

Censorship in Libraries

Libraries, upon their foundation, became a portal for individuals to access an education in situations where they otherwise would not have been able to gather information and insight into the world. The access to information that comes with entering a library is one thing that keeps patrons from returning time and time again. As the needs of patrons are widely varied, libraries must have collections that reflect the diverse needs of those who come to seek materials. However, having a wide-ranging collection of material within a community of equally varied individuals does cause tension, and these conflicts become apparent when certain books are discovered and combatted due to their subject. When the censorship of books that are offensive to some individuals, but informational to others, becomes a possibility, it is the place of the library to stand and reflect on what intellectual freedom is truly worth.

By definition, “intellectual freedom means the right of any person to believe whatever he wants on any subject, and to express his beliefs or ideas in whatever way he thinks appropriate.” (Shuman, 1977) This type of freedom is closely related with the American Bill of Rights, which gives democracy and freedom to all American citizens. This freedom grants individuals the unrestricted ability to explore the various perspectives that exist on different topics, and formulate their own opinion. The knowledge of American citizens is based on a curiosity that is fed by the freedom to find information of all sorts – information that is unhindered by censorship.

It is an integral facet of the library system to provide patrons with a channel to successfully find the information they seek. In times of social unrest, personal research and educational pursuits, the library serves as a location to gather the information needed

to make changes occur. To preserve the free exchange of ideas that are available to the public, the first amendment was created. Through the first amendment, intellectual freedom, and freedom of speech, is protected. Yet, this freedom comes into scrutiny when groups deem certain subjects immoral or unacceptable. In these cases, it is important to note that intellectual freedom “becomes virtually meaningless, however, when accessibility to such expressions is denied to other persons.” (Shuman, 1977) With intellectual freedom being a concept deeply embedded within the functions of a library, the preservation of the right rightly remains a large concern for libraries as an institution. In instances where censorship is suggested and freedom threatened, libraries must note that “the definition of intellectual freedom has a second, integral part; namely, the right of unrestricted access to all information of ideas regardless of the medium of communication used” (Shuman, 1977).

The article “Intellectual Freedom Courses in Graduate Library Schools,” written by Bruce Shuman, not only provides an excellent insight into intellectual freedom but also simultaneously scrutinizes library schools and their reflection of the issue as a whole. The article outlines a study that was conducted to inquire into whether or not library schools were accurately preparing future librarians for the issue of intellectual freedom that will almost certainly become a reality during each and every student’s career. Following a detailed account of the results from a survey the study passed out, Shuman emphasizes the need for library schools to make a discussion of intellectual more of a priority.

As libraries intrinsically depend on intellectual freedom, Shuman notes that it is surprising that “only about 15 percent of the accredited library school programs

responding (to the survey) offered courses devoted to intellectual freedom.” (Shuman, 1977) The Shuman article, in totality, creates an interesting and unique perspective to the issue of intellectual freedom by focusing on the manner that library schools approach the issues and how they choose to prepare future librarians to defend intellectual freedom in their communities. The fluctuating degree to which library schools place weight on this issue, as demonstrated through Shuman’s research results, demonstrates a clear issue with the way schools are preparing students. Through the course of this article, Shuman provides insightful evidence and responses to this problem and offers acceptable solutions to the lack of coverage library schools give to intellectual freedom.

The article titled “Intellectual Freedom,” published by the American Library Association (ALA), approaches the subject of intellectual freedom from a perspective that does not involve looking at library school programs. Instead, this article details the role of the librarian as an important figure in preserving intellectual freedom and discusses how the number of book-challenges per year affects the community. The importance that the ALA places on this issue is clear when the article states that “the freedom of expression guaranteed by the First Amendment is uniquely fulfilled by the library. Newspapers provide information, but it is naturally abridged and tends to reflect the prejudices of an editor or publisher. Schools educate, but according to a program to fit the many and imposed by educators and administrators” (Intellectual Freedom, 1999). Directly confronting the issue of intellectual freedom and the role librarians need to adopt in order to “be prepared to defend intellectual freedom in all its forms,” the ALA calls libraries and their workers to action (Intellectual Freedom, 1999).

The information that is presented by the ALA in the article is given to the audience in a very readable and organized manner. The article is broken down into multiple sections like: “Why Intellectual Freedom,” “Why Libraries,” “Why ALA,” and “What You Can Do.” This method of construction creates a cohesive and logically flowing argument that builds upon itself to create a compelling case for intellectual freedom and why this subject is important to libraries. The frequency of censorship attempts in libraries is clear when the article highlights that “nearly 600 challenges reported to the American Library Association in 1997. It is estimated that these account for no more than 20 to 25 percent of the total number of challenges throughout the United States” (Intellectual Freedom, 1999). By giving the reader specific information about the frequency of which the first amendment is attempted to be stifled, this ALA article accomplishes something important: it draws attention to how this is an issue that does not only effect libraries, but America as a whole. To close the article on a note of activism, “Intellectual Freedom” presents a detailed list of members of the community can do to ensure that intellectual freedom is not threatened.

Demonstrating the complexity of the issue regarding intellectual freedom, “Intellectual Freedom and Libraries: Complexity and Change in the Twenty-First-Century Digital Environment,” written by Eliza T. Dresang, focuses on the roles different groups play in this issue. This article dedicates a portion to outlining the roles that librarians play in advocating for and protecting intellectual freedom by detailing the library bill of rights and the turbulent history that libraries have with intellectual freedom. Like the article published directly by the ALA, Dresang found it important to outline the number of challenges as they stood in 2006. She writes: “Between 2000 and 2004,

schools accounted for 75 percent of book challenges reported to the ALA (43.9 percent of the total were in school libraries), and another 18.5 percent of the challenges took place in public libraries, making a combined 93.5 percent” (Dresang, 2006). Being able to note the changes that occurred in the time between the ALA article and Dresang’s research allows the audience to understand that the passing of time is not an indicator of the problem being solved, but that it is still something very relevant to communities.

Eliza Dresang offers additional insight into the problem of intellectual freedom in communities and libraries by discussing the roles of women, the youth and the internet in their interaction with the library system and the freedom of knowledge. For example, Dresang addresses the censorship that members of America’s youth can access by stating: “The U.S government has succeeded in officially, and for the time legally, limiting the access to constitutionally protected materials that libraries can provide to youth. This has happened suddenly and somewhat subtly and has numerous real and potential ramifications” (Dresang, 2006). Directly addressing the overt censorship of certain groups of Americans does not leave any room for doubt, and Dresang, throughout her article, greatly emphasizes the ways in which censorship occurs without any backlash through discussions of youth censorship in libraries and the largely silent censorship of what is available on the Internet.

The articles “Intellectual Freedom,” “Intellectual Freedom and Libraries: Complexity and Change in the Twenty-First-Century Digital Environment” and “Intellectual Freedom Courses in Graduate Library Schools,” contribute to the discussion that is necessarily still occurring on the issue of intellectual freedom. By adopting different methods of discussing the importance of protecting intellectual freedom and the

degree to which libraries must be involved in this movement, each author demonstrates the complexity of the issue in that censorship of information is not something that can be quelled by the protection of the first amendment alone. The issue of intellectual freedom is one that must be ever-present in communities in order to ensure that information is not hidden from public access in the way it was in the past. Information must be protected in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes and to keep the public as informed and involved as possible with issues of the world and all of the intelligence contained within it. As each author notes, librarians must believe that the preservation of intellectual freedom is of the utmost importance in order to preserve the library as a place of unbiased autonomy and choice.

Nancy Roque

References:

Eliza T. Dresang. (2006). Intellectual Freedom and Libraries: Complexity and Change in the Twenty-First-Century Digital Environment. *The Library Quarterly*, 76(2), 169-192.

Intellectual Freedom. (1999). *American Libraries*, 30(6), 1-12.

Shuman, B. A. (1977). Intellectual Freedom Courses in Graduate Library Schools. *Journal of Education for Librarianship*, 18(2), 99-109.

Nancy Roque