The Blank Stare: Censorship, its History and its Affect on Children

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March 6, 2011
The Blank Stare: Censorship, its History and its Affect on Children discusses censorship and how it pertains to the library and youth. Censorship is to control what others perceive. This is a battle that has been waged for centuries, and will be waged until the end of time. This battle is a battle for control of information and who, when and where it is disseminated. Censorship will be discussed through its definition, its history, its presence in libraries and it’s impact on youth.

Censorship is to control what others perceive. Censorship has been used for centuries for control of political reign, religious reign, family values and even minority control. Censorship can be exacted upon any aspect of life, whether it is television, radio, news, and reading or even through conversations. The World believes that it has a lot to hide, or filter for the use of only a select few. However, the most censored group is that of youth. Adults believe that they need to “protect” their young and one of the most prevalent protection tools is that of censorship. The use of censorship to control youth is not a new idea, and just like censorship in general, it has been around for ages. The most common censored hub is that of the library. Libraries of all kinds are censored; public, private, corporate, special or any other type of library is a victim of some sort of censorship. This paper will discuss what censorship is, its history, censorship in libraries and censorship and youth.

What is Censorship?

Censor, n. the title of two magistrates of ancient Rome, who drew up the registrar or census of the citizens, etc., and had the supervision of public morals (Censor, Oxford).

Censor, n. any person who controls or suppresses the behavior of others, usually on moral grounds (Censor, Dictionary).

The American Library Association defines censorship as:

the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous. It is no more complicated than someone saying, “Don’t let anyone read this book, or buy that magazine, or view that film, because I object to it!” Censors try to use the power of the state to impose their view of what is truthful and appropriate, or offensive and objectionable, on everyone else. Censors pressure public institutions, like libraries, to suppress and remove from public access information they judge inappropriate or dangerous, so that no one else has the chance to read or
view the material and make up their own minds about it. The censor wants to prejudge materials for everyone. (American, n.d.)

These three definitions of censor supply the same meaning. They all mean that someone in a place of power, whether it is actual governmental power or a position as simple as being knowledgeable, has taken it upon themselves to determine what is appropriate for their fellow human beings to observe. This act of power removes an individual’s responsibility to determine what is right for their life.

Censorship can be applied to any medium. However, it is mostly applied to books, movies, newspapers, and radio. These mediums receive the most censorship because they have the largest following of customers, and they reach the most people. These mediums are attractive for censorship for these same reasons, and the point of censorship is to control what people observe, and the more control the censoring body has, the more effective they are at allowing only what they want observed.

There are many motives for censorship and most have to do with the moral, the psychological, or the sociological. The moral motive “denotes personal behavior and connotes righteousness as defined by the teachings of religion” (McClure, 1983, p. 22). However, it does not only apply to religion, it can also apply to economic, class, cultural and political motives as well. Psychological motive is described as “the concern for the mental and emotional well being” (McClure, 1983, p. 22). This has to do with ideas such as how something, like a book, will affect the psyche of the reader and as to whether or not it is appropriate for that reader. Psychological motive can also be applied to any other motive such as political, familial, religious, etc. because they can all affect the mind. The sociological motive “arises from the urge to advance or protect the concerns of one segment of society over the concerns or prejudices of other segments” (McClure, 1983, p. 22). This motive can be applied to political, religious, minority, as well as familial motives. Moral, psychological and sociological motives are only the big three categories of censorship, however, below are examples of the most censored motives within society.

The first motive is family values. Many materials are censored for family values because people, mainly parents, believe that the materials in question contradict what they teach at home. They fear that these materials will encourage bad behavior, independent thinking, or even cause their children to grow up too fast (Bucher, 2010, p. 101).

Politics and censorship go hand in hand. There has not been one single political movement, race, discussion or take over that has not used censorship of some sort. Generally in politics censorship is used to show the public how the politician, government, etc. is better than the current body. Another use of censorship is to “protect” the public from what the politician, government, etc. does not want them to know. There is nothing more upsetting to people than
politics, and the problems that arise from them. This is because we are a society that encourages political freedom, as well as the freedom to know about politics and what is expected from them. The argument is between the conservatives who believe that society is too exposed and that there are no morals, and the liberals who believe that it is a crime to hide any information from the public (Bucher, 2010, p.101).

Another large vehicle for censorship is religion. This country was founded on the right to religious freedom. However, it was never decided what constituted religious freedom. Yes, in theory everyone can practice whatever religion they please as long as it does not hurt others, but that does not mean that they will not be persecuted for these beliefs. Generally with regards to censorship and religion, most arguments are that women, morals, themes, sex and witchcraft are not portrayed in the correct manner and the omissions of these subjects upsets people and makes them feel as if they are on trial for their beliefs (Bucher, 2010, p. 102).

Minorities and their rights are also a target for censorship. Most often minorities are arguing that they are not represented in the correct manner or even present at all. Minorities and censorship can show up in any category. They can be represented incorrectly in the political realm, educational realm, the religious realm, and even on as small as a scale as the family realm. Minorities, such as women, people of color, the elderly, homosexuals, and disabled people have all experienced censorship in one form or another. They have been misrepresented in politics, religion, reading materials and television. The largest complaint is that the verbiage used to describe them is incorrect or that they are represented as in a stereotype, and not as who they really are (Bucher, 2010, p. 102-103).

The primary subjects targeted for censorship are profanity, sex, homosexuality, witchcraft and/or religion, violence, racism, substance use, scientific and historical theories. Censorship is a long and sordid subject. There are arguments for censorship and arguments against it, but the common denominator between the two arguments is that they believe they (the censoring body) are doing what is best for people and society. Alleen Pace Nilsen states in her essay “Focus on Censorship,” that “If we didn’t have boundaries, we might have to create them just so there would be something to let us know when we had gone beyond them. The problem is that different people want different boundaries” (as cited in Sigler, 1999, p. 233). Censorship is centered around attitudes and people’s stances on them. Attitudes toward politics, family, sex, religion and minorities all gain censorship and will be censored until the end of time. Censorship will continue till the end of time because people will always be, think and act differently.

The History of Censorship
As mentioned above censorship has been around for ages and is not likely to disappear until the population of the world begins to think exactly the same thing as a collective whole, which is highly unlikely. However, unlike identical thought processes, censorship is a commonality amongst the different cultures of the world. In the ancient cultures of Israel and China, censorship was a legitimate method to control the morals and politics of its populations (Newth, 2001). In ancient Rome and Greece good governance involved shaping the character of the people and because of this censorship was seen as an honorable necessity (Newth, 2001).

One of the most famous cases of censorship in ancient times was of the poisoning of Socrates. Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the minds of the youth and not believing in the gods and, because of this, he was sentenced to death by poison. Socrates was not the only ancient figure to be censored. Martin Luther was also a victim to censorship. He was banned by the Catholic Church and all of his teachings and writings were burned by Papal decree (Newth, 2011).

The invention of the printing press caused quite a stir for technology as well as for censorship. The press was a great advantage for governments, religion and the people; however, it also created a medium in which allowed for the publication of opinions that differed from the ruling body. In 1559 Pope Paul IV published the Index Librorum Prohibitorum (the index of prohibited books) (Newth, 2011). Later in the fifteenth century Pope Innocent VIII required printers to submit manuscripts to the church for approval of dissemination (Bucher, 2010, p. 97). This list was issued 20 times through the centuries by different popes, and the last issue was issued in 1948, and was finally suppressed in 1966 by Pope Paul VI (Newth, 2011).

Book burnings historically are the most brutal methods of censorship applied to a culture. In the 13th century Genghis Khan’s grandson burnt down the city of Baghdad, and the destruction was so devastating that “the Tigris River ran black with the ink of books” (as sited in Byrne, 2003, p.3). The most famous political faction responsible for book burnings was the Nazis regime in Germany during the 1930s. These books pyres, surprisingly enough, were promoted and carried out by the Hitler Jugend, the Hitler Youth. The purpose behind the book burnings was to “cleanse the minds of people and society” (Newth, 2001). German author, Heinrich Heine was quoted saying, “Where they have burned books, the will end in burning human beings,” and he could not be more correct with the later establishment of the final solution for the Jewish population (Newth, 2001).

Nazis Germany was not the only country responsible for country wide censorship, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was also responsible for censoring what was available for their populous. The USSR had strict censorship that lasted until the 1980s, and the citizens of Russian and the other occupied countries by the USSR are only now finding out truths that had been long hidden from them for decades (Newth, 2001).
However, just as censorship was popular historically so was the abolishment of censorship. In 1766, Sweden was the first country to abolish censorship and to create laws to guarantee the freedom of the press. After this monumental ruling Denmark and Norway soon followed suit with the abolishment of censorship and creation of press freedom laws in 1770. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution, created in 1787, is still regarded as the catalyst for the comprehensive protection of the freedom of expression in western countries. The French National Assembly of 1789, taking its cue from the United States Constitution, states that, “The free communication of thought and opinion is one of the most precious rights of man; every citizen may therefore speak, write and print freely” (Newth, 2001).

In ancient societies there was an argument for censorship. The main argument being that the lower classes could not be responsible for their own thoughts or actions and therefore it was up to the ruling classes or government to make these decisions for them. However, history has proven that this thought process is outdated and inaccurate, which can be seen through the French Revolution, the fall of Rome and Greece and the destruction of the Nazis and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Censorship and Libraries

Libraries were created for the collection and dissemination of information. The type of information collected depended upon the type of library, but they have all encountered censorship of one form or another because they provide information. Information is seen as dangerous because it has the potential to enlighten its reader to completely radical and forefront thinking.

Libraries have been targets of censorship since ancient times. History is full of the destruction of library collections, such as the deliberate burning of a library in China in 221 BCE. Just like the library in China the University of Oxford's library was burned down on direct orders of King Charles II (Newth, 2001). Even in the twentieth century the burning of libraries was used as an effective warning against the peoples of warring nations.

In 1991 the Serbian government banned the Albanian language and all its collections. Because of this ban many libraries and their contents were burned down in Sarajevo and Kosovo. This is act of destruction is similar to that of the Nazis and the burning of Jewish authored materials (Newth, 2001).

Just as the oppressors, such as the Nazis and Serbian government, censored materials and destroyed what they deemed inappropriate, they have also collected and preserved materials that were suppressed under their dictatorships. The Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) collected manuscripts that were deemed unacceptable within their archives. These archives of censored materials were later used against them in glasnost (Byrne, 2003, p. 4).
Historically librarians were expected to be the protectors of literature, especially literature that concerns children and young adults. Because librarians were charged with this duty they, as well as teachers, were given the license to censor what they determined to be inappropriate for the public. Just as librarians were charged with the responsibility to monitor the public’s literature consumption, they were also being attacked by pragmatic citizens who believed that money could be spent elsewhere because the library in question could not prove that they reduced crime, improved happiness, or assisted in economic growth (Moellendick, 2009, p. 69). It is easy to understand why libraries thought it impossible to fight censorship, and that is because they were not viewed as a successful partner within it’s own community.

Librarians have always had to ask: who has access to the library? What materials can be accessed in the library? And who can access the library? These questions are extremely important to the correct management of a library. Because librarians need guidance in correct management of a library the American Library Association created the Library Bill of Rights in 1939. The Library Bill of Rights states that:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment. (American Library, 1939)

This entry of the Library Bill of Rights was especially helpful during the McCarthy era in the United States. Libraries and librarians were scared to oppose the findings of the McCarthy administration because they were afraid that they would incur their wrath. The American Library Association came to the rescue with the creation of the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC). The IFC was created to support any library of librarian faced with the demands for censorship (Davenport, 2007). However, this does not prevent self-censorship that was, and still is, practiced by librarians.

Deciding what to purchase can pose as a huge dilemma to librarians. Librarians are suppose to serve the public and when the public demands the censorship of a material it can be hard to ignore, especially when the material in question falls in to the children or young adult collection. Cora Moellendick, author of “Libraries, censors, and self-censorship,” believes that “librarians do not self-censor because they personally disagree with the content of the book, but
because they are leery of having to defend their choices to hostile parent’s and community members” (2009, p. 72).

Any librarian, who chooses to work in a public setting, or even a private setting, needs to be prepared to defend their collection. However they should not be self-censoring because they need to remember that to censor is to withhold information, and access to any information, little or big, should be an inherent right to all. Therefore librarians who want to uphold the ideals of unrestricted access, within their collection policy, should be prepared to face the public.

Censorship and Youth

In 1900 the emergence of the children’s librarian began to be accepted as a specialty with the visible and vocal presence of Anne Carroll Moore (McDowell, n.d., p. 1). The importance of guiding children’s literature was great because librarians believed that the children’s parents neglected their reading and because of the great pull that children felt towards sensational and bad fiction, such as dime novels (McDowell, n.d., p. 3). Because of the importance of guiding children to appropriate reading materials librarians practiced varied censors. One such censorship was marking the catalog. The librarian would put a mark along the margin of the catalog to determine whether or not a book was appropriate for youth consumption (McDowell, n.d., p. 14). There was also the use of book lists published by various publishers and librarians, such as Caroline Hewins.

Historically there are many reasons for the censorship of children’s literature. The largest reason being that there needs to be a limit to the amount of moral corruption that a child is exposed to. Because of this such, laws as The Obscene Publications Act of 1857, in England, was passed to protect the morals of youth (McClure, 1983, p. 22). Plato was one of the first to advocate censorship, but not to protect the morals of the young, but because he believed that if children are not disillusioned with literature then they will be better leaders of the government that they inherit (McClure, 1983, p. 22).

As time moved on so did the method behind censorship of youth. During medieval times children were encouraged through moral and didactic works and anything that did not conform to this format was destroyed or kept from the eyes of the young. Later on during the Victorian era didacticism was replaced with expurgation, or the removal of offensive materials. The Victorians allowed the reading of books that could be considered adult, but they censored them for children by removing offensive subjects such as exposure of the human torso, and references to any activity that involves the human torso (McClure, 1983, p. 23).

As mentioned above the most censored subjects within recent history have been subjects that deal with sex, drugs, religion, politics, race, and obscene situations. One of the most popular books to be censored in the past and the present is Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The Concord
Public Library first banned the novel in 1885 for its coarse language and New South, a publisher, most recently censored the novel in 2011 (Removing, 2011). New South replaced “nigger” with “slave” in all 219 occurrences of the racial slur throughout the novel (Schultz, 2011). Another popular book that has been censored recently is the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. This series has undergone a great debate between public schools and religious leaders who do not believe that this book is healthy for young minds because it encourages witchcraft and wizardry (Removing, 2011).

Librarians are not the only entities that have been responsible for the censorship of youth, but pro-censorship organizations have also been responsible for censorship. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is an organization that was created for the advocating of “pure” culture (Parker, 1999, p. 135). The WCTU fought to remove such controversial subjects as sexual identity, race, class and sexism. The WCTU argued that the materials that they interact with directly affect the good morals of the youth. With their inability to remove all impure materials from libraries and bookstores the WCTU began to publish their own pure materials (Parker, 1999, p.136-37). Another pro-censorship organization is the Family Friendly Libraries organization. The Family Friendly Libraries goal is to “create citizen action against libraries who do not filter Internet access, or who put questionable books on the shelves” (Moellendick, 2009, p. 70). This organization wants to give parents the right to limit their child’s borrowing of library materials. When a library does not fulfill this organization’s requests the members then attend board meetings speaking their concerns (Moellendick, 2009, p. 70).

Censorship and youth is all about control. Adults are terrified of losing control of the younger generation. If control is lost then so is the possible running of the future world. Sarah Fine believes that “censorship particularly when it comes to children, is not about their moral development; it is about the fear of losing control over them…Dirty language is still cleaner—and easier to control—than rebellion” (cited in Sigler, 1999, p. 234).

Censorship is to control what others perceive through command of information. It has been used for centuries for the control of politics, religion, family values and even minorities. Censorship can be exacted upon any aspect of life, whether it is television, radio, news, and reading or even through conversations. The World believes that it has a lot to hide, or filter for the use of only a select few. However, the most censored group is that of youth. Adults believe that they need to “protect” their young and one of the most prevalent protection tools is that of censorship. The most common censored hub is that of the library. Libraries of all kinds are censored; public, private, corporate, special or any other type of library is a victim of some sort of censorship. It affects all mediums and all people. However libraries and youths are censored more than the average medium. Libraries have been censored in the past and present for the betterment of society. Youth have been censored for their protection against
a possible corruption of their morality. However, censorship is not the issue the issue is control, and censorship will continue until all people agree on every issue and problem.

References


