



The Reading of Young People

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THE COMPLEXITY of the concept of intellectual freedom is most evident when one considers its application to young people—those to whom the society has not yet accorded the privileges of full membership or its concomitant responsibilities. This article will be concerned principally with this complexity and with the inherent paradoxes of the ideal of freedom of the intellect for young people of high school age, roughly the ages thirteen to eighteen, the “young adults.” Crucial problems of freedom relative to the reading of younger children of elementary school age do occasionally arise, but it is concerning the high school-aged youngster, the reader who is neither clearly child nor clearly adult, that questions of freedom of access to print and other media, as well as freedom of speech and expression, that problems become most perplexing. The intention here will be to state and examine some of these perplexities and to consider the current status of the intellectual freedom of young people.

It may help in clarifying this aspect of intellectual freedom, of freedom of speech and of the press, to consider first the rational basis for the general concept, its fundamental assumptions, and the reasons why it is of such great consequence. This is Carl Becker’s summary:

The democratic doctrine of freedom of speech and of the press, whether we regard it as a natural and inalienable right or not, rests upon certain assumptions. One of these is that men desire to know the truth and will be disposed to be guided by it. Another is that the sole method of arriving at the truth in the long run is by the free competition of opinion in the open market. Another is that, since men will inevitably differ in their opinions, each man must be permitted to urge, freely and even strenuously, his own opinion, provided he accords to others the same right. And the final assumption is that from this mutual toleration and comparison of diverse opin-

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ions the one that seems the most rational will emerge and be generally accepted.¹

Walter Lippmann states:

Freedom of speech has become a central concern of the Western society because of the discovery among the Greeks that dialectic, as demonstrated in the Socratic dialogues, is a principal method of attaining truth, and particularly a method of attaining moral and political truth. "The ability to raise searching difficulties on both sides of a subject will," said Aristotle, "make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise." The right to speak freely is one of the necessary means to the attainment of the truth. That, and not the subjective pleasure of utterance, is why freedom is a necessity in the good society.²

The basis, then, for the democratic ideal of freedom of expression and, by extension, freedom of access to all ideas and opinions is that such freedom is a first condition of man's hopefully unending search for truth. This is the rational underpinning of the concept of intellectual freedom.

While the contingencies of social living necessarily impose limitations upon freedom of speech and of the press, each limitation imposed must justify itself. There must be very compelling and broadly accepted reasons why anyone is prohibited by anyone else from expressing himself in speech or writing or otherwise, or from having full access to information, ideas, opinions or artistic expression.

To what extent does this central ideal of the democratic society apply to those who have not yet reached maturity or the age-status of full citizenship? Specifically, for purposes of the present discussion, to what extent does the society consider the adolescent entitled to freedom of the intellect?

First, an assumption seems to be made almost universally by the adult society that certain types of reading can have undesirable effects upon mind and character, and therefore necessarily upon conduct. Therefore, the argument follows that it is the duty of society to place restrictions upon the availability of such reading matter. While these restrictions might be very minimal in the case of the reading done by adults, they must be broader for young people, who are presumptively less mature, more impressionable, and in greater danger of corruption or subversion. This exception to the ideal of the free marketplace of ideas is apparently as ancient as the ideal itself. It is found

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in Plato; and even John Stuart Mill, in the classic modern statement on freedom, believes it “hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties” and not to those “below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood.”³

That reading can cause improper or immoral conduct has never been scientifically proven, and probably never will be. Nevertheless, that some kinds of reading can result in undesirable behavior is accepted as truth by practically everyone (our laws prohibiting the distribution of hard-core pornography can have no other basis), and most especially it is accepted that some kinds of reading can have undesirable effects upon the character and conduct of young people. Harold Gardiner states, “The ‘experts’ who maintain that books do little harm to children, or that definite harm cannot be proved, do not echo the thoughts of the American citizenry.”⁴ Norman St. John-Stevass states as a commonly accepted assumption that “even if there are legitimate doubts about the effect of reading upon adults there can be no doubt that reading does have a positive effect upon youth and especially children.”⁵

Even Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose name has become associated with permissiveness, while believing that some types of reading matter treating sexuality and immortality can be “without harm to adults over 18,” says of books and other media that depict sexual intimacies, especially those of a loveless, perverse or brutal kind, that

such works are unhealthy for society because they assault the carefully constructed inhibitions and sublimations of sexuality and violence that are normal for all human beings (except those raised without any morals at all) and that are essential to the foundations of civilization.⁶

The library profession itself, which owes its existence in a sense to the (unproven) premise that books can have beneficial effects upon behavior, tacitly accepts the complementary premise that some books can have adverse effects upon the behavior of some people—and that those most likely to be affected adversely are the young and the immature.

Given the tension that results from American society’s lip-service to the ideal of the totally free marketplace of ideas as opposed to the practical reality that intellectual freedom never seems to have been generally accepted in the United States (even in the Supreme

Court) as an absolute, principally because of a widespread conviction that some types of expression can have harmful effects, it is not surprising that librarians face frequent censorship dilemmas. When one adds the factor of the widely accepted notion that young people are the ones most likely to exhibit these harmful effects, it is also not surprising that librarians who serve young people are the librarians who face the most frequent and the most complex dilemmas. And, despite the nervousness of the adult society, it is the young people of high school age who are most curious about precisely those things which their elders choose to classify as forbidden; thus it is frequently the librarian who deals with adolescents who finds the clash between the ideal of intellectual freedom and its practical realities most traumatic.

During the past three decades, simultaneously with the growth and expansion of library service to adolescents in public and high school libraries, and simultaneously with an increasing frankness and freedom in printed expression, reports of censorship attempts affecting adolescents have been cited in the news media with a generally accelerating regularity. An examination of the library literature from the late forties through the mid-sixties provides a dreary and repetitious catalog of books which were evidently considered dangerous in some way, but which, in view of the events of the few intervening years, seem strangely non-controversial: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Brave New World*, *1984*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* appear with regularity among the supposedly lubricious novels. The textbooks of Rugg, Muzzey and Magruder, together with almost any book containing an optimistic view of the United Nations, also find themselves accused of subversion, with the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution and various other patriotic groups hovering in the background. Public attacks on schools and schoolbooks as being part of some vague conspiracy became something of a theme of the fifties, typified by E. Merrill Root's *Brainwashing in the High Schools*.

The attempts to censor young people's reading seem principally to have centered upon the subjects of sex and politics. Most novels that have been the centers of censorship in schools and in libraries serving adolescents have included some sexual episode or some supposedly obscene words. Books in the broad area of politics that have been the object of censorship attempts have typically been those accused of preaching some "foreign ideology," most often Communism, or of

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being insufficiently critical of Communism, too critical of capitalism, or of suggesting some vaguely dangerous social experiment, such as equality of the races.

The complexity of the censorship question in schools is indicated by the apparent incompatibility of two ideas: 1) adolescents must gradually be led to the appreciation of mature, adult literature, and to the development of their critical faculties by exposure to controversy and 2) the school's curriculum and the reading provided under the school's auspices must reflect in some way the values of the adult society. Thus Carl Becker says: "The function of high schools is to teach immature young minds what is known rather than to undertake the critical examination of the foundations of what is accepted in the hope of learning something new"⁷—a kind of denial of the free marketplace of ideas for adolescents. Yet, if one is to insist upon the completely free marketplace of ideas in a school library, one would have to insist upon the right of the librarians and teachers to acquire and distribute materials which take positions diametrically opposed to the values which the school is attempting to inculcate—a book, for example, describing the delights of dangerous drugs and how to secure and use these drugs, or, perhaps, a blatantly racist book.

While the activity of our recent past would seem to suggest great constrictions imposed by adults on the intellectual freedom of adolescents, balancing factors are gradually increasing the attention paid by the library profession to the question of intellectual freedom and the beginning of a stiff resistance by librarians, including high school librarians, against censorship. Library periodicals, including notably *Library Journal* and *American Libraries*, and, in particular, the A.L.A.'s *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*, now report as a matter of course on censorship attempts and provide a public forum on issues of freedom. While the Fiske study⁸ in 1959 revealed a tendency of school and public librarians to censor books in nervous anticipation of possible complaints, it does seem, a decade later, that the American climate for intellectual freedom for the adolescent in the library as elsewhere, has improved during the closing years of the 1960s, although this view would be difficult to document. Even as early as 1963, Jack Nelson and Gene Roberts, Jr., in a rather superficial but carefully researched study, *The Censors and the Schools*,⁹ reported many book censorship incidents occurring throughout the United States, but a surprising number of these incidents were only unsuccessful attempts at censorship. If one judges by the literature of li-

brarianship and by the reports of recent conferences of school librarians (admitting that these may represent the conventional piety rather than the actual practice) the library profession is committed today, with some dissenting voices, more than ever to the ideal of intellectual freedom for the adolescent. Even the United States Supreme Court, in a 1969 decision involving an appeal in behalf of three persons thirteen to sixteen years of age, found in their favor and stated: "In our system, students may not be regarded as closed-circuit recipients of only that which the state chooses to communicate. . . . In the absence of specific showing of constitutionally valid reasons to regulate their speech, students are entitled to freedom of expression of their views."¹⁰

This decision seems to assure the protection of the First Amendment to children and adolescents, and, at least in the view of the *New York Times*, "it may make it more difficult for public schools to censor student publications or to purge school libraries or curriculum of 'objectionable' material."¹⁰

It may very well be that the crucial issues of intellectual freedom relevant to adolescents' reading during the decade of the seventies will not be centered upon the library at all, but will be of a nature quite different from the issues with which librarians have been grappling during the past generation. Edgar Z. Friedenberg seems to consider the school library and even books themselves as irrelevant to anything important for young people (a view which one can also derive from McLuhan) and to insist that absolutely nothing should be censored. "Young people should be allowed to read anything they want to read. What can happen to kids when they read a book that can't happen to adults?"¹¹ The easy availability in paperback of practically everything, including the allegedly harmful pornography and political writings of a sort that are, by someone's definition, subversive and even revolutionary, does seem to remove much of the point from library censorship.

Perhaps most critical in any consideration of the coming issues concerning young people and intellectual freedom are the developments during the late sixties on American college campuses. Fashions of all sorts tend to filter down from colleges to high schools, and there is already a large and flourishing group of "free speech" underground newspapers in metropolitan area high schools. The word "demand" is beginning to appear in news stories about high school disturbances,

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and adolescents appear to be relishing the heady sense of freedom that was formerly the prerogative of their slightly-elders. Freedom at least to participate in the determination of their own destinies may become increasingly a goal of the members of the adolescent sub-culture, and it is increasingly difficult to deny this freedom to senior high school students who are of legal age to marry and to be drafted. The extent to which true independence of action will ever be granted to those in a state of financial dependence upon their parents is a dubious matter, but it does seem that their enforced protection from books that might harm them will not long continue.

From the point of view of the extension of intellectual freedom, this development would seem to be all to the good, and yet, it seems, the complexities remain.

The librarian dealing with children and young people functions in close proximity to the adult community which controls the schools and libraries, and, as long as schools and libraries exist, will evidently continue to live with the tension between the adolescent and his elders. The latter will presumably continue in their convictions about the harmful potential of books, and young people will undoubtedly continue to find the forbidden interesting, so that censorship skirmishes are unlikely to disappear altogether.

The real danger to intellectual freedom among the young may well come from an erosion of the ideal itself, already apparent among a vocal minority of college students. The resort to violence and the forcible prevention of speech by those with whom a group of students disagrees, already have occurred at Harvard, at Dartmouth, at Columbia, at New York University and elsewhere, even at Berkeley, home of the Free Speech Movement. The impatience of young people with the ideal of the free marketplace of ideas, where all points of view are aired, is often based upon an appealing idealism and an eagerness to right a glaring injustice, as well as upon a true instinct that those who would maintain the status quo can often be skillful in prolonging rational debate for their own purposes while hypocritically quoting John Stuart Mill.

But the liberal ideal of the free marketplace of ideas, for all of its near-impossibility of perfect realization, is nevertheless a viable ideal; indeed its maintenance as an ideal may very well be a condition for the continuance of any worthwhile civilization. It is crucial that young people have some sense of its central importance, especially in an

age when the tradition of civility and of rational discourse in which the ideal originated and developed does not appear to be a strong or visible influence in the society.

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