Censorship in the Public Library: An Annotated Bibliography

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INFO 522: Information Access & Resources
August 29, 2010
Introduction and Scope

The following bibliography covers censorship as experienced by and perpetuated in public libraries. Articles include both empirical research, concerning surveys of librarians and patrons about actual and theoretical censorship, and theoretical research, concerning the ethics, methods, and effectiveness of censorship in public libraries. Several articles focus on specific regions, reasons for censorship, and/or material being censored. While most articles are strongly anti-censorship, two argue for censorship in specific situations. The focus is on the censorship of books and other materials in circulation, as opposed to Internet censorship, with a reoccurring theme of self-censorship by public librarians.

Description

The most influential definition of censorship for American librarians can be found in the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights (as cited in Li, 1998). The Library Bill of Rights states that librarians should "challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment," including providing resources for “all people of the community the library serves” and not excluding material due to “partisan or doctrinal disapproval” or the “origin, background, or views” of its creator (para. 6). Censorship can consist of formal challenges or complaints from the public demanding materials be removed (Arns 2007), a decision not to carry materials to stave off possible controversy (Schraeder, 1997), or more subtle methods such as labeling controversial materials or shelving them in a special area (Niosi, 1998).

Summary of Findings

One way to explore the practice of censorship in public libraries is to look at what types of materials are being censored. The first category of frequently-censored materials is those that focus on, or include a positive portrayal of, controversial topics. The most common reasons for challenges, as collected by the American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom, is sexual explicitness (Burke, 2008); Vroman (2005) notes that this is a special concern for video, as “these images created by video are more accessible to children than the images created by books” (para. 7). Although homosexuality is not one of the most frequently-given reasons for challenges (Burke, 2008), the ongoing gay marriage
debate makes homosexuality a contentious topic. Burke’s survey, conducted in 2006, found that 25% of adults supported removing a gay-themed book from the library (down from 45% asked the same question in 1973). Doyle (2002) considers a different type of controversy, the purchase of how-to manuals for violent and/or illegal acts; he points out that access to these books is even more contentious after September 11 and the consequent fear of terrorists.

A second category is works censored or challenged for their negative portrayals of certain people or groups; this usually falls under the category of hate speech. Li (1998) identifies hate speech as speech specifically calling for hate or violence against certain groups, framing the issue of censorship as a compromise between First Amendment rights and the safety of those people. Burke (2009), surveying members of the public on the hypothetical removal of a book written by an author racist against African-Americans from the library, found that 34.5% asked in 2006 supported removal (down from 38.1% asked in 1976).

Specific categories of materials come with their own censorship concerns. Vroman (2005) points out that the ALA’s stance against any kind of labeling (besides directional aids) and against restricting access to materials based on age means that libraries are not supposed to display MPAA labels on videos or prevent minors from borrowing R-rated movies, decisions that can meet with protest from the public. As this suggests, protecting minors is one of the major reasons for censorship attempts—meaning that children’s materials are under a special amount of scrutiny. Saltman (2008) reports that the number of Manitoba public schools who had faced censorship challenges rose from a quarter to a third in surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s; the number of censorship attempts in public libraries has also risen. Schraeder (1997), however, points out that it’s often impossible to predict which titles will attract the attention of censors. Citing a Canadian study that found 90% of public library books challenged in a three-year period were only challenged once, he includes a long list of reasons patrons gave for challenging books (some expected, some bizarre) to show that almost every library holding will be found objectionable by someone.

The next question to ask is who is doing the censoring? Burke’s two studies found several predictors of support for censorship: those with less education and those who
believe homosexuality is wrong were more likely to support the removal of a pro-
homosexuality book (2008), and those with less education, certain religious affiliations,
and who were African-American were more likely to support the removal of a racist book
(2009). Lambe (2004), surveying attitudes concerning materials containing hate speech
and pornography, discovered that the most important predictors for support of censorship
were “right-wing authoritarianism” for pornography and “standing commitment to
democratic issues” for hate speech (p. 294). These results suggest that all censorship
debates are not created equal, and that the proliferation of censorship cannot be placed
solely on the shoulders of conservatives or liberals. Indeed, Saltman (2008) suggests that
“advocates of censorship of children’s literature on the left of the political spectrum are
becoming uneasy
bedfellows with the traditional advocates of censorship, those on the right” (para. 16).

A more surprising, and perhaps more dangerous, answer to the question of who
censors is librarians themselves. Moody (2004), conducting a survey of Queensland public
librarians, found that feelings on censorship do not always translate to behavior; while
100% of respondents agreed with anti-censorship statements, 83% hypothetically rejected
at least one controversial item given unlimited funds and space. Schraeder (1997)
discusses the phenomenon of librarians practicing “very careful selection” and not
purchasing certain books that might be controversial or appear on a list of challenged
books. Along with simply not buying materials, there is covert censorship, an even more
insidious form of self-censorship. Niosi’s 1998 survey of Californian public librarians found
that three out of five librarians segregated certain controversial children’s titles in their
adult section, including books on death and books on homosexuality. One librarian
demonstrates why this is an example of censorship, saying that “children often do not
browse these shelves because they are labeled ‘parent shelf’” (np). Moody (2005) discusses
several other subtle forms of censorship, including relying too much on certain review
journals or outsourcing for acquisitions (as both tend to exclude alternative publishers and
topics). As stated above, Vroman (2005) reports how labeling can serve as a form of
censorship (by, for instance, discouraging parents from letting their children borrow
materials labeled controversial or R-rated).
These findings leave one thing to consider: what can librarians do to combat censorship, including self-censorship? A few authors, contrary to ALA policies, openly recommend censorship in certain circumstances. Doyle (2002) suggests that how-to manuals for violent, illegal acts should not be purchased—but only if they are purely instructional with no ideological component (which leaves out The Anarchist's Cookbook and, in fact, most books in that category). Li (1998) recommends avoiding materials promoting hate speech, as this could “destroy years of good public relations” with the community (np). Apart from these two, most authors have suggestions on how to avoid censorship, whether from outside challenges or self-censorship from within. Regarding avoiding challenges, Schraeder's 1997 “Why You Can't 'Censorproof' Your Public Library” explains why self-censorship is ineffectual at preventing challenges, as well as suggesting other solutions covered in the library literature. Niosi (1998) stresses the importance of having a written selection policy, so as to have official backup if a would-be censor asks why a controversial book was selected.

Arns (2007) presents a unique perspective on censorship challenges, investigating what characteristics of leaders are valued during censorship battles, by surveying librarians at three libraries who have weathered extensive censorship battles. While some leadership characteristics were valued both during normal times and during censorship battles, the “ability to identify and mobilize opinion leaders and others,” along with several other characteristics, became much more important in a time of crisis. Arns recommends considering these leadership characteristics before a crisis occurs, when board members are being appointed.

The last type of advice on avoiding censorship lies in confronting self-censorship. Both Schweinsburg (1995) and Hannabus (2001) focus on identifying one’s won self-censorship. As Moody (2005) points out, “[s]ome forms of censorship are so unconscious that even the individuals perpetrating them have no idea that they are in fact censoring” (p. 139). Schweinsburg emphasizes that all selection is based on some sort of value system, and therefore could be considered censorship; librarians must understand their own methodologies for selection, and share them with others, in order to avoid overly biased selection that amounts to self-censorship. Hannabus, also stating that self-censorship is more widespread that one would expect, provides questions for readers to mull upon.
regarding their thoughts on censorship, including considering not just they consider appropriate for themselves, but also what they consider appropriate for young children (a frequent reason for censorship).

For all the arguments against censorship, none is more effective than that of Byrne (2004), who reports on the results of unfettered censorship. Along with the arguments against censorship other articles repeat, Byrne looks at the effects of censorship in other countries, particularly those libraries operating in totalitarian regimes; especially effective is his report of Chile, where “many years of dictatorship [...] left a legacy of self-censorship of which many Chileans are barely aware. It prevents them from openly discussing many topics and even from comprehending their self-imposed barriers” (p. 143). If this seems unthinkable to American readers, Byrne takes care to connect these reports with the post September 11th loss of civil liberties in the United States. Even without a totalitarian dictatorship, this drives home the fact that censorship in public libraries has an effect above and beyond that of simply not being able to check out books.
Bibliography


**Abstract:** “Although single-purpose boards and commissions have been used to provide public goods and services since the colonial era, little scholarly attention has been given to the leadership characteristics and behaviors required of their members. As a result, appointing officials and those considering appointment have had little systematic guidance concerning the skills associated with successful service. This study addresses this problem by exploring the skill and knowledge preferences of board members at three exemplary public libraries and the effect of contentious censorship controversies on these preferences. Analysis of the board members’ assessments of twenty-three commonly recognized leadership characteristics and behaviors reveals a dramatic increase in the numbers highly valued by the board members during controversies and statistically significant changes in their collective value. These findings suggest that assumptions concerning the experience and training that lead to effective public library board performance should be rethought or, at least, receive further consideration.”

**Annotation:** This article stands out due to its subject pool consisting of board members from three libraries that had weathered three major censorship controversies (over internet filtering, censorship challenges of a movie, and censorship challenges of several books), as opposed to asking about hypothetical censorship situations. The results suggest that leadership qualities concerning the “‘art’ of public administration” (p. 291) are vital during a censorship crisis and should hold more weight when selecting board members. While the sample is small, the use of non-hypothetical situations and careful statistical analyses make these findings extremely useful to consider before a library is hit with controversial challenges.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because
of its specific focus on libraries that would make an initial Dialog search practical. After using Expand to discover the controlled vocabulary, I searched for the terms as an initial search.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary/Keyword

**Search String:**
- `e censor`
- `s e9 [2634 CENSORSHIP]`
- `e public`
- `s e26 [15620 PUBLIC LIBRARIES]`
- `s s1 and s2`


**Abstract:** “Gay images have slowly become integrated into mainstream cultural venues over the last forty years, including publishing. Studies show that gay-themed materials in libraries are targets of censorship attempts. Are these attempts reflections of the opinions of the majority of the population or of a vocal minority? The information in this study contributes over thirty years of trend data on the general public’s views of the censorship of gay-themed materials in libraries. This information can be useful to library policy makers and those faced with materials challenges.”

**Annotation:** The value of this study lies in its exploration of how non-librarians feel about censoring certain public library materials and how support for censorship has changed over time; its focus on a current controversial topic indicates how likely this material is to be challenged now and in the future. While religious affiliation and belief that homosexuality is wrong were predictors of supporting removal, only around one-third of
the population in 2006 supported removal of a book “in favor of homosexuality” (p. 250), and that percentage has dropped since 1973. This article’s focus on a specific controversial topic and changing attitudes towards it is useful, but a more general view of changing attitudes towards library censorship in general as a comparison would better place it in perspective.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries; I conducted a search in the database itself after using Dialog because of the ease of selecting peer-reviewed journals. I began with a keyword search to see what kind of results I would find and to discover controlled vocabulary for a later search.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science

**Method of Searching:** Keyword

**Search String:** public librar* censor*

[limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]


**Abstract:** “When asked about a hypothetical book containing racist beliefs, do people support removing the book from their public library or not? The study examined responses to this question from surveys conducted from 1976 to 2006. Responses were analyzed for changes over time and for differences between demographic categories of respondents. Data were gathered by the General Social Survey, a well-respected social sciences data resource.”
Annotation: Like the author’s 2008 article, this article is valuable for considering public attitudes towards censorship for another specific topic. The variables most predictive of opinion on removing a book racist against African-Americans were education, race, and religious affiliation; again, however, the majority of almost every demographic group opposed removal. Since opinions do not always predict action, a less hypothetical study might provide more useful data, as would a study differentiating between controversial children’s and adult literature.

Search Strategy: I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries; I conducted a search in the database itself after using Dialog because of the ease of selecting peer-reviewed journals. After a keyword search, I selected the relevant controlled vocabulary and repeated the search.

Database: Library Literature and Information Science

Method of Searching: Controlled Vocabulary

Search String: “Censorship” AND “Public Libraries” AND peer-reviewed


Abstract: “Libraries have vital roles in protecting heritage, offering individuals and societies opportunities to improve the quality of their lives, and contributing to civil society. They play an important role in the free exchange of ideas within societies and across time and space. Libraries can be damaged through war, looting and neglect. But more pervasive is the great variety of methods of information control by censorship which are given many justifications including decency, community well-being, privacy and national security. However, such views are contingent, not absolute as changing attitudes
to pornography illustrate. Librarians face personal dilemmas that contend with professional responsibilities to meet the needs of users and to promote the widest possible access to information. Any librarians who might wish to uphold principles of unrestricted access to information must either accept the boundaries or struggle against them.”

**Annotation:** This article’s focus on libraries in times of war, from totalitarian regimes to post-9-11 America, powerfully emphasizes how high the stakes are when libraries are censored. Its strength lies in tying these reports to common issues of censorship faced in American libraries today, showing the results of some types of censorship run rampant. Like many others, however, this article connects censorship solely with right-wing conservatism, not touching on the censorship based on left-wing political correctness.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary

**Search String:** “Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT “Censorship / School libraries” [limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]

Abstract: “The terrorist attacks of September 11 pose a potential threat to intellectual freedom inside and outside of libraries, particularly regarding information deemed to be useful to terrorists. After a brief look at this threat I proceed to discuss the liberal position on intellectual freedom in the light of Lester Asheim's distinction between censorship and selection. I then entertain a criticism of the liberal/Asheim position. The criticism suggests that the liberal position requires at least some public and academic libraries to carry potentially dangerous materials like bombmaking manuals. I defend the liberal position against this objection, concluding that such materials do have a place in some libraries, terrorist threats notwithstanding.”

Annotation: This article’s direct response to post-September 11 attacks on intellectual freedom make this an especially useful article while the United States still faces its repercussions; more generalizable is the article’s defense of not censoring dangerous materials. Doyle’s conclusion, to only censor pure manuals with no ideological text, seems disingenuous, especially since he admits there are very few books fitting these criteria and that objective selection will likely weed them out anyway. His defense of why these books should be carried at all is much more useful.

Search Strategy: I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

Database: Library Literature and Information Science

Method of Searching: Controlled Vocabulary

Search String: “Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT

**Abstract:** “Censorship never dies: like intellectual freedom of which it is a part, it goes on changing its form. The discussion reviews some of the key social, political, religious, artistic and moral factors, suggests that censorship is an area which pre-eminently brings out the worst and best because it is more complex than it looks, because consensus is rare, because everyone thinks they are right, and because professional and personal roles work together and sometimes get confused. Statements about intellectual freedom and rights are aspirational for practitioners trying to make personal decisions about what is acceptable and accountable. Reference is made to political correctness, alleged harms, community standards, and the role of the information professional as an intermediary.”

**Annotation:** This article engages the reader to examine his or her own reactions to censorship and hypothetical situations in order to better be prepared for actual selection and challenges. It is somewhat light on content compared to other articles, but its succinct summary of methods of censorship and practical concerns are useful for the practicing reader.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science
Method of Searching: Controlled Vocabulary

Search String: “Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT “Censorship / School libraries” [limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]


Abstract: “To influence public attitudes about hate speech and pornography (in either direction), one must understand the characteristics of people who do and do not wish to censor such expression. This article examines the relationship of attitudes about pornography and hate speech to a variety of demographic, psychological, and sociopolitical variables (including age, gender, education, political affiliation, religiosity, media use, need for cognition, authoritarianism, neuroticism, openness, extroversion, and commitment to democratic principles). The similarities and differences of the relationships with the two expressive contexts are explored.”

Annotation: The value of this article lies in its exploration of what demographics tend to favor censorship. While the article considers government censorship and censorship of different types (including books, Internet, public speaking, etc.) instead of specifically library censorship, the importance of knowing the demographics of one’s community is very relevant. A rundown of respondents’ answers on specific questions would be more useful, as the statistics on those asking about print censorship would be more directly applicable to libraries.

Search Strategy: I selected PsychINFO in order to find articles on the psychology and thought processes involved in censorship and challenges. I searched for censorship as a descriptor, along with libraries as a keyword in order to find research that connected its findings to censorship in libraries.
Database: PsychINFO [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Controlled Vocabulary/Keyword

Search String: e censor
s e39 [1533 CENSORSHIP (1978)]
s censorship/de and libr? 


**Abstract:** “One of the issues that challenges the principles of the Library Bill of Rights as well as those of the First Amendment is the increasing appearance of hate speech and literature that openly advocate hate, violence and even death for certain individuals or groups. […] Since hate speech correlates strongly with threats of violence, librarians should understand the harm such speech does to the targeted people, understand their concerns, and communicate with them in order to reach a consensus in dealing with this issue. Librarians, rather than insisting on absolute, unlimited freedom of speech, should understand the limitations of the First Amendment and the Library Bill of Rights as well as dilemmas of their professional ethics.”

**Annotation:** This article provides a rare case of a librarian openly arguing for censorship; in the case of hate speech, the author proposes that it is far too likely to cause violence to be allowed in the library. While hate speech is a more justified form of censorship, the author’s arguments are unconvincing; his statement that ordering certain materials could destroy good relationships with the community becomes more uncomfortable if those materials were books containing homosexuality instead of hate speech. The article’s point of view is valid, but it falls short in focusing on oppressed groups as opposed to repeating the usual justifications for censorship.
**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary

**Search String:** “Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT “Censorship / School libraries” [limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]


**Abstract:** “Public librarians have long held to the social justice philosophy of free access to information for all people. The issue of censorship relates to the professional principles of the Australian Library and Information Association and to the role public librarians play in nurturing social capital in communities. The paper considers the philosophy of free access to information in the context of contemporary item selection and classification processes within public libraries. A survey of Queensland public librarians identified attitudes towards the public right to information, and determined the degree to which censorship is practiced or prevented in public libraries. The findings support those of international research that anticensorship attitudes are not always indicative of censorship behaviours, and that some librarians employ self censorship of materials to avoid censorship challenges.”
Annotation: This article is valuable because it specifically compares attitudes on censorship to (hypothetical) practice, with a special emphasis on the self-censorship practiced by librarians choosing not to purchase controversial materials. The sample of 25 respondents is too small for meaningful statistical analysis, and the hypothetical questions still do not address real practice or address the justification of limited space and funds for self-censorship. However, it focuses on materials with post-911 relevance (such as works on al-Qaeda and bomb-making) and provides a useful international perspective on censorship theory and practice.

Search Strategy: I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries that would make an initial Dialog search practical. After using Expand to discover the controlled vocabulary, I searched for the terms; after browsing the results, I excluded common non-scholarly journals to narrow my results.

Database: Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Controlled Vocabulary/Keyword

Search String:  
e censor  
s e9 [2634 CENSORSHIP]  
e public  
s e26 [15620 PUBLIC LIBRARIES]  
s s1 and s2  
s s3 not jn=slj not jn=Newsl Intellect Freedom not jn=Am Libr not jn=OLA Q not jn=PNLA Q not jn=Libr J not jn=Inf Scotl not jn=Feliciter

Abstract: “Librarians, through their professional associations, have long been committed to the social justice principle embedded in the concept of ‘free access to information’. External censorship challenges to library collections threaten this principle overtly. However, censorship can also occur in libraries in various covert and often unconscious ways. This discussion paper raises concerns about current practices and processes that can effectively censor library collections from within. The paper concludes by highlighting areas of practice in which librarians need to be vigilant for such covert censorship.”

Annotation: Moody’s article offers a valuable look at less obvious forms of censorship, including selection based on vendors with their own biases, pressure from government funders, and self-censorship. The attention the article brings to these issues is vital, as statistics of challenges and censorship do not include the much more widespread, often unconscious covert methods of censorship. Its Australian origin makes it slightly less relevant to American librarians, considering Moody considers the selection of pro-homosexuality books a “relatively easy decision” (p. 144)—a description often not true in the United States.

Search Strategy: I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

Database: Library Literature and Information Science

Method of Searching: Controlled Vocabulary

Search String: “Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT
“Censorship / School libraries” [limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]


**Abstract:** “This article examines issues related to selection and censorship in five public libraries in Southern California. The purpose of the study was to document public librarians’ selection practices and to determine whether library policy and procedure assist librarians when confronted with challenges from the community. Also explored are the issues of self-censorship in selection and the influence the community exerts on the libraries’ selection processes. Findings of particular interest focused on the importance of and need for library policy; outsourcing selection; the practice of segregating materials within children’s collections; and the low number of formal challenges.”

**Annotation:** This article’s look at contrasting what librarians feel about censorship how they act towards controversial books is a useful focus; especially necessary is reporting on the subtle, but real censorship of placing controversial children’s books on a “Parents” shelf and discouraging children from browsing them. While the study’s geographical spread is limited, its inclusion of questions concerning both opinion and actions taken provide a generalizable angle many other studies did not include.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries; I conducted a search in the database itself after using Dialog because of the ease of selecting peer-reviewed journals. I began with a keyword search to see what kind of results I would find and to discover controlled vocabulary for a later search.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science

**Abstract:** “Pressures to censor or ban books for children and young people are increasing in schools and libraries across North America and Canada. The censors believe that the toleration of dissenting opinions somehow endorses those opinions. However, society requires tolerance, especially tolerance in recognizing the rights of others, particularly minors, to make their own decisions about what they read and their right to have access to a broad range of information. Therefore, it is vital that public and school libraries accommodate the assorted interests and needs of youth by providing the widest possible variety of recreational and informational reading materials. Political or religious groups that are completely convinced of the righteousness of their position might want to suppress divergent viewpoints. However, democracy is based on the free exchange of ideas. Intolerance of diverse views in children’s books can easily result in censorship, vigilante tactics, and the suppression of the imagination.”

**Annotation:** The value of this article lies in its focus on a fact not often talked about in other articles: that censorship attempts come from all along the political spectrum. Its listing and refuting of reasons of censorship from both liberals and conservatives serves to remind the reader that censorship done for reasons he or she agrees with is still censorship. While the article is fairly short and does not take an in-depth look at the studies it cites or the reasons for censorship it lists, it presents a good overview of the topic.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I
searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary

**Search String:**

“Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT “Censorship / School libraries” [limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]


**Abstract:** “Because there is considerable pressure on public librarians to censor materials in their collections, it is no wonder that some staff will go to almost any lengths to avoid challenges, criticism, and controversy over which titles and which kinds of materials should be made available to their communities. Nevertheless, while these reactions are quite understandable, a close reading of recent censorship research suggests that they are not solutions. The purpose of this article is to explore the reasons why this kind of avoidance behavior—“censorproofing”—is eventually doomed to failure, and to suggest alternative strategies that might make more effective use of the time, energy, imagination, and resources of public library staff.”

**Annotation:** This article provides a well-reasoned, powerful argument against self-censorship, both as an effective deterrent of censorship challenges and as an action in line with the mission of libraries to support intellectual freedom. The author’s main argument, that one can’t easily predict which books will be challenged because people can find offense in everything, is well-supported with statistics and quotes from actual public library
challenges. The section on alternatives to censorproofing is more philosophical than practical, but the author correctly notes that the strategies he lists “have been widely discussed in the literature” (p. 23).

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries that would make an initial Dialog search practical. After using Expand to discover the controlled vocabulary, I searched for the terms; upon discovering several relevant scholarly journals, I repeated my search restricted to those journals.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary/Keyword

**Search String:**
e censor
s e9 [2634 CENSORSHIP]
e public
s e26 [15620 PUBLIC LIBRARIES]
s s1 and s2
s s3 and jn=Public Libr Q


**Abstract:** “Discusses the role of the information specialist as an intermediary and how each selection made in the process of providing information involves a value judgment. Topics include censorship, self-knowledge and censorship, censorship in the wider community, professional response to the demands of censorship and ethics issues, and academic preparation.”
 Annotation: Emphasizing the importance of recognizing one’s biases, this article looks at the connection between selection and censorship, focusing on the less obvious forms of censorship such as self-censorship and labeling. While the article is more philosophical than practical, it does drive home the important point that all librarians must be able to understand, explain, and justify their decisions regarding controversial books.

 Search Strategy: I found Moody’s article to be an excellent take on my topic, with a useful theoretical literature review. I checked the references for other scholarly articles and discovered this one.

 Database: N/A

 Method of Searching: Footnote chasing

 Search String: Referenced in:


 Abstract: “The rise in video circulation rates has created a new censorship debate among public libraries. The American Library Association has opposed any form of censorship in the library, but video content has forced some libraries to limit access to minors, charge fees, and use ratings labels.”

 Annotation: While this censorship debate is no longer new, this article provides a useful overview of the special censorship issues that come with video collections, including survey data examining whether libraries follow the ALA’s official policy on videos. A more recent survey would be more helpful, but this article’s value lies in recognizing that not all
censorship is the same as book censorship and in providing rebuttals to common pro-
censorship stances.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Library Literature and Information Science because of its specific focus on libraries. After a search with the controlled vocabulary “Censorship” and “Public libraries,” I searched on censorship without public libraries or school libraries in order to find more general works on censorship that were relevant to public libraries.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary

**Search String:** “Censorship” NOT “Censorship / Public libraries” NOT “Censorship / School libraries” [limit to 1995-2010; limit to peer-reviewed]
Conclusion and Personal Statement

The most difficult aspect of this project was finding scholarly literature—as a former student of clinical psychology, it was eye-opening to see the ratio of non-scholarly to scholarly literature in library science. I did, however, make things more difficult by narrowing down my topic. I found a number of peer-reviewed articles on Internet censorship, including many legal articles (although the length of those presented their own problems), and a bibliography of historical cases of censorship including articles published before 1995 would have given me many more options. In the end, however, I decided to focus on the aspect of censorship that most interested me: the modern-day censorship of books (with other library materials in circulation considered as well). I would have liked to focus entirely on self-censorship, but as a majority of the articles I found at least mentioned it, I was pleased.

My search strategy ended up more heterogeneous than I would have liked, but many of my efforts to broaden my searches led nowhere. Library Literature and Information Science was the only database where the set of censorship and public libraries led me to more than one result—and even then, almost half of my articles didn’t have “Public libraries” as a descriptor. LegalTrac and ERIC’s results were all Internet-censorship related, while JSTOR offered nothing and PsychInfo supplied one article I used. Interestingly, footnote chasing and citation searching were almost completely unhelpful. Many of the relevant footnotes were not scholarly, too old, or articles I had already found, while citation searching through Social SciSearch for every article led to only a few references that I didn’t use. Why? I think this stemmed from a topic with far more anecdotal than scholarly literature, meaning I’d already found most of the modern scholarly references cited. In addition, many of the classic censorship texts cited by many are pre-Internet, full books, or both.

In order to really do this topic justice, I’d like to do a more complete annotated bibliography—one including older works, books, and perhaps centering on self-censorship in all types of librarianship. I’m fascinated by what I learned on censorship, and I’d love to synthesize more studies and articles in order to ascertain how to better prevent it.