

# Defending the freedom to read

## A reflection of personal values and censorship

by Frances J. Maloy

Values affect the behaviors, attitudes, and choices that we make. It is a good idea to get in touch with these values: identify them, evaluate them, and consciously choose to recommit to them or adopt new values. W. Lee Hisle's theme has prompted me to reexamine the personal values that led me to librarianship and have kept me in the field for 16 years.

### What freedom means

A need to serve, a desire to be involved in higher education, and an interest in harnessing the power of information drew me to library school. While in library school, I discovered that working in libraries would meet another very important value of mine—freedom. I define freedom as the right to choose, to think, to research, and to make your own decisions.

During a class discussion on censorship, book banning, and intellectual freedom, I learned of the important advocacy role that the ALA plays nationally. We also discussed that the freedom to read meant that you had to defend the right for all points of view to be presented, even when the point of view was very offensive to you. It was at this point that I felt committed to the profession of librarianship; other professions could have met my need to serve and be a part of the educational process, but none that I was considering served my value of freedom as directly.

Once I was working in a library, it didn't take long for me to realize that not all librarians shared the same view of freedom regarding librarianship as I did. I encountered subtle and not so subtle acts of censorship, most not intentional, in the behaviors and attitudes of librarians. Specific examples that I know about include: a request by a librarian to withdraw a title from the collection that she thought was racist; the absence of any general gay or lesbian periodicals in a research library collection; and a gift of sexually explicit material being put in a locked area rather than putting it through the normal processing procedure.

I made the decision to put Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* on reserve. My intent was to protect the book and make it available for all interested people to read. A student questioned this decision and assumed I was censoring the book. I was surprised that he interpreted my actions as censorship, although I did wonder why no one checked the book out from reserve. In retrospect, I should have kept the book in the circulating collection and ordered several more copies.

One justification that I hear for not buying something is that it will get stolen or destroyed. If this were really true no library would subscribe to *Der Stern* or *Sports Illustrated*, and we would have very poor art and photography book collections. Another

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reason I hear is that the material doesn't fit in the focus of the collection. This is a very legitimate reason for not purchasing materials, and there are excellent resources available to help guide librarians with these decisions.

### **The Internet and censorship**

To open access to the Internet raises the issue of censorship again and forces librarians to address how their own values are affected. Some librarians argue that since we carefully select print materials for our collections, we should filter access to the Internet as well. I have difficulty accepting this justification because I see a difference between spending money to purchase, catalog, and house an item, and providing access to the material on the Internet. Academic librarians have always been concerned with creating selected bibliographies or recommended sources for our researchers, and academic librarians

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have also been concerned with providing researchers the tools and skills to locate all possible sources on a topic. I see filtering the Internet the same as providing reference assistance to a researcher and knowingly excluding relevant primary and secondary sources because I found the content offensive.

### **Recommit to freedom**

I hope that through the dialogue Lee Hisle has begun, we librarians will recommit to our value of freedom—freedom of expression, freedom to think, and freedom to read. I hope that we will focus our efforts on opening access to all materials while teaching researchers how to use reason and critical thinking to evaluate the quality of the sources they are using. ■

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