The end of history: censorship and libraries

Alex Byrne[*]

ABSTRACT

Libraries have vital roles in society in protecting heritage, offering individuals and societies opportunities to improve the quality of their lives, and contributing to civil society. They play an important role is the free exchange of ideas within societies and across time and space. Libraries can be damaged through war, looting and neglect. But more pervasive is the great variety of methods of information control of censorship which are given many justifications including decency, community well-being, privacy and national security. However, such views are contingent as can be illustrated by considering changing attitudes to pornography. Librarians face personal dilemmas which contend with professional responsibilities to meet the needs of users and to promote the widest possible access to information. Any librarians who might wish to uphold principles of unrestricted access to information must either accept the boundaries or struggle against them.

Marble figurines from Tell es-Sawwan (6000 BCE) … Akkadian statue base (2000 BCE) … Copper head of a ruler from Nineveh (2300 BCE) … Assyrian stone statue (8000 BCE) … Model chariot from Mesopotamia (1900-1600 BCE) … Decorated alabaster vase from Warka (3000 BCE) … Gold jewellery from Ur (2600-2400 BCE) … Statue of Dud, prime minister of Lagash (2600-2300 BC) … Stone tools, sculptures and carving (100,000 BCE) … 80,000 cuneiform tablets, one with observations of the planet Venus (700 BCE … (Fray 2003)

[*] **Biographical note:** Alex Byrne chairs the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE - http://www.faife.dk) and is a member of the Governing Board of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA - http://www.ifla.org). He is the University Librarian and a Deputy Chair of the Academic Board at the University of Technology, Sydney in Australia where he can be contacted on Tel +61 2 9514 3332, Fax +61 2 9514 3331, alex.byrne@uts.edu.au.

The oldest extant pieces of writing in the world: the Gilgamesh Epic, the earliest work of literature in the world ... the oldest versions of the Code of Hammurabi, the earliest law code in the world ... (Bilderback 2003)

Letters between the court of Sharif Hussein of Mecca and the Ottoman rulers of Baghdad ... the Ottoman records of the Caliphate including:

- *requests to the Sublime Porte in Istanbul or to the Court of Sharif of Mecca*
- *lists of the cost of bullets, military horses and artillery for Ottoman armies in Baghdad and Arabia*
- *the opening of the first telephone exchange in the Hejaz*
- *the theft of clothes from a camel train by Ali bin Kassem, who attacked his interrogators "with a knife and tried to stab them but was restrained and later bought off"*
- *a 19th-century letter of recommendation for a merchant, Yahyia Messoudi, "a man of the highest morals, of good conduct and who works with the government"*

Handwritten accounts of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, with personal photographs and military diaries, ... microfiche copies of Arabic newspapers ... (Fisk 2003)

The modern day sacking of Baghdad …

> … for Iraq, this is Year Zero; with the destruction of the antiquities in the Museum of Archaeology on Saturday and the burning of the National Archives and then the Koranic library, the cultural identity of Iraq is being erased. Why? Who set these fires? For what insane purpose is this heritage being destroyed? (Fisk 2003)

This was Arab history, the history of Islam, but also the history of Mesopotamia, the history of trade, the history of colonialism, the history of the world.

Is this the end of history?

Fukuyama, in his provocative work, *The end of history and the last man*, proposed that the spread of the liberal democratic model was irreversible. He argued that history is being driven in a coherent direction by rational desire and rational recognition that is taking states to a post-historical position in which liberal democracy is the final form of government. If that process should continue, then "the apparent differences between peoples' 'languages of good and evil' will appear to be an artifact of their particular state of historical development" (Fukuyama 1992).

Whatever the merits of his argument, the destruction of heritage in Baghdad has been a clear example of wrong.   In the name of creating freedom records of our shared history have been destroyed. This is not the occasion on which to discuss either the political arguments for or against the invasion of Iraq. However, the consequences for cultural

heritage and the nation's capacity to rebuild its economy and society have been most serious. Libraries and museums throughout the country have been despoiled to feed the international trade in stolen antiquities, provide personal benefit and express anger. The invading troops have stood by – in contravention of the fourth Geneva Convention (Red Cross 1949) and the *Hague convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict* (United Nations 1954). They and their governments have ignored the warnings given before the invasion by international scholars and those concerned with cultural heritage such as the International Committee of the Blue Shield, which IFLA currently leads (Blue Shield 2003).

The distress caused by this loss is heightened because it was absolutely avoidable. The artefacts and documents had survived generations of thieves and wars, including the 1991 Gulf War. They were well documented. The need for their protection had been stated publicly. Leaders of government had acknowledged that they should be protected. They had survived the missile attacks and the shooting during the taking of Baghdad. The locations of the museums and libraries in which they were held were known. But yet they were not protected.

Of course, it is not the first time that heritage and intellectual resources have been destroyed. The destruction of libraries in Laos, Cambodia (Sturges and Rosenberg 1999) and Kosova/Kosovo (Frederiksen and Bakken 2000) symbolically destroyed national cultures. In Kosova it started with the harassment of library staff. In Cambodia, it was an element of 'Year Zero' marking the beginning of the age of creation of a new social order through the total transformation of society (Glover 2001, pp. 303-305). In the new nation of Timor Loro'sae (East Timor), the limited libraries provide by the Portuguese and Indonesian administrations were destroyed in the outrage of September 1999 (Blood 2001). It was not the first time in Baghdad itself: "Genghis Khan's grandson burnt the city in the 13th century and, so it was said, the Tigris river ran black with the ink of books" (Fisk 2003). Here in Alexandria, the great Library was destroyed. And, across the world, successive invaders and colonial powers have made off with cultural and other riches.

Many of these destructive events were motivated by greed or national pride. Others were attempts cultural cleansing, attempts to expunge culture, language or history. Whatever the purpose, they take from all of us. As the treasures of Baghdad remind us, documentary heritage is the shared history of humanity's discoveries, ideas and dreams.

The roles of libraries

That heritage has been kept in the great libraries and archives of the world which have traditionally been considered primarily to be storehouses of knowledge. They kept records, knowledge, works of imagination to enable the work of state and religion and for the scholar. Many works were preserved even when considered unacceptable by church, state or library authorities. Sometimes, as at the monastery of Bobbio during the Dark Ages, the fight against heresy demanded the collection of Aryan manuscripts in order to 'know the enemy' (Lerner 1999, p. 41). Even the libraries of oppressors have preserved works which they would suppress. For example, the KGB kept the

manuscripts of those they destroyed - thereby creating an archive of unacceptable literary works which was preserved for the time of *glasnost* when the doors of their literary vaults opened (Shentalinsky 1997).

Many have preserved knowledge which would be valued later. The Biblioteca Capitolare in Verona for example preserved the secular Younger Pliny's *Letters* and the poems of Tibullus and Catullus as well as early religious works from the sixth century on (Hobson 1970, pp. 17 seq). The libraries of the Islamic world preserved and transferred classical knowledge and added their own until they were taken up by the European scholars of the twelfth century (Gates 1968, p. 26).

Great libraries grew from archives of records and collections of literature (Casson 2001). Their growth was driven by acquisitiveness. Some, including the immense clay tablet collections at Nineveh and Hattushash – some of which were lost last month in Baghdad - and the Museion of Alexandria aimed at universality. Their administrators attempted to collect without limit, infamously building the Museion by using force to obtain all manuscripts carried by seafarers as well as carrying off riches from tributary states (Kesting 1985). Less hostile methods included soliciting copies from other libraries, borrowing manuscripts to copy in scriptoria or visiting other libraries to make copies, traditions which were continued by monastic libraries until printing made them redundant.

Some collections have increased through the carrying off library treasures in time of war. The Bibliothèque Nationale, for example, gained significantly from the zeal of Napoleon's commissioners who had been designated to remove cultural trophies from the conquered territories (Hobson 1970, p. 78). Such collection building methods were criticised by Panizzi. He "derided the Russians for building their library at St Petersburg from the Polish libraries they had carried off, and the French for with-holding still books taken from Italy and elsewhere by the armies of Napoleon. Better far to be without a national library, than to increase it by such means" (Miller 1988, p. 119). Books were also collected from conquered territories during the Nazi occupation of Europe (Petropoulos 2000) and on many other occasions.

Initiatives to repatriate "spoils of war" have extended to attempts to identify the original owners or their heirs so that restitution may be made[1]. Museums have led such initiatives but libraries are beginning to engage with the issues. The work of Russian and German national libraries has been especially notable and has, to a degree, been conducted under the auspices of IFLA (Lehmann 1996). Less dramatic, but none the less inimical to the preservation of national heritage is theft and illegal trade in antiquities and cultural property which continues despite the *Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property* (Unesco 1970); (Meyer 1974).

But libraries are more than treasure houses. They play an important role in defining and supporting the identity and culture of peoples. (Said 1984, p. 169) noted that the foundation of national institutions like libraries and universities is essential to creating a

---

[1] See for example the Washington Principles which were devised to guide initiatives to recover and restore Nazi confiscated art (Commission for Looted Art in Europe 1998).

sense of nationhood among exiled peoples such as Jews and Palestinians. Together with such projects as constructing a national history or reviving an ancient language, the institutions offer a concrete realisation of national identity. Offering a graphic illustration, a banner over the entrance to the national museum of Afghanistan proclaimed within days of the expulsion of the Taliban regime from Kabul: "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive" (Steen 2001).

But they also respond to societal changes by providing assistance to individuals to better themselves. The public library, as the 'people's university', supports both formal and self education through access to the world of knowledge and is in principle free of charges and open to all. Its potential is exemplified through such projects as the Biblored Capital Network of Public Libraries in Bogotá, Colombia, which its founder proposed "to promote a different vision, a different lifestyle in Bogotá … measuring citizens' success through … the development of their potential by providing them opportunities to improve the quality of their lives …" (Caballero 2003, p.1). He described the libraries as "urban temples" which would "symbolize the importance that the city wanted to placed on education and intellectual development, which also allow citizens to appreciate life more" (*Ibid*, p. 3)[2]. It provides access to information wherever it might be held. This function offers a powerful argument for investment in libraries as contributors to national development. In China, for example, public libraries have been coupled to "… self-adjustment in China's socialist market economy … economic construction and … serving economic development" (Liu 1996).

Another vision characterises public libraries as "open forums that cannot restrict access, that play a key role in the free exchange of ideas … and that must not become engaged in viewpoint discrimination …" (Latham 2001). This understanding of the public library's purpose goes further than the passive provision of access by extending into the promotion of access and the protection of the rights of users to receive ideas. The library is considered to exemplify democratic values in being 'open to all' and designed to accommodate a plurality of ideas and views. It can play an important role in promoting civil society, as was noted by Hisham Kassem, publisher of the *Cairo Times,* during a BBC radio discussion after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. He emphasised the importance of the civilising influence of libraries when he commented about unemployed young men from southern Egypt:

> … when these boys began to feel a sense of injustice there were no public libraries for them to read Voltaire or … Hassein or … or whoever. There was just a sheikh in the mosque talking about injustice. They joined the first voice of dissent they heard (Kassem 2001).

Censorship and its manifestations

Thus the damage to libraries, such as the University Library in Basra last month, has even wider effects than the destruction of heritage. The looting and breakage not only

---

[2] Biblored was awarded the 2002 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Access to Learning Award of US $ 1 million for its "accomplishments in making information technology accessible without charge to the public, particularly underserved communities" (*Ibid*, Preface).

damages the record of humanity's discoveries, ideas and dreams but hampers our potential to learn and imagine.

Other forms of information control are less dramatic than the looting we have recently seen but none the less serious in their consequences. They are manifested through the various forms of censorship and information control with which we are depressingly familiar.

Some centre on attitudes to sexuality and include prohibitions on obscenity and indecency, pornography and, latterly, that which might be considered to encourage paedophilia (Jones 2001a, pp. li-lx). Other concerns about decency can seek to prevent bad language, sexism and sexual harassment. At a societal level, the intention can be to ensure the suppression or advancement of specific ethnicities and languages, to prevent hate speech and racial vilification, or to protect religion by punishing blasphemy. Some may wish to manufacture consent for a regime or rewrite history, perhaps to favour a particular interpretation or to hide an unpalatable past. At a personal level, justifications can include the protection of private property, maintenance of privacy or avoidance of defamation. Special provisions usually apply to protect national security and in times of war or the threat of war.

This list does not present an exhaustive list of the purposes of censorship, but nonetheless indicates their broad extent. Many of the purposes and the likewise numerous methods of censorship date from early times. Speech, art and literature were all censored in Ancient Rome (Corrigan 2001) and the free exercise of all continues to be challenged by applying a multitude of techniques (Jones 2001a).   Many directly affect libraries and information services (Anderson 1974). Methods include funding restriction, filtering and blocking of the Internet, community pressure to exclude materials from collections and, at the extreme, book burning.

Libraries are also affected by measures which limit the availability of materials for acquisition. Of course publication of a work may be prevented absolutely.   At the extreme, and frequently for political reasons, publication may be suppressed by actions taken against creators and others along the production and distribution chain. Actions extend from intimidation leading to self-censorship to the much grimmer psychiatric abuse, imprisonment, exile and murder. Impediments such as market censorship, prior restraint on publication, and broadcasting bans prevent acquisition. Other measures can ensure that materials can only be obtained in modified forms and include bowdlerization or other reshaping by editors or translators. Commercial practices can restrict the audience for some materials through license provisions or demanding technology requirements. Even some library practices can restrict availability, especially the selection or deselection of materials for ideological reasons but including also misuse of restricted collections and misleading cataloguing and classification.

The central question when considering the nature of censorship lies in identifying the types of conduct which the law may seek to suppress (Griffith 1996, p. 3). The conservative approach to censorship emphasises the real or alleged harm to society which will result from moral disintegration including damage to the general social and cultural environment. The accepted approach in liberal democracies seeks a balance

between the least possible inhibition on freedom of expression while restricting that which is considered to be beyond community standards and, especially, that which flouts the primary human rights. Other countries adopt more liberal or more restrictive policies and practices, whether legal or extra-legal. Libraries must operate within these constraints. Any librarians who might wish to uphold principles of unrestricted access to information must either accept the boundaries or struggle against them.

Moral regulation

Finding a balance to suit a society presents a continuing tension between those who would be more open and liberal and those who would favour orthodoxy. Dramatically illustrated in contemporary Iran by the seesaw between the democratic modernisation promoted by the elected President Khameini (who was formerly a librarian) and the reaction of the religious establishment, such tensions are nonetheless common in all societies. All groups in society may express their views of what is proper and demand adherence to those views, demonstrating calls to order (Bourdieu 1998 [1994], pp. 54-56) which are so self-evident to those who express them that they may be perplexed when others fail to acknowledge their legitimacy.

Censorship, in the broad sense adopted in this paper, can be either assimilative or coercive. It is assimilative when it is perceived to have legitimacy because of its imposition by recognised authority, by authority which is accepted to be legitimate and disinterested. It is coercive when it is employed as a means of enforcing the moral or ideological beliefs of an element of society which is not recognised to hold legitimate authority, at least in relation to imposing those beliefs.

Authority can only be obtained by presenting, at least in appearance, an image of legitimacy and disinterest. and disinterested loyalty to the public good (Bourdieu 1998 [1994], p. 59).   The state generally attempts to regulate all forms of publication including printing, theatrical performances, public preaching and caricature because publication has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of an act by the state or the state itself (*Ibid*, p. 63). This was of particular concern to Communist and other dictatorial regimes. The widespread circulation of *samizdat* and the like demonstrated that many living under those regimes did not accept their legitimacy.

The professional narrative of non-judgemental, disinterested provision of access to information, which offers such a prized self-image to librarians, is a prime example of this process. General community acceptance of that self-image confers a legitimacy on their professional choices to make available or not make available. This legitimacy operates to endorse their decisions thereby endorsing that which they identify as worthy of being made available and, simultaneously marginalising that which they proscribe. When that legitimacy is not accepted, assimilative processes cannot operate and librarians may be forced to consider coercive measures. Decisions to remove Enid Blyton books from library shelves in many countries, including Australia and Sweden (Stenberg 1996), in the 1960s and 1970s offer prime examples of such coercive professional behaviour. The librarians making those decisions denied the popularity of

the books among children in Blyton's target reading ages, somewhat sanctimoniously removing the books because of a perception that they were educationally unsound.

The problem of pornography

Of the many types of human expression which can pose problems, pornography or obscenity is often the first to come to mind and, often, the easiest to find a reason to suppress. It is perhaps the first to come to mind because sexuality is a universal experience and attracts many taboos. It may be the easiest to suppress because for many its expression has little overt utility and might even be threatening. For some, it can only be justified through the right to free expression. Considered through this prism, there appears to be little *need* for users to access pornography (outside research into pornography or its effects, of course) and arguments about the right of users to explore their own sexuality or the diversity of human experience appear to lack substance in contrast to the fears of perversion or exploitation, especially of children.

But there is little agreement on what constitutes pornography or obscenity even within a culture, let alone between cultures. Literary history is demonstrates that acceptability is a moveable feast. For example, a good collection of English literature today would almost certainly include DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*[3] but it, like *Ulysses*, was considered obscene and banned in many countries (Grant 1992).   The banning and subsequent release of both demonstrated that conceptions of the pornographic are contingent. Indeed, Judge Woolsey found that *Ulysses* was a work of high literary merit (Vanderham 1998).

Changing community concerns and expectations pose special problems for the librarian who would seek to select according to "community standards". Some have reacted with timidity as did Swansea Libraries on the release of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – they purchased a copy but made it available by request only (Lucas 2001). This timid response is in the long established library tradition of the closed cabinet of restricted materials, accessible through cryptic catalogue entries such as "Sex – see librarian" (Byrne 1999). Others have developed extensive collections which document changing tastes and moral views including the infamous *Enfer* of the Bibliothèque Nationale (Quignard 2001).

The contention is made that the widespread display and consumption of pornography contributes to a cultural and social environment which is damaging to women (Griffith, *op cit*). (Itzin 1992, p. 413) has proposed that the incitement to racial hatred legislation could be a model for the regulation of pornography, rendering it unlawful to publish or distribute material which is likely to stir up sexual hatred. However, other feminists object to this proposition, suggesting that it casts women as victims with the result that measures to protect women are implemented rather than those which liberate women (Dwyer 1995, p. 183). In its recent General Comment 28[4], the United Nations Human Rights Committee has indicated an obligation on states to control pornography where it depicts adults, suggesting that the Committee considers pornography to be a form of

---

[3] Despite its exclusion from *The western canon* (Bloom 1994).
[4] "Equality of Rights between Men and Women", handed down 29 March 2000.

free expression, analogous to hate speech, which must be controlled but not totally banned. It argues that "the publication and dissemination of obscene and pornographic material which portrays women and girls as objects of violence or degrading or inhuman treatment is likely to promote these kinds of treatment of women and girls" (Joseph, Schultz et al. 2000, p. 639). It previously recognised that child pornography has become a common form of abuse of children worldwide and urged Belgium, for example, to take effective measures to curtail its possession and distribution (*Ibid*, p. 484). This represents an expression in international jurisprudence of the harm principle, justifying restrictions on the right to know by reference to other rights, especially in this case the rights of children.

Pornography and obscenity are particularly difficult for librarians (Isaacson 2000) perhaps because the profession is largely feminised in many countries. The personal concerns expressed by many librarians echo the contending views of feminist writers. As professionals committed to communitarian ideals, they abhor exploitation and degradation, especially of children. But their commitment to access to information includes the commitment to enable client access to information which they may personally find abhorrent. Some refuse to purchase and make available materials which have been or might be challenged, citing 'community standards' or legality (sometimes on doubtful grounds). Some object to providing Internet access to pornographic sites in public libraries, as in the recent case in which the Canadian Union of Public Employees called the Ottawa Public Library a "porn palace" and a "poisoned work environment" (Gray 2003); ('Keep the porn away from kids - editorial' 2003). Many seek a middle way such as the Swansea solution of making works thought questionable available only on demand. Others tough it out, expressing their strong commitment to freedom of access to information and consequently deciding to buy and make available solely on grounds of relevance or literary quality (Jones 2001b).

Community standards and the library

Prima facie it would appear that the concept of "community standards" should sit well with library policy and practice. It is consistent with the notion of service to a community such as the residents served by a public library, the students and staff of a university or school, or the members of a research institute. The primary service is making available information materials, whether by purchase, electronic licence or other means. To that end, libraries and their staff members select materials to purchase or make available and develop selection policies to guide their decisions. Those policies reflect the interests of each library's community of users and respond to their needs within whatever budgetary, policy and legislative constraints the library may operate.

However, it can be but a short step from selecting that which is relevant to rejecting that which might be considered objectionable by the community or indeed the librarian himself or herself. It is easy to say 'my clients don't need that' or 'we can't afford it' when considering materials about which the selector feels uncomfortable or fears a community backlash. It is easy to avoid controversy by restricting purchases to the tastes of the majority using the justification of applying the always limited resources available to deliver the broadest benefit. But this strategy risks marginalising minority

preferences whether they be for particular genres, languages or formats. The old blind lady with an interest in philosophy might, for example, find it very difficult to obtain spoken word versions of the writings of the great philosophers because all public libraries consider them to be of minority interest. Members of an ethnic minority might be unable to read in their own language. More challengingly for the librarian, the fetishist and neo-Nazi may demand and be refused materials supporting their interests. Each may claim that their interests have been ignored and they are subject to oppression by the majority.

Deciding what to purchase can pose major ethical dilemmas for both libraries and librarians. Since resources are always limited, selections must be made. The aim is to find a basis for making decisions which eschews bias. It challenges the each library to develop a clear selection policy which is based firmly on the needs of the library's clients and not subject to extraneous considerations such as political acceptability. For librarians, it can lead to self questioning of the reasons for making particular selection decisions especially when the materials are personally objectionable or perhaps expected to be controversial.

Professional associations have tried to guide and assist both institutions and individual librarians by preparing ethical statements which frequently make such demands as

> The librarian
> - shall endeavour to provide best possible user access to information and literature without censuring (*sic*) legal material
> - shall on the most objective basis possible provide information which is as complete as possible and matches user needs … (Riksbibliotektjenesten 2002) translated by (Vaagan 2002)

and

> In his/her professional activity a Russian LIBRARIAN (*sic*):
> - builds his/her relations with users on the basis of respect for a person and his information needs;
> - considers free access to information as a person's inherent right; …
> - resists access restriction to library materials and does not allow unauthorized withdrawing and groundless refusal (censorship) of requested documents; … (Russian Library Association 1999) quoted in (Melentieva 2002).

Although far from universal, these commitments to meeting the user's needs, objectivity and resisting censorship are widely shared by librarians and their associations. Their philosophical foundation is expressed in documents such as the *CLA statement on intellectual freedom* which includes the assertions that

> Libraries have a basic responsibility for the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom … [and] to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable. To this

end, libraries shall acquire and make available the widest variety of materials. (Canadian Library Association 1985 [1974])

This was echoed later by the *IFLA Statement on libraries and intellectual freedom* (IFLA 1999) which was subsequently transformed into the *Glasgow Declaration* (IFLA 2002).

Despite these aspirations, the weight of community expectations bears heavily on public and school libraries. The commitment to meeting the needs of the clientele can be expressed as a wish not to offend the general views of the community which librarians serve. Thus, librarians may exclude some material from their libraries for fear that it might offend the general community or a section of it and in doing so, might deprive another segment of the community from material which it desires to access or from which it might benefit. The work of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom has demonstrated the frequency of demands for censorship imposed by pressure groups and highlighted the importance of a principled stand in response to such pressures (ALA. Office for Intellectual Freedom 2002).

A recent example can be seen in the calls in many countries for the banning or restriction of JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Calls for removal of the books from school libraries have been based on their explicit references to magic - which has been called anti-Christian and offensive to Christians. (Montgomery 2002) reports a library employee's objection to ordering them on the grounds that they promote "witchery". Writing about the books, Christian publications have warned against the dangers of making "light of sorcery, charms and spells … [which] invoke evil – and the origin of all evil is demonic" (Horvat 2002). Alongside all these objections, the books have been immensely popular, firstly in the English reading world and then in translation. Parents and teachers have reported that non-readers have become so engrossed that they have read them avidly and to the end. This sets perceived dangers against the goal of encouraging reading – a primary goal for librarians specialising in services for children and young adults. To remove or censor them would violate the professional commitments both to access to information and to meeting clients' needs. The case illustrates the contradictions between responding to calls for censorship in the name of community standards on the one hand and both providing literature desired by members of the community and also addressing broader community goals such as the extension of literacy.

Librarians' educative role demands not only that they should provide the materials required by their clients but also that they should contribute to the development of a degree of critical media consciousness by their clients. These serious purposes demand that effective libraries must make available useful – that is, 'good' – materials, whatever they may be. However, the utilitarian commitment to non-judgementally meeting users' needs should mean providing what the user demands even if it should be unacceptable to the librarian or the general community. It requires the expansion of professional techniques such as classification to handle previously proscribed materials (Dilevko and Gottlieb 2002). Further, the deeply felt and generally expected professional responsibility to maintain documentary heritage should be inclusive of all expression, including the obscene, if the record of human consciousness is to be preserved. The

imperatives to make available that which is useful (as defined by individual clients and the broader communities served by each library) and to preserve the record imply that librarians will be forced into challenging acceptability.

This responsibility forces librarians to deal with information and knowledge which they dislike or distrust. There are many things of which we dare not speak. Wilde famously wrote of "the love which dare not speak its name" but the challenges extend beyond sexual matters. For example, in his recent book, *On the natural history of destruction*, Sebald writes of horrors which we dare not express, even to ourselves, through the experience of the German people post World War II (Sebald 2003). Günter Grass has similarly challenged his fellow Germans in his latest book, *Crabwalk*, in which he explores the effects of history and memory on the present (Grass 2003).

Censorship forces us to consider the reasons for which someone may wish to suppress information. We need to ask: Why? What is their interest in suppression? Who will gain from that suppression?

Censorship and intellectual freedom

Censorship with respect to political content is particularly prevalent in times of war or international tension. As an American writer noted quite early in the Cold War: "Since mid-1950 the drive to remove books on Communism from library shelves, to label them as untouchable, or to restrict their use has become more vocal and more insistent" (Bixler 1954). But he was against restriction and quotes approvingly President Eisenhower's abjuration to the students of Dartmouth College on June 14, 1953: "Don't join the book burners … Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book as long as any document does not offend your own ideas of decency. That should be the only censorship."

Considered broadly, intellectual repression is an inevitable result of censorship whether it be imposed by others or through self censorship adopted for fear of the consequences of expressing one's thoughts or the perhaps even more pernicious danger of political correctness (Lessing 2001). Either way, it stultifies the imagination and imprisons the human spirit. Its consequences are long lasting. The many years of dictatorship in Chile, for example, left a legacy of self censorship of which many Chileans are barely aware. It prevents them from openly discussing many topics and even from comprehending their self imposed barriers. (Budnik 2002) noted that this inhibition prevented librarians from pursuing their professional commitment to unrestricted access to information.

Applying the covert methods adopted in the Soviet bloc, intellectual repression can be resisted by resort to an underground literature (*samizdat*), exile literature (*tamizdat*), overseas broadcasts (*radizdat*), and tapes (*magnizdat*)[5]. Libraries within such repressive societies generally ignore subversive media unless they collect it for research purposes and then keep it in very secure conditions with use permitted only under very

---

[5] Terms derived from official Soviet terminology such as *gosizdat* … material put out by the state publishing house (Skilling 1989, pp. 3-17).

stringent conditions (Genevieva 1999). However widely it may circulate within the society, it is not considered as part of the recognised cultural heritage (at least until the regime changes). The reasons are various: librarians may approve the restriction of dangerous ideas or the selective promotion of particular views - or they may be cajoled or intimidated into supporting the censor. In seeking accommodation with the oppressive regime, the librarian may become "a real heroine of moderation" - Kundera's telling label for Ivana the Terrible, the headmistress in Škvorecký's *Miracle in Bohemia* who picks out the least bad quotations from Marx (Kundera 1984, p. 18).

In Soviet Russia and under other totalitarian regimes, librarians could offer passive resistance by collecting unacceptable materials even if they could not be made available. They could hope for a better day and build for that future. However, it appears that such work was limited to state sanctioned collections of banned materials such as that in the Lenin Library. As Budnik noted, the effects of living and practicing within a repressive system run deep.

South Africa

South Africa is a case in point. Its long history of intellectual repression, censorship and secrecy coupled political censorship in support of an authoritarian regime with concern about pornography (Merrett 1994).   Before the Second World War, black writing was ignored and unconventional white writing suppressed. From 1937, there were repeated calls for and initiatives to impose political censorship to prevent criticism of fascism and to suppress communist and anti-war views. Starting with the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950[6], the state constructed a structure of censorship and self-censorship which lasted for four decades.

Imported books and periodicals were strictly controlled under the Customs Act on sometimes arbitrary grounds. Although university libraries could obtain permits to import banned books for research purposes, only two permits had been issued by May 1955 – and the titles were kept confidential. However, there was relative freedom for materials published in South Africa which enabled the publication of a rich anti-apartheid literature.

The recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry in Regard to Undesirable Publications in 1957 included a single system for both imported and domestic publications; a Publications Board to categorise materials; registration of all newspapers, periodicals, publishers and booksellers; and banning of communist literature. In a sop to research it recommended that libraries could hold banned literature for research purposes. Nevertheless, the South African Library Association (SALA), among others, strongly opposed the subsequent 1960 Bill because of its effect on freedom of expression. The provisions regarding the press were dropped in favour of a Press Code. The legislation was reintroduced and passed in 1962 avowedly to control indecency, blasphemy and communist opinions.

---

[6] Contemporaneous to the House Un-American Activities (McCarthy) Committee in the USA.

After the shootings at Sharpeville in 1961 and subsequent marches, a state of emergency was introduced under which writers were imprisoned or deported and publications banned. Detention, house arrest, banning and listing, political trials and banishment were used over the following years to intimidate, harass and silence critics of the regime. Black writing and any critical of apartheid or presenting unacceptable race relations was suppressed. Banned persons, organisations declared unlawful, anything deemed to have security implications and anything which could cause embarrassment to the government could not even be mentioned.

New censorship legislation in 1974 removed the right of appeal and enabled administrative banning. It was in Gordimer's chilling phrase, "an octopus of thought-surveillance" (Gordimer 1976). In the late 1970s, the Botha government made the system more sophisticated, giving the censors greater powers but introducing some positive amendments including a general exemption for university and other large libraries. Alternative publishing ventures challenged the system.   Under the 1986-1990 state of emergency, suppression of ideas and control of communication were central. Widespread censorship "was very much more radical and effective than that which operated before 1986 … [it] sought to control information only from within South Africa, depended almost entirely on state employees to enforce it, and encouraged self-censorship" (Merrett, *op cit*, p. 137).

From President de Klerk's speech on 2 February 1990, this whole unwieldy apparatus began to be dismantled as publications, organisations and individuals were unbanned. However, although some provisions were removed, the Internal Security Act remained in force and continued to be used. Classified documents and archives were destroyed, presumably to protect those who might have been held responsible for the crimes of apartheid. Merrett (*Ibid*, p. 194) suggests that "This seemed to sum up the censorship of the glasnost years, which allowed a greater degree of freedom of opinion and expression while placing a high premium upon covering up unedifying details of the past".   South Africa subsequently provided a brave example of a nation attempting to deal with its dark history when, from 1996, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission worked to uncover those "unedifying details" while promoting reconciliation especially with those who acknowledged their crimes.

Merrett considers that in some South African university libraries there was overzealous application of the censorship laws and a tendency to anticipate their application. There was a climate "of apparent liberalism overlaid by an anxious legalism and subservience to distant authority" and few challenged their legitimation of "a system of thought control" (*Ibid*, pp. 198-199). Merrett charges the profession of librarianship with "collaboration and connivance with the authorities" in zealously upholding the Act (*Ibid*, pp. 211-213). The entire professional ethos was undermined: the more liberal members "appealed for administrative tidiness in the censorship system", the "totalitarian aided and abetted the state by searching for escaped banned material on the open shelves, interpreting the law literally, and surrounding the process with an air of bureaucratic solemnity" (*Ibid*, p. 212). Their professional association, the South African Institute for Library and Information Science (SAILIS) failed to oppose the racist and repressive policies of the government, concentrating on 'professional' issues.

Merrett suggests that the Publications Act could have been rendered unworkable if librarians had chosen not to comply with its provisions and consequences.

Merrett may well be correct but the demands he would have placed, with the benefit of hindsight, on South African librarians are weighty. As members of a racially divided society, they could be expected to reflect the views of the various segments of that society with some supporting the government's policies, some accepting them as necessary if unpleasant, and some rejecting them. Even those who felt that the policies were wrong would have found it difficult to challenge them. A stronger response to the Publications Act and other repressive measures would have conflicted with their commitment to service to the community and their sense of obedience to authority, with key aspects of their professional habitus. It could also have placed their lives and livelihoods at risk and might have led to imprisonment, brutality or exile.

Other forms of information control

This paper has focussed on the consequences of war, which is all too fresh in our minds, and the implications of censorship, usually inflicted by governments. But there are other forms of information control which have no less serious effects.

They include the insidious commodification of information which turns knowledge into something which can be appreciated only through its price in the market place. Notable for its effects on the cost structures and operation of scholarly communication over the last thirty years, commodification has made it impossible for researchers outside the richest nations to access the wealth of scholarly literature. Despite recent initiatives such as PubMed and BioMed, access to important information for health, education and national development is outside the reach of most university libraries in this continent, Africa, and in many other parts of the world. Concern to extend their economic hegemony has led the owners of commodified to argue for the extension of intellectual property protection under the guise of fair trading arrangements promoted by the World Trade Organisation and World Intellectual Property Organisation.

Indigenous knowledge is exploited under similar provisions. Intellectual property regulations protect the exploiter, not the original owner of the knowledge. We need to recover the original balance between the interests of the creator and those of the wider community, of humanity. But we also need to finds way of addressing indigenous and other non Western concepts of knowledge.

In addition, we need to address the needs of the vulnerable. They include those on the wrong side of the digital divide who suffer major information inequality – inequitable access to information. The disabled experience particular disadvantage because modern communications media can make it even more difficult for them to access information and to be able to participate fully in society.

These are all form of information restriction. Although some might be considered 'collateral damage' because they are by products of processes which have other goals, all have the effect of disempowering peoples. Perhaps that is the reason why they are so

difficult to change: because, in disempowering many, they advance the advantage of a few.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a broad approach to its topic, "censorship and libraries". It has considered the motivations and effects of censorship but also the dire results of war and disadvantage on library collections and on access to information. It has touched briefly on other forms of information control. It has considered some of the results of those practices.

The heritage of humanity is not just the property of one people, one nation, one religion – or a few millionaires … It belongs to us all. From librarians, it demands a commitment to preserve, celebrate, and make available riches of scholarship and knowledge. It requires us to deal even with that which makes us uncomfortable and which some believe should be suppressed.

Here in Alexandria, we are celebrating the opening of the new Biblioteca Alexandrina. May it be a worthy successor to its predecessor the great Library of Alexandria and promote universal access to information. In Gunter Grass's words:

> *It never ends. Never will it end.*
> (Grass 2003)

References

ALA. Office for Intellectual Freedom 2002, *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 6th edn, Chicago, ALA.

Anderson, AJ 1974, *Problems in intellectual freedom and censorship*, New York, R. R. Bowker.

Bilderback, L 2003, *Information on the looting and burning of Iraq's National Library and National Archives [ALACOUN:9314]* (personal communication, email, 15 April 2003, to ALA Council List <alacoun@ala1.ala.org>), ALA.

Bixler, P 1954, 'Introduction', in *Freedom of book selection: proceedings of second conference on intellectual freedom, Whittier California June 20-21 1953*, F Mosher, ed., Chicago, ALA pp. 1-9.

Blood, J 2001, *APHEDA Library Project - National University of East Timor*, August 2001, [Dili], APHEDA. http://untl.labor.net.au.

Bloom, H 1994, *The western canon: the books and school of the ages*, New York, Brace.

Blue Shield 2003, *Statement by the International Committee of the Blue Shield on the impact of a war on cultural heritage in Iraq*, The Hague, International Committee of the Blue Shield. http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/statement-iraq.htm.

Bourdieu, P 1998 (1994), *Practical reason: on the theory of action [Raisons Pratiques]*, G Sapiro, R Johnson and L Wacquant trans., Cambridge, Polity.

Budnik, C 2002, *Open use of the Internet and self censorship in Chile* (personal communication, discussion, August 2002, to A Byrne), Glasgow.

Byrne, A 1999, ''See librarian': university libraries and intellectual freedom', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* vol. 30 (2), pp. 107-118.

Caballero, MC 2003, *Biblored: Colombia's innovative library network*, Washington, Council on Library and Information Resources.

Canadian Library Association 1985 (1974), *The CLA statement on intellectual freedom*, CLA. http://www.cla.ca/about/intfreed.htm.

Casson, L 2001, *Libraries in the ancient world*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Commission for Looted Art in Europe 1998, 'Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, December 1998', in *Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, Washington DC, December 3, 1998*, Washington, ECLA. http://www.lootedartcommission.com/lootedart_washingtonprinciples.htm.

Corrigan, PL 2001, 'Rome, ancient', in *Censorship: a world encyclopedia*, D Jones, ed., Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, vol 3 pp. 2052-2058.

Dilevko, J and Gottlieb, L 2002, 'Deep classification: pornography, bibliographic access, and academic libraries', *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* vol. 26, pp. 113-139.

Dwyer, S 1995, *The problem of pornography*, Wadsworth.

Fisk, R 2003, 'Library books, letters and priceless documents are set ablaze in final chapter of the sacking of Baghdad', in *The Independent*, London, 15 April 2003.

Fray, P 2003, 'Culture's vultures', in *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 18-20 April 2003, Easter Weekend Edition, News Review, p. 23.

Frederiksen, C and Bakken, F 2000, *Libraries in Kosova / Kosovo*, Copenhagen, IFLA/FAIFE. http://www.faife.dk/.

Fukuyama, F 1992, *The end of history and the last man*, London, Penguin.

Gates, JK 1968, *Introduction to librarianship*, New York, McGraw-Hill.

Genevieva, E 1999, *Closed collection in the Lenin Library* (personal communication, interview, October 1999, to A Byrne), Moscow, unpublished.

Glover, J 2001, *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century*, London, Pimlico.

Gordimer, N 1976, 'No protection', *Index on Censorship* vol. 5 (1), p. 44.

Grant, D 1992, 'DH Lawrence: a suitable case for censorship', in *Writing and censorship in Britain*, P Hyland and N Sammells, eds., London, Routledge p. pages?

Grass, G 2003, *Crabwalk*, New York, Harcourt.

Gray, K 2003, 'City library becoming 'porn palace': CUPE: children can glimpse explicit material on library computers', in *Ottawa Citizen*, Ottawa, 25 January 2003, p. D1. Republished http://www.cla.ca/issues/citizen_grary.htm.

Griffith, G 1996, *Censorship: a review of contemporary issues*, Sydney, NSW Parliamentary Library.

Hobson, A 1970, *Great libraries*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Horvat, MT 2002, 'Harry Potter and the problem of good and evil', *Daily Catholic* vol. 13 (100). http://www.dailycatholic.org/issue/2002May/may30tru.htm.

IFLA 1999, *Statement on libraries and intellectual freedom*, The Hague, IFLA.

IFLA 2002, *The Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom*, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. http://www.ifla.org.

Isaacson, D 2000, 'Discriminating librarians', *Library Journal*, pp. 40-41.

Itzin, C, ed. 1992, *Pornography: women, violence and civil liberties*, Oxford, OUP.

Jones, D, ed. 2001a, *Censorship: a world encyclopedia*, Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn.

Jones, D 2001b, 'Libraries: Britain and the United States', in *Censorship: a world encyclopedia*, D Jones, ed., Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, vol 3 pp. 1416-1418.

Joseph, S, Schultz, J, et al. 2000, *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: cases, materials and commentary*, Oxford, OUP.

Kassem, H 2001, 'Letter to America, broadcast 9 December 2001, transcript time mark 00.29.11', Correspondent, (London), BBC. http://news.bbc.co.uk/.../transcripts/1698317.t.

'Keep the porn away from kids - editorial' 2003, in *Ottawa Citizen*, Ottawa, 28 January 2003, p. B4. Republished http://www.cla.ca/issues/citizen_editorial.htm.

Kesting, JG 1985, 'Qumran and the quest of modern librarianship', in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, A Kent, ed., New York, Marcel Dekker, vol 39, Supplement 4 pp. 368-387.

Kundera, M 1984, 'Paris or Prague?' *Granta* vol. 13, pp. 11-19.

Latham, JM 2001, 'Positioning the public library in the modern state: the opportunity of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA)', *First monday* (6-7). http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_7/latham/.

Lehmann, K-D 1996, 'A new proposal for negotiations by the German-Russian Expert Group concerning the repatriation of the spoils of war', *Spoils of War: international newsletter* (3). http://spoils.libfl.ru/spoils/eng/spoils3.html.

Lerner, F 1999, *The story of libraries: from the invention of writing to the computer age*, New York, Continuum.

Lessing, D 2001, 'Foreword: censorship and the climate of opinion', in *Censorship: a world encyclopedia*, D Jones, ed., Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn pp. vii-x.

Liu, X 1996, 'Public libraries and economic development in China', in *Proceedings of the 62nd IFLA General Conference, Beijing*. http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla62/62-xial.htm.

Lucas, J 2001, 'DH Lawrence', in *Censorship: a world encyclopedia*, D Jones, ed., Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, vol 3 pp. 1382-1386.

Melentieva, JP 2002, 'The Russian librarian's professional code of ethics', in *The ethics of librarianship: an international survey*, RW Vaagan, ed., München pp. 209-217.

Merrett, C 1994, *A culture of censorship: secrecy and intellectual repression in South Africa*, Cape Town, David Philip & University of Natal Press.

Meyer, KE 1974, *The plundered past*, Readers Union.

Miller, E 1988, *Prince of librarians: the life and times of Antonio Panizzi of the British Museum*, London, British Library.

Montgomery, JG 2002, 'A most delicate matter: religious issues and conflict in the US library workplace', *Library Management* vol. 23 (8-9), pp. 422-434.

Petropoulos, J 2000, *The Faustian bargain: the art world in Nazi Germany*, London, Allen Lane.

Quignard, M-F 2001, 'Érotisme et pornographie (special issue)', *Revue de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* vol. 7.

Red Cross 1949, *Convention (IV) relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war*, Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross. http://www.icrc.org.

Riksbibliotektjenesten 2002, *Recommended ethical guidelines for librarians and library employees in Norwegian academic and research libraries*, Oslo, Riksbibliotektjenesten.

Russian Library Association 1999, *Russian librarian's professional code of ethics*.

Said, E 1984, 'Reflections on exile', *Granta* vol. 13, pp. 157-172.

Sebald, WG 2003, *On the natural history of destruction*, A Bell trans., New York, Random House.

Shentalinsky, V 1997, *The KGB's literary archive*, London, Harvill.

Skilling, H 1989, *Samizdat and an independent society in central and eastern Europe*, Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Steen, M 2001, 'Precious little survives hammers of men who desecrated for God', in *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 5 December 2001. http://www.smh.com.au.

Stenberg, C 1996, *Draft CAIFE Report* (personal communication, email, 30 October 1996, to CAIFE drafting subcommittee).

Sturges, P and Rosenberg, D, eds. 1999, *Disaster and after: the practicalities of information service in times of war and other catastrophes. Proceedings of an international conference sponsored by IGLA (The International Group of the Library Association), University of Bristol, UK, 4-6 September 1998.*, London, Taylor Graham.

Unesco 1970, 'Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property', in *The plundered past*, KE Meyer, ed., Reader Union.

United Nations 1954, *Hague convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict*.

Vaagan, RW 2002, 'Norwegian librarianship, ethics and ABM', in *The ethics of librarianship: an international survey*, RW Vaagan, ed., München, Saur pp. 192-208.

Vanderham, P 1998, *James Joyce and censorship: the trials of Ulysses*, New York, New York University Press.