findings

The various n-grams and visualizations are inconsistent because they do not draw from the same sources of data, but are useful nonetheless. When those are combined with qualitative findings, such as historical newspaper and journal articles, we can find context and meaning in the representations of data. They provide evidence that concern over censorship of literature and the arts rose in tandem with concerns about censorship in other professions. This study looked at journalism, book publishing, medicine, and education for comparisons. For instance, health information was restricted by the government because of concern about morality (i.e., birth control), and the American Medical Association asserted its authority (and changed the law) due to concerns over the control of medical education and quackery. There was similar concern by the news press over governmental control of the press for political will. Young's comprehensive bibliography demonstrates a growing concern about censorship, clearly linking library censorship with inappropriate material and

ensorship of literature, while much of the book focuses on political censorship, especially during various wars. Drury's textbook demonstrates critical self-reflection on librarianship, but focuses on censorship of literature. Thus, all of the professions demonstrate a tension between professional duty and governmental or other formal control mechanisms.

This cross-comparison of censorship of various professions – here, education, health, and journalism – shows various sources of tension: between human rights and authoritative political regimes, and science and religion. The literature of librarianship shows that librarians were not only speaking or writing about censorship, but also bringing in a metacognitive, or reflective, view of the subject. Librarianship, thus, was a profession at odds with itself in a time of changing morality, but it was not alone.

### *The Professions:*

The time period that is covered in this study saw the rise in professions, spurred by increased access to education and a push to widen the influence of universities. This gave the burgeoning professions the ability to craft a vision over their domain, and to decide what was to be acceptable.

Librarianship, education, and journalism are joined together in what Marcia Bates refers to as the "meta-professions." As they were gaining professional status by crafting codes of ethics and standardizing education, they began resisting censorship by the authorities, such as the church and state.

Health sciences falls outside of the meta-professions, but similarly exerted control over information. This might be attributed to a changing attitude about science and medicine that occurred during this time of rapid innovation in health care and scientific discoveries.

A belief in scientism spread to cover the social sciences, such as librarianship and education, which were seeking to use more scientific methods in their approaches. Aligning their work with science gave practitioners a means to increase their authority over outmoded forms of social control. The science of aesthetics could even help justify decisions about 'bad books.'

Quotes from the various professions help illustrate the above claims.

### *Librarianship:*

Our objectionable books fall into four classes: (a) Sex-books and extreme socialistic books, which are in the Social Science section; (b) books of art anatomy, in the fine

arts section; (c) Books on obstetrics, biology, etc., in the Industrial Arts Section; (d) suggestive fiction, in General Circulation....Some persona object to our inclusion of objectionable books; others think we are too puritanical (Feipel, 1922, p. 860)

The use of certain types of books in public libraries is such that these volumes receive special handling as restricted books, a name suggestive of limitations to the staff without implying censorship to the public...much discussed titles of questionable moral tone create problems. In libraries wishing to exercise no censorship beyond their standards of choice in selection, such books of literary and artistic merit may be included in the collection but their circulation is limited to adult readers whose intelligent use of them is not to be questioned” (Flexner, 1927, p. 121 – 122).

“...few words are as fluid and vague in content as the six deadly adjectives – obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent and disgusting – which are the basis of censorship. No two persons agree on these definitions” (Ernst, vii).

#### *Journalism:*

Censorship in some form or other is revealed as inevitable because of the limitation in channels and time...post-censorship is being undertaken by government control, and...pre-censorship is being undertaken by the station managers...America...does not now have democratic free speech on the air. (Crane, review of Frost’s *Is American Radio Democratic?*, 1937)

It so happens that England and America have both suffered from a form of censorship which in England is called the Obscene Libel laws...[which] does produce its moments of macabre gaiety; as when the Bishop of London, during a debate in the House of Lords, remarked that he would like to build a bonfire of contraceptives and dance around it...In American...witness the efforts of the late Anthony Comstock (Dangerfield, 1937).

The government – being composed of politicians anxious to win public favor and to succeed themselves – naturally wants to make its own announcements...The newspapers, on the other hand, have precisely the opposite duty. Their function is to keep the public constantly informed of trends and projects leading to plans and acts so that democratic processes may be exercised to the full...there is a real menace to the legitimate flow of news to the public in the proposal of a Central Information Bureau...(Krock, 1937).

#### *Education:*

We want our youngsters to become ‘movie-choosers,’ not haphazard ‘movie-goers...’ This discussion of movie stars and movie stereotypes and movie censorship ties in very closely with a third major objective-that of developing critical thinking and discrimination. (Reid, 1940)

### *Health Sciences:*

The Food and Drug Acts...would [require] owners of proprietary articles to submit their advertisements and labels to a central authority. Such a scheme would not be without difficulty, and it would involve a form of censorship similar to that exercised in Australia and the United States. (Parliamentary Committee on Proprietary Medicines, BMJ, 1913).

The well-being of the public as a whole was the commanding factor in determining the method of publication of medical matters in the lay press. Let it be agreed that some such public instruction in preventative medicine should be carried out. About the actual details of disease the public should be told little...(Medical Men and the Lay Press, 1926)

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