

Political Issues: What to do when private values and public values are at odds

When circumstances arise that make a library question a book selection, that selection can be deferred to the library board of trustees. If there is censorship on the library board, how can a library serve the needs of the community? At what length should a member of the library board or a librarian serve public values if their own private or family values are different?

Art Jaros was recently fired from the Downers Grove Library Board of Trustees regarding comments he made at a board meeting about the necessary inclusion of sensitivity training and homosexuality (Walberg, 2017). This seemingly off-collar remark led to a deeper investigation into the role of this person on the library board. In 1999, Jaros and fellow parent Carr had demanded the removal of the book *Blue Star Rapture* from the Downers Grove South high school curriculum because they believed it violated community standards, citing the book was pro-obscenity and anti-Christian (Kantavelos, 1999). Jaros' son, Kurt, was also involved in an attempt to remove a book *This Day in June* from the West Chicago library in 2017 (Oberle, 2017). These three related events from members of the same family suggest that they believe it is acceptable to put private life values above those of the public.

How do family values become different than the values of the community or public? People form values based on the culture that they grew up in. Because cultures change, values change sometimes leaving generations that still live together with differing sets of values. Each decade uses a different set of family values learned from their family and community (Doherty, 1992). There are two approaches as values shift- to cling to old values, or to embrace the new changes. With the way the family structure has changed in the 2010s toward favoring a la carte families, the values have broadened to encompass different family structures. Many have adapted to the change and welcome in these new family values, yet others whose traditional family lines have continued have had no personal exposure to these values. With no exposure to what values could be, the traditional family members could have not been presented with an opportunity to welcome change or they could have immediately rejected things different than their own structure.

One part of family values is parenting values. If a parent believes something is not appropriate for their child, they restrict it. Parental restriction does not always translate into the library setting. If a librarian believes a child should not check out a book for its content based on age, what are the best options? Tell parents? Suggest a different book? Say something to the student? Author Scales says that if the student requests an interlibrary loan book listed out of their YA age range, the example given is *Thirteen Reasons Why*, probe on the theme and see if there are any in-house younger age recommended books that deal with the same subjects such as

bullying or suicide. If the student still wants the older book, then it is the librarian's responsibility to get the book for the child. The article goes on to say that libraries allow children to read books that they cannot read at home. It is not the role of the librarian or teacher to judge what books children can read or what books parents allow their children access to (Scales, 2017).

How is edgy or controversial material carefully considered by the library? There are many reasons why a library would consider buying controversial books. In a 2012 article, Intner references a purchase of *50 Shades of Grey* for the library suggesting that although the book is a bestseller, its provocative content gives room to pause before purchase. The argument for purchase is to get a hot title circulating rather than a title sitting on a shelf, to draw in readers who have heard the buzz over the book in the media, and to provide a place for people to read this book that cannot purchase it at home. Reasons not to buy are listed as a library is for education, not entertainment, that most readers will buy books they really want, and the consideration of those who object to all adult-themed content on the shelves such as erotica and those who believe that the library is attacking their religious beliefs by stocking books they don't agree with. Wrath of the objectors can spoil the good reputation of a library in a community (Intner 2012). People who object to books are rarely the audience to read them. Intner suggests the creation of a controversial books section to please both sides of the argument or to consult the Board of Trustees. "This is what a Board of Trustees composed of community leaders is ideally suited for doing," she states. In 2017, placing books in a special section is also declared a form of censorship giving them unequal place with the other books on the shelf.

One type of censorship that is often over-looked in libraries is the continued practice of self-censorship. When the fear of a challenge from the community feels too great for the librarian, a book with good reviews that fills a need in their collection will be passed over. No statistics on how many books are self-censored exist because librarians are not reporting about the books they thought were good but did not purchase. This type of censorship also includes moving children's books to the adult section or put titles in a restricted area including banned sections or glass display cases, and media services who rate books lower due to controversial content (Whelan, 2009).

Self-censorship doesn't just hurt libraries and communities, it hurts authors. Many young-adult authors second guess their choices after facing a censorship criticism meaning that the words that they chose to connect with young adults are now more adult and proper instead of natural because they chose to placate adults who feared their book was too edgy and would be rejected by libraries who fear repercussions (Whelan, 2009). Using strong language to convey a point resonates with readers who can understand the emotion behind a swear word without needing to be told the character is saying something angrily. This type of inclusion helps readers to understand more in context. Should these things be excluded, or a sexual act to be cut out after the tension for it is built up, when readers are put into these situations in their lives, they will have emotions or feelings and not know what to do with them since their guiding literature was truncated. This is not the message that should be given to today's youth or to any of the patrons

of libraries. Library advocates argue that children will self-regulate what content is too much for them to handle (Whelan, 2009).

It is the role of libraries to ascertain what content best represents the communities and aids in education. Lester Asheim asserted his concern over self-censorship through library selections in 1953 saying, “We must recognize that in many communities, the library is the only real agency for the circulation of book materials and that the ban in the library is, in effect, a ban which operates on the community as a whole.” As a guideline for judging books, consider the merits and values the book, the reasons to keep a book. Critics and censors will point out the weaknesses and possibilities for misinterpretation. The role of the selector is to find the good in a book and defend reasons to keep it in a collection. Consider the book as a whole and not take passages out of context to make them seem like a representation of the whole. A selector should not succumb to the prejudices of his own background or the pressure from his library’s patrons (Asheim, 1953).

The American Library Association has a task force in place since the late 1960s to help those involved with libraries to stand up for the Library Bill of Rights (Asato, 2011). When the first episodes of censorship in library and legal actions that followed were brought to the attention of the ALA, they did not handle the cases well often drawing division between the members (Asato, 2011). Now, the ALA has set guidelines and steps in immediately when a library issues or persons are threatened and have become true advocates for freedom of speech in libraries. In regards to censorship issues, the ALA has a plan in place to aid whistleblowers and others who believe intellectual freedom is being challenged by the rulings of a library or board in opposing the library or board member whose decision they believe is threatening the community needs through censorship.

This issue of how to make determinations on content is not restricted to American libraries. A British law banning the promotion of homosexuality was questioned by librarians. Who is the judge to whether or not a library’s inclusion of a homosexual text is considered promoting homosexuality? Several congressman came to the defense of libraries saying that libraries are not put at risk by this provision, yet in the same breath, an amendment to the clause specifying local libraries are safe from any rebuttal by purchasing books was voted down (Flagg, 1988).

When libraries do not have proper procedures in place for challenges, often, the community must step in to ensure the needs of the community are not being misplaced by the needs of one. In school libraries, parents may challenge a book because of cover art or a skimming without reading through it causing turmoil in a school reading program if they do not know what to do (Vance, 2016). Many libraries have adopted standards and procedures for book challenges including requirements to read through the book before a challenge, or to speak with the author about the intended audience (Vance, 2016). It is the responsibility of the library to make sure a plan is in place before any opposition occurs to know how to handle the situation.

Libraries are no strangers to book challenges. Libraries now celebrate Banned Book Week on the last week in September to showcase what fighting for the First Amendment right in a story looks like through examples of books that have been challenged or banned on display (Long, 2006). During this week, many libraries hold events so the public can see why a book might be challenged or attempted to ban and what type of themes are or were considered controversial. These events open a dialogue between the community and the library so that the patrons of the library understand how freedom of speech translates into books and into their libraries. Several state legislatures have dealt with legislation aimed at the restriction of sexual orientation which led to the ALA to pass a resolution on the inclusion of materials reflecting diversity and encouraging libraries to add in books representative of all peoples (Long, 2006).

Kurt and Michaela Jaros wrote letters to the library before taking their proposal to ban *On This Day in June* from the West Chicago Library to the board ("*Library Refuses To Move Gay Kids' Book After 'Family' Group Objects*", 2017). Jaros cited that the book contained images that were unsuitable for kids. Hearing of this issue, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund rallied its members to speak on behalf of the book at the library board meeting (Williams, 2017). At the West Chicago board meeting, 150 people were allowed in to attend. Patrons of the library came out to sing praise for the picture book stating that it should be ok for all children to see clean images of people attending a parade and that the content was very age appropriate. The vote towards keeping the book was 138-13 and the book remains on the children's shelves of the West Chicago library (Oberle, 2017).

In the case of Art Jaros and the Downers Grove library board, Jaros could not escape his comments, even though he disputed that they were true. Jaros had been quoted as saying at a previous library board meeting that sexual harassment inclusion training was irrelevant and that protection should be taken to keep homosexuals out instead. Using a trusted political position as a member of the library board of trustees to make homophobic (and misogynistic) remarks proves that it takes more than just a demonstration of leadership ability to be on a library board. At the start of the meeting, Jaros was ousted before he could hear the testimonies of the many individuals who came to speak on behalf of the inclusion of LGBTQIA books and issues at the library. Some speakers stood up for Jaros saying although his voice was opposing the majority, his opinion on the board represented diversity ("*Library Official Voted Out After Alleged Homophobic Remarks*", 2017). Jaros filed a countersuit of defamation, which resulted in the judge upholding the firing of Jaros from the board as an ethical choice (Ward, 2017).

The message that a library sends by the selection of its books and members should be one of openness and inclusion, not an exclusion of materials or ideas. Libraries are places of learning and education as well as entertainment and should not face censors by a group that shares different tastes in these items than others in the same community. It may be tough for some librarians to choose controversial books knowing that they may face a challenge, but in these cases, it is the role of the librarian to consider the person who could see that controversial book as an object to change their life.

After viewing the videos of the testimonies from the two library meetings where the Jaros families were questioned for their ethical choices in libraries, it is obvious that there is a need in these local communities for more LGBTQIA and urban literature. I was raised in a very strict religious background to a white family and did not have a way to grasp understanding of cultures such as these different from my own until I was in college able to check out literature on diversity at an academic library and meet people of different backgrounds to have open dialogue with. Coming from this place, I find it easy to empathize with both sides of this argument- those who fear the repercussions of a community discussion on ideals different from what you have always known, and those who feel underrepresented in a community and would be ostracized by those who do not understand. Once you have taken even the smallest effort to see things from someone else's point of view, in this case to embrace the beauty of an LGBTQIA parade in *One Day in June* or to understand the dialogue of an urban setting in *Blue Star Rapture*, you cannot help but to believe that these books have a rightful place to be shared with the community. I wish someone had put books like these in my childhood library, not just for me, but for all the other kids who didn't get to go away to college to see what the world looks like outside of the rural bubble. Those children are now parents who will likely teach their children the same set of values they learned with no intervention unless one library, or one book selector, makes a move to start displaying and therefore offering a lesson on inclusion and diversity.

Literature Cited:

Asato, N. (2011). The Origins of the Freedom to Read Foundation: Public Librarians' Campaign to Establish a Legal Defense against Library Censorship. *Public Library Quarterly*, 30(4), 286-306. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2011.625598>

Asheim, L. (1953). Not Censorship But Selection. *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 28(Sept), 63-67.

Doherty, W. (1992). Private Lives, Public Values: The future of the American family. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199205/private-lives-public-values>

Flagg, G. (1988). British librarians worried by anti-homosexual law. *American Libraries*, 19(June), 423-424.

Intner, S. (2012). Censorship Versus Selection: It's Déjà Vu All Over Again. *Technicalities*, 32(5), 1-11.

Kantzavelos, M. (1999). DOWNERS GROVE SCHOOLS REJECT BOOK-BAN REQUEST: [WEST FINAL, D Edition]. *Chicago Tribune*, p. 1. Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.naperville-lib.org:2315/chicagotribune/docview/418944391/AA860412FF4B4A72PQ/6?accountid=41876>

Library Official Voted Out After Alleged Homophobic Remarks. (2017). *NBC Chicago*. Retrieved 9 December 2017, from <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/Library-Official-Voted-Out-to-Appraise-After-Reported-Ant-Gay-Remarks-442821803.html>

Library Refuses To Move Gay Kids' Book After 'Family' Group Objects. (2017). *HuffPost*. Retrieved 9 December 2017, from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chicago-library-this-day-in-june_us_59b00fd8e4b0b5e53102c446

Long, S. (2006). Banned Books Week: a celebration of intellectual freedom. *New Library World*, 107(1/2), 73-75. Retrieved from http://blogs.ubc.ca/lled4492015/files/2015/03/Long_Banned-Books-Week.pdf

Oberle, K. (2017). *West Chicago Library to leave LGBT book in children's section*. *Daily Herald*. Retrieved 9 December 2017, from <http://www.dailyherald.com/news/20170829/west-chicago-library-to-leave-lgbt-book-in-childrens-section>

Scales, P. (2017). Age Appropriate Reading. *School Library Journal*, 63(4), 24.

Vance, C. (2016). Censorship in the Library: The Dark Side of Dystopia. *Against The Grain*, 28(4), 22-24. Retrieved from http://www.against-the-grain.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ATG_v28-4.pdf

Walberg, M. (2017). *Library official removed after reported comments on homosexuality*. *chicagotribune.com*. Retrieved 9 December 2017, from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/downers-grove/news/ct-downers-grove-library-controversy-0906-20170905-story.html>

Ward, C. (2017). *Judge upholds ouster of library trustee in wake of reported remarks on homosexuality*. *chicagotribune.com*. Retrieved 9 December 2017, from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/downers-grove/news/ct-downers-grove-library-ruling-0922-20170921-story.html>

Whelan, D. (2009). A Dirty Little Secret. *School Library Journal*, 55(2), 27-30.

Williams, M. (2017). *TONIGHT: West Chicago Library Board Considers Challenge to This Day in June | Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*. *Cbldf.org*. Retrieved 9 December 2017, from <http://cbldf.org/2017/08/tonight-west-chicago-library-board-considers-challenge-to-this-day-in-june/>