COMMENTARY

Librarians' Experiences of Censorship in Carceral Facilities

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This commentary reviews responses about censorship in a nationwide survey of academic, public, and similar librarians and library staff who provide information to incarcerated people.

For librarians who work with incarcerated people, censorship is often inherent in maintaining any kind of library services, whether the need to censor is communicated directly by carceral staff, invoked in policy, or shaped by a library worker's interpretation of their role in the institution (Conrad 2017). While at times censorship seems to shape the entire library collection in a carceral facility, librarians have found many ways to build professional rapport with facility staff, subvert demands for censorship, and build robust collections despite prohibitions on certain types of materials (Arford 2016).

Regardless of formal and informal censorship practices, people who are incarcerated *do* gain access to information, books, and established library services. Our ongoing research on library services and incarceration, first presented in a series of articles in *Library Journal* (see Jordan-Makely and Austin 2021; Jordan-Makely, Austin, and Brammer 2022), invited librarians in the field to share their experiences with censorship and self-censorship, among other factors that shape or limit the services their libraries provide. Almost two-thirds of those who responded to this 2021 survey said they had encountered censorship in their work, and other, open-ended comments serve to describe the nature of the challenges that library workers are facing in carceral settings. A follow-up survey launched the following year added to this picture of censorship as an enduring and menacing obstacle without clear demarcations.

In some instances, respondents to our surveys mentioned that incarcerated patrons' lack of access to technology was a major driver of censorship, noting that some prisons are allowing access to electronic sources such as offline versions

of JSTOR. One information worker described this as an issue of "technological infrastructure," and another noted that access was "extremely restricted by [the] lack of Internet access in the prison," suggesting a fundamental shortcoming across the entire facility rather than a lack of specific resources.

The content review process was also frequently mentioned. In some instances, book reviews were conducted by facility staff. Reviews varied from requiring facility staff approval of proposed titles to purchase, to surveillance and removal of items from existing library collections, to formal review committees for challenged materials that included a librarian. A respondent required to submit proposed titles for review noted that "many titles were canceled through this process." In the instance of a review committee, the director of library services for the state was included as a reviewer of challenged materials. This is one of the more ideal scenarios described, as review has been recognized as a means by which facilities forestall access to materials (Gaines 2019).

In attempting to comply with facility restrictions, information workers themselves sometimes engage in censorship, in turn shaping and limiting the collections available to people who are incarcerated. "Censorship is an unfortunate necessity in this environment," one respondent opined. "We are required to deliberately filter out materials that include depictions of violence, nudity (incl. medical), pornography, detailed maps, weaponry, hate speech and the like."

Indeed, the list of reasons for prohibiting materials is purposefully broad and arbitrary in many instances, and interpretations of restrictions can change according to who is making the decision. "They have rejected materials because of the content, i.e., calling things pornographic or violent that we would not have," seems to be a common experience.

Security, or the concern that materials might somehow incite violence—or be used as weapons themselves, in the case of hardcover books and staples—was a recurring theme. Nudity and sexuality were also highlighted as justifications that were used to prohibit specific materials, a particular concern because this could include LGBTQ+ materials. Researchers who focus on information access for incarcerated people have noted that criteria for refusing materials, including that materials constitute a threat to the facility, have been used to prohibit incarcerated people's access to books about their own identities, including materials about racial belonging and racism, and have even classified accessing relevant medical information as self-endangerment (Austin et al. 2020; PEN America 2019).

Languages other than those that could be read by staff were also mentioned several times, including text in Hebrew. This echoes a larger trend to ban materials in languages other than English, as occurred across the entire Michigan prison system. While this ban has been somewhat lifted, the ACLU believes that ongoing censorship of materials in languages other than English constitutes a violation of first amendment rights (Polo 2022). We also collected evidence of censorship that infringed on religious freedoms, and where information workers pushed back against facility staff to defend their patrons' Constitutional rights.

As librarians working with incarcerated people and researchers focused on the role of library services within carceral facilities, we routinely hear that access to books and information is a lifeline, a survival mechanism, a way to plan for a future, maintain a sense of self and connection to the outside world, and more. Lack of access to books and information inside is widespread; we've heard of prison systems with one (or less, when the position is unfilled) librarian consulting for the entire state, of hostile prison librarians, and have read about prison systems that control information to the extent that they forbid journaling (Sweeney 2010). Despite all of this, incarcerated people, and the information workers who advocate alongside them, do create robust networks for sharing information and books.

Despite the instances of censorship in this commentary, it is important to note that restrictions are not ubiquitous and vary from facility to facility or even between areas in a single prison. A handful of respondents denied any direct instances of censorship on the part of the carceral facilities where they worked. This may have been shaped by careful selection policies. As one respondent stated, "I've heard stories of library and educational materials being rejected, but it hasn't happened to me yet. We do second-guess some of our choices (of materials to bring in) though." These instances remind us that formal policies and actual practices can differ, that materials determined to be a threat (such as hardcover books) are often available inside of facilities (with little instances of actual threat), and that, when it comes to information, the barriers to access are more porous than they may be in the public imagination.

More information about censorship in prisons, including banned books lists, is available through The Marshall Project (2023). More information on prison media review policies and practices is available in an ITHAKA S+R report (Pokornowski, Tanaka, and Epps 2023). Additional resources on library services for incarcerated people are available through the San Francisco Public Library's "Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People" grant project, which is graciously made possible by the Mellon Foundation (2023).

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