

**CENSORSHIP AND PUBLIC MORALITY:
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE LIBRARY**

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Whilst the library has often, but not always, been the focus of formal censorship, it has always been subject to the kind of quasi-censorship we now refer to as neo-censorship. The judgements that the librarian, whether in a national, public, academic or research library, makes on stock selection; display, presentation and storage of material; and assistance to readers, all place the librarian in the role of potential censor. Despite some protestations from leaders of the profession, for the most part librarians have tended to listen to the promptings of their inner censor and, what is more, they have continued to do so in the age of electronic delivery of information content. To say this is not to condemn the members of the profession as willing allies of the suppressors of cultural expression. Librarians generally express goodwill towards an ideal of information and ideas freely open to all, but in the practice of their profession they have tended towards conformity with conventional conceptions of public morality.

In this conformism librarians are to a large extent only expressing their location in the whole ecology of information and ideas. The librarian is somewhere near the top of a food chain in which information is produced in raw state by researchers and other observers, given form and shape by writers and commentators, published and packaged by companies and institutions and distributed by yet another layer of mainly commercial organisations. If the ecosystem is controlled and manipulated by larger forces and is poisoned by fear and prejudice, what is the librarian to do? The answer to this question used to be 'Carry on with the cataloguing and hope that goodwill is enough'. More recently IFLA, the leading international body in librarianship, has chosen to promote a more committed approach to librarianship through its FAIFE core activity. (<http://www.ifla.org/faife/index.htm>) The FAIFE Committee was set up in 1997 and it takes Article 19 of the Universal Declaration as expressing the mission of librarianship that IFLA represents.

This is hardly a complete innovation in the philosophy of librarianship. Individual librarians have practiced courageous Article 19-based librarianship all over the world. Most notably, in the USA the American Library Association, through its Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), promotes and supports librarianship as a counter to censorship. (<http://ala.org/ala/oif/default.cfm>) One of the key activities of the OIF is to help librarians stand up to the hundreds of challenges to items of library stock that come each year from citizens or organisations. Books, such as seemingly unobjectionable as Harper Lee's 'To kill a mockingbird', are challenged, chiefly on fundamentalist Christian or right wing political grounds. The OIF supports the librarians concerned and has developed a Challenges Toolkit for use on such occasions.

IFLA, through FAIFE, stands for global standards and a universal approach to the problem of censorship and neo-censorship as it affects libraries. In seeking to do something about this there is, of course, a whole series of layers of difficulty. FAIFE's activity is described as having three elements: Advocacy, Education and Intervention. Intervention is intended to show IFLA's support for librarians who struggle to provide access to information and ideas in countries that practice some form or other of the suppression of information. The history of FAIFE's intervention is that it mainly takes the form of press statements, and that more substantial activity has been possible in only a few cases (missions to Kosovo, Cuba, and Israel/Palestine for instance). It is also clear that nothing at all has been done in relation to the worst cases (such as Burma or Equatorial Guinea) where suppression is so complete that it seldom produces comment outside the national borders. There is also a sense that the interventions do more to make a general point than they help to change things in the target country. Therefore a great deal of FAIFE's energy has been directed towards activities that fall under the Advocacy and Education headings.

Whilst FAIFE advocacy and education is intended to have an impact, however indirect that might be, on formal censorship it is much more directly aimed at changing a profession that is too complicit in neo-censorship. Three types of neo-censorship can be identified as effecting librarianship: the use of software filtering to control electronic access, not only by government at various levels, but by libraries themselves, often through the agency of commercial organisations; the control of access to intellectual property through its ownership and distribution by major global corporations; and the pervasive effects of social conformity of a number of different kinds. FAIFE is developing a Workshop programme (funded by the Swedish development agency Sida), with learning materials that can be used by local presenters throughout the world, that is setting out to address these areas as effectively as possible. Workshops based on IFLA's Internet Manifesto (<http://www.ifla.org/III/misc/internetmanif.htm>) have been developed and piloted since early 2007 and they directly apply to filtering. The problem of the concentration of corporate ownership and control of information, through publishing, library book supply, electronic content aggregation, and the functioning of search engines has not yet been fully addressed, but it is high on the agenda. Workshops that address aspects of social conformity are also in the development process.

The perception that HIV/AIDS is first of all a problem of knowledge and secondly a matter of infection and treatment, was introduced as a general theme for IFLA in 2003. Its implications for FAIFE were clear. In many parts of world open discussion of sexually-related matters is not socially accepted and thus it was possible for millions of people to contract HIV/AIDS without any idea of its sexual transmission. It has taken brave people to stand up and acknowledge their own HIV positive status, or that of family members, and information institutions that are willing to spread this message wider are important. FAIFE's Workshop package on 'Access to HIV/AIDS Information' is already being welcomed by librarians in developing countries. The next package to be developed, in late 2008, will be on 'Transparency, Good Governance and the Struggle against Corruption'. Key aspects of this will alert librarians to the dangers of corruption in the profession itself, chiefly through the over-close relations between prosperous corporations on the one hand, and underpaid librarians on the other. Other related projects should follow.

FAIFE also sees itself as having a role in exploring the dimensions of intellectual freedom on behalf of the profession. When librarians sought guidance on the issues raised by the publications of cartoons unfavourable to the Prophet Mahommed in a Danish newspaper in 2005, FAIFE responded. A debate was held at the annual World Library and Information Congress in Seoul in 2006, and the Chair analysed the issue in IFLA Journal. (<http://www.ifla.org/V/iflaj/IFLA-Journal-3-2006.pdf>). The question of tolerance and the ways in which tolerating the (often intolerant) views of religious groups might limit intellectual freedom (neo-censorship via tolerance) is not an easy one. At present the Chair is researching the way in which comedians come to terms with the boundaries of freedom of expressions for the lessons this might offer to the library profession. All in all, FAIFE's project of arousing the conscience of the library profession has many years of work left in it.