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Preservation of Intellectual Freedom: Historical Reflections on the Censorship Challenges Faced by Public Libraries

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A little bit of context...



A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone (Jo Godwin).

Material challenges in public libraries are at an all time high while also possessing a huge political and emotional weight (Yeon & Dudak, 2025, p.539).

There is no issue in librarianship which is more likely to bring libraries on to the pages of the press (Malley, 1990, p.1).



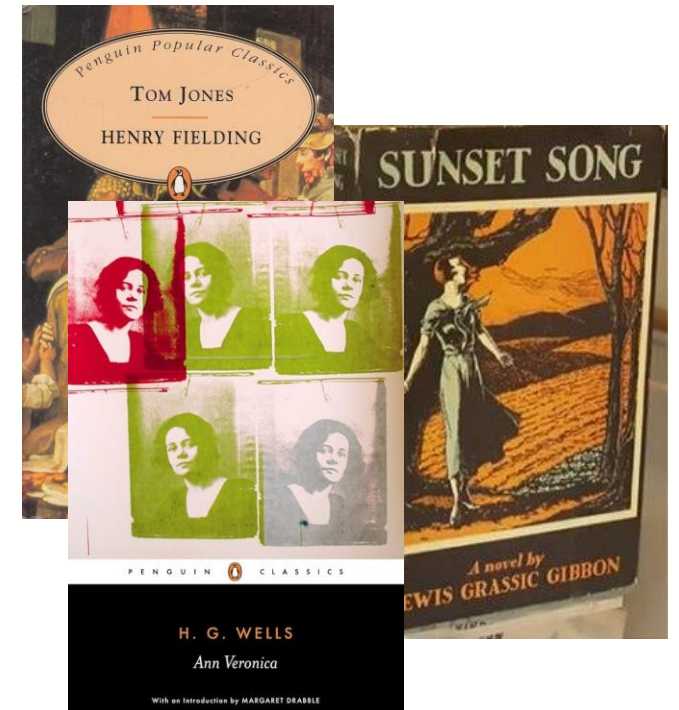
Purpose of session



- To reflect on how censorship has manifested in public libraries from a historical perspective (including some present and future considerations)
- To discuss three key works:
 - Thompson, A.H. (1975). *Censorship in Public Libraries in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century*. Bowker.
 - R v London Borough of Ealing and others ex parte Times Newspapers Ltd and others (1987) IRLR 129
 - Fiske, M., 1959. *Book selection and censorship: A study of school and public libraries in California*. University of California Press.
- To identify patterns of censorship (the who, the why, and the what?)
- To discuss the behavioural elements of censorship

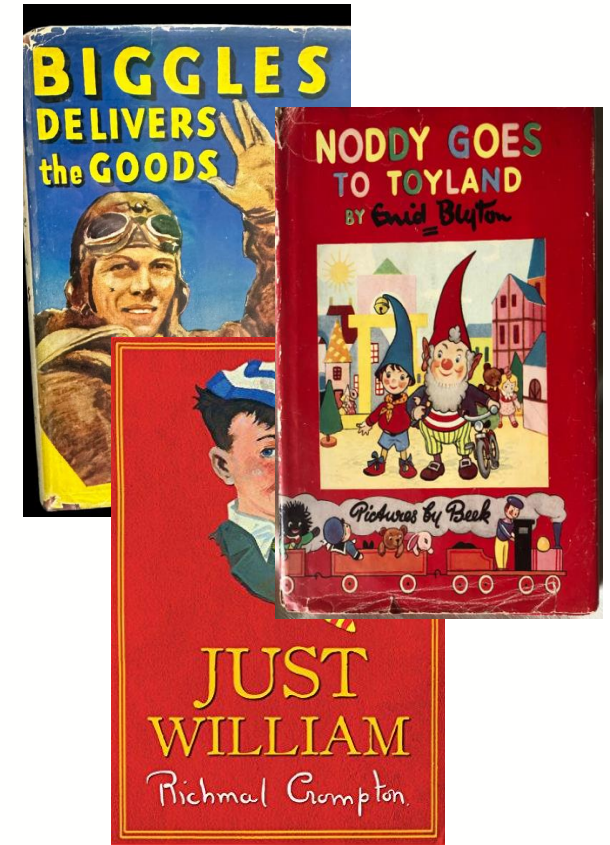
Some examples (Thompson, 1975)

- In 1910 the novel *Ann Veronica* by H.G. Wells, a story about an emancipated young woman during the time of the Suffragettes, was withdrawn from circulation by the Beverley Public Library.
- In 1913 Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* was banned in Doncaster after "extracts were presented [to the library committee], some indecent, impure, and objectionable" (Thompson, 1975, p.4).
- In 1935 the classic Scottish novel, *Sunset Song*, by Lewis Grassic Gibbon was withdrawn by Aberdeen Public Library deemed "unsuitable for general circulation" (Thompson, 1975, p.9).



Selection, not censorship?

- In 1947 E.H. Colwell, Children's librarian in Hendon Public Libraries commented on Blyton's work: *"The criterion for popularity is not enough and a book that is too easy to read and does not challenge a child's mind will not endure."*
- In April 1963 in St. Pancras Borough Library, Borough Library Mr W. Taylor: *"The books are actually not on the banned list we just don't buy them... they are badly written and do not stimulate a child's imagination"*
- In August 1964 Canberra Public Library rejected Noddy, Just William, and Biggles because they did not *"stimulate the imagination or extend the knowledge of children"* (Thompson, 1975, p.140-141).





Early content advisory...



BRIGHTON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

This book must be returned on or before the last date stamped below to avoid fines. If not reserved, it may be renewed once by post or telephone, when the book number, your reader's number and the last date stamped should be given. No fines are charged for overdue books borrowed by children from the Children's Departments

Central Library

Telephone: Brighton 62801

READERS ARE WARNED THAT THERE
ARE SOME PASSAGES IN THIS BOOK
WHICH MAY BE DISTURBING,

Used by Brighton Public Library in 1969 as a “fore-warning” system, devised by John Allen, Chief Librarian:

“Whilst watching a television programme during the introduction of which a notice was flashed on the screen warning intending viewers that there may be passages disturbing to them, I thought that this would be an excellent idea for translating into the world of books...”



Objections in the period 1900–1974 (Thompson, 1975)



- The objectors could be categorised under four categories:
 - (1) individual readers,
 - (2) organised groups,
 - (3) council members, and
 - (4) librarians.
- In terms of the categories of the types of material challenged and censored, he identified:
 - (1) political literature,
 - (2) religious literature,
 - (3) literature with sexual content, and
 - (4) a miscellaneous category (Blyton, Wodehouse, Crompton, etc)



The News International case (1986)



- Industrial dispute between News International (NI) and several trade unions was instigated by NI ceasing production of its newspapers in Fleet Street premises and moving the production to a facility in Wapping
- A call to support the trade union members in their dispute was heeded by Labour councils, and over 30 councils in England, Scotland and Wales decided to remove NI publications from their public libraries for the duration of the dispute
- Curry (1997) reports that some members feared that the action could set a dangerous precedent, leading to reciprocal bans by Tory councils in the future for political purposes they favoured
- The Library Association commenting on the case in 1986:
 - *“In our view it is manifestly not right that councillors should allow their personal opinions on a political or industrial matter to stand in the way of the right of access of the public to all publications which can reasonably be provided. Library Association Record, 88 (4) 1986, p.163)*



The Library response



- Councils were advised **against** the action by their library leaders and in legal advice
- Mr J. Goudie QC, to Islington Borough Council, which was subsequently circulated to a number of other councils stated that, *“in making any judgement in exercise of its duties [the council] should be guided by the ‘library’ criteria” only and that “Other ‘non-library’ considerations however relevant to the public interest should not be taken into account.”*
- A judicial review was sought by the publisher and printer of the newspapers, the holding company of the newspapers, and residents in Camden, Hammersmith, Fulham, and Ealing.



The judgement



- *I am of the opinion that the ban imposed by the respondents was for an ulterior object. It was inspired by political views which moved the respondents to interfere in an industrial dispute and for that purpose to use their powers under this [PLM] Act.*
 - – (R v London Borough of Ealing and others, p.49)
- *[The respondents] deliberately set out to punish the applicants. They had readily and easily available a weapon which they proceeded wilfully to use regardless of the library requirements of the public which should have been, but was not then, their concern. It cannot be other than to all sensible and right-minded people alarming, I think, to see such irresponsible behaviour by persons elected to serve their interest according to clearly stated law and in defiance of impeccably correct advice. There could hardly be a clearer abuse of power.*
 - (R v London Borough of Ealing and others, p.66)

The Fiske Report (1959)

TABLE 9

OBJECTORS TO CONTROVERSIAL BOOKS IN PUBLIC AND
SCHOOL LIBRARIES
(Percentages)

| Objectors | School libraries | Public libraries |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Librarian | 42 | 65 |
| Administrative personnel | 23 | - |
| Parent | 18 | 7 |
| Teacher | 8 | 2 |
| Patron | 6 ¹ | 21 |
| Other | 3 | 5 |
| Number of respondents | 95 | 132 |

Note: Data above is based upon cumulative figures for the three years preceding the study's field work.

¹Students.

- Conducted between 1956 and 1958 across California's school and public libraries
- Shortly after height of McCarythism
- McCarthy Era led ALA and the profession to declare librarians as defenders of intellectual freedom
- Fiske's findings suggested that some librarians were not as supportive of this value as the ALA believed.

Reasons for objections

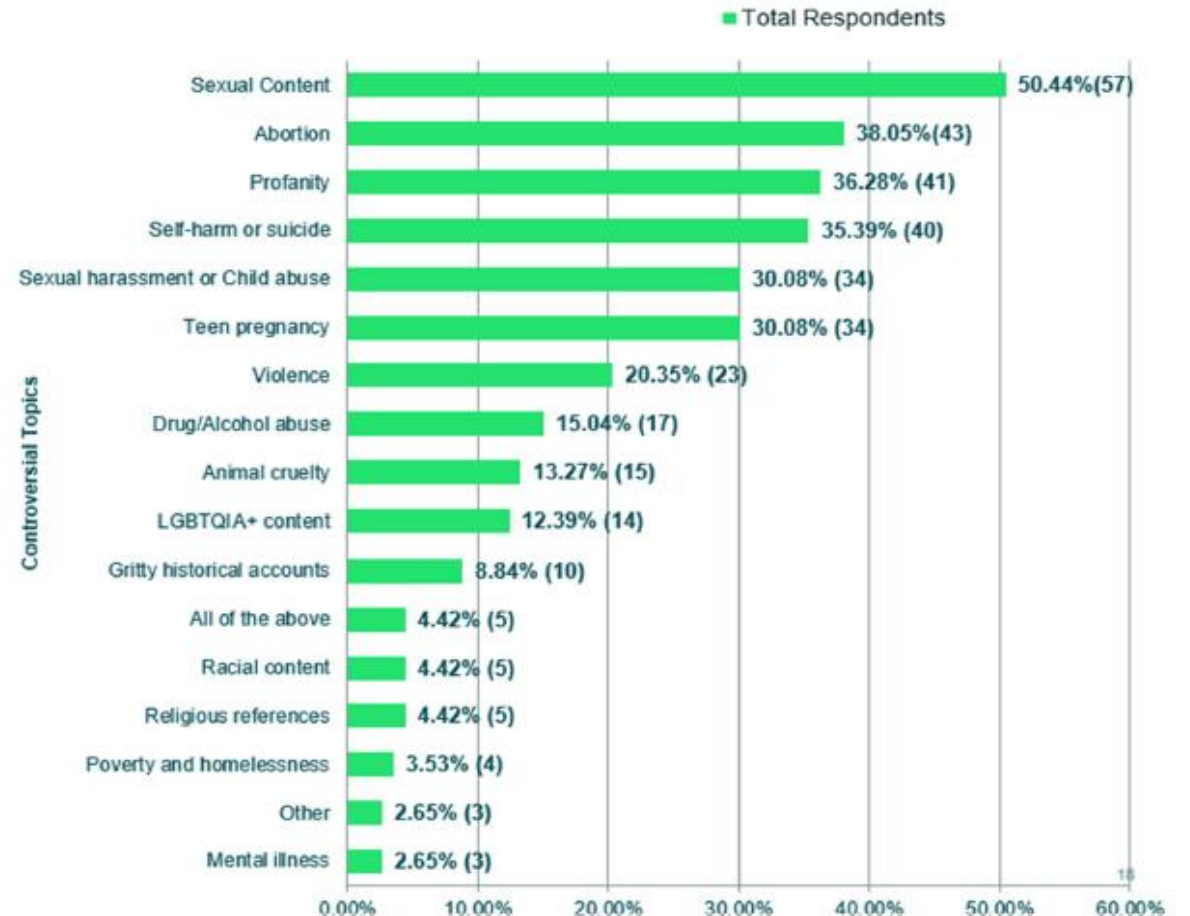
1959

TABLE 10
 GROUNDS FOR OBJECTIONS TO BOOKS IN PUBLIC AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES
 (Percentages)

| Grounds for objections | School libraries | Public libraries | Total, public and school libraries |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| Politics..... | 29 | 16 | 22 |
| Sex/obscenity | 28 | 44 | 38 |
| Profanity | 10 | 12 | 11 |
| Race, religion..... | 7 | 8 | 8 |
| "Controversial" or "unsuitable" . | 11 | 7 | 8 |
| Literary merit | 7 | 8 | 7 |
| Other | 8 | 5 | 6 |
| Number of respondents | 95 | 132 | 227 |

Fisk (1959)

2024



Moore & Tudor (2024)



The issue of self-censorship



1959

TABLE 14
LIBRARIANS' PRACTICE IN REGARD TO CONTROVERSIAL MATERIAL
(Percentages)

| Practices | School librarians | County librarians | Municipal librarians | Total |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Habitually avoid..... | 29 | 5 | 17 | 18 |
| Sometimes avoid ¹ | 29 | 45 | 49 | 41 |
| Not a criterion..... | 38 | 37 | 29 | 34 |
| No opportunity..... | 4 | 13 | 5 | 7 |
| Number of respondents..... | 51 | 40 | 65 | 156 |

Note: Categories represent dominant behavioral tendencies synthesized from respondents' explanations of how they handle specific titles.
¹If in spotlight or if avoidance can be justified for another reason.

1959

TABLE 21
PRACTICES IN REGARD TO CONTROVERSIAL MATERIAL,
BY LENGTH OF EXPERIENCE IN LIBRARIANSHIP
(Percentages)

| Practices | Years of experience | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-------|------------|
| | Less than 10 | 10-19 | 20 or more |
| Habitually avoid..... | 15 | 16 | 24 |
| Sometimes avoid ¹ | 29 | 45 | 52 |
| Not a criterion..... | 56 | 39 | 24 |
| Number of respondents... | 39 | 44 | 58 |

¹Combines "avoid if in spotlight" and "avoid if justifiable on 'legitimate' grounds."

2024

A more recent study found that “46.9% of the 113 respondents [school librarians] admitted to not purchasing a book because the book contained subject matter that might be controversial” (Moore & Tudor, 2024, p.14)

Community influence and self-censorship

1959

2024

TABLE 11
PRACTICES REGARDING CONTROVERSIAL MATERIAL,
BY COMMUNITY CLIMATE
(Percentages)

| Practices ¹ | Community climate | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------|-----------------|
| | Restrictive | Mixed | Permissive |
| Habitually avoid | 13 | 21 | 25 ² |
| Not a criterion | 40 | 43 | 22 |
| Number of respondents . . . | 62 | 38 | 55 |

¹Excluding "sometimes" and "no opportunity"—see Table 14. Columns, therefore, do not total 100 per cent.

²Nearly all of these restrictive librarians living in permissive communities are accounted for by one city which has a centrally and firmly controlled school library system and a public library system directed by a restrictive, and for the most part non-professionally trained, headquarters staff.

A combination of state censorship, hostility to press freedom, cancel culture, big tech interference, media complacency, and a substantial proportion of the public that has lost trust in its fellow citizens, has created the conditions within which authoritarian alternatives can germinate (Doyle, 2024, p.96).



Concluding thoughts

- Historical examples of censorship challenges mirror very much what we are viewing today
- While social media may exacerbate the number of challenges, the targets, reasons for challenge, and the behaviours these challenges represent remain consistent

Those who engage in censorship are always apparently altruistic – they invariably claim to be acting for the benefit of others (Thompson, 1975, p.212).

History does not look fondly on the hubris of those who... appoint themselves as arbiters of permissible speech and thought. Their authority is only ever contingent on the wisdom of their time (Doyle, 2024, p.4).



Concluding thoughts



- Self-protective information behaviours related to censorship (professional and public), including self-censorship, remain under-studied.

[Library self-censorship] ...the most elusive form of censorship (Yeon & Dudak, 2025, p.541)

Self-censorship is problematic because it violates core tenets of librarianship's commitment to intellectual freedom and limits library collections, denying access to books that diverse student bodies need to process their changing worlds. (Moore & Tudor (2024,p.2)

secrecy

short-termism

risk aversion

deception



- Curry, A., 1997. The Library Association Record and Censorship: A Content Analysis. *Libri*. 47 (4). pp.214-233.
- Doyle, A., 2021. *Free speech and why it matters*. Constable.
- Fiske, M., 1959. *Book selection and censorship: A study of school and public libraries in California*. University of California Press.
- Malley, I., 1990. *Censorship and libraries*. Library Association.
- Moore, J. and Tudor, A., 2024. To Add or Not to Add: An Examination of Self-Censoring Behaviors among School Librarians. *School Library Research*, 27.
- R v London Borough of Ealing and others ex parte Times Newspapers Ltd and others (1987) IRLR 129.
- Thompson, A.H., 1975). *Censorship in Public Libraries in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century*. Bowker.
- Yeon, J. and Dudak, L.T., 2025. Potential for trauma in public libraries experiencing book banning and material challenges. *Public Library Quarterly*, 44(5), pp.539-563.