



Public Library Collections in the Balance: Censorship, Inclusivity, and Truth

Author _ Jennifer Downey

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Reviewer _ Amy Leota Shropshire, Graduate of the MLIS program at the University of Alabama

Public Library Collections in the Balance: Censorship, Inclusivity and Truth, by Jennifer Downey, focuses tightly on issues of self-censorship in collection development, as well as community challenges. It features constant reminders of the First Amendment and Library Bill of Rights as guides for appropriate policy and institutional framework, particularly in collection development. The author also presents some unique and multi-faceted challenges and examples of situations of censorship, to aid librarians involved in collection development and policy making.

First, the author gives a detailed account of the history of library censorship. Self-censorship, in the name of good taste and public value, was the traditional role of librarians, but has since become a point of struggle and contention. Librarians are no longer the arbiters of what is considered appropriate material. So-called “bad” fiction such as romance novels and street lit can be gateways to other literature, and some patrons simply prefer this style of literature aesthetically. Public libraries have a responsibility to cater to the entertainment as well as educational needs of their patrons. The strong stance of the American Library Association (ALA) against all forms of censorship often causes contention with the library’s overwhelming need to serve its community when challenges are issued. With self-censorship being the previous norm for libraries, patrons and communities can often misunderstand the library’s current place in the community. The place of the public library in its community is clearly delineated by the First Amendment and Library Bill of Rights. The author offers strong and grounded stances on several controversial points. Rating systems are often used to determine the appropriateness of material for juveniles, as well as juvenile-only cards. However, the ratings systems often used to make determinations are created and maintained by groups with no official legal authority, in often problematic ways. Additionally, the CIPA requirements to filter public computers to receive economic

benefits are optional, but non-compliance is economically untenable for many libraries. Over- and under-blocking have plagued filtration software, and CIPA puts forth few guidelines on what types of material should be blocked by filters.

These policies are a legal and ethical slippery slope, as the Library Bill of Rights clearly opposes any form of censorship and affirm the rights of minors to choose and access materials in conjunction only with parents. The library does not operate *in loco parentis*, or stand as arbiter of juvenile materials. For example, some parents may encourage their children to view educational material on sexual health, whereas other parents may find the material obscene and inappropriate. Only parents and minors themselves may determine what is appropriate for them, and the public library must represent the full spectrum of community needs.

Community assessments and proactive policy creation and maintenance are each given their own chapter. Policies should be multitudinous and clearly written with the ideals of intellectual freedom in mind. Policies should be in place for collection development and how to handle challenges, among other subjects. The text outlines and gives samples for many such policies and handouts. Frequent community conversations on the importance of intellectual freedom and the priorities of the library are also necessary to avoid challenges and gain community support. Community assessments can provide information both on the majority of patrons, as well as snapshots of the needs of minority groups of library users.

The majority of challenges come with multiple reasons, but certain patterns are easy to identify. Librarians should be prepared for challenges on materials featuring sexual health education, those featuring LGBT characters, books with violence and explicit language, and especially materials aimed at children and young adults containing these and other controversial themes. However, librarians



should be careful to avoid self-censorship of such materials, as they are essential to a vibrant collection. Placing materials in a different section, limiting the ability of minors to check out certain materials, and placing other barriers between a patron and any material goes against the grain of inclusive libraries and can be considered forms of censorship.

The author also takes a strong stance on disreputable information. Librarians are not arbiters of information, merely providers. Ahistorical texts, pseudo-science, and disreputable self-help varieties of literature should also be included. As difficult as this is for librarians accustomed to providing the most accurate information available, the principles of inclusivity require that these popular but often inaccurate books be represented so that the readers can judge for themselves their accuracy and merit. This is perhaps the most difficult inclusivity requirement for librarians. The passion for accuracy and repute of sources that pervades the profession makes the acquisition of obviously untrue materials extremely difficult but necessary.

Inclusive collection development also requires proactively seeking out resources, book lists, and collection

development materials that represent the interests of minority groups of the community. Resources for handling collection challenges are provided in the text, with multiple references to the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) and the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF). Two appendices are also included to aid in proactively locating LGBT materials and small and alternative presses for a full and varied collection. The constant reiteration of the same standards of intellectual freedom as they apply to every scenario is slightly tedious. However, given the focus of the book, this repetition is instructive rather than arbitrary. It serves to center each issue in terms of the priorities of the Library Bill of Rights and the First Amendment quite clearly in each section. For students intending to work in public libraries and studying intellectual freedom, this is a great textbook. Additionally, for administrators and other librarians involved in collection development and the creation of policy this is an intensely grounding resource. The appendices are especially relevant for the purposes of affirming and proactively inclusive collection development.

Free Speech on Campus

Authors _ Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman

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Reviewer _ Rosanne M. Cordell, Northern Illinois University, retired

Free speech on college and university campuses in the United States is a complex topic with competing and conflicting rights, governing body responsibilities, goals, legal precedents, popular views, and purposes. To untangle all of this requires both attention to fine legal points and a broad view of societal needs. Chemerinsky and Gillman have the expertise and experience to bring both these characteristics to bear on discussions of this topic, but they do much more: they outline specific policies that can and should be followed by universities and colleges in seeking to provide the best of higher education. Chemerinsky (*The Conservative Assault on the Constitution, The Case Against the Supreme Court, Closing the Courthouse Door: How Your Constitutional Rights Became Unenforceable*) and Gillman (*American Constitutionalism: Structures of Government, The Votes that Counted: How the Court Decided the 2000 Presidential Election*) have distinguished positions at the University of California, Irvine, School of Law and taught an undergraduate seminar on Free Speech on College Campuses in 2016. Their combined voices bring a clarity and, surprisingly, brevity to this topic that are rare.

Chapter One lists very recent events and court cases related to free speech on campuses, explaining the contradictions and legal problems involved. The tension between providing supportive educational environments for minorities and underrepresented populations and the critical need for free speech in democracies is presented in a compelling and sympathetic manner. The current population of students is not denigrated as overly sensitive or cushioned, but the critical place of First Amendment rights is also clearly demonstrated. The authors believe that the principles of free speech and the associated constitutional rights are at risk, in part, because the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in the US Department of Education have muddled the issues involved and have initiated investigations when none should have occurred. The authors believe that both inclusive educational environments and defense of free speech are possible if their guidelines are followed.

Chapter Two details the primacy of free speech in constitutional law and provides a brief history of First Amendment rights in the United States. The distinction