

Mission Position: *Censorship in the Corporate Library*

by Justin Scroggs and Teresa Leonard

*"And so, without more circumstance at all,
I hold it fit that we shake hands and part:
You, as your business and desire shall point you;
For every man has business and desire,
Such as it is; ..."*

— Hamlet, Act I, Scene V¹

Though our troubles are perhaps less grave (pun intended) than the Prince of Denmark's, librarians, corporate and otherwise, face a dilemma. In serving our patron base, we make decisions on a daily basis — retain this item, discard that one, purchase the third, and ignore the fourth. In wrestling with these choices, we face the potential that members of the population we serve will take issue with the decisions we make. As we are all aware, in some cases such criticism has led to the removal of materials from library shelves and the loss of employment by librarians making or defending the decisions. Such is our situation.

Some forty years ago Lester Asheim, now Professor Emeritus of the School of Information and Library Science, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, described our dilemma:

"To the selector the important thing is to find reasons to keep the book. Given such a guiding principle, the selector looks for values, for virtues, for strengths, which will overshadow minor objections. For the censor, on the other hand, the important thing is to find reasons to reject

*the book. His guiding principle leads him to seek out the objectionable features, the weaknesses, ..."*²

While the distinction between "selector" and "censor" is perhaps arbitrary — and this point has been widely debated — in the end the distinction is largely pointless. Librarians make choices. If an item is not judged as worthy of inclusion in a collection, it is excluded.

In building and maintaining collections, corporate librarians base their decisions on the potential value of an item as well as its current value. These choices are made in the same manner regardless of the library type. We ask questions about the item and its potential uses in furthering company aims.

These questions asked in the evaluation

of an item may include:

Is the source authoritative and comprehensive?

Is it affordable?

Does it occupy too much shelf space?

Do the patrons want it?

How long will it be current?

The one question that is largely irrelevant in the corporate setting is: Is it offensive?

We generally do not collect materials of mass interest. While the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated* might well be found in a number of corporate libraries, most would not contain a single copy of any of the eleven banned books that led to the 1982 landmark Supreme Court decision, *Pico v. Island Trees*.³ Nor would we generally be interested in collecting the works of Grisham, Waller or Angelou. Succinctly stated, our mission is different from the missions of other types of libraries.

Our mission is to build a collection, not for the general public, but for the corporate environment in which we work. In that environment seemingly irrelevant materials, old telephone directories for example, are often of greater value than the current edition. With this limited focus, our col-

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lections are largely discipline-specific and often small in size relative to the collections of other types of libraries. It would be no surprise that the library collection at the software giant SAS Institute, located in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park, consists primarily of materials about computers and related topics.

In general our collections are not open to the public and thus are not open to public scrutiny and the attempts at censorship that can follow. Our collections are built with corporate funds. The "We don't want our tax dollars spent on that" and "We don't want our children to have access to such things" arguments have little relevance in our arena. We are not by and large driven by "higher" goals. We are not charged with the task of providing resources for the educating of America, serving as repositories of our intellectual heritage or responsible for the entertainment and enlightenment of the general population.

Ours is perhaps a less lofty and, thankfully, less ambiguous charge. The focus of corporate collections is perhaps clearer than that of other types of libraries. Rarely is an acquisitions decision made on the basis of a subjective moral judgment of "good or bad." Each item collected is, in theory, directly related to a specific institutional project, task, or purpose. In that respect, pressure on our collection development decisions comes from another direction.

In the broadest sense, our acquisitions concerns are the same as those of public, academic, and school libraries. Our goal is to provide access to items desired by our patrons, both present and future, in a timely and cost-effective manner. As an integral part of the corporate world, however, our collections compete for space and resources with other segments of our companies. In the for-profit sector library, our budgets are measured by the same criteria as the allocations of the company's other departments. Serials subscriptions are reviewed as carefully as inventories and expense reports. In the corporate world, we are more likely to experience censorship pressure in the form of criticism for wasting company resources or for over-spending than for purchasing objectionable materials.

As noted above, our collections are

more specialized in focus and are often smaller in size. In addition, our libraries and library resources may be spread among a number of locations serving company employees around the globe. Serving patrons in such an environment provides us with opportunities and challenges. One result of these narrow and often far-flung collections is that we quite often participate in the larger realm of inter-library interactions as net borrowers.

For many corporate libraries access to a particular item is more important than the possession of it. In the same way that it is often in the corporate best interest to use contract labor or lease equipment, corporate libraries frequently make use of the collections of other libraries. It may be cheaper to arrange to borrow from a local library

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or pay inter-library loan fees than to purchase, catalog, circulate, and store an item. In this respect we experience the effects of censorship not as professionals in the field of library and information science, but as borrowers or patrons.

In our libraries, we would perhaps not purchase a copy of *Heather Has Two Mommies* for our permanent collection.⁴ But we might on occasion need access to a copy. The decision to add Newman's book to our collection is based on a cost-benefit analysis of the purchase, not on the appropriateness of the content. In the corporate arena, the fact that we are considering the book at all would imply that the book has a potential use by

someone in our company. Appropriateness in our arena speaks to the usefulness of an item, not to the possible offensive nature of its contents.

We choose to collect the item or borrow materials based on how much or how often they would be used versus the cost of acquiring them. If an item is judged to be of sufficient worth, we get it; if it isn't, we don't. All collection development decisions are based on the larger corporate focus. By and large, we are more concerned with censorship in public and academic libraries, from whom we so frequently borrow materials, than in our own milieu.

As borrowers, corporate librarians affirm the principles of freedom of information. We want access to all types of materials. Yet when placed in the role of lender, we may not be quite so liberal.

Many corporate libraries are selective users of services such as OCLC, participating as borrowers, but not lenders. And when it comes to materials generated in our corporate settings, we are not all that fond of "freedom of information." A large percentage of the information contained in corporate libraries is proprietary or of use in creating proprietary materials. In this context, information is seen as a company resource in much the same way as computer code or pharmaceutical formulae.

Even when source materials, such as census data, are to be found in the public domain, dissemination of that information to a potential competitor is still suspect. Competitors have the same opportunity to access these data for themselves; it is our interpretation or understanding of the data that is to be protected. In this

respect, we are, in the broadest sense of the word, censors ourselves, or at the very least "hoarders" of information. As frequent guardians of proprietary information, we are more concerned with materials going out than with materials coming in. Only those on "our side" have complete and unlimited access.

Often the materials we produce can themselves be viewed as products. This is especially true in the for-profit arena. Information is for sale, not for loan. Magazines, television networks, and newspapers copyright their stories and vend them via online databases or by fax. In many cases it is the corporate library that does the vending. After all, even in libraries, business is business.

In one sense corporate libraries lead a sheltered existence. We generally serve adults only, our patrons are typically concerned only with items needed for their jobs, and our collections are not usually funded by tax dollars. These circumstances allow us to operate in an environment largely free of censorship based on moral or ethical grounds. Most frequently, censorship only inconveniences us, and then only when it hampers our ability to access materials in other libraries in a timely fashion.

In terms of the collections we manage, we choose materials for inclusion based on their value in meeting company objectives. These materials more often are held to standards of value per dollar spent than to standards of offensiveness or appropriateness. Ours is not a public mission. We are a consumer of the resources of other libraries in the same ways as other patrons. If the truth be known, we often are censors ourselves, restricting access to the information in our care to persons within our corporate family. Due to the particular demands of the corporate environment, censorship in general is not a constant concern. If we need an item, we attempt to find it, buy it, or borrow it. If we are criticized in making collection development decisions, it is most frequently for

wasting money — not for collecting items of questionable moral or ethical quality.

References:

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Act I Scene V. in *The Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. William George Clark. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1870), 818.

² Lester Asheim, "The Librarian's Responsibility: Not Censorship but Selection." in *Freedom of Book Selection*, ed. Frederic Mosher. (Chicago: A.L.A., 1954), 95.

³ Steven Pico, "An Introduction to Censorship." *School Library Media Quarterly*, 18 (Winter 1990): 84-87. Nine books were banned from the high school library: *Slaughterhouse Five*, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; *The Naked Ape*, by Desmond Morris; *Down These Mean Streets*, by Piri Thomas; *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*, edited by Langston Hughes; *Go Ask Alice*, by an anonymous author; *Laughing Boy*, by Oliver LaFarge; *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright; *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich*, by Alice Childress; and *Soul on Ice*, by Eldridge Cleaver. One book was banned from the junior high library, *A Reader for Writers*, edited by Jerome Archer. The eleventh banned book, part of the twelfth grade English curriculum, was

The Fixer, by Bernard Malamud.

⁴ Leslea Newman, *Heather Has Two Mommies*. (Northampton, Mass.: In Other Words Publishing, 1989). Newman's picture book continues to draw public criticism and censorship attempts.

Has your library initiated an innovative program to encourage reading? North Carolina Libraries is looking for new and exciting programs for possible use in an upcoming issue. We're looking for ideas from all types and sizes of libraries, and for readers of any age. If you have been involved in creating such a program, please send a brief (one paragraph) description of the program, photographs, brochures, and other promotional materials to:

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