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Issues and Trends in Intellectual Freedom for Teacher Librarians

Where We've Come From and Where We're Heading

ANGELA MAYCOCK

"The more things change, the more they stay the same."

What comes to mind when you hear that phrase? Does it conjure a sense of defeat, of being stuck in the mud and spinning your wheels? Do you picture some poor, hapless soul throwing up her hands with a sigh of resigned frustration? Certainly we have all found ourselves in that very scenario, feeling mired in bureaucracy and powerless to alter the course of "how we've always done things."

Or do you detect a note of hope hidden in that statement? Looking at it a different way, could you see it as reassuring instead of discouraging? Would it be too much of a stretch to even consider it a rallying cry—a whoop of triumph that, even in the midst of disorienting change, our basic principles remain sound and can guide us through a world transformed?

Both interpretations are apt descriptions of the state of intellectual freedom in school library media centers today. This article will use the perspective and experience of the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) to examine and evaluate "what's happening" in intellectual freedom today for teacher librarians.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

In many ways, the landscape for school libraries has been altered tremendously over the past decade to include resources, programs, and services that would have been virtually unrecognizable at the turn of the century. The most disorienting transformations largely involve technologies that have radically changed ways of doing things in libraries. And many of these changes have had profound impact on—and consequences for—intellectual freedom.

THE TROUBLE WITH TECHNOLOGY

Proliferating electronic resources have challenged school librarians—first to keep up with all the new tools that can benefit students, then to analyze their usefulness and select

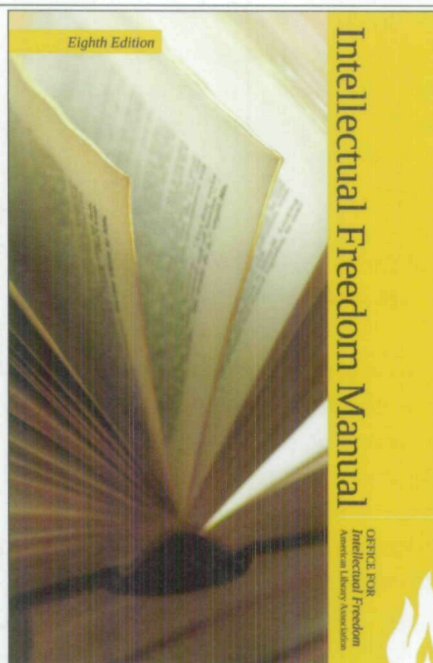
those best suited to the media center, and finally to find ways to make them accessible in school libraries. Intellectual freedom issues emerge at all three levels, but with particular prominence when it comes to access. Once school librarians have done the heavy lifting of determining which resources will be most useful, they often face the even greater hurdle of communicating that value to school administrators and information technology (IT) departments—and persuading such stakeholders that the benefits outweigh the costs and perceived risks of access.

Perceived risks have driven many school districts to limit access for both students and teachers through aggressive Internet filtering. ALA opposes the use of filters for a variety of reasons, beginning with the basic violation of intellectual freedom that comes with a product that is designed to deny access to information. In addition, filtering technology is flawed and only moderately accurate. Filters make mistakes. They block constitutionally-protected speech, while still allowing objectionable material to be viewed. This makes filters impractical for libraries and offers a false sense of security to librarians, administrators, parents, and students alike.

In an ideal world, librarians would not filter the Internet but instead focus on educating students on how to find and evaluate information—teaching young people to be their own best filters. Yet many libraries are subject to state laws, funding mandates, or institutional cultures that require them to use Internet-filtering tools. School librarians in such situations need to advocate for wise application of filtering technology, in order to protect intellectual freedom to the greatest extent possible—and also to protect the school from potential First Amendment litigation.

The use of Internet filters to block lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) resources is a particularly timely and pressing issue in school libraries. Many filtering companies—private entities with no obligation to disclose how and why they blacklist particular sites—set their products to default blocking of LGBT sites, including those featuring political issues, educational content, and support groups for LGBT youth. This is not only ethically and constitutionally unacceptable, but also makes libraries that use such tools potential targets of litigation. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has successfully filed suit against school districts in Tennessee to protect access to LGBT material online, and may soon do so in other states as well (ACLU 2011).

Other technological developments facilitate new ways of violating privacy—including the use of monitoring software to track students' computer activities—and have created intellectual freedom issues in schools and library media centers. Libraries have a longstanding commitment to protecting reader privacy, which has been a part of the *ALA Code of Ethics* since 1939. But school IT staff members do not necessarily share the ethics and values of the library profession. Decisions about monitoring student activities, like those about Internet filtering, are often made based on misguided fears or enthusiasm over technological capabilities—but can have ramifications that are even worse than the originally feared consequences. A recent story about a school district spying on students via laptop webcams is an instructive—and



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frightening—example.

The Lower Merion (PA) School District began loaning laptops for students to use both in class and at home. The computers were loaded with software—intended to help recover missing laptops—that enabled staff to remotely activate webcams. Problems came to light when a student faced disciplinary action based on photos from his laptop's webcam, and his family filed a lawsuit. A subsequent study found that the district's monitoring system had "stored more than 56,000 images, most from missing laptops. But the total included images of about 40 students whose webcams kept shooting—sometimes every 15 minutes—even after the students' computers had been found and returned to them" (Martin 2010). The school district eventually agreed to pay \$610,000 to settle a class-action lawsuit over the controversy.

CENSORSHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Not all intellectual freedom issues have such major financial implications, but few have more ethical and emotional resonance for librarians than censorship and book banning. Over the past decade, censorship efforts have ebbed and flowed. Between 2001 and 2010, ALA recorded 4,659 challenges—a challenge being a formal request

for a library or school to remove or restrict access to materials (ALA 2011). Though ALA works hard to collect information on as many challenge situations as possible, our records reflect only a small fraction of the challenges that actually occur. The Office for Intellectual Freedom has estimated that only 20-25% of challenges are ever reported. A recent study corroborated this, when respondents to an informal survey reported that only 33 out of 160 challenges that they experienced, or 20.6%, had been shared with ALA (Houghton-Jan 2011). OIF is working on a campaign to increase challenge reporting and spread the word about the support we can provide to librarians facing censorship issues.

ALA has observed numerous trends in challenges to library materials over the past ten years, including more frequent challenges to materials in Advanced Placement or honors level courses and an increase in organized challenges—those brought or backed by groups such as the 9.12 Project, Parents against Bad Books in Schools (PABBIS), and SafeLibraries (Tang and Marklein 2010). The Internet offers instant access to resources from these and other groups on what books they see as objectionable—in some cases highlighting specific passages and language taken out of context—and how to get them removed from local schools and libraries.

At the same time, online tools have also helped draw together supporters of libraries and schools facing challenges. A group of parents in West Bend, Wisconsin created a blog called "West Bend Parents for Free Speech" (<http://westbendparents-forfreespeech.webs.com>) in 2009, which successfully mobilized opposition to a request that dozens of young adult books be removed from the local library. In 2010, when a complaint was brought against Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* in a school in Republic, Missouri, supporters flocked to social media sites to express their outrage. Anderson reported that "more than 25,000 people have read the blog on my website. Another 15,000 have read it on Jezebel.com. Hundreds and hundreds of people have commented and posted their own stories about speaking up about be-



JUNIOR FICTION

IT'S A SECRET!

13 gifts. Wendy Mass. Scholastic Press, 2011. \$16.99. 978-0-545-38793-4. Grades 3-7. Tara's school prank means spending the summer with her mom's sister's family in Willow Falls. Boring! Then she meets the neighbor kids and Angelina D'Angelo (who may actually be magical), and her summer becomes an adventure.

The silver bowl. Diane Stanley. HarperCollins, 2011. \$16.99. 978-0-061-57543-3. Grades 5-8. Scullery maid Molly, entrusted with polishing the silver at Dethmere Castle, sees visions whenever she polishes the ceremonial hand basin. When the royal family's curse begins to appear, she discovers she can help lift it. Will anyone believe her?

Stir it up! Ramin Ganeshram. Scholastic Press, 2011. \$16.99. 978-0-545-16582-2. Grades 4-8. Thirteen-year-old Anjali dreams of becoming the youngest Food Chef Network chef ever, but when her audition conflicts with her father's plans for her, she has to make some important decisions. Trinidadian recipes included.

A true princess. Diane Zahler. HarperCollins, 2011. \$15.99. 978-0-061-82501-9. Grades 3-6. When Lilia flees an abusive master, her plans to discover her real identity are changed when an elf princess enchants Lilia's best friend. Now, Lilia must find an ancient jewel to trade for his life, or lose him forever.

The very little princess: Rose's story. Marion Dane Bauer. Elizabeth Sayles. Random House, 2011. \$12.99. 978-0-375-85692-1. Grades 2-4. When the tiny china doll Rose finds in the attic comes to life, she's delighted to have such an important secret and tries to be less careless. After all, she's Princess Regina's only protection—until big brother Sam gets involved.

ing raped or sexually abused. A Twitter feed #speakloudly was set up by an English teacher and the subject became one of the most heavily tweeted on Sunday" (Staino 2010).

LABELS AND RATING SYSTEMS RUN AMOK

Yet even such an overwhelmingly positive, large-scale response cannot always overcome objections. In the case of the Republic challenge, *Speak* was ultimately retained in the school library, but Sarah Ockler's *Twenty Boy Summer* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* were removed. The district convened a task force to review not just the three books that had been challenged but book selection standards for the entire district, taking into account both "existing board policy and the public rating systems that already exist for music, TV and video games... The board adopted the standards—which cover language, violence, sexuality and illegal substances—in April and those standards have since been applied to the three books" (Riley 2011).

This approach is at odds with how librarians select materials for school libraries—by evaluating the work as a whole and taking an inclusive approach, rather than seeking out red flags and excluding anything potentially controversial. Today, young readers' freedom to choose is coming up against the growing popularity of rating systems that screen not just music and video games, but also books for hot button issues such as sexual content, profanity, violence, and even "consumerism." Common Sense Media is one prominent source of such ratings and reviews. Ostensibly intended to provide trustworthy information for busy parents, these systems raise warnings about the "age appropriateness" and potentially objectionable content in many worthwhile books. School librarians need to be aware that while these rating tools may be convenient, they can also provide ammunition for challenges to books that some may find offensive.

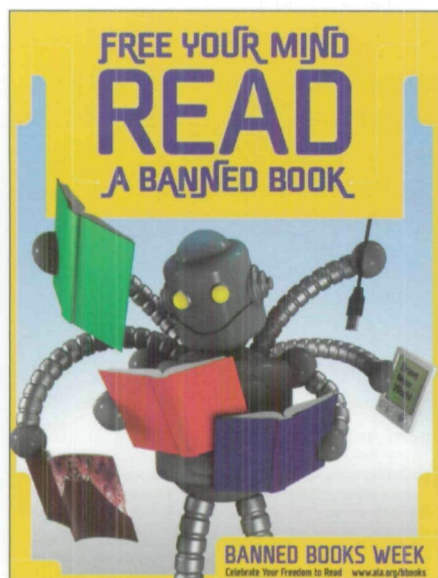
Young people's right to select their own reading material from a wide range of

choices is a basic tenet of ALA's intellectual freedom policies. But other trends are emerging around access to books in school libraries that have troubling implications for the freedom to read. The widespread adoption of reading assessment programs like Accelerated Reader is one example. While such programs can successfully monitor and even encourage reading among students, they also can effectively limit reading choices to titles that have quizzes available in the software. School libraries using Accelerated Reader also commonly label and shelve books by reading level and encourage (or, in some cases, mandate) that students only check out materials that fit their AR level. This practice has problematic implications, both in terms of limiting students' reading choices and with regard to reader privacy.

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION

Another development with significant implications for current and future teacher librarians has been the growing role of adjunct instructors in school librarianship education programs. Adjunct instructors bring so much to the table, including vital and current real-world experience that full-time library school faculty may sometimes lack. As one adjunct instructor explains, "To provide a solid foundation of pragmatic knowledge about how to manage an LMC program, I structure my courses to mirror the realities of school librarianship: always too much information to deal with, multitudinous (and often seemingly unreasonable) demands, constantly changing situations, and never enough time to get everything done perfectly" (Yucht 2010).

One concern, however, is that the emphasis on the practical may sometimes be to the detriment of topics considered too theoretical—including professional values like intellectual freedom. Front-line experience can be invaluable in training librarians to grapple with ethical challenges, but it can also favor expedient solutions to complex intellectual freedom "gray areas." OIF hears from library school students with questions and concerns about the issues



Banned Books Week poster

they're confronting in library school curricula. When a children's literature class was considering the place that potentially controversial material might have in school library collections, one student wrote that her adjunct instructor's advice was: "Spend your entire budget on regular (which is to say, non-controversial) materials. Then when someone comes asking why you don't have *And Tango Makes Three*, you can just say you're out of money."

Instructing new library professionals to avoid controversy at the expense of access to information raises huge concerns and, one hopes, happens only in rare instances. Yet self-censorship in selection, unfortunately, is an all-too-common phenomenon. Librarians may avoid materials seen as potentially objectionable—even if they may benefit members of the school or library community—out of fear of possible challenge controversies and even retaliation, up to and including job loss.

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN = INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM DOWNTURN

Decisions about how to spend limited resources are difficult in even the best of times, but today school librarians are seeing how economic hard times can lead to greater challenges to intellectual freedom. With increased scrutiny on how tax dollars are spent and efforts to cut spending

at all levels, many libraries are more likely to come under fire for providing access to ideas that some may find objectionable. At the same time, reduced funding and staffing can have a chilling effect on librarians' willingness to stand up and defend students' access to information.

OIF regularly hears from school librarians who wish to report challenges but not pursue matters further, due to concerns about job security. OIF keeps all consultations strictly confidential, but this anonymous individual's situation is typical of dozens of reports each year:

"There have been five titles removed from my school library this year for content. The school director reserves to herself the sole right to ban titles from the library without further review or consultation. Your offer of assistance is appreciated, but as a school employee, I can't take further action on this issue without risking my job. I'm afraid due to other issues affecting my family, I can't afford to stand on principle right now. Once I have secured a job elsewhere, I would be able to discuss this further."

...THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

Clearly, intellectual freedom is under strain—in some cases, to the breaking point—in many library media centers today. More new technologies, organizations, and resources than ever are stacking the deck against open access to information for children and young adults. The outlook, in some respects, looks bleak indeed.

Yet, despite all the changes and challenges, much of what actually takes place in library media centers today remains the same—a mission to support student learning and growth, manage costs and innovation, and enhance teaching effectiveness. And certainly, the grounding principles of intellectual freedom, as articulated in documents like the *Library Bill of Rights* and *ALA Code of Ethics*, continue to provide a solid foundation for school libraries in their efforts to provide access to ideas.

Even many of the challenges remain the same. The most common reasons for

challenges continue to revolve around concerns about young people's ability to access ideas that some deem unsuitable for them—particularly material containing sexual content, offensive language, and violence. Questions about the privacy of students' library use—from circulation records to Internet use to the handling of student overdue items and beyond—challenge teacher librarians as much as ever. And middle school and junior high—those years and spaces where children grow into young adults—continue to be prominent battlegrounds over intellectual freedom.

The dominance of particular issues—challenges to information about sexuality for young people, concerns about children stumbling upon inappropriate material online, or the problem of "dark" reading material for young adults, for example—can be exhausting and even demoralizing. But their continuing prevalence gives librarians an opportunity to develop solid, well-considered policy and procedures to respond to anticipated concerns.

Being prepared for questions and concerns is the first and most important step to defusing challenges before they become crises. Does your library media center have a selection policy that emphasizes intellectual freedom and access to information? Do you have procedures in place for individuals to request reconsideration of library materials? Familiarize yourself with these policies and, while you're at it, refamiliarize yourself with the *Library Bill of Rights* (<http://ifmanual.org/lbor>) and the *Code of Ethics* (<http://ifmanual.org/codeethics>). Far from dusty, musty, stale statements, these living documents may inspire or reinvigorate you to defend your students' rights to read and access the information and ideas they need.

Intellectual freedom groups within ALA regularly review these statements and develop updates and interpretations as needed, such as "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program," updated in 2008, and, "Minors and Internet Interactivity," developed and adopted in 2009. As school librarians move into a new era increasingly defined by access to electronic resources, these docu-



CRIMINALS AND SLEUTHS

Death cloud. Andrew Lane. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011. \$16.99. 978-0-374-38767-9. Grades 6-9. What was Sherlock Holmes like at age fourteen? This entertaining mystery introduces the young sleuth as he hones his logical style.

Staying with an uncle in the country, Sherlock investigates a mysterious death, survives kidnapping and violence, and matches wits with an evil baron.

Shelter. Harlan Coben. Putnam, 2011. \$18.99. 978-0-399-25650-9. Grades 7 up. With his father dead and his mother in rehab, sophomore Mickey Bolitar takes some solace in Ashley, his new girlfriend, until she disappears. He joins forces with a goth girl and a school outcast to try to track down Ashley, which leads them into serious danger in this fast-paced mystery.

Texas gothic. Rosemary Clement-Moore. Delacorte, 2011. \$17.99. 978-0-385-73693-0. Grades 8 up. In this witty first-person narrative, senior Amy Goodnight housesits at her aunt's ranch where a ghost and an annoying but handsome neighbor pull her into a mystery involving past—and maybe present-day—crimes. Amy has always rejected her family's magical powers but now she may have no choice.

Uncommon criminals. Ally Carter. Hyperion, 2011. \$. 978-1-4231-4795-4. Grades 6-10. Who can resist a teenage girl with her own crew of con artists and thieves, especially if their intentions are more honorable than criminal? Kat from *The Heist Society* is after a world-famous jewel called the Cleopatra Emerald but finds herself pitted against older, more experienced thieves.

ments can help ground practice and policy to best protect students' intellectual freedom, asserting, for example, "The digital environment offers opportunities for accessing, creating, and sharing information. The rights of minors to retrieve, interact with, and create information posted on the Internet in schools and libraries are extensions of their First Amendment rights" (Intellectual Freedom Manual 2009).

Protecting students' rights to read freely and think for themselves is a big job, an important job, and one that concerns us all. ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom exists to support librarians who make this happen in libraries across the country every day. Whether or not you're an ALA member, and regardless of your position or what kind of library you work in, anyone can contact OIF for advice, assistance, or just to report a challenge.

So, talk to us. Talk to each other. Intellectual freedom flourishes with conversation and collaboration. In a changed and changing world, let's work together to ensure that school libraries remain true centers of inquiry, learning, and success for young people.

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