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Censorship of Online LGBTIQ Content in Libraries

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Introduction

Historically, librarians in the United States have addressed censorship of LGBTIQ print materials. Most of the time, school and public libraries have chosen to "self-censor". In other words, librarians will either choose not to select LGBT materials, shelve LGBT materials in hidden locations, fail to promote LGBTIQ materials, "hide" LGBT materials during processing and cataloging, or remove LGBTIQ materials from their collections completely. The American Libraries Association does not condone these practices, as they go against the American Libraries Association Bill of Rights.

Unfortunately, librarians working in public libraries and K-12 school media centers in the United States may be more likely to restrict access to LGBTIQ online content. Whether through filtering, inappropriate cataloging practices, failure to promote LGBTIQ resources through the library website, or not selecting particular LGBTIQ EBooks for patron-driven acquisitions systems, people seeking out LGBTIQ information online at their public libraries or school media centers might be denied access. Children and teenagers, people with disabilities, the homeless, and the transgender community are populations most frequently affected by such intentional or accidental online censorship.

While Americans often criticize other countries for implementing laws that restrict all citizens' access to online content addressing LGBTIQ subjects or other content deemed illegal by their governments, Americans feel the need to "protect" children and teens from content they perceive as "inappropriate". Librarians, pressured by the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA), as well as the desires of

concerned parents, are reconsidering "freedom of access" to anything that the community would consider pornographic or sacreligious. At the same time, use of filters to restrict non-pornographic online LGBTIQ content in American libraries is now leading to lawsuits. Librarians who must comply with CIPA and COPPA need more training on how to employ filters without restricting content or online spaces appropriate for minors.

"The Dirty Little Secret"—Most Librarians Are Censors

While library associations around the world express their support for freedom of information, diversity, and social justice issues, public and school librarians still choose not to provide certain materials to their users. In the first national survey of school media specialists, *School Library Journal* discovered that 70% of the librarians surveyed would not buy titles considered controversial out of fear of attacks from parents (Whelan 2009). According to the same survey, the most frequently cited reasons school librarians gave for not purchasing materials for their collections included sexual content (87%), objectionable language (61%), violence (51%), and homosexual themes (47%) (2009). As LGBTIQ books often contain (or are perceived to contain) sexual content and homosexual themes, they are most at risk for librarian censorship (Downey 2013; Whelan 2009). The fear of parental and community censure even causes some librarians not to acquire books that receive awards from American Libraries Association, just because the book may have one objectionable word (Downey 2013; Whelan 2009). This attitude extends to pre-selection of EBook titles for patron-driven acquisitions systems such as Overdrive. A small rural library may have no LGBTIQ content in their Overdrive collection, while the San Francisco Public Library Overdrive collection will have over 1,000 LGBTIQ EBooks in theirs.

It is possible that the way women are raised to conform to particular heteronormative values may influence their attitudes toward freedom of information. An international survey conducted by the Georgia Institute of Technology's College of Computing determined that married women with children under sixteen years old are most likely to support Internet censorship (Depken 2006). While a mother's instinct is to protect their children from harmful influences, which does affect female librarian attitudes toward censorship (Barbakoff and Ferrari 2011), the driving forces behind most female librarian self-censorship are often obedience to authority and fear of how others may perceive them (Downey 2013). These attitudes, sadly, are causing many people to abandon libraries and look elsewhere for LGBTIQ information and support.

I n t e r n e t   M o n i t o r i n g   a n d   C e n s o r s h i p

According to the Global Internet Survey of 2012, only 28% of respondents from the United States strongly agreed with the statement "The Internet should be governed in some form to protect the community from harm", compared with 50% of all respondents from the twenty countries surveyed (Internet Society 2012). In the same survey, only 22% of respondents from the United States strongly agreed with the statement "Censorship should exist in some form on the Internet", compared with 35% of all respondents (2012). While Americans may be less likely than people from other countries to support online monitoring and censorship, the United States federal government passed legislation that threatens freedom of access to any information or online resources perceived as threatening to our society.

First, Congress passed the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) to regulate the ability of children 13 years of age or younger to visit particular websites or provide their personal information on those sites without permission from a parent or guardian (Federal Trade Commission, n.d.). Next, Congress enacted the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) in 2000 in response to concerns regarding children's access to online content perceived as obscene or harmful (Federal Communications Commission 2014). CIPA mandates that all schools and libraries receiving federal funding for Internet access through the E-rate program must block or filter any online content considered "(a) obscene; (b) child pornography; or (c) harmful to minors (for computers that are accessed by minors)" (2014). CIPA also requires that school "Internet safety policies must include monitoring the online activities of minors" (2014). Schools applying for E-rate funding for the first time must demonstrate compliance with CIPA. While the Federal Communications Commission states that "CIPA does not require the tracking of Internet use by minors or adults", in 2001 the federal government passed the USA PATRIOT Act, which empowers the federal government to monitor the online activities of any individuals believed to be a threat to domestic security, or to request that people who observe any suspicious online behavior to contact the authorities.

Net Nanny is the most popular filtering software in the United States (10TopTenReviews, n.d.). It allows administrators to monitor the online activities of anyone logged into a "Net Nanny protected" computer, as well as restrict or deny access to social media sites, blogs, or websites that contain particular keywords or images. Net Nanny can restrict or deny access to websites located through Google searches or visits to specific URLs typed into the browser. The administrator can choose the level of restriction, keywords, and URLs that he or she does not want computer users to see. Net Nanny

produces a filtering software for schools and libraries called ContentWatch for Education which has the same features as Net Nanny but is licensed for use in public computer labs, classrooms, or on mobile devices owned by the institution (ContentWatch 2014).

Children and teens who visit libraries to use the computer labs are restricted to using those computers set up with Internet filtering software. This is especially the case for public libraries that serve as the de facto libraries for their local school districts (Barbakoff and Ferrari 2011). Patrons must log into the public access computers with their library barcode and unique password; once logged in the computer will begin to time and record their activity. Adults who use the computer labs in public libraries also have their activity timed and recorded. While public libraries are not required to provide information about the online activities of their patrons to outside authorities, they may keep track of the online activity of patrons accused of viewing pornography on public access computers, or patrons attempting to hack into particular sites. Computer users may or may not know that their computer activity is being monitored, or that filtering software is denying them access to information, unless they have learned about that information from another source. In effect, filtering creates an information and digital divide between students in underserved and affluent school districts, as well as poor individuals without their own devices and wealthy ones with access to their own personal filter-free devices (or the technical skills to hack the filter) (Batch 2014). Filtering may also pose a barrier to those with visual, auditory, and learning disabilities, as filtering software may impact captioning, website layout, availability of images, or speech to text / text to speech functionalities in word processing programs and dictation software (van de Bunt-Kokhuis, Hansson, and Toska 2005).

Public and school libraries without LGBTIQ print collections that program their Internet filters to restrict access to websites and social media sites that include neutral and positive LGBTIQ-related URLs, keywords, images, and social media sites violate the American Libraries Association's Library Bill of Rights, as well as the individual's freedom to read and freedom to seek information. In certain situations, LGBTIQ youth and their parents can sue libraries for blocking educational websites that support LGBTIQ youth. In Tennessee, high school student Andrew Emitt discovered that he could not search for LGBT scholarships in his school computer lab, or websites from well-known LGBT organizations, but he could retrieve websites promoting "reparative therapy" by "ex-gay" ministries. This discovery led Andrew and the high school librarian (who chose to remain anonymous) to contact the American Civil Liberties Union and file a lawsuit against their school district. As all Tennessee public schools use the same filtering software with the same restrictions, the court's

decision in favor of Emitt forced all of the school districts in Tennessee to lift the restrictions on all LGBTIQ websites (American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee 2009). In 2012, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) filed a lawsuit against the Camdenton R-III School District in western Missouri, where the court declared use of the filter to block out positive LGBTIQ websites as discriminatory and unconstitutional (Volokh 2012).

Students brave enough to speak to librarians and school administrators about their LGBTIQ information needs had support from peers, teachers, and other adults in their communities. In most cases, however, people are still afraid to approach librarians and ask them for help locating LGBTIQ content. Imagine a homeless youth searching online for an LGBTIQ-friendly shelter or community center at their public library and not being able to find such information—would they be willing to out themselves as homeless or LGBTIQ to potentially judgmental library staff? Imagine a transperson trying to locate appropriate medical information or support services at a filtered public library computer terminal—would they feel safe asking library staff for assistance?

The OPAC and Library Website—Censoring LGBTIQ Existence?

Historically, Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classification systems have frequently ignored, mislabeled, or "misidentified" individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (Johnson 2010; Roberto 2011). While librarians think that call numbers and subject headings make physical materials easier to find, they prove extremely intimidating for the average person. The online catalog could lead someone inadvertently to "the LGBT section" of the library, simply because the LGBTIQ titles may be in the same call number range. Depending on circumstance, the LGBTIQ titles owned by the library honestly fall in the same subject area, and would naturally receive the same classification, or an administrator may wish to place all materials containing LGBTIQ content—whether fiction or non-fiction, social sciences or biology, drama or law—in one section of the library based on curricular needs or perceived user preferences (CannCasciato 2011). Grouping all LGBTIQ materials together under one call number or one subject heading de-queers the rest of the catalog, and thus the library collection. It is no wonder that some people searching for LGBTIQ information will not browse the stacks or use the OPAC. They would like to use the library, but they may want a page on the library website where they can go anonymously for recommended books or online resources. Sadly, not every school or public library decides to promote recommended LGBTIQ resources through their websites, even if those

resources sit on their shelves waiting for readers. This is especially true for young adult LGBTIQ resources. To this day, regardless of whether or not a library has access to LGBTIQ materials, most school and public library websites will rarely make public mention of new LGBTIQ acquisitions or online resources. Sometimes the filtering software will even deny people access to the American Libraries Association's GLBT Round Table webpage and blogs, even though the GLBT Round Table does not review erotica or pornography.

Recommendations

While some librarians will support filtering if that is what they perceive serves the community best (Barbakoff and Ferrari 2011), other librarians see filtering and censorship driving away patrons (Rodriguez 2014). In the case of libraries that censor online LGBTIQ content, this causes people to look elsewhere for LGBTIQ information. By restricting access to online LGBTIQ content, libraries are delivering the insidious message to young people that LGBTIQ people, their histories, their cultures, and their causes are *dangerous and a threat to society that shall not be named.* As more states include sexual orientation and gender identity in their non-discrimination laws, school and public libraries will need to revisit their filtering policies and how they promote LGBTIQ resources through their websites.

Before moving forward with such an endeavor, the librarian should reflect upon their self-censorship practices, and come up with strategies to change those thought processes and behaviors—particularly if these self-censorship habits do not match their personal attitudes toward diversity and social justice (Downey 2013). Next, the librarian should form a committee of library staff, parents, teachers, teens, and community members to assess the existing filtering software. The committee should test their Internet filtering software and record what websites get restricted. If the filter goes so far as to restrict access to interactive, collaborative resources such as Google Drive or online encyclopedia entries about LGBTIQ issues, the committee will need to discuss if the filter is really effective and clearly identify what they want restricted. With community support, the librarian can bring these recommendations to the individual or group in charge of programming the filter. After they make the changes, the committee should test the filtering software again, this time on a computer programmed with software and features for those with disabilities. If the filtering software has an impact on those programs and features, it could violate the Americans with Disabilities Act, and will need to be uninstalled from that computer. Last but not least, the librarian should check their online catalog, EBook collections, and streaming audiovisual collections for LGBTIQ content.

If the content exists, the librarian should investigate how it is being promoted through the library webpages. If there is no mention of these resources as they are acquired, no subject guide, or no mention of such resources during LGBT History Month or Pride Month, the librarian should investigate why that is. If no one on staff has time to develop those online resources, and if the library has a volunteer program, the librarian should ask potentially interested teens or library school students if they would like to help. The librarian and volunteers may want to review the webpages of those libraries that do promote LGBTIQ content to determine whether or not that approach would be appropriate for them. If the community is unreceptive to promotion of LGBTIQ content on the library webpage, create a moderated Facebook, Tumblr, or GoodReads account and provide a link on the appropriate webpage or library social media account. Interested library patrons can join, learn about LGBTIQ library resources, and connect with new friends in the community.

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