

# The State of Censorship

By Eileen Wirth

## A SURVEY OF CENSORSHIP ISSUES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES SHOWS CAUSE FOR BOTH CHEER AND CONCERN

**I**n the Atlanta area, a library director removed the controversial book *Fermata* without even being asked—in order to prevent a potential protest. Such actions are viewed as “a practical retreat rather than an act of cowardice,” according to one Georgia librarian.

In Indiana, a group called Citizens Concerned for the Constitution has tried to pass a Safe Library Bill to “protect the children from inappropriate materials such as R-rated movies and videos in libraries.” The move has caused widespread concern among the state’s public librarians.

In other parts of the nation, groups and individuals concerned about witchcraft have asked librarians to remove Halloween displays and to censor books on the occult. And, of course, there are the standard requests to restrict titles dealing with homosexuality, especially books for children like *Daddy’s Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

These are just a few examples of the requests for censorship that a random sample of institutional members of ALA’s Public Library Association reported in a nationwide survey conducted in the summer of 1995, to which 372 library directors or their representatives from nearly all states responded.

Despite such instances, the survey found that local public libraries do a good job of combatting censorship:

➤ Although more than two-thirds of the directors reported that between 1990 and 1994 they had received requests to remove materials or perform other acts of censorship, very few of these attempts succeeded. Nearly 90% of the librarians said that since 1990 they have not withdrawn an item because of a community request.

➤ The typical library receives fewer than four requests a year to remove material—a figure that has increased by less than one request per year in the last five years.

Nevertheless, many librarians are concerned about what could happen. They cited rising local influence by the Chris-

tian right and other special-interest groups and worried about a general climate of intolerance for unpopular views and minorities.

“The public in general grows more difficult each year . . . always on edge, intolerant of other needs or interests, finding fault, blaming the other (whoever the other is, I can’t quite figure out),” said one librarian.

“Five years ago, we received four or five requests for reconsideration each year. Now we receive three or four a month. The general climate is more conservative,” wrote one respondent. “It is my personal opinion that organized and unorganized Christian fundamentalists are the greatest single threat to our freedoms,” wrote another. These concerns, however, should not be allowed to obscure the generally positive picture that emerges from the survey.

### Dedication to intellectual freedom

America’s public libraries overwhelmingly support the ideal of intellectual freedom, but survey findings suggest that not all librarians are absolutists. Librarians almost universally endorse ALA’s Freedom to Read statement and regard ALA’s Library Bill of Rights as very important. Some 91.5% said that their boards had adopted a policy statement based on the Library Bill of Rights, and half of the libraries that have not adopted such a policy are considering doing so. In addition, 82.4% have adopted a policy based on the Freedom to Read statement.

More than 90% of librarians either agreed or strongly agreed that resisting censorship is one of the most important obligations of a public librarian. About 93% either agreed or strongly agreed that censorship should be resisted whenever possible and practical; and 92.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed that “if someone wants a book or other item removed from the collection, it is better to give in than to fight it with possibly unpleasant consequences.”

There’s less agreement on specific statements relating to intellectual freedom. A majority of librarians indicate that they would at least consider a request to censor materials even if they wouldn’t give in to such a request:

➤ A plurality (46.6%) of librarians disagreed or strongly disagreed that “whether or not to fight censorship depends on many factors and on the situation at the time,” while 35.8% either agreed or strongly agreed with this view.

➤ Nearly two-thirds of librarians (65.9%) demonstrated a similar ambivalence by either agreeing or strongly agreeing that “an attempt at censorship represents one aspect of community opinion and should be considered seriously.”

As these responses indicate, a majority of librarians would, at a minimum, treat a censorship request as a valid expression of community opinion and consider it seriously.

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"We librarians sometimes run perilously close to attempting to disenfranchise a segment of our community by agreeing in advance not to take their views seriously," wrote one librarian. "While we may and should agree not to cave into demands to remove materials, we are remiss if we refuse to listen, to acknowledge, and respond in some way to the views and concerns of individuals and groups who are a part of our public."

It is interesting to note that the responses from librarians nationwide parallel those of Texas librarians surveyed on these questions by Lorie Roy in the Winter 1991 *Texas Library Journal* (p. 122-124).

### Availability of controversial materials

Perhaps the test of whether a library believes in intellectual freedom is whether controversial materials are accessible on its shelves. The survey found that the vast majority of libraries owned about half the titles on a list of a dozen works that previous studies have cited as controversial. In addition, if such works were owned they were usually fully accessible. Several librarians indicated that they struggle with budget constraints that prevent them from purchasing controversial books or magazines.

"We are trying to cover as complete a spectrum as we can to reflect community viewpoints within budget restraints. We have not yet had pressure to add paramilitary or hate materials to our collection though pressure could happen in the

future," said one respondent.

"The local newspaper called all libraries in the area when *Sex by Madonna* came out," wrote another. "Our book budget that year was about \$500 and the only set of encyclopedias was a 1982. Purchase of a new set took priority."

This librarian is not alone, at least when it comes to *Sex*. Some 91% of the respondents said they don't own the book. Another high-visibility "not-owned" item was *Playboy* magazine: More than 85% said they don't subscribe to *Playboy*, while another 5.9% restrict access—the highest percentage of restricted access of any work listed.

In contrast, a number of books that once caused controversy are now apparently mainstream. For example, 98.9% said that *The Catcher in the Rye* is accessible, while *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is accessible at 88.4% of the libraries.

Patrons sometimes take direct action to try to ensure that their libraries don't own works they deem offensive. "Our patrons are more inclined to check out and lose offensive materials or return them with words carefully removed [than to seek their removal]," said one librarian. "People steal rather than formally challenge," wrote another.

### Targets of censorship attempts

This may be the computer era, but books still appear to be the major targets of censorship attempts. Some 114 librarians (30.6%) reported between one and three requests to remove,

## THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF CENSORSHIP

JUDGING FROM AN EXAMINATION of censorship requests by size, the smaller the community the library serves, the less likely it was to have had a request to remove materials between 1990 and 1994:

Population Served	Percent Receiving Requests
Over 1 million	100
500K to 999,999	95
250K to 499,999	80
100K to 249,999	92
50K to 99,999	66
25K to 49,999	62
10K to 24,999	61
5K to 9,999	52
Under 5K	26

Although the survey contains no data to suggest the reasons for the dramatic drop in censorship requests in small communities, it's easy to speculate:

➤ The larger the library, the larger and more diverse the number of patrons who might potentially make such requests.

➤ The larger the library, the larger the collection and the more likelihood that it contains materials that are offensive to at least some patrons.

➤ The larger the library, the less likely it becomes that a social relationship exists between librarian and patron, making it easier and less socially awkward to complain.

The study also examined censorship attempts by region, using U.S. Census categories to place responses by region (where these could be determined either by direct response or from a postmark). According to responses, libraries in the Pacific region (including California, Wash-

ington, Oregon, Alaska, and Hawaii) are most likely to have had a request to remove a book both in 1994 and between 1990 and 1994. Some 66% of these libraries had such requests in 1994, and 79% had such requests in the five-year period.

In contrast, libraries in New England had by far the fewest requests, with 30% reporting such requests in 1994 and 40% during the five-year period. Other regions and their percentages during the five-year period and 1994:

Region	1990-94	1994
Mid-Atlantic	60	42
East North Central	76	52
West North Central	60	53
South Atlantic	71	57
East South Central	62	53
West South Central	69	54
Mountain	68	64

These results suggest that except for a pronounced lack of censorship requests in New England, regional differences in censorship requests are not as great as might be presupposed from popular stereotypes about various areas. However, it is important to note that the cross-tabulations of censorship were performed by region, not individual state. Comments from librarians made it clear that libraries in widely scattered individual states can experience organized protests that affect regional rankings. Neighboring states may have few if any problems at the same time. The survey made no attempt to rank-order states because of the small number of libraries responding from some states, especially small states.

label, or reclassify books during 1994. Another 25 reported four or more requests to censor books, with five of those reporting 11 or more such requests. These figures were far higher than requests to censor any other form of materials, including magazines, CD-ROMs, and videotapes.

Children's books dealing with sex are especially common targets of such requests. Some 18 libraries reported receiving requests to censor *Daddy's Roommate*, the most commonly cited title. This was followed closely by *Fermata*, *Forever*, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, and *Mommy Laid an Egg*.

Adult works that are most likely to cause controversy deal with gay and lesbian sex, or otherwise offend religious groups. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which some religious groups picketed, drew more complaints than any other video. Librarians sometimes find themselves caught between religious rivalries. One librarian reported receiving a complaint that the magazine *America* was "Jesuitical propaganda," but the patron was mollified when the library subscribed to a religious publication he suggested for "balance."

Individual librarians also reported what many people would consider oddball complaints, such as an objection to a book about raising chickens that "made poultry farmers look bad" or a protest of a teddy bear display made from recycled fur.

Halloween books and displays seem to be drawing increasing numbers of protests. For example, a county administrator tried unsuccessfully to stop one library from holding its annual Halloween "campfire" featuring ghost storytelling and urged the library to remove *Macbeth*. The library wasn't his

only target: He also tried unsuccessfully to get the school district to stop serving devil's food cake, but became a local laughingstock in the process.

### Source of requests

Libraries receive more informal requests to censor materials than formal requests (informal requests were defined on the questionnaire as phone calls, casual letters, or comment cards). Individuals were by far the most common source of formal censorship requests in 1994: Librarians reported that the mean number of requests from individuals was 3.1, compared with a mean of only 0.52 requests from religious groups. The number of requests from other organized groups (feminist groups, racial minority advocacy groups, etc.) was even smaller.

Comments from librarians give a good sense of who is likely to protest and why. Many reported receiving protests concerning controversial displays.

"Most recently Madonna's *Sex* caused the most furor, with hundreds of calls and letters including withdrawal of some financial support for the library's annual fundraising campaign. All communications were from individuals."

"In 1995, we had 53 complaints about our display policy. All except two were protesting a monthlong display by P-FLAG. The remaining two protested a display by the Vegetarian Society."

"A parent (a minister) protested *The Color Purple* being on a suggested reading list at the high school. He didn't

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think the language was appropriate for his daughter. He admitted he had not read the book. The board reviewed his written protest to remove the book from the library and refused to do so."

"So far we have been very fortunate and dealt primarily with individual parents and their desire to restrict access to certain materials for children. We explain our policy of not limiting access while respecting the parents' right to monitor their own children's library materials."

"A parent objected in writing to *Mommy Laid an Egg* and wanted it placed in an area where young children can't get it. I sent her our form and invited her to complete it but we have never heard from her."

Some librarians feel they are the targets of organized scrutiny:

"More and more groups are keeping an eye on what is on library shelves. These are not library users who check out a book that offends them and complain but groups that search for offensive materials."

"There is apparently an organized effort in this state to exert pressure on libraries regarding children's access to material (especially videos) and we get calls from individuals frequently about it."

### Censorship decisions

As indicated earlier, censorship attempts are highly likely to fail. Ironically, when a decision is made to withdraw an item, the library director is most often the decision maker—some 45.2% of the time compared with 16.7% of such deci-

## LIBRARY GOVERNANCE AND CENSORSHIP

LIBRARY BOARDS APPEAR to take the danger of censorship seriously, but the form of library governance appears to have little impact on whether freedom to read issues arise. Librarians reported that:

➤ 77.8% of their boards regarded a dispute involving freedom to read as either important or very important.

➤ Only 10.6% of boards were more concerned about freedom to read than they were five years before, although 66.9% were equally concerned.

➤ Nearly 95% were not currently facing a freedom to read issue.

Responses indicate that fears of organized groups attempting to dominate local library boards probably are exaggerated. Sometimes such attempts appear to backfire. The survey found no major differences relating to censorship based on election or appointment of board members.

"We have had one individual over the years who has objected to several titles in our collection. None have been removed. This person was elected to our board of trustees and attempted to have children's access to materials restricted to the Youth Services Department. This action brought the community out in force to protest this restrictive effort. This resulted in greater awareness in the community of the need to protect the right to access to all materials for all citizens."

sions being made by library boards and the remainder by city administrators or others.

Some librarians apparently engage in self-censorship:

"I know that in my library, the previous director avoided censorship disturbances on occasion by self-censoring," commented one respondent. "I believe this explains why many of the materials mentioned in the survey don't exist in my library."

### An uncertain future

Some of the concern about censorship that emerged from the survey despite the generally positive findings had to do with an uncertain future of dealing with complex problems related to intellectual freedom and technology. Although the survey was conducted a year ago, comments suggested the direction the censorship battles would take in the months that followed:

"We are looking at having Internet access for patrons. Due to the fact that pedophiles often use the Internet to go after children, there may be some problem there. Censorship from the community will become less of a problem because fewer people will be reading but prior restraint and slanted propaganda will become the censorship modes of choice."

"Pornography on the Internet is definitely the coming issue."

"Child safety and pedophilia on the Internet are issues we will soon be facing. It's not clear to me that active solicitation of minors for sexual purposes is an intellectual freedom issue. It seems different from access to sexually explicit materials which our policies already addressed."

And there are those who are less concerned about technology than a more basic issue:

"The biggest problem is the ability to read," concluded one librarian. ❖

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