**‘Do New Zealand Public Library Workers Self-Censor Controversial Library Materials?’**

**An Exploration of their Knowledge and Views on the Promotion of Intellectual Freedom in Public Libraries.**

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Submitted to the school of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Information Studies.

15 October 2012

**Abstract**

The first objective of this study is to investigate how much knowledge public library workers have of the role of libraries in upholding intellectual freedom. Secondly, to establish whether, and for what reasons, library workers would opt to self-censor when confronted with controversial library materials. Lastly, to determine whether library workers require further information and training in order to achieve the professional anti-censorship standards as promoted by the Library and Information Association of New Zealand (LIANZA).

I used a qualitative methodology to collect data and conducted nine interviews with library workers from public libraries in the central North Island of New Zealand. They were asked to share their views on twelve books—commonly available in public libraries and selected for their controversial content—to determine which self-censorship actions they would take regarding each individual title. They were asked to give reasons for self-censorship actions. They were also asked to share their knowledge of intellectual freedom in libraries.

The key findings for the first objective were that all the participants were familiar with the concept of intellectual freedom in libraries, but none of them were aware of the content of the LIANZA statement or their own library’s policy. Almost all the participants relied heavily on their management for information even if the information is conveyed informally. Secondly, the participants often selected self-censorship actions, with the main reasons being a personal distaste of the item or fear of offending library users. Lastly, almost all the participants said that they felt sufficiently informed on intellectual freedom in libraries and required no further training.

**Keywords: censorship, intellectual freedom, self-censorship, public libraries, freedom to read**

**Research Methodology**

**Rationale for the research**

It is widely acknowledged that the library and information sector is closely involved with the promotion of intellectual freedom. The Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA)—in line with professional library associations worldwide—took a strong anti-censorship stance on 21 March 2002, by adopting the Statement on Intellectual Freedom. It places an ethical responsibility on LIANZA members to provide library users with:

* the widest range of information materials possible (within the constraints of library budgets
* materials relevant to their requirements
* materials representing the full spectrum of viewpoints held in the community (LIANZA, 2002).

It further states that librarians have a responsibility to neither promote nor suppress opinions and beliefs expressed in library materials and resist all attempts at censorship, except where that censorship is required by law (LIANZA, 2002). I attached a full copy of the statement as Appendix 1.

Duthie (2010) is of the view that professional ethical codes which deal with the promotion of intellectual freedom in libraries are ‘sweeping and general’ in nature. They fail to offer specific instructions to library staff on how to deal with controversial library material when personal views contradict professional standards (p. 88). This is in line with Hauptman’s research in 1988. He found that a librarian’s dilemma (meaning the conflict between personal beliefs and professional practice) is one not ‘easily solvable by application to organizational dictates (ALA) or a casuistic code’ (as cited in Curry, 1997, p. 233).

Curry examined the conflict between personal convictions regarding censorship and the professional practice of public library managers. Her research results show that this conflict remains a highly controversial topic in library and information services (1997, p. 234). Duthie (2010) agrees with Curry and says that the wide range of literature devoted to the issue of censorship in libraries is a powerful sign that this highly controversial subject gives rise to powerful emotions (p. 86).

The first major research into censorship in public library collections was carried out by Fiske in 1956 and the key finding of her research was anti-censorship attitudes held by librarians are not always indicative of their censorship behaviours (1959, as cited in Moody, 2004b, p.9).

Although research has been done on a variety of aspects of censorship in New Zealand libraries, no study has been done to determine how much knowledge or insight ‘rank and file’ librarians have of the LIANZA statement issued in 2002 or to examine their attitudes towards the statement (Malpas, p.76, 2009). There is no research available on whether library workers in New Zealand would opt to self-censor when confronted with controversial library materials. There is no research on which types of materials may lead to self-censorship actions or the reason for these actions.

The outcomes of this research will be beneficial to New Zealand library and information studies by adding to the body of research relating to intellectual freedom in libraries. It is also hoped that by creating a greater awareness of practical censorship issues experienced by library workers in their efforts to...

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