

**LAMP Institute 2010:
Controversial Materials in Libraries**

**Ruth Ann Jones
Special Collections Cataloger
Michigan State University Libraries**

22 May 2010

What kinds of material might be controversial?

- a) Material that is offensive or abhorrent to almost everyone: hate literature, Holocaust denial literature, child pornography
- b) Material where opinion is divided -- it's offensive to some but not all: pornography featuring & intended for adults; political opinions opposite to one's own; any opinions or beliefs that are hotly debated in the public area; anything related gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people; ethnic humor.
- c) Material promoting dangerous or illegal activities. *The Anarchist Cookbook. Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying.*
- d) Material that some people may not consider appropriate in public, even if they enjoy it in private or among friends: bathroom humor; crude language, etc.

Why do library collections include these categories of material?

- a) Diversity of collections. We strive to build collections that represent all viewpoints. "Tolerance is meaningless without tolerance for what some may consider detestable." Should there be limits on this? Is there such a thing as too diverse?

Reading: *Diversity in Collection Development: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*
<<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/diversitycollection.cfm>>

- b) Collection development goals. Need to support the teaching and research needs of the institution. These determine the subject areas we collect in and the relative depth of each collection area. "Collection of record" -- most comprehensive level.

Background info: *Guidelines for a Collection Development Policy Using the Conspectus Model*
<<http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s14/nd1/gcdp-e.pdf>> See especially p. 7-9, a standardized set of definitions for collection development policies on how in-depth a library's collecting efforts are in a particular field.

What teaching and research needs are served by a collection that includes hate literature, pornography, low-brow humor, etc. Libraries preserve knowledge - shouldn't we be selecting the best of what humanity produces, not the worst?

What administrative issues may arise for a library from controversial materials in its possession?

- a) Security of materials (that's why this is a particular issue for Special Collections)
- b) Staff reactions -- unwillingness to work with certain genres
- c) Patron reactions -- age-appropriateness, embarrassment

Reading: *Labeling and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*.
<<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/labelingrating.cfm>>

- d) Stakeholder issues -- bad publicity for the library

Whose values do we live by?

Conflict between values of librarians & archivists ("Save everything!") and populations portrayed by or affected by the materials being saved.

Reading: Boles, Frank. "Just a bunch of bigots' : a case study in the acquisition of controversial material." *Archival Issues: Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference*. Vol. 19, No. 1, 1994, 53-65. Your institution may have online access to this journal.

Library/archive position: collecting material does not mean we endorse the attitudes or beliefs expressed in it; needed to provide a full account of history.

Public position: exposure to prejudicial attitudes or beliefs or to negative representations of a minority group are harmful to that group; libraries should not perpetuate or facilitate that

"Meta-philosophical" position proposed in Boles article: essence of American culture is that it's a synthesis of many cultures; values espoused by different groups are weighed against each other; for that to happen, the contributions of any one group have to be weighed against its failures.

Hands-on examination : possible lessons

'Controversial' material exists as part of a continuum -- social, geographic, historic/temporal.

Controversial material is crucial to the 20th century's reconceptualization of history; from a record of political & military decision-making to a record of daily life and a historiography that recognizes the connectedness of all parts of society - unfortunately that includes the bad as well as the good.