

Intellectual Freedom
and Social Responsibility
in American Librarianship,
1967–1974

by

TONI SAMEK

WITH A FOREWORD BY
SANFORD BERMAN



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To the memory of
Jackie Eubanks

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Foreword

by Sanford Berman

The controversies within librarianship over social responsibility and intellectual freedom that Toni Samek so painstakingly (and fascinatingly) chronicles for the period 1967–1974 persist into the new millennium. Her thoughtful, detailed study can well provide a basis for better understanding where — as a profession — we have been, and where we’re going.

Two recurring themes in Samek’s analysis are the concept of *neutrality*, as propounded most notably by David K. Berninghausen, and the question of what *intellectual freedom*—enshrined in the Library Bill of Rights and subsequent “interpretations”—really means in practice, and who it applies to.

Perhaps surprising to some, I don’t think neutrality, as an ideal, is necessarily a Bad Thing — provided it’s undertaken within a context of real social and economic justice, of actual equality and empowerment. But that wasn’t the reality in the sixties. Nor is it today. In fact — although with striking and laudable exceptions — most libraries now, just as before, are not “neutral” at all. Instead, they are distinctly biased toward property, wealth, bigness, mainstream “culture,” and established authority. And so, overwhelmingly, are professional institutions like the American Library Association. In April 1997, I made these points during a talk at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:

Despite the frequent rhetoric about free-and-public, libraries seem increasingly to identify with the middle and upper classes, with wealth and property. Fines — of any kind — are arguably classist, discriminatory — yet there’s no discernible trend or movement to abandon them. And the same for fees for basic services — like Internet use or online database searches or getting a book that’s at another branch. If anything, these are multi-

plying. Baltimore County's Charlie Robinson declared candidly in a *Library Journal* interview last year what I suspect is widespread but seldom admitted: that his library was firmly and unapologetically a middle-class institution serving the middle class. No one needs to be a savant to appreciate that resources expended on investment and business tools and services astronomically exceed what is devoted to similar materials and outreach to workers, labor union members, and poor folks. There's literally no comparison. Where I work, as simply an indication of mind-set and orientation, senior managers regularly get informational routings from the director's office. Much in these packets is directly library-related: newsletters and reports from other library systems and groups — but invariably there are also bulletins and announcements from local chambers of commerce, along with *everything* issued by a Twin Cities right-wing think tank called the Center for the American Experiment. The slant of these routings I've challenged at least twice, not urging that the business and conservative stuff be dropped, but rather that material from labor, antipoverty, women's, and ethnic sources be included. The routings continue as always, the assumption being that to emphasize business and property and wealth is right and normal and somehow *not* political.

Finally, anyone who's attended an ALA conference or read about public-private tie-ins in the library press realizes that libraries are increasingly and overtly being commercialized. Indeed, we last week created a new heading at Hennepin County Library (HCL): Libraries — United States — Commercialization. The heading reflects a discussion on precisely that development in Herbert Schiller's 1996 book, *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America*. The first program at this year's San Francisco conference will doubtless — as in past years — be billed, not as the ALA Opening Session, but as the Ameritech Opening Session. At this year's midwinter meeting in Washington, D.C., a major panel problem sponsored by ALCTS featured 12 speakers talking about outsourcing. Every one of them was vendor. Not one represented consumers or expressed an anti-outsourcing viewpoint. That was about selection. The day before, a two-hour session on outsourcing cataloging did include two librarians, who essentially reported how they did it good (i.e., abdicated their cataloging responsibilities), but their presentations were dwarfed by a twice-as-long performance by someone from OCLC who, in effect, conducted an unabashed infomercial. When, at the very end, I questioned out loud the quality and value of outsourced catalog records, I was greeted by an almost totally hostile response from both speakers and audience. And then there's San Francisco Public Library, as an example, naming whole areas or rooms to com-

memorate corporate donations — like the Exxon or Amoco Room (I forget which). That's akin to providing daily, nonstop advertising to the beneficent donor. And it *is* political. It affects — undoes — the feeling of a neutral, nonthreatening, nonhuckstering turf that a public library ought to have.

In June 1990, at its annual conference in Chicago, ALA (first the membership, then the council) approved a “Policy on Library Services to Poor People,” originated in Minnesota by MLA’s Social Responsibilities Round Table (MSRRT). Grounded in the elemental recognition that poor people do not enjoy the same access to library resources and information that people with adequate incomes do, the policy sought to promote the elimination of barriers to library use by low-income people, provision of relevant services determined by underserved populations themselves, raising public awareness of poverty-related issues and resources, and acting to directly reduce if not eliminate poverty itself through support of such legislative initiatives as living wage laws and universal health care. One decade later, the policy has yet to be seriously and systematically implemented. (For details on how it was officially derailed, see my Foreword to Karen Venturella’s *Poor People and Library Services* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998]). To Berninghausen & Co. that very non-implementation would probably be hailed as an exercise in “neutrality.”

“Intellectual freedom,” as promulgated by the Library Establishment (particularly ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom and Intellectual Freedom Committee), has always been much too narrowly conceived. It has largely marbled into a fixation on challenges to specific library materials — like the *Harry Potter* series and R. L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* books — and frantic opposition to Dr. Laura’s crusade for Internet filtering. Of course, challenges happen. Frequently. Often, but not always, the motive *is* censorious. And in such cases, the effort should be resisted, invoking the First Amendment and Library Bill of Rights. However, two things need to be observed about challenges or “requests for reconsideration.”

First it *should* be the staff and public’s right to question materials selection — unless we believe that selectors are always infallible, that they just can’t make mistakes. (A library user some years ago at HCL complained about a kid’s book dealing with Down’s syndrome that consistently employed the obsolete and demeaning terms “mongoloid” and “mongolism.” Obviously, this was something that staff had overlooked in weeding. So it was rightly, if belatedly, withdrawn. About a year and a half ago, I asked for reconsideration of a French picture book that had been secured through a jobber without any reviews or other evaluation. The selection was outsourced, done sight unseen. In fact, the book peddled

every imaginable stereotype concerning Native Americans, clearly violating most guidelines for bias-free writing and illustrating. Well, they retained the title, but I think it was proper to question the choice.)

Second while individual challenges usually garner headlines (and ALA attention), they don't represent the true extent or depth of library censorship. This "outside" censorship is almost certainly less pervasive and less damaging to intellectual freedom than what I call "inside" censorship. When, for instance, *Of Mice and Men* is dropped from a school reading list in Peru, Illinois, that's definitely not good; but neither is it a national calamity or a truly meaningful case of book banning — because the chance is that the Steinbeck novel is still available in the school library, in the public library, and in the local or electronic bookstore. The prototypical Dr. Laura-style filtering — the ostensible object of which is to protect minors from violence and especially sex on the Web — should concern librarians and patrons, too. After all, filters are notoriously unable to differentiate between "legitimate" and "obscene" sexual matter and, if universally applied within a library, would limit access by adults to Constitutionally protected speech. Well, ALA has adopted guidelines opposing filtering as an abridgment of the First Amendment, and librarians have instead developed online kid-guides that promote "safe" sites. But the irony here is that the profession seems to be suddenly defending the presence in libraries of often graphic, explicit sexual images and texts in electronic form that it just as diligently excludes from libraries in print or video formats. (To be candid, there are real, on-the-floor problems in many libraries involving patrons who not only access visual erotica on the Internet, but then deliberately attempt to impose those images on other library users, for instance by printing copies and laying them out publicly — or leaving a terminal with possibly offensive graphics still appearing on the screen. However, these are behavioral problems best addressed by rules and protocols and particularly by remote printers and privacy screens.)

These, then, are the far more widespread and serious kinds of censorship — that is, limiting access to ideas and opinions and cultural expression, as well as throttling speech itself — that are practiced *within* and *by* libraries:

- the failure to select whole categories or genres of material, despite public interest and demand on the one hand or the need to reflect a broad spectrum of human belief and activity on the other
- irresponsible, circulation-based weeding, consigning sometimes valuable and unique works to the dumpster
- economic censorship in the form of fines collected solely for rev-

enue and the imposition of fees for services like video and bestseller borrowing that make them unavailable to poor or fixed-income people

- inadequate if not outright erroneous cataloging, as well as restrictive shelving practices, rendering much material inaccessible even though it *is* in the collection
- repression in the workplace, denying staff the opportunity to express themselves without fear on professional and policy issues, and — especially by means of electronic monitoring — creating an atmosphere of intimidation and submissiveness

To slightly amplify the selection category: Self-censorship is librarianship's "dirty little secret." Put another way, it's the fact of seldom-acknowledged and hard-to-justify boundaries or exclusions. As examples, most libraries don't collect comics or many graphic novels. Few get any zines whatever, although that's arguably the hottest contemporary publishing scene. Recent surveys show that small press fiction and poetry, as well as many other well-reviewed freethought, labor, and alternative press titles, are woefully underrepresented in both public and academic libraries. And then there's sex, particularly if it's in the form of photos or film or deals with beyond-the-pale topics like anal intercourse or S&M. Ordinarily, libraries would have bought multiple copies of anything by Madonna. But her graphic *Sex* book, which featured a number of S&M pics, was barely bought at all — or treated (as at Minneapolis Public Library) like a communicable disease: one copy sequestered behind the reference desk, only to be glimpsed in-house after giving up your driver's license as collateral. (As an ironic contrast, libraries like Hennepin County that didn't get Madonna's tome at all, *did* buy *Madonnarama* [San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1993], a collection of essays and criticism *about* her book. So there's abundant commentary available regarding a work that purposely *isn't* available!) In "Really Banned Books" (April 1998 *Counterpoise*), Earl Lee writes, "Few, if any books are banned outright in this country. But many *are* overlooked, ignored, sidelined and squeezed out of the market place." "Many small press books," he concluded, "are unable to find a place in bookstores or libraries." Books with sexual content — like the excellent products from Down There Press (San Francisco) and Factor Press (Mobile, Alabama) — top his list of virtually banned material.

Becoming increasingly dominant within librarianship — albeit never recognized or described by the Intellectual Freedom junta — is what might be termed the Techno-Blockbuster philosophy, which views digital technology as the overriding fact of the future, making traditional formats like

books, magazines, CDs, and videos ultimately superfluous, yet which emphasizes — for the time being — conglomerate-published, Madison Avenue-hyped bestsellers, which may be bought in massive quantities to satisfy artificially created demand. And they aren't just acquired. They're prominently displayed and publicized by libraries as though there were some special, intrinsic, compelling worth to them. They are consciously pushed in ways that most midlist or small and alternative press materials are not, reflecting a bias in favor of bigness and big money. This is what I said about the whole issue in that 1997 speech:

The shibboleth is that libraries are supposed to oppose censorship and provide the widest possible spectrum of perspectives and information — cultural, social, economic, political, religious, sexual. At the national and state policy levels, something curious has happened. The ALA and state associations rightly battle legislation like the Communications Decency Act, and support school and public libraries facing challenges to particular books or films or magazines. However, the time and energy spent on these matters is so overwhelming that as a profession we don't seem to have noticed, much less done anything about, the growing actuality that the very channels and producers of intellectual and cultural goods are shrinking in breadth and vitality and diversity. It's what Schiller, Ben Bagdikian, Michael Parenti, Noam Chomsky, Norman Solomon, and Robert McChesney have tried to warn us about for years. And what *The Nation* has stunningly documented with respect to publishing alone in two recent issues. It's the rapid concentration of media ownership; the expansion of conglomerate publishing; the death of independent bookstores (and the variety they promoted) under the onslaught of Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores, as well as K-Mart discount operations; the giveaway of public airwaves to the Big Boys; and the not-surprising dictation by superstores like K-Mart, Blockbuster Video, Baker & Taylor (through its "best" lists) of what gets published, what gets pushed, and even what gets expurgated (e.g., sanitized rap). The bottom line militates against producing or distributing novel, experimental, or critical material that may have limited markets.

To be a little melodramatic, while we're agonizing over *Of Mice and Men's* being dropped from that school reading list in Peru, Illinois, Ted Turner, Disney, Viacom, and Bertelsmann are walking away with the whole damn store. These giants decide what's okay, what's fit to be read, or seen, or heard. And like well-bred sheep, we buy right into it. Our library orders hundreds of copies of books that in some instances haven't been published yet — and in others haven't even been *written*. Why?

Because Random House announced it will spend \$50,000 on hyping the new Grisham or Mary Higgins Clark novel or Marcia Clark memoir. Quality, relevance, accuracy, style — none of that's as important as sales and hypes. We become willing accomplices in the homogenization and commodification of culture and thought.

Finally, related to that last category of inside censorship, the vaunted Library Bill of Rights and ALA's Professional Code of Ethics do *not* firmly and explicitly support or encourage free speech on the job, the right to openly state opinions on professional and policy matters without fear of reprisal. Samek documents the abject failure of these declarations and their keepers to assist such colleagues as Joan Bodger, Ellis Hodgin, and Zoia Horn in their struggles against internal muzzling and governmental repression. It is no different now, 30 years later. Managerial prerogatives still trump librarians' rights to unfettered expression. And appeals to the profession's intellectual freedom guardians by beleaguered colleagues are reflexively and sometimes angrily rejected as "micromanagement." Or simply not acknowledged at all.

My saddening conclusion about workplace speech in libraries is that it's generally not free or legally protected. And that the only staff who *may* enjoy some measure of personal liberty are either those covered by academic freedom guarantees in university settings or represented by a union. Despite my directly and swiftly informing ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, Intellectual Freedom Committee, and Intellectual Freedom Round Table (to which I belonged) about my early-1999 denial of free speech at Hennepin County Library (fully documented in the December 1999 *Librarians at Liberty*) and asking for their help, none of them ever assisted me. Indeed, they never even responded. No did ALA leaders. And precisely the same non-response greeted my plea for help in January 2000, when I discovered that six books by and about me had been expunged from the HCL online catalog and possibly also from the shelves. So the somber fact remains that ALA *still* fails the individual librarian, instead favoring bureaucratic and managerial interests. (In part, this is an almost inevitable outcome of its membership criteria: *anyone* willing to pay dues can join, so while ALA may, indeed, be composed largely of librarians, there are also significant numbers of trustees, vendors, and publishers, among other "outsiders." And such decision-making bodies as the ALA Council and Executives Board are notoriously freighted with administrators and administrator-wannabes.)

Yes, the situation remains bleak. Yet many colleagues retain the vision of a profession that truly and permanently weds the principles of social responsibility and intellectual freedom, resulting in libraries that are

- equally accessible to everyone
- dynamic sources of all kinds of information and ideas, available in a huckster-free setting; and
- open places, where rules and policies emerge from unshackled, transparent discussion among users and staff.

Samek's work demonstrates how hard it has been to realize that vision. It's up to the rest of us to keep trying.

*Edina, Minnesota
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