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Responding to Challenges to LGBTQ-Friendly Works in the Public Library

**Introduction**

While censorship, by definition, is committed by governments and “institutionalised power” seeking to suppress or “control the creation and dissemination of ideas” (Hannabuss & Allard, 2001, p. 81), the term is commonly applied to individuals and groups challenging or complaining about the availability of types of information. In libraries, most commonly, challenges to books and other materials are against those containing sexual themes (graphic descriptions, nudity, and homosexuality), violence, strong language, the religious or occult, sexism or racism. Children’s works depicting realistic situations come frequently under fire, including such titles as *Daddy’s Roommate* (1990) by Michael Willhoite and *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989) by Lesléa Newman, ranked second and eleventh, respectively, among the most challenged titles of the 1990s (Schrader & Wells, 2007). Though the authors describe their objectives of providing works which help children with non-nuclear families “see their own image reflected back to themselves within the culture at large” (as cited in Salem, 2006, p. 106), “both Newman and Willhoite have been accused of promoting sodomy, militancy, prostitution, bestiality, and incest” (Salem, 2006, p. 106).

Public librarians must be equipped to handle such complaints with tact and interest in the concerns of the patron, while upholding collection development policies and codes of ethics on intellectual freedom subscribed to. This essay will discuss practices for responding to patron challenges, policy development, relevant statements from library associations, the importance of LGBTQ-positive literature for youth, and the ethical dilemma of professional neutrality. A study by Ann Curry (1997) suggests that in Canada, 72% of challenged materials remain in public

libraries, while 12% are relocated or reclassified, and 16% withdrawn entirely. Of the latter group, the majority contain racist or sexist language, themes, or images. Many practicing public librarians “uphold and defend the ideal of intellectual freedom and resist censorship” (Jones, 1983, p. 137) through balanced collections representing multiple views on an issue, under the principle that “the best collection is one that always makes you feel slightly uneasy” (as cited in Coley, 2002). As James LaRue (2007) wryly notes, “if removing a book makes a library better, then logically, the best library has no books at all” (p. 55).

### **Responding to the Patron**

Dealing with confrontation from a patron over questionable library materials is most successful when staff are trained in proper conduct and well informed of library policy. LaRue describes the in-person challenge process with practical tips on behaviour, including warning against the common errors of “becoming wildly defensive” or “falling into the jargon of our profession” (LaRue, 2007, p. 84). The aim is to diffuse immediate conflict by empathizing in a professional manner, listening respectfully, being “open, attentive, polite” and “focused” (LaRue, 2007, p. 76), allowing escalation through a Request for Reconsideration of Materials form if the patron wishes, but ultimately, attempting to maintain the patron as a library user: “The patron came into the library seeking service and instead found something upsetting [...] The goal of the library staff is to have patrons walk out with something that satisfies their library need, a positive service transaction” (LaRue, 2007, p. 77).

The Request for Reconsideration form is used in many libraries to facilitate formal review of an item by staff, members of a committee, the library director, and potentially the board of trustees. The form requires the patron to consider the material critically and answer questions such as “Did you read the entire book?” and “What do you believe is the theme of the work”, before initiating

the lengthy reconsideration process in which “the objections of a person challenging the book are weighed against the book’s merits and the rationale for why it was included in a collection” (Martin & Murdoch, 2007, p. 72). The patron should be kept abreast of the process, provided with copies of library policy, and informed of their right to appeal the decision, though LaRue (2007) notes, “responsiveness doesn’t mean appeasement or agreement” (p. 79). In the event of a complainant who wishes to pursue the dispute, Martin and Murdoch (2007) advise that “you should be prepared to fight for a book’s presence in your library – and fight loudly” (p. 73), with LaRue agreeing that public debate is often beneficial to the library as an institution: “If you hunker down and hide behind the Freedom to Read statement, you may earn the admiration of your peers, but you don’t change any minds in your community” (LaRue, 2007, p. 36).

Addressing a challenge in a public forum will require the library not only to strictly follow procedure, but also to uphold commitments represented in formal policy, such as making any recommended purchase which falls within selection criteria (LaRue, 2007), or responding to attempted censorship with acquisitions intended to balance the issue in question. A library that seeks to represent all segments of the community must realistically assess not only whether holdings and services relating to oppressed or minority groups are adequate, but also whether “soft-censorship, or pre-censorship” (Schrader & Wells, 2007, p. 19) has biased selection such that the opposing “viewpoints of ultraconservatives” are similarly “under-represented” in the collection (Martin & Murdoch, 2007, p. 72).

### **Developing Policy**

Developing strong and clear written policy allows librarians to act consistently, according to established procedure, and “circumscribes the censorial influence of pressure groups and individuals; and it builds general public support through better informed boards, staff, parents and

students” (Schrader & Wells, 2007, p. 26). Library policy on censorship and selection should refer directly to position statements from library associations, include language to the effect that the library does not endorse the content of all materials it holds, and, according to Schrader and Wells (2007), also “explicitly include BGLTT concerns and protections” (p. 11). Public libraries should also offer training to frontline workers on understanding policy and communicating effectively, as provided in documents such as the ALA’s *Strategies and Tips for Dealing with Challenges to Library Materials* (1999), as well as delineate which position in the staff is responsible at each stage of the process (Jones, 1983). A clear and transparent course for challenges to intellectual freedom should be supplemented by a selection policy which informs staff in making decisions and demonstrates the philosophy of the library to the inquiring public or media (Jones, 1983).

### **Codes of Ethics**

Statements on intellectual freedom and the rights of public library users issued by CLA, ALA, and IFLA unequivocally support collections representing diverse points of view as well as action against censorship, including subtle forms such as labelling, materials with age-restricted access, or inaccessible physical locations. The CLA Statement on Intellectual Freedom (1985) instructs libraries to “facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular, or unacceptable. To this end, libraries shall acquire and make available the widest variety of materials”. The ALA Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read statements include similar, if not stronger, imperatives to resist censorship and suppression which threaten democracy.

While the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms applies to the operations of public libraries and their staff, little legislation or case law exists specific to censorship of materials (Schrader & Wells, 2007). However, the *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District* decision by the

Supreme Court of Canada (2002) ruled against a board that elected to not allow three picture books depicting same-sex relationships among supplemental reading materials, in violation of the School Act's "principles of tolerance and non-sectarianism". The judgement delivered by Chief Justice McLachlin emphasized the need for diversity and tolerance, and the human rights aspect of the case, which could similarly be applied to public libraries:

Exposure to some cognitive dissonance is arguably necessary if children are to be taught what tolerance itself involves. As my colleague points out, the demand for tolerance cannot be interpreted as the demand to approve of another person's beliefs or practices. [...] Learning about tolerance is therefore learning that other people's entitlement to respect from us does not depend on whether their views accord with our own. Children cannot learn this unless they are exposed to views that differ from those they are taught at home (par. 66).

Many public and children's librarians resist acting *in loco parentis* and refuse to implement age-restrictions on materials, placing full responsibility with the parent for supervising what a minor reads or borrows and for discussing challenging subjects. As the public library has an educational function and represents an inclusive community space, the message of the Chief Justice that "tolerance is always age-appropriate" (par. 69) affirms the mission of diversity in children's collections.

### **Impact of Gay-Positive Literature on Children**

In responding to the complaint of a patron regarding books with gay-positive themes intended for children or teens, in addition to explaining the duty of the library to provide a range of materials for all members of the community, it would be beneficial to be able to articulate the importance of these works to questioning youth, or children with same-sex parents or relatives. Because of the "marginalized leper status of BGLTT youth in Canadian society" (Schrader, 2007, p. 9), they may find the public library to be the only sanctuary free of judgment and with available, pertinent information. At school and home, studies prove that gay students are at "significantly

higher risk of emotional distress, physical abuse and verbal harassment” (Schrader & Wells, 2007, p. 9), are more likely to be threatened with weapons or encounter violence at school (Salem, 2006, p. 109), attempt suicide, abuse drugs, drop out of school, or be rejected from a family home (Schrader & Wells, 2007, p. 10-11). Resources such as those the library provides can assist in the healthy emotional and sexual development of LGBTQ youth, and reduce perceptions “of sexual minorities as ‘other’, as marginalized and voiceless” (Schrader, 2007, p. 9).

### **The Neutral versus Political Librarian**

While the principle of a balanced collection may be the “first and best defense against book challenges and other threats to open access” (Martin & Murdoch, 2007, p. 72), many authors debate the morality of the “neutral” librarian who privileges broad access above selecting accurate materials, inadvertently “dwindl[ing] into passive and unthinking relativism” (Hannabuss & Allard, 2001, p. 81). The argument of balance can be leveraged both in favour of acquiring progressive works such as *Daddy’s Roommate* as well as potentially harmful ones including *Alfie’s Home*, a book developed as a direct response to *Daddy’s Roommate*, by an organization devoted to “healing” same-sex attraction, presumed to be the result of childhood trauma such as sexual abuse, through psychiatric treatment and non-denominational religious seminars (Manley, 1994). Will Manley (1994) remarks that pressure groups have caught on to the resistance of libraries to censorship, and instead seek to influence acquisitions in favour of their materials – an issue which 90% of Canadian and British libraries face (Curry, 1997). Further, he asks, to what extent do we accommodate established falsities in the interest of balance: “We don’t automatically counterbalance our books on the Nazi death camps with propaganda from anti-Semitic bigots who claim that the Holocaust never took place. Why then should we be so eager to satisfy the demands of the anti-gay activists?” (Manley, 1994, p. 880). Joseph Good (2008) condemns librarians for

“lackadaisically permitting any idea, no matter what its relative moral merit, to filter through the library to the patron” (p. 144): “Indeed, the very notion that both sides of an issue are inherently equal, and therefore entitled to an equal share of the public’s attention, smacks of moral relativism” (p. 143). Such renewed interest in the public librarian as a moral gatekeeper for society presents a significant dilemma for librarians, particularly where collections and user services may have impact on the physical, emotional, or intellectual lives of patrons.

A number of authors observe that adopting a position of neutrality only serves to reinforce the status quo (Jensen, 2008 ; Schrader & Wells, 2007 ; Durrani & Smallwood, 2008 ; Good, 2008). Suggestions to reach marginalized user groups and participate in consciousness-raising include classifying racist or anti-gay works under the subject heading “hate-literature” (Iverson, 2008, p. 27), and “develop[ing] creative partnerships” with groups working to alleviate social oppression (Durrani & Smallwood, 2008, p. 125). The practicing librarian would be wary not only of the potential for conflict between factions (Could a cataloguer label *Alfie’s Home* “homophobia” without tagging *Daddy’s Roommate* as “sin?”), but also of allowing a small number of individuals to adopt such personal responsibility. It is not difficult to agree that true neutrality may be impossible (Jensen, 2008), or that public library collections must be inclusive of the underrepresented (Durrani & Smallwood, 2008), but implementing a progressive ideal in service with the reality of a diverse community of users and the imperative of satisfying funders may be unrealistic for many institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Challenges to public library materials are most effectively diverted by staff training, written policy on intellectual freedom, and by maintaining a balanced collection predicated on a knowledge of the community being served. Censorship exists not only because of external

influences, but also manifests in daily operations such as selection, reference, and cataloguing where librarians may, unintentionally, privilege their own views as normative, or fail to seek out materials beyond the mainstream and familiar. Finally, while the rhetorical concepts of neutrality and intellectual freedom find little resistance from the profession and public, many librarians encourage social responsibility through political and moral activism in the workplace.



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