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# Censorship, the Classroom, and the Electronic Environment

David M. Considine

The issue of censorship as it affects teachers and librarians in our schools has been well documented. One study referred to it as “a real and present danger for educational leaders today.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that the American Library Association is opposed to censorship and actively campaigns against it through its Office of Intellectual Freedom, many librarians succumb to censorship pressures and practice self-censorship, restricting student access to information particularly in the controversial areas of drugs, sex, religion, and politics. Nor are librarians the only group affected by such pressures.

Commenting on a case in Louisiana, Charles Suhor said, “Teachers were burned and their future choice of materials would surely be affected by fear of reprisal from individuals and pressure groups in the community.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to external pressures, teachers and librarians may also have to contend with the internal pressures of concerned and often conservative school administrators. Philip Anderson and Karen Lee Wetzel reported ominously in 1982:

In censorship controversies teachers cannot count on principals knowing law well enough to protect teachers, but they can count on principals knowing law well enough to remove teachers from the school system.<sup>3</sup>

Teachers and librarians intimidated by such observations need to be aware of three facts. First, as professional educators they have the right and responsibility to be involved in decisions about the selection and use of instructional materials. These resources, print or nonprint, should meet established criteria and be selected through a

formal procedure so that they may be compatible with the school’s philosophy and goals. Education involves more than simply imparting knowledge. It involves helping students grow emotionally, morally, and intellectually by providing them with all its strengths and weaknesses.

When we limit their exposure to ideas and information, we limit their understanding of the world and their ability to respond to it. Justice Douglas defended the right of students when he said that First Amendment rights included “not only the right to speak and publish, but also the right to hear, to learn, to know.”<sup>4</sup> As exploration and discovery, education is incompatible with censorship which retards imagination, investigation, and individuality. Teachers and librarians must have a commitment to providing students with information in such a way that students understand its place and its value in their culture.

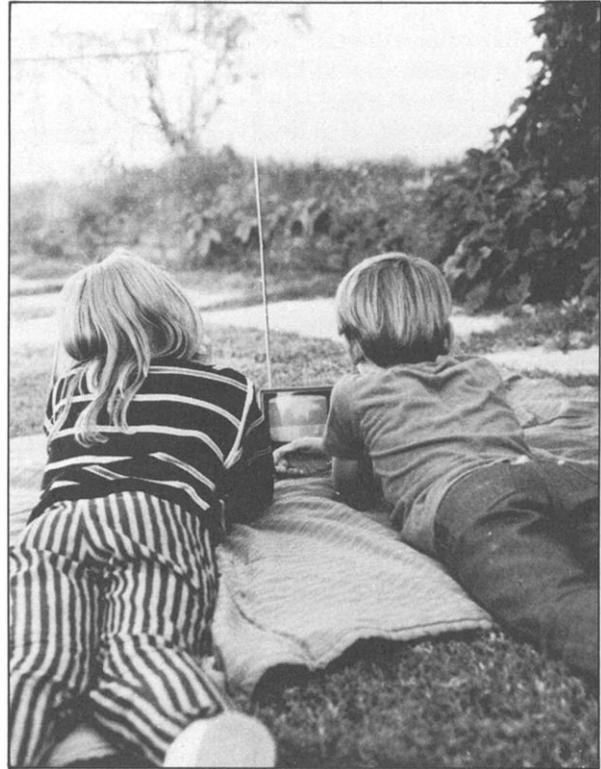
Second, educators must be aware that courts have been increasingly supportive of the right of students to publish, distribute, and receive information, including controversial information. The *Bayer v Kinzler* decision announced that “the responsible presentation of birth control information to students is not to be dreaded.”<sup>5</sup> *Keefe v Geanakos* concerned a teacher who used an article from *Atlantic Monthly* as part of his teaching materials. The use of so-called “dirty words” in the classroom was defended by the court which argued that high school seniors were sufficiently mature enough to understand such words and their use in the language. One of the most important rulings came in *Island Trees v Pico* in 1982 when the court wrote:

We hold that school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, or other matters of opinion.<sup>6</sup>

While educators understandably wish to avoid court battles, it's important that they understand the rights students have to acquire information and their own responsibility to provide it. Taking that step may be made easier if they understand that courts have been protective and supportive when the materials challenged have been consistent with the goals and philosophy of the school, when their educational value has been demonstrated, and when they have been geared to the age and maturity level of the students.

Third, educators need to be aware that through the expansion of cable television, the emergence of the microcomputer, and the growth of the home market for videotape recorders, youngsters are exposed to more media messages than any previous generation. Students have access to messages which are increasingly more explicit and which technological developments enable them to watch repeatedly at their own convenience without censorship or commercial interruption. Whether we like it or not, we all live in an increasingly multi-media, multi-sensory culture in which the young derive a significant amount of their information and ideas not from the printed word but from images fused with sound. We may be able to control and curtail what they read, hear and see while they are at school, but it is impossible for any of us to control the electronic envelope that surrounds them. The very presence of the new technologies in the home where viewing is largely unsupervised affords a social sanction and a seal of approval to even the most tasteless and questionable programs.

Educators must develop strategies that will enable young people to interpret and understand the media messages that bombard them. For us to understand these messages and their potential effect on students, we need to be aware of the circumstances and situations that shape and determine both the messages' form and content. Speaking at Appalachian State University in fall 1983, George Gerbner head of the Annenberg School of Communication, observed that those who control the stories of a culture control the culture. In the case of the mass media, that power is increasingly placed in fewer and fewer hands.



In the late 1960s, previously separate areas of the media merged and came under the control of large conglomerates whose interests were neither in entertainment nor in education but entirely in business where the profit motive was dominant. This has already had an effect upon the world of literature. Gulf and Western which owns Paramount pictures also owns both Simon & Schuster and Pocket Books. Universal motion pictures is controlled by MCA which also controls Putnam and Berkeley. Holt Rinehart and Winston, Popular Library, and Fawcett are part of the CBS stable. Warner Brothers, which was acquired by Kinney National Service owns Warner Paperback Library. While the fusion between two formerly separate elements of the media may seem a harmless business venture, the implications for anyone concerned with quality literature are apparent:

The real danger is that if these two old antagonists finally join, they will find themselves identifying their interests exactly. They will please each other first of all, the mass audience second of all, and the rest of us not at all.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time that technology affords young people greater access to the media than ever before and business decisions place the media in the hands of fewer individuals and organizations,

there is another element about today's media messages that must concern us. More than a decade has gone by since the FCC directed radio stations to know and understand the lyric content of the music they played. Today we need only turn on our radios to comprehend how explicit and erotic popular music has become. In recent years provocative songs such as "Nightmoves," "Sexual Healing," and "Physical" have all become hits. Album covers with explicit graphics contain sexual messages in titles such as "Balls to the Wall," "Force It," "Jump On It," and "The Wetter The Better." Children today can go to toy stores and purchase dolls and wigs carrying the name of Brooke Shields. Such merchandise, itself a direct result of the media merger, encourages children to look upon Shields as a role model. In motion pictures such as *Pretty Baby*, *The Blue Lagoon*, and *Endless Love*, Shields has perpetuated an image of child and adolescent sexual precocity. In refusing to endorse her anti-smoking campaign, the American congress determined that she was an unfit role model for American Youth.

Television, too, reflects the suggestive and violent content to be found in music and motion pictures, magazines, and toys. The advent of MTV has already contributed to the emergence of erotic and violent images set to the music and lyrics of today's rock and roll. There seems little doubt that the audiovisual stories and messages children are exposed to whether in film, television, or the music industry represent a marked departure in terms of both form and content from the stories with which our young were traditionally raised. Communication theory supports the view that the effect of a message is increased when the message is repeated and when the audience has little else to compare it to. Technology guarantees that today's media messages are repeated at will, and the relentless reliance upon format and formula provide young people with little in the way of comparison. One need only glance at the titles of some recent movies aimed at young people to see how suggestive and stereotypical they are. *Class*, *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*, *My Tutor*, *Homework*, *Private Lessons*, *Zapped*, and *Sixteen Candles* all depict a narrow view of adolescence and a negative view of school and teachers. One of the most successful of these sexploitation movies was *Risky Business* which turned education into a whorehouse and suggested that sex was more important than love and money more significant than hard work and principles.

It is hardly surprising that so many young people flocked to see *Risky Business* which skillfully blended movie and music while indulging their fantasies and making fun of adults and adult institutions. With no one to ask them to consider or question the views and values the film endorsed, this impressionable audience was left all the more susceptible to such image-making. We must accept the fact that our role is not simply to provide students with information but to enable them to develop skills so that they may question and understand the information around them.

Censorship of materials in the classroom and the library is a meaningless and futile endeavor. Those who advocate it in the mistaken belief that regulating and restricting information will protect the young become accomplices and accessories in allowing the mass media to target young audiences. Such audiences are rendered all the more vulnerable because we have denied students the skills they need to understand the media and the messages it transmits.

The notion that we can protect the young by denying them access to materials has been invalidated by the expansion of the electronic environment and changes in community standards. Today, a teenager may wear emblazoned on a T-shirt words that many of us could not read in books when we were students. We can no more ignore that fact than we can control what children are exposed to on television, in movies, magazines, billboards, and music. The attempt to close our eyes and their minds to such information renders our schools and education increasingly irrelevant. The implications for teachers and librarians are clear:

Patrons choices are not limited to the library so the electronic librarian must develop a role amidst the movies, television, hotline services and other sources of information in and beyond the community.<sup>8</sup>

It is simply that the world beyond the classroom with its bright images, loud sounds, and rapidly paced information is more stimulating than school; it is the fact that that world has had a direct effect upon our students influencing everything from their concentration span to the way in which they think, act, and behave, all bearing directly upon our ability to teach. We must be able to gain and maintain students' attentions. In part that means we must appeal to them in the style and language of the mass media.

Equally as important, however, we must go beyond superficial appearances, and challenge and confront the style and the statement of the media. For our young people to be informed, aware, and articulate, for them to be able to understand and process the information they are surrounded with, and for them to be able to develop skills for an increasingly technological age, they must be able to read images as well as print. Classes dealing in critical viewing skills, visual literacy, and critical listening will enable them to understand the visual language that is so prevalent in our culture. Without being able to identify still and moving images, students are deprived of a basic reading skill. English teachers and librarians who incorporate film and television into the curriculum must foster an awareness of the relationship between the printed word and the projected image. Students need to understand the basic shots that compose a film and the circumstances in which each is employed. They must be encouraged to consider the relationship between reality and the way it is represented in the media. They must understand that techniques such as editing can take an event or a statement out of context and present it as though it were real. Analysis of plot, conflict, resolution, setting, and character should go hand in hand with the study of the visual language so that students will understand the relationship between the book or play and the film. They must also understand the nature of stereotyping and the conventions and codes that have created and maintained such images. It is this knowledge, not censorship, that will protect students.

In the final analysis, censorship is an issue of intellectual freedom. It is, however, much more than just making material available, to students. It becomes not simply a question of what we make available to the young but the way in which we make it available, the context in which we put it, the degree to which we help them locate, identify, interpret, and judge information in all its forms. Those who seek to restrict access to information to protect students do not understand the inescapable effect of the electronic environment. In the end, all they protect is themselves and the institutions in which they work. While the problem of the legal battle is averted, such teachers, librarians, and administrators fail to fulfill their mission of educating young people and providing them with skills that will enable them to understand themselves and society.

Refusing to place a book on a shelf or to show a film in a classroom does not protect students. Ignoring the mass media and refusing to incorporate it into the curriculum leaves students all the more susceptible to its influence, the very influence that the forces of censorship often seek to reduce. Protection does not come from prevention. The electronic environment has made it impossible today to prevent young people from being exposed to all forms of questionable material.

Since we cannot prevent them from being exposed to such material, we need to make certain that the exposure they receive is educated and informed. Control of both the production and consumption of objectionable material will only come about by educating young people and providing them with skills that will enable them to become critical consumers capable of evaluating information in a variety of formats and rejecting that which attempts to manipulate them or debase them. Until we achieve that aim, those who choose to censor materials must accept the fact that in reality they become accomplices in the very process they seek to prevent.

## Notes

1. Joseph E. Bryson and Elizabeth W. Detty, *The Legal Aspects of Censorship of Public School Library and Instructional Materials*, Charlottesville, Virginia, Michie, 1982, p. 1.
2. Charles Suhor, "Censorship and the Saber-Toothed Gadget," *Media and Methods* (November 1978): 23.
3. Philip Anderson and Karen Lee Wetzel, "A Survey of Legal Knowledge of High School Principals on Censorship Issues," *English Journal* (February 1982): 38.
4. *President's Council Dist. 25 v Community School Board. No. 25*, 409 U.S. 998 (1972) p. 999.
5. *Bayer v Kinzler* 383 F Supp. 1164 (E.D. New York 1974):
6. *Island Trees Board of Education v Pico*, Case No 80-2043 L. W. 4831 1982, p. 4836.
7. Bruce Cook, "Producers and Publishers: The Book Brothers," *American Film* (April 1978): 25.
8. Edwin C. Dowlin, "Education for the Electronic Library," *Drexel Library Quarterly* (Fall 1981): 82.

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