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Published paper

Pooley, A and Birdi, B (2008) *How ethical are we?* Public Library Journal, 23 (1).
12 - 15.

Source: Public Library Journal (Cilip)
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 1, March 2008
Page: 14,15,16,17
Area: 1520 sq. cm
Circulation: 7000 Quarterly
BRAD info: page rate £0.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 020 7255 0500
Keyword: The University of Sheffield

Training: Intellectual Freedom How ethical are we?

ALEXANDRA POOLEY and BRIONY BIRDI
reflect on training in censorship and intellectual freedom in the public library.

tions.

"I feel it's a topic we probably all feel we know about and don't need training in; but I suspect that in the face of an actual situation, we might be less confident than we expect." Library staff survey respondent

Intellectual freedom is a concept which many believe to be at the heart of the library profession (Byrne, 2000:61; Gorman, 2000:90; IFLA, 2007:1; McMenemy et al, 2007:126). Even so, Curry's 1997 study of censorship and intellectual freedom found that "British... [public library] directors acknowledge that more training [on censorship and intellectual freedom] is needed at all employee levels", but that it "appears...to have a low priority because of its abstract nature and the more immediate need for training in new technical and service-delivery areas." (149).

Ten years have passed since Curry's study, so what is the present situation? The overall aim of the MA Librarianship dissertation study, on which this article is based, was to establish if the weakness concerning training for public library employees regarding intellectual freedom and censorship identified by Curry (1997:149) still exists, and if so, to suggest how this problem could be resolved.

Defining key terms

Before beginning the study, it was necessary to define the key terms. For 'censorship', we use the American Library Association definition: "The suppression of ideas and information that certain persons - individuals, groups or government officials - find objectionable or dangerous" (ALA, 2007). This is particularly useful as it clearly defines censorship as a negative act which denies information.

For 'intellectual freedom', we again used the ALA definition: "The right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction" (ALA, 2007). Although censorship and intellectual freedom are issues in their own right, we would consider them to be inextricably linked because if one exists the other cannot be taking place.

Both definitions were included in the questionnaire distributed to public library staff (see below). Respondents were invited to discuss any disagreement they may have had with these definitions, yet none chose to challenge the explanations offered indicating agreement with the provided defini-

Data collection: questionnaires

The first phase of the data collection consisted of one questionnaire for public library staff and an additional questionnaire for lecturers. These two lines of enquiry were not dependent on, or informed by, the responses of the other.

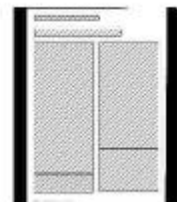
The participants did not form a representative sample of the population, but an accessible selection. However, given the inductive, and predominately qualitative nature of the research this was not problematic. Inductive research does not necessarily seek to be representative, but to illuminate an issue in greater depth.

In total, 86 public library staff questionnaires were sent out, and 77 were returned, giving a response rate of 89.5%. The sample was reasonably varied, including a wide range of working-ages, job titles and length of public library experience. The majority of respondents were educated to degree level or above (86%), held a professional qualification (83%), and were members of CILIP (73%).

A separate, simultaneous questionnaire was sent to professionals who are involved in training and advising public library staff, but are not library employees themselves. For example, library and information studies lecturers, and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) advice staff.

The researcher contacted the CILIP Advice Team and Ethics Panel, and the sixteen universities with LIS courses accredited by CILIP. Twelve universities replied, although four replied to say that they had forwarded the email to the appropriate lecturer and a further university explained that they had very little course content relating to the subject. Seven lecturers from different institutions returned the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 44%. The sample contained three Lecturers, two Senior Lecturers, one Subject Leader, and a Professor of Library Studies, all of whom work at different universities.

It was particularly useful to gain another perspective from people with some experience of these issues and who, by the nature of their jobs, were likely to be aware of the current state of training. It was also interesting to be able to compare the thoughts of outside observers with those currently working in public libraries regarding questions such as: the appropriateness of training; who should receive training; and whether individual judgements or absolute guidelines are central to dealing with issues relating to censorship and intellectual



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freedom. This comparison added greater depth to the investigation.

Data collection: interviews

Given that questionnaire-based methods of gathering data can produce limited replies, face to face interviews also took place with four public library questionnaire respondents. Interviewees were chosen by geographical distance, due to time and money constraints, and represented 5% of the total respondents to the survey.

Interview questions were designed to build on themes brought out by questionnaire responses, with a particular focus on the future of training regarding censorship and intellectual freedom. For this reason the interviews were part of a second phase of data collection and took place after all questionnaires had been returned.

Findings: the state of ethical training today

There appears to be little doubt that the weakness identified by Curry's (1997:149) research continues to exist. The majority of the public library questionnaire respondents had not received training in the areas of censorship and intellectual freedom, and even some of the 16 respondents who had received some training only received guidance in certain areas of concern and did not address the topics as a whole. Additionally, interviewees revealed that their library authorities continue to prioritise training which address "technical and service-delivery areas" (Curry, 1997:149).

Given that the majority of the library staff sample held a professional qualification, it was hoped that the number of positive responses would have been higher. However, only 16 of the 77 respondents (21%) could recall having received any training relating to censorship and/or intellectual freedom. Respondents referred to a wide variety of training experiences including a specific course on stock selection, briefings on Freedom of Information and Data Protection, and a workshop at a regional CILIP Members' Day.

Library school lectures were mentioned with the highest frequency, with nine respondents recalling such training. However, as mentioned above, given the high percentage of professionally qualified respondents (83%) it seems worrying that 61 respondents could not remember having received training. Although Cole's (1998) study revealed that some respondents had not covered intellectual freedom at library school, it may also be likely that some respondents failed to remember this lecture, or equate training only with courses they are sent on by their employer. One respondent indicated in her questionnaire that she had received no training, but later (in her interview) referred to lectures attended at library school; highlighting that in fact some training had been received.

Content of training received

To attempt to ascertain if the message of the training had made much of an impact, respondents were also asked to write down three main things they learnt from the training they

had received.

Overall, the training appears to have had a positive impact on respondent's awareness of the complexities of issues relating to intellectual freedom and censorship. Responses included: an awareness of the potential for personal bias; the need to be conscious of unintentional censorship; an understanding of the sensitivity of the issues; valuing the freedom of the individual; the legal position of libraries; and who to consult in the event of a problem.

Exploring the absence of training

79% of respondents could not recall having received any training in this area.

The two most frequently cited reasons for which respondents believed that they had not received any training on issues relating to intellectual freedom or censorship were because it is: "not necessarily an everyday issue" and so is regarded as a low priority; or that it has "no immediate relevance to [my] job". Similarly, an interviewee expressed the view that she thought that she had not received any training because it was an issue not deemed to be relevant to her post. However, during the course of her interview she remembered that she had once been "asked to bring porn" by a home library user. Reflecting on this, she suggested that with training she "might possibly have dealt with it better, as it was I ran".

Budget pressures and a lack of staff time were mentioned by six respondents, while two respondents indicated that it was "not considered a priority training need by library managers". More worryingly, one respondent regarded the lack of training as being related to a "move away from professional librarianship" within her authority, while a further three respondents made reference to training being unnecessary because they felt that the values of intellectual freedom were upheld in their area. Comments such as these perhaps suggest a lack of awareness regarding unintentional censorship.

Three of the respondents took a broader approach to the matter, referring to the UK situation as a whole: "public librarianship in the UK seems somewhat reticent about these issues... issues are not addressed directly but answered on an ad hoc basis". Such a response echoes comments made by a lecturer who claimed that the issues of censorship and intellectual freedom have "been neglected, even ignored, and that librarianship has been a poorer profession because of this".

Who should receive 'ethical training'?

Both questionnaires asked participants to respond to the statement "Training on intellectual freedom and censorship should be provided to all levels of public library staff". Nearly two-thirds of public library staff respondents (63%) agreed with this statement. *Figure 1*

The crucial role played by frontline staff was emphasised by many as a reason to provide training to all employees. As

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one respondent explained, frontline staff are often "first in the line of fire when people object" and they tend to "get the brunt of complaints". Those who disagreed with this referred to a lack of necessity, general cost implications, or simply that training should be concentrated on more senior employees so that frontline staff could forward issues to them.

For academic staff, the provision of training for all levels of library staff was also clearly supported in line with the results from the public library staff questionnaire. Five respondents strongly agreed, while the final two respondents agreed with the statement. One respondent stated that "if public library staff do not know why public libraries exist in the first place any service they may offer is weakened". Such a statement clearly echoes the view found in the literature (as stated above) that intellectual freedom is at the heart of the library profession (Byrne, 2000:61; Gorman, 2000:90; IFLA, 2007:1; McMenemy et al, 2007:126) and supports the library staff respondent comment that "these issues lie at the core of librarianship".

How well do we deal with 'ethical complaints'?

To try to ascertain how confident public library staff questionnaire respondents already felt with issues relating to censorship and intellectual freedom (and therefore what type of training was required) they were asked to respond to the statement: "I feel able to confidently deal with a complaint relating to censorship and intellectual freedom by a member of the public". **Figure 2**

Over half of the respondents (51%) chose to strongly agree (9%) or agree (42%) with the statement. Just over a quarter (26%) of these respondents also made reference to some form of training, or knowledge of local authority policy. An interviewee also referred to local authority policy and relevant parts of the staff manual that could help them when dealing with a complaint relating to electronic resources, as well as a course previously undertaken in book selection. However, it is interesting that not one public library questionnaire respondent or interviewee referred to the CILIP guidelines on this issue.

It is interesting to compare these data to the responses given regarding whether or not training had or had not been received. Not all of those respondents who reported having had training earlier in the questionnaire indicated that they were confident; 3 (19%) strongly agreed, 8 (50%) agreed, 2 (13%) were neutral, and 3 (19%) disagreed.

The explanation given by 9 of the 14 respondents (18%) who disagreed with the statement, and all of the 5 respondents (7%) who strongly disagreed, can be typified by the comment of one respondent that she did not feel confident due to a "lack of training/awareness".

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Judgements versus guidelines

Both questionnaires asked respondents to consider the statement "Individual judgements, rather than absolute guidelines, are key to responding to any complaints that refer to issues to do with censorship and intellectual freedom", **Figure 3**

Respondents to this question had very mixed feelings. Thirty-three respondents (43%) selected 'neutral' and used the opportunity to explain their answer to clarify why they had chosen this response. Fourteen of these respondents indicated that they felt a mixture of judgement and guidelines were appropriate for dealing with such issues, and a further four respondents stated that many issues would be "context dependent". Taking this idea a little further, one respondent suggested that there are "occasions when some element of judgement may be required... for example in relation to safeguarding children using the internet". However, it is likely that some people reading this may disagree with that comment and assert that 'safeguarding' is merely another word for censorship; the ALA guidelines clearly state that access should not be restricted on the ground of age (ALA, 2007a).

One respondent provided a more cautious version of comments made by many of those who had agreed with the statement stating that "with any policy there will inevitably be grey areas and there should be some leeway for staff to exercise discretion. However, if this is exercised too freely, then there is a danger that the discretion will be applied according to individual prejudices and could then end up being discriminatory".

The closeness of the justifications and comments made across the board – by those who agreed, were neutral and disagreed – indicates the complexity of this area. There is support for the existence of guidelines, but these will necessarily need to be interpreted and, therefore, an element of individual judgement will be required.

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Recommendations

A fundamental objective of this research was to suggest ways in which the training for public library staff relating to censorship and intellectual freedom might be improved. An initial point to make is that in order to promote the importance of engaging with issues of censorship and intellectual freedom, the content of specific training and library school courses should be examined, in addition to that of the more 'informal' training methods such as via conferences and journal articles.

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It may be, of course, that censorship is taking place because people have not been trained to deal with the complexity of issues that may arise, not because they disagree with the concept of intellectual freedom.

Below are the main suggestions that have emerged from this research:

● **Greater engagement with ethical issues in library schools**

If the library profession wishes to support intellectual freedom then it must promote it during professional training. This suggestion was also made by Cole (1998) and although progress has been made since then it is still not enough. Assuming that libraries and librarians support intellectual freedom and oppose censorship can lead to complacency; we must promote what we believe in and our reasons for doing so.

● **Specific training to be introduced by CILIP**

Running a course on this area would bring CILIP to the forefront of educating library staff on issues relating to censorship and intellectual freedom, cementing its commitment to ethical considerations. Many of the public library questionnaire respondents expressed a wish for a basic general awareness course, and a number of respondents are already turning to CILIP for sources of information regarding censorship and intellectual freedom. It would, therefore, make sense to join these two findings, especially given that all interviewees envisaged CILIP taking a key role in the education of library staff.

Although some staff may have already covered the issue at library school, many other employees will not have received any training, especially given the increasing use of paraprofessionals. Additionally, even if the issues were covered at library school, some questionnaire respondents indicated that they would welcome an update on the topics. It is probable that a quick overview or refresher session could be provided in a half day, with a day long course providing more comprehensive training.

However, for library staff to be able to make these judgements with reference to professional rather than personal beliefs it is likely that they will require some form of guidance and/or training. It would be unreasonable to expect anyone to make complex judgements without guidance about how to approach such issues. The final section of this article will therefore consider ways in which improvements could be made to ethical training as it currently stands.

A final point

Intellectual freedom should not be taken for granted; we cannot assume that everyone understands what it is, its implications, the threats to its existence and how to defend it - if they have not been given the tools with which to do so.

● **Further development of the Information Ethics website**

In addition to specific training, the new Information Ethics website (www.infoethics.org.uk) needs to address this issue, and other ethical issues, in more depth. The available selection of case studies must be relevant to, and useful for, public library staff interested in intellectual freedom and must include examples which relate, for example, to the complexity of meeting chil-

dren's information needs with reference to intellectual freedom.

● **Greater emphasis on ethical issues in the Chartership and Revalidation process**

To make sure that candidates for Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) have an understanding of ethical issues, the Museums Association holds a training course called Ethical Problem Solving (Museums Association, 2007a). It appears from this evidence that the library profession is lagging behind the museum profession in their formal engagement with ethical issues. If CILIP introduced specific training, as recommended above, then it would not be unreasonable to suggest that they incorporate a greater ethical dimension into the Chartership/Revalidation process to ensure that Chartered librarians and information professionals have knowledge of the relevant issues.

● **Training to be offered in local authority library services**

At the very least, it would be advisable to include a page in any staff manual acknowledging the complex and sensitive nature of issues relating to censorship and intellectual freedom. It could also provide quick tips on dealing with any complaints of this nature that may arise, together with contact details of members of staff with expertise in responding to such issues. Additionally, with the increase in Internet filtering in public libraries, often clarification is needed at the local level, and therefore library authority specific advice is necessary.

● **Greater engagement with issues relating to censorship and intellectual freedom by other organisations**

To emphasise the centrality of intellectual freedom to the profession, it would be helpful if other organisations promoted ethical considerations of relevance to their particular interests. Censoring stock is after all not a "reader-centred" (Opening the Book, 2007) action, but a suppression of information/material that may be of interest to some readers.

Further information

Further details of the research covered in this article are contained in the dissertation submitted by Alex Pooley (and supervised by Briony Bird) as part of her MA in Librarianship degree at the University of Sheffield (Pooley, 2007). For information contact: Briony Bird, Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield (0114 222 2653; b.bird@sheffield.ac.uk).

Acknowledgements

We thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding Alex with a Professional Preparation Masters Award (2006-7).