Censorship in public libraries in Israel : a national study /

Simcha Djuraev

Abstract

This research examined censorship of public library collections in Israel. Its goal was to assess public library managers' principle and practical attitudes toward issues concerning collection development and controversial materials.

The question of principle and practical attitude toward controversial materials in public libraries is related to fundamental questions about the essence and mission of public libraries: The meaning of "intellectual freedom" in public library activities, the social mission of public libraries, suitable and unsuitable criteria for collection development, applying the principle of free access to information in public libraries and access to potentially offensive items.

So far, no comprehensive study of collection censorship in public libraries in Israel have been conducted, and therefore the importance of this research which was a pioneering field study. One of its main goals was to present a picture as accurate as possible of the active public libraries in Israel. Thus, research population included community public libraries (even small and independent libraries, unsupported by the Ministry of Culture) in which selection procedures were conducted and had collections for both children and adults.

The dependent variables were practical attitudes to controversial titles (books, films) and websites. The independent variables were respondent properties (gender, age, role, seniority, education, sector and religiosity), library properties (target audience sector, socio-economic level of local authority, area, location within school facility) and respondent principle attitudes toward issues related to collection development in public libraries (commitment to intellectual freedom, conception of public libraries' social roles, suitable criteria for collection development, tendency toward inclusion and free access to materials in the library).

The research combined a quantitative method (closed questionnaires) with a qualitative method in a semi-criteria-focused methodology (half structured interviews). The quantitative section was designated to provide a comprehensive and

thorough survey of Israeli public library managers' attitudes. 190 respondents participated, namely about 30% of the research population. The majority of respondents did not have librarian qualifications, apparently because most of the libraries participating were from the rural sector in which libraries are managed less professionally in all aspects. This is not surprising, since most public libraries in Israel are situated in rural areas, and previous researches have reported little to no library training among the majority of practicing librarians in Israel. The qualitative section included 20 interviews and was designated to enable profound analysis of the environment in which managers function and their reasoning for principle and practical attitudes. The corpus was built so as to present a diversity of attitudes and argumentations in regard of the subject of material selection in public libraries. Therefore, the sample did not purport to be representative, but rather to reach "saturation" through a variety of library and librarian properties as wide as possible

The findings of the quantitative section were as follows: There was general agreement among respondents with the conception of the library as a place mainly dedicated to providing leisure activities and entertainment and an almost general agreement with the conception of the library as an institute committed to the principle of intellectual freedom. There was a little reserved agreement with the conception of the library as an institute with an educational mission and a little less agreement with the conception of an active liberal mission. Most respondents agreed with "modern orientation" approach to collection development, but not with "avoidant" approach. Neither there was general agreement with the principle of free access to information in the library. The respondents differentiated between different kinds of controversial materials. The highest openness level was toward materials touching sexual subjects, which were considered worthy of inclusion in public libraries (except for pornography to which 91% objected). Materials touching sensitive subjects in the Israeli society were considered unworthy and materials potentially endorsing crime were considered even less worthy. Generally, the respondents tended to allow restricted access to controversial titles (books, films) and websites in their libraries. But there were differences in their attitudes toward different items. Regarding almost all titles, more than half of the respondents chose to buy them without any restriction. In contrast, more than half of them chose not to buy the titles "Torat Hamelech", "Yeshua",

"Dianetica" and "Milchamto Shel Hitler"[1]. More than half of the respondents chose not to allow access to the sites "Canabis", "Kahane.Info" and "Fantasy.com", while more than half of respondents allowed restricted access to "Al Moqawama" and "Anarchists Against the Wall".

Analyzing differences between respondents showed that most of the differences were related to religiosity levels of respondents and conservativeness of target audience. The next variable of importance was socio-economic level of local authorities. The variables age, seniority, education and library training were related only to few differences between respondents. It was found that in all three variable groups which were examined (actual treatment of controversial titles and websites, theoretical agreement to include controversial materials in public libraries and issues concerning collection development) there was a significant negative correlation, not always complete, between community conservativeness and respondents' religiosity to respondents' openness. In addition, respondents serving conservative communities showed ambivalent attitude to collection development policy. They agreed tentatively with both "avoidant" and "modern orientation" approaches.

It was found that there is a significant positive correlation between level of commitment to intellectual freedom and actual treatment of controversial titles (moderate) and websites (weak). There was also a significant positive correlation between theoretical agreement to include controversial materials in public libraries and actual treatment of controversial titles and sites. The strength of the correlation varied according to the type of controversial material: strong for materials touching sexual subjects and weak for materials touching sensitive subjects in the Israeli society or materials potentially endorsing crime. Our respondents have shown consistent principle and practical attitudes, although not entirely so, to controversial materials.

Community conservativeness and respondents' religiosity influenced actual treatment of controversial titles above and beyond respondents' professional attitudes. But, in regard of controversial websites, these variables did not overweight respondents' professional attitudes. Our research supports the prevalent assumption in research literature that religious values of librarians and communities influence collection

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[1] "The King's Law", "Jesus", 'Dianetics", "Hitlers' War"

development in public libraries. However, it brings up questions about the validity of this assumption with respect to controversial websites. It can be said that the ongoing controversy about internet filtering in public libraries stems from professional causes and not necessarily from moral-religious causes.

Findings of the qualitative section were as follows: Interviewees thought that the primary function of their libraries was to provide leisure activities and entertainment. Libraries offered first and foremost enjoyment from books and also various activities which had a complementary purpose of attracting people to the library. For all of them, the library was seen as a community institution, in the sense that was it committed to giving the best services suited for the local population. All interviewees mentioned that the library is open freely for everyone. Almost all of them thought that public libraries have a task of promoting or facilitating intellectual freedom for their readers, although they varied in their interpretation of the concept of "intellectual freedom" and their commitment level. The main differences were against the background of religiosity, schooling and environment. Almost all interviewees did not agree that the public library has a mission to promote understanding and tolerance among groups in the Israeli society, although they found it important and have acted somewhat to achieve this goal. In contrast to the claim that the world of librarianship is divided between favoring institutional activism and favoring institutional neutrality, our interviewees completely supported the approach that libraries should keep their neutrality and present balanced collections. Although all of them thought the library has some educational influence on readers, they differed in conceptualizing the centrality of the educational role (Is education a mission of the public library or is it a byproduct of its activity?) and in conceptualizing the nature of the educational content (Which values the library could or should teach?). Here too, the main differences were against the background of religiosity, schooling and environment. Almost all interviewees regarded their library as a gate to information by means of free access (freely and equitably) to library collections and internet. It seems that libraries lose their role as traditional learning centers and places to learn computer and information skills. However, computer use is flourishing, except in ultra-orthodox libraries in which no access to the internet is given because of religious and social boundries. Interviewees were preoccupied with questions about setting limits to children's use of

computers and internet filtering. The subject of giving service to the ultra-orthodox sector within general sector libraries was prominent in the interviews.

The common approach was to first and foremost satisfy readers' demands, usually for new popular titles, as means of attracting people to the library. In big libraries with sufficient financial means, there was automatic acquisition of best-sellers. In libraries serving conservative audiences (Arabs, ultra-orthodox and religious Jews) this did not happen, because of threshold conditions restricting book selection. But even in those libraries there was a distinct preference for popular titles. In contrast, in some small-budget libraries in rural environment, interviewees emphasized that not "any book" would be accepted to their libraries.

Mostly, personal or community standards had to be dealt with when parents criticized some content observed by their children, especially parents from the religious and ultra-orthodox sectors using general population libraries. In libraries serving smaller and more homogenous communities, community standards had a heavier weight, in comparison to libraries serving different and diverse audiences. All interviewees agreed that public libraries should present a wide variety of opinions, but differed as to which "diverse opinions" should be presented. A common stance among interviewees was that it is almost impossible for a librarian to disregard his own views and tastes, but he must not let them influence his professional conduct. Interviewees from libraries in the Arab or religious and ultra-orthodox Jewish sectors held the same view, but they also believed it was their responsibility to choose the best suited items for their community, to their best understanding.

The possibility of labeling controversial items was not acceptable for the interviewees. In six libraries controversial items were put away, by removing them from the new-arrivals showcase or through classification. In nine libraries certain items were restricted by removing them to a place inaccessible to the public. In libraries of the rural Arabic sector and the ultra-orthodox sector, restricting access was an a priory tactic used to balance between the need to facilitate access to information (in subjects such as puberty, pregnancy, birth and even divorce) and the wish to preserve community modesty customs and the library's respectability. Four interviewees recounted that they removed certain books from the collection because of their content. One of them was compelled to remove a significant amount of books.

Age-based division existed in all libraries. But there were significant differences among interviewees regarding the question of necessity to restrict teenagers' access to some contents, and to which. In libraries serving religious and ultra-orthodox Jews there were extra restrictions on acquisition for teenagers, and they were not allowed to loan books from the adults section. In libraries of the general population, age-based loaning restriction occurred in varying levels of rigor. In libraries of the Arab sector, such restrictions were not needed, since the adults section held no item which might contain unsuitable content for teenagers. Several interviewees recounted that parents requested them oversee what their children read in the library or take home. In most of the general population libraries, the request was denied. In contrast, interviewees from libraries serving ultra-orthodox and religious sectors usually made an effort to fulfill such requests. In eleven libraries there was at least one complaint, and in three libraries there were frequent complaints. In four libraries, religious readers complained to the local authority or rabbi about an item in the library. In two cases, there was an attempt to establish an outside committee that would supervise library collection.

The main argumentations in favor of holding controversial titles were: The public library is obliged by the principle of intellectual freedom to hold materials conveying diverse opinions, views and lifestyles. A public library should be connected to happenings outside its walls, by giving access to materials which caused public debate or even flurry and materials which hold importance to the public. The library should present views abhorred by society (such as holocaust denial and praising terror), so that we could get to their roots and deal with them. Materials which poignantly criticize certain sectors and may be considered offensive by people of said sector should also be included in public libraries, because of their own importance and because it is wrong reject an item for fear of hurting someone's feelings. A public library should comply any demand, especially when malicious information is already available on the internet and it is unlikely that presenting it in the library would specifically cause damage.

The main argumentations against holding controversial titles were: The public library is an institute with an educational or social role to promote healthy processes in society. Therefore, it should not support, even indirectly, crime, women abuse, sects, holocaust denial, terror, drug abuse, racism or mission by presenting a favoring view.

Presenting an opinion in the library gives it respectability or legitimacy, and in some cases it might have destructive consequences. Accessibility of information on the internet exempts the library of its commitment to unrestricted intellectual freedom. Materials contradicting religious beliefs don't have to be presented in libraries serving religious audience. Even in libraries serving the general population, it is recommended to consider readers' feelings, so that everyone would feel welcomed.

The findings of the qualitative section support a common argument in research literature that the main causes of censorship attempts are related to the question of young people's access to content considered unsuitable for their age, especially materials containing sexual content, offensive language and violence. In addition, the research detected moral-religious censorship in public libraries serving religious audience. It was found that conceptualizing the public library as an institute committed to the values of the community (in interviewees from the Arab and ultra-orthodox sectors, and to some extent in the religious sector as well) is related to the tendency to disapprove of presenting controversial materials in the public library. Furthermore, the findings support the assumption that in small and rural areas librarians tend more to supervise their collections, but not necessarily in the meaning of applying censorship. A significant factor was the conception of the public library's role in the community and the librarians' role. Finally, it was found that attributing psychological-educational power of influence to books and reading is associated with the tendency to disapprove of presenting controversial materials in public libraries.

Ethical behavior is conducted by a constructed set of values which is realized according to circumstances. Library managers may reach a decision to restrict intellectual freedom their libraries as a result of ethical deliberation based on professional values, as they perceive them. Indeed, the common outlook in literature negates this option and perceives it as censorship. In accordance to this view, which upholds intellectual freedom as prime value, an impression of a significant gap between ethical commitment of library managers and their concrete behavior is created. However, in the eyes of these managers, restricting access to certain items is a balanced choice that takes into account legitimate professional values, such as accommodating the target audience. It seems that one of the main conclusions of our research is that it might be better to move away from the binary perception of "censorship" against "intellectual freedom". Acknowledging that there is a range of

possible behaviors within the ethical frame would enable research and discourse which will refine the values on which professional ethics are based.

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