Self-Censorship & The American Library: A History of the Visible & Invisible

The library as a symbol and advocate for intellectual freedom has always appealed to me. Banned Books Week was one of my favorite library celebrations, and I always enjoyed discussing the need to protect information from those who would silence it. When I started taking courses for the library science program, I remember learning about self-censorship and how it struck me that censorship is not a simple black and white debate. Furthermore, when I began taking History of Libraries, I learned that the American public library has not always been this steadfast beacon of intellectual freedom that defended the right to read. There was a time when censoring what books the library carried on its shelves was not only commonplace, but a practice librarians took pride in and was even lauded by the time period’s stance on morality. This history shows that the library is a complex institution and that once again understanding censorship, and by extension self-censorship, is not an easy task. Learning that the library has not always stood for intellectual freedom did not tarnish my love for libraries, but rather cemented in me the notion that what continues to make American libraries great today is the people – the librarians, staff, and patrons – who make up the institution. In my History of Libraries class, I had already completed a couple of assignments on the topics of the library as symbol for intellectual freedom and self-censorship. I wanted to continue examining those topics for my final project.

Starting off the research questions I posed were

- Are there ways to curtail self-censorship in public libraries or libraries in general?
- How prevalent is self-censorship in public libraries or libraries in general today as well as in the past?
- Is understanding the history of intellectual freedom in the public library one way to address self-censorship?

I feel that when we talk about libraries and protecting intellectual freedom we often focus on the problems from the outside. Banned Books Week, the Freedom to Read Statement, and a number of other programs and policies created by the American Library Association anticipate most threats to intellectual freedom from patrons, parents, and organizations outside the library institution. Not that there isn’t any merit to that, but it is interesting how little we seem to talk about self-censorship. Furthermore, we do not often widely acknowledge that the public library in America did not always uphold patrons’ rights to intellectual freedom and that it is a fairly recent concept in the overall history of libraries.

There is quite a lot of history on intellectual freedom in the library as well as evidence to how libraries used to act counter to their stance on intellectual freedom today. However there doesn’t appear to be any specific history on self-censorship. Now, I personally approached this
project as seeing the 19th century view of librarians deeming certain books good or bad as a form of self-censorship that was acceptable at the time. However, it appears to never be called that therefore I don’t think there is really a history on self-censorship that goes back that far. In fact the definition of self-censorship that I kept finding was clearly rooted in the library of today which has embraced intellectual freedom and, in theory, should always protect it. I also did not find anyone making connections to the selection habits of the 19th century to issues of self-censorship today. Furthermore, most of the information I could find on self-censorship was just studies and surveys that had been conducted or recent articles examining collections in various libraries throughout the country.

The strength of this project was on finding historical evidence of library policy in the 19th century as well as the shift in policy that embraced intellectual freedom in the 20th century and beyond. This was all fairly well-documented with many instances of primary and secondary sources. On the other hand, a weakness of this project was finding history on self-censorship. Most evidence I could find was very recent, from the last couple of decades, and most of that evidence just focused on studies and surveys. The research was also limited to school libraries rather than public libraries. In fact I make a note of this in a “Personal Observation” segment on the Self-Censorship page of my website. However, I didn’t really let that deter me as school libraries and public libraries do work closely together nowadays and that it is often children’s and young adult books that face the most challenges. I feel that self-censorship studies and surveys overwhelming look at school libraries because of the fact that kid and teen books are so often challenged and most challenges come from parents. Parents are likely to have more sway over what the school does than a public library as the school library has to contend with the school board and school administration. The modern definition of self-censorship also focuses heavily on libraries not picking controversial books because of the fear they have of parent retaliation. There is clearly more research to be done on self-censorship in the public library. It could also be used to compare it to school libraries to see if there are any trends. As a side note, I think it would be very interesting to try and look at the historical shift from censorship of books for adults (like The Grapes of Wrath) versus today’s more constant challenges to the books kids are reading.

When I began planning this project, I started out using some of the research I had done for my past assignments on intellectual freedom and self-censorship. I also then decided to take a general look at the history of intellectual freedom in the public library as well as the history of American public libraries in 19th century. I more or less created a rough outline of big events and narrowed down my topic to three main categories that I wanted to explore in length: Libraries & Morality, Intellectual Freedom, and Self-Censorship. Each page then explores several topics within that category that I thought helped flesh out the theme of the page. Libraries & Morality specifically focused on libraries in the 19th and early 20th century and Intellectual Freedom looked at the change in libraries in the 1930s and some of the programs that came about because of this shift in philosophy. Self-censorship provided definitions as well as the studies that have been done on the topic as well as what’s being done to curtail self-censorship today. I focused first on trying to find as many primary sources as possible. I wanted to showcase at least one or two per category. From there, I looked at secondary sources to help gain a little bit of perspective on each primary source as well as flesh out the topics I chose. I chose the website format because I felt it would be the easiest way to show an image of the
primary source as well as then discuss it. The visual was right there on the webpage next to the content so that readers would be able to compare and contrast. Furthermore, with a website, I was able to link certain images of the primary sources right back to where I found them so readers could see the piece in its entirety while also having their own place to do more research if they chose. I wrote the website similar to how I would write a paper and used APA style which I then was able to make an entire page dedicated to my sources similar to how a Works Cited list would be. I chose to divide up the Sources page so that it was easier to see what sources were used on each page.

All in all, I really enjoyed this project and loved some of the primary sources I found along the way. I feel I have expanded my understanding of the public library in the United States and evolution of its stance on intellectual freedom. I also learned about what studies had already been done on self-censorship and where there is room for improvement.