"The Books Will Still Be in the Library": Narrow Definitions of Censorship in the Discourse of Challengers

Emily Knox

Abstract

One of the many areas of conflict between challengers and professional librarians centers on the definition of censorship. Challengers often employ a definition that maintains that banning materials is the only true form of censorship, while the codified definition of censorship within librarianship is concerned with impediments to access. Through analysis of arguments in the West Bend (WI) challenge case, this article explores three themes in challengers' narrow definitions of censorship found in their discourse. First, challengers argue that moving books within the library is not considered to be censorship. Second, they maintain that labeling books for content is also not a form of censorship. Finally, challengers focus on "common sense" actions and the power of the majority in their arguments to impede access to controversial materials.

Introduction

In American society, there is stigma associated with the words "censor" and "censorship" as they are highly political and contested terms. To be a censor in a public library context means to take on a power role within the local community. When an individual or group challenges a book held by a library—requests that it be removed, restricted, or relocated—they often justify their demand through appeals to the sound judgment of members of the community. Challengers insist that their requests are not a form of censorship but simply the "right thing to do" given the "obvious" offensiveness of the material in question. They perceive their actions as a strategy to protect the values of the community or to ensure the safety of children. Challengers do not represent their actions as the manifestation of a political role but as giving voice to the concerns of what they believe to be the majority of people in the community.

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 62, No. 4, 2014 ("The West Bend Challenges: Open Access and Intellectual Freedom in the Twenty-First Century," edited by Joyce M. Latham and Barbara M. Jones), pp. 740–749

Through arguments made by the challengers to materials in the West Bend Community Memorial Library (WBCML) and their supporters, this article examines how individuals who support the relocation and labeling of controversial books define censorship. Censorship is contested because it is a practice that relies on the political power of one group over another. Similar to the term "racist," in order to identify oneself as a censor or view one's actions as a form of censorship, one must acknowledge one's power within a particular system; this is a claim that the West Bend challengers are reluctant to make. Challengers instead argue that their requests reflect "common sense" reasoning in order to deflect any consideration of their own powerful position within challenge cases.

What Is Censorship?

Censorship is an amalgamation of practices, including the redaction of text in a document, cutting pages out of a book, or denying access to materials. These practices can be passive, as when an institution chooses not to acquire materials for fear of engendering controversy, or, active, involving the removal of books from library shelves or filtering websites on library computers. What unites all of these practices under the umbrella of censorship are the justifications given for carrying them out.

In her research on conservative Christian groups and their conceptualizations of intellectual freedom, Kelly P. Kingrey found that the groups she studied held a narrow definition of censorship that encompassed three subcategories. First, governments are the only entity that can censor. Second, only banning meets the definition of censorship; restriction or relocation do not. Finally, children do not have the same right to intellectual freedom as adults. Kingrey noted that "the first two sub-categories represent central pieces of these groups' conceptualization of what censorship means, and the third sub-category represents the distinction they make between what actions qualify as censorship when applied to adults and what actions qualify as censorship when applied to children" (2005, p. 82). Although Kingrey's work focused on specific conservative Christian organizations involved in advocating the Children's Internet Protection Act, similarly narrow definitions of censorship are also used by the challengers and their supporters in the West Bend case. As will be demonstrated below, impediments to access do not meet the challengers' definition of censorship.

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship more broadly than the groups in Kingrey's study. One ALA definition focuses on practices and states that censorship is the "suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous" (n.d.). Another definition centers on the outcome of a challenge to library materials. Censorship is "a change in the access status of material, based on the content of the work

and made by a governing authority or its representatives. Such changes include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age-grade-level access limitations" (ALA, 2010, p. 417). These definitions are codified in the ALA's Code of Ethics and the Library Bill of Rights (Knox, 2014). In contrast to narrow definitions that focus on the complete banning of materials, the ALA maintains that individuals and groups, including librarians, can be censors and that any change that may be construed as an impediment to access to materials is a form of censorship.

The ALA also opposes labeling materials in libraries for content because such identification markers are prejudicial (ALA, 2010, p. 155). Examples of content labels include tags that indicate that an item is sexually explicit or violent. On the other hand, viewpoint-neutral directional labels (such as genre labels) improve access to materials. However, the ALA also notes that directional labels can be proscriptive rather than descriptive and, as such, can be used as a tool to impede access to controversial materials. That is, labeling materials can be a form of censorship. While many libraries collect materials that are labeled for content by private agencies, including the Motion Picture Association of America and the Recording Industry of Association of America, these labels are also considered to be prejudicial and a violation of the Library Bill of Rights. However, they are not removed as this might be considered a form of expurgation (ALA, 2010, p. 156). The issue of labeling controversial materials for content is a prevalent theme in the West Bend challenge case.

What is missing from the preceding definitions of censorship is an explicit statement of power. In order to understand the importance of power with regard to the term *censor*, one might consider its similarity to the word *racist*. In their article on political opinion and anxiety in the United States, Sarah Sobieraj, Jeffrey M. Berry, and Amy Connors (2013) state that "what makes accusations of racism so upsetting for respondents is that racism is socially stigmatized, but also that they feel powerless to defend themselves once the specter is raised" (p. 425). One might also argue that some individuals fear being called racist because to do so makes one's political and social power manifest. Similarly, in order to censor one must have the power to do so since, by definition, censorship is the realization of the intimate relationship between knowledge and power. At its heart, the practice of censorship is predicated on who gets to decide what certain people or groups should know. That is, it is dependent on one group having power over other's access to knowledge. As will be demonstrated in the arguments made by challengers and supporters in the West Bend case, a reluctance to acknowledge this power informs the narrow definition of censorship.

The West Bend Challenge Case

The West Bend challenge case began on February 3, 2009, when Jim and Ginny Maziarka sent a letter through the West Bend Community Library's book drop to the director. The letter expressed their dismay that the library's website included recommendations of books for teens with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender topics. The following week, the Maziarkas sent the mayor, library director, and library board a request for "ex-gay" books to be added to the library's collection.[1] This second correspondence also included a copy of the library's Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials and a list of thirty-seven books that the Maziarkas wished to be moved from the teen to the adult section of the library. After a public community hearing, the challenge ended with the board voting to allow the books to remain—unlabeled—in the young adult section of the library.

This investigation primarily analyzes arguments from community members that supported the Maziarkas's challenge case in letters to the editor, transcripts of voicemail messages, and opinion columns, all printed in the *West Bend Daily News* (*WBDN*), a local newspaper. It also includes letters, petitions, and blog posts written by Ginny Maziarka. The documents were coded for common themes using Atlas.ti qualitative research software. Even though the authors of these materials are easily traceable, initials are used for attribution for writers other than Ginny Maziarka in order to provide some anonymity for individuals who were not party to the original written complaint. The quotations include necessary context, and pertinent words and phrases are indicated in bold. This emphasis is the researcher's voice alone.

The Concept of Censorship in Challengers' Discourse

There are three major themes regarding the definition of censorship that can be found in the West Bend challengers' discourse. First, moving the books within the library is not considered to be a form of censorship. Second, labeling such controversial books as explicit is also not censorship. Finally, the requests for moving and labeling are a matter of "common sense" and to do so is the will of the majority of the library's constituents. By eschewing the terms "censor" or "censorship" with regard to their own actions, the challengers and their supporters minimize their own power within the challenge case. Each of these themes is discussed in turn below (italicized words indicate "my emphasis").

Relocation is not censorship

One of the most prevalent arguments made by the supporters of the West Bend challengers is that moving books within the library is not censorship. The writers in the *Daily News* presented various justifications for this argument. For example, one of the writers explicitly stated that the books will remain within the library's collection:

> Let me take this time to correct some misconceptions about the recent library controversy. *No one wants to ban books from the library, just move them.* The books that contain explicit sexual content *will still be in the library. Let me repeat: They will still be in the library.* . . . If I were to check out these books and read it [*sic*] to minors, I'd probably be arrested. Let's be educated here and *not throw out a word like "banning" without being totally informed.* (K.B., 4/4/2009)

For the writer above, moving the books was not a form of censorship or an act of banning. "Banning" implies that the books will be moved from the library entirely, while moving the books cannot be compared to such an action, and only the uninformed would classify this act as censorship.

Another writer stated that the materials should be moved to a restricted section of the library:

> I would like to express my deep disappointment in our library's stand on the YA Zone content made available to our youth. I understand there are children who desire to read such materials. There are also children who do not want to read these types of materials or need to know they are available. To have them in plain view for everyone is very inappropriate. *No one is saying you can't offer these materials, but those people should have to ask for them.* (J.C., 3/6/2009)

This particular argument is of interest because the writer stated that the books are inappropriate for "everyone." Therefore, although the library can continue to have the books within its collection, they should be made available to patrons only upon request. Note that the ALA defines the restriction of books due to content as a form of censorship because it impedes access for certain groups and abrogates patron privacy (ALA, 2010, p. 183).

In another letter to the editor, a writer noted that keeping the books in the adult section would reduce youths' access to such inappropriate materials:

> Your statement as reported in the *Daily News* on Thursday April 23, 2009 that it is not the right of any one individual to make choices for everyone else is not quite valid. There are many people, not just the Maziarkas, in the city of West Bend and the surrounding area that are against ready access to materials such as described above. These types of material belong in the adult section of the library. *Censorship is alive in our country whether or not we believe it. Witness the numerous statements in the newspapers, television news commentators and radio reports who state that they cannot repeat what was said as it would offend the community morals.* I dare say that I don't believe the *Daily News* will reproduce my letter in its entirety and so I give them permission to blank out, censor if you will, the portions of this letter as they desire. Then, if anyone wants, I will forward this letter to them so they can read it uncensored. (K.G., 4/25/2009)

There are several interlocking themes discussed in this quote. By implication, the writer argued that moving the books is not censorship even

though "censorship is alive in our country." Censorship actually occurs when the news media are unwilling to repeat some of the more salacious parts of the books in question. The writer also believed that because he or she is on the "other side" of the debate, the *WBDN* will not print his letter. This too would be an act of censorship.

Finally, another letter writer used his or her influence as a taxpayer to justify her argument for moving the books:

> As a tax-paying citizen of West Bend, I would like to express my view in regards to the current library issues. Please do not allow the Library Board to represent the People of West Bend regarding the inappropriate material in the children's section. *It is not anyone's intention to have it removed from the system, but to have it moved to the adult section. It is and should be the choice of all parents to decide when their child is ready to view such material.* Please do not allow our voices to be drowned out by the literal views of a few people who hold these positions. If you doubt what the citizens really want, then put it to a community vote and let the people speak. Remember that our local officials are supposed to represent the majority. (A.B., 7/15/2009)

Here the term "literal" is not clearly defined, but the writer implied that moving the books in question would not be censorship but simply an aid for parents when choosing materials for their children.

Similar to the conservative groups that Kingrey studied, what unites all of these writers is their view that impeding access by moving the books in question is not a form of censorship. Although they clearly state that hindering access is their intention, the practice is simply viewed as a "reasonable request" or as a tactic that will help parents shield their children from harmful materials. Censorship, for these supporters of the challenge, means removing the books from the library entirely.

Labeling is not censorship

Another theme in the challengers' discourse is that labeling the books as explicit is not a form of censorship. Instead, labeling the books for content would provide parents with support when choosing materials for their children, and this is categorically a positive action. This is in contrast to librarianship's stance that such labels can impede access and is therefore censorship. The Maziarkas's petition for changes to the library's policy stated their view on labeling clearly. They asked that the library include the following:

> Visual identification of explicit material: We request that the Library Board adopt a policy to provide for the *labeling with a visible identification mark (similar to a RIAA or MPAA Parental Advisory warning)* such materials targeted toward minors that (a) are obscene, (b) child pornography, (c) appeals to a prurient interest in nudity, sex, or excretion; (d) depicts, describes, or represents, in a patently offensive way with respect to what is suitable for minors, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual

> contact, actual or simulated normal or perverted sexual acts, or a lewd exhibition of the genitals. (Petition to the West Bend Library Board)

The Maziarkas argued that such labeling will provide parents with a means for guiding their children to appropriate material. Although the Maziarkas equated such labels with those from the RIAA and MPAA, librarians are discouraged from following the lead of these private agencies.

One of the Maziarkas's supporters explicitly stated that labeling for content helps parents choose materials for their children:

> We all agree that it is not for me, the mayor or the library to decide what your kids read. We also agree that it is the parents' duty to parent as they desire as long as they are not sexually, physically or mentally abusing their children. *Let's at least give the parents and kids the resources needed to make parental decisions and wise choices instead of slipping in some porn when no one is looking. A fair warning to what they will find within the library materials by labeling them as containing adult material*, putting them upstairs where kids won't see them while browsing the YA section and an Internet porn filter *are common sense protections for minors, not attacks on free speech.* (D.A.H, 4/30/2009)

Labeling the offensive material gives parents sufficient assistance to protect their children from seeing materials that may cause them harm. For the supporters of the challenge, content labels were simply "fair warning" and raised parents' awareness of problematic materials in the library. Ginny Maziarka made a similar argument in a letter to the library:

> It is our goal to *provide the utmost protection for the children who are patrons* of the local library and use the SHARE library system. Additionally, *we seek to empower parents to be able to assist their children in making age-appropriate, healthy and wise decisions when choosing materials from the public library.* (G. Maziarka, Undated Petition Letter)

The implication here is that moving the books to the adult section will make the library "safe" since teens will not be able to "stumble upon" the challenged materials. The issue of safety in the public library is a common justification for challenging books in challengers' discourse (Knox, 2013).

Another writer suggested that, since the library already provides directional labeling, adding content labels is not a form of censorship:

> In the *Daily News'* June 3 article concerning the Library Board meeting, Barbara Deters, board president, points out that "the library already separates books by age . . . and that all young adult books have a bright yellow label with the initials YA. Three paragraphs farther into the article, board member Patti Geidel says, "moving, removing or labeling books is a form of censorship." In essence, *we have the verification by two board members that by separating and labeling books, as currently practiced by the library, we have been censoring the books all along. Patti Geidel goes on to say that she believes in intellectual freedom for everyone.* I, too, believe in intellectual freedom for everyone. (J.G., 6/11/2009)

This writer argued that since the library provides viewpoint-neutral directional labels, the library should place content labels on its materials. This writer makes an argument by analogy wherein since the library already labels materials, then additional labels must be permitted and therefore are not a form of censorship.

Common sense and the power of the majority

The final theme that is prevalent in the West Bend challenge supporters' arguments concerning censorship is an appeal to common sense and the will of the majority in the community. This theme is found both in the Maziarkas's letter quoted above as well as the original letter to the library director:

> As a *conservative community, I am sure the taxpayers of West Bend would be as offended as my husband and I were* when we reviewed this website that directly links itself to our very own West Bend Community Memorial Library. (Jim and Ginny Maziarka, 2/3/2009)

Here the Maziarkas argued that their request reflects the wishes of most adults in the community since they are almost all taxpayers. In their view, the majority of the community is conservative and would therefore agree with their challenge.

One example of a "sound judgment" argument is advanced by D.A.H., who noted that moving the books and labeling them are "common sense protections." Another letter writer stated that the request to move the books is "reasonable":

> I was sorry to see the hypocrisy of the West Bend Library Board on June 2 when many people spent more than three hours, with some giving their thoughts regarding unfit books for young people in a certain area of the library. I presumed (wrongly) that the board would take time to consider those thoughts. Mrs. Barbara Deters [then board president] said they would take 10 minutes to decide what to do. Obviously they agreed long before to not change anything asked of them. *Two of those requests were very reasonable—move the objectionable books to a more adult area or label them objectionable for a certain age.* . . . I would like to see those mature board members acknowledge young children are not ready for pornography-type material and still be willing to move or label questionable material. I question the board's sense of discernment and see a need for them to be replaced. (P.P., 6/6/2009)

For P. P., not moving the books or labeling them was not common sense. Those who refuse to do so are immature and lack "discernment," that is, they lack the sound judgment to understand that the books would be harmful to children.

One writer raises the specter of a minority "gay agenda":

> I feel that our country, state, city of West Bend *is being attacked by the gay agenda that wants us to believe that the homosexual life style is normal.* The library certainly has the right to have these books there, but I couldn't

> imagine my grandchild coming across one of these books. Why is it so difficult to just move them to the adult section and then have other books promoting our family values? We need to have both sides of the issue. As a parent and a grandmother I'm deeply concerned about what's happening to our America. Thank you. (No author given, 5/5/2009)

Although not stated explicitly, the author implied that many Americans disagree with the "gay agenda." The use of the term "normal" and the idea that something is "happening" to American society suggests that a minority is forcing the majority to accept something that they do not wish to accept.

Letter writers to the newspaper also stated that the Maziarkas were, in fact, speaking for a large number of citizens:

> Your statement as reported in the *Daily News* on Thursday April 23, 2009 that it is not the right of any one individual to make choices for everyone else is not quite valid. *There are many people, not just the Maziarkas, in the city of West Bend and the surrounding area that are against ready access to materials such as described above.* These types of material belong in the adult section of the library. (K.G., 4/25/2009)

For this writer, the Maziarkas were not just one voice of dissent but were stating the will of the people in West Bend. What is most important is that it is one of the few times that the challenge supporters were willing to claim their power over the institution of the library. Their perception is supported by their petition to the board, which garnered seven hundred signatures. It is because they believed they were in the majority (and are taxpayers) that the library board should have acquiesced to their wishes.

The Power Of A Word

For the challengers of West Bend and their supporters, moving and labeling books was not a form of censorship. For them, censorship meant a full denial of access to the materials in question. Moving the controversial books to the adult section simply makes it more difficult for the children and youth to encounter the books, while labeling helps parents make informed choices regarding which materials are appropriate for their children to read.

The issue of the power of the majority is particularly important when it comes to defining censorship in the quotations given above because it is one of the few times in which the challenge supporters acknowledge that impeding access is based on power. Similar to the use of the term *racist*, in order to acknowledge that one is a censor, you must first acknowledge that you have power over another person's access to information. As Sobieraj, Berry, and Connors (2013) note, there is anxiety around political talk, of which challenges and censorship are a part. To be a censor, like being a racist, is to be a type of person of whom society disapproves. To challengers it is, by definition, a majority opinion.

As this study and Kingrey demonstrate, challengers generally are unwilling to accept librarianship's broad definition of censorship. For them, censorship is narrowly defined as the total removal of materials and, as long as the books are available through some method, no censorship has taken place. They view their requests for labeling and relocation as legitimate, commonsense measures for counteracting the possible harm caused by having what they consider inappropriate materials in the public library. This view fails to account for those who might be harmed by making such materials inaccessible to them.

Note

1. "Ex-gay" materials are endorsed by groups such as Americans for Truth About Homosexuality and the now defunct Exodus International. They argue that individuals can change their sexual orientation through therapy and prayer.

References

American Library Association. (2010). *Intellectual freedom manual* (8th ed.). Chicago: Author.

American Library Association. (n.d.). Intellectual freedom and censorship Q & A. Retrieved January 27, 2014, from http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=basics&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=60610A

Kingrey, K. (2005). *Perceptions of intellectual freedom among conservative Christian advocacy groups: A grounded theory analysis.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas Women's University, Denton, Texas.

Knox, E. (2013). The challengers of West Bend: The library as a community institution. In C. Pawley & L. S. Robbins (Eds.), *Libraries and the reading public in twentieth-century America* (pp. 200–216). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Knox, E. (2014). Supporting intellectual freedom: Symbolic capital and practical philosophy in librarianship. *Library Quarterly, 84*(1), 1–14.

Sobieraj, S., Berry, J. M., & Connors, A. (2013). Outrageous political opinion and political anxiety in the US. *Poetics, 41*(5), 407–432. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2013.06.001

Emily Knox is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include intellectual freedom and censorship, the intersection of print culture and reading practices, and information ethics and policy. She is currently writing a book on challenges to materials in public libraries and schools. Emily received her PhD from the doctoral program at the Rutgers University School of Communication & Information. Her master's in library and information science is from GSLIS. She also holds a BA in religious studies from Smith College and an AM in the same field from The University of Chicago Divinity School. She was the associate director and reference librarian at the St. Mark's (now Keller) Library of the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York City for five years before returning to school.