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# The Fiske Report

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'Sitting on history' by grytr / by-nc-nd

#### Introduction

I have a soft spot in my heart for library history. I credit my library history classes for making me the academic librarian I am today. They taught me more about critical thinking, how to do research, and how to navigate an academic library than the rest of my program combined. In this post I am revisiting a particular set of topics that especially interested me while pursuing my degree – censorship, self-censorship, and librarian image-making.

It seemed to me as I went through my program, that one aspect of library school that was particularly stressed was instilling the values of the profession. My introductory class posed mental exercises meant to make students think about privacy, access to information and their own personal biases. "A young girl wearing black with many piercings comes in looking for a book on suicide." "A disheveled man with a beard comes in asking for books on bomb making." While the introductory class told me what a proper librarian would do in those situations, the library history classes told me why the profession took a stance in the first place.

Louis Robbins summarized the rise of the librarian as intellectual freedom fighter in her abstract to "Champions of a cause: American librarians and the Library Bill of Rights in the 1950s":

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"The library profession's understanding of the Library Bill of Rights—and, in fact, American librarianship's understanding of itself—is a product of both contemporary political discourse and of the American Library Association's pragmatic responses to censorship challenges in the 1950s. Between the 1948 adoption of the strengthened Library Bill of Rights and 1960, ALA based its 'library faith' on a foundation of pluralist democracy and used social scientific 'objectivity' to try to fend off challenges to its jurisdiction. When the McCarthy Era brought challenges to the very premises of pluralistic democracy, however, librarians responded by becoming 'champions of the cause' of intellectual freedom" (Robbins, "Champions" abstract).

While reading about this time period I also learned about the Fiske Report. From 1956 to 1958, Marjorie Fiske conducted a study of book selection and censorship practices in California. The fear generated during the McCarthy Era lead the American Library Association to issue a number of statements declaring librarians the defenders of intellectual freedom. In contrast, Fiske's report showed that some librarians were not so quick to stand up for this belief, if they held it at all. Born out of the fear generated by the political climate of the period, Fiske found the echoes of McCarthyism present during many of her interviews. This is unsurprising, as the Hollywood blacklist was still in effect and McCarthy himself had only just begun to fall from favor in 1954. Some of the interviewed librarians may have even lived through WWI and helped to remove German language books from their libraries or complied with requests for names of patrons who asked for books on explosives (Starr). However, the report uncovered several important themes that ran much deeper than current politics. This post will discuss the Fiske Report, its origin and findings, and its lasting implications. My goal is to share a bit of library history in the hopes that it will grant some perspective and elaborate the complexity and nuance of the issues raised.

#### **Background**

Between the two World Wars, "the American library profession experienced a reawakening of debate regarding freedom of access. Traditionalists advocated the guardianship of community values by restrictive collection policies, and progressives favored collection development that was once again neutral and actively representative of all points of view" (Starr). In 1939, ALA adopted the first Library Bill of Rights, based on a policy of the Des Moines, Iowa Public Library, possibly as a response to the controversy surrounding *Grapes of Wrath* (Chadwell 20). Another potential impetus was the challenge put forth by Bernard Berelson, "Librarianship must stand firmly against social and political and economic censorship of book collections; it must be so organized that it can present effective opposition to this censorship and it must protect librarians who are threatened by it" (qtd in Starr).

In 1940, ALA formed its first Intellectual Freedom Committee. However, it was not until 1948 that ALA adopted what is presently known as the Library Bill of Rights (Chadwell 20). In 1953 ALA issued The Freedom to Read. The statement defined the profession's "responsibility for making available the widest diversity of views and expressions, including those the majority might label unconventional or unpopular" (Chadwell 22). With these documents ALA was strengthening its public position as defender of intellectual freedom. However, Thomison said in the ALA-sponsored A History of the American Library Association, "it was abundantly clear that the profession was not united in its bill of rights" (145). Thomison explained "at the time of its adoption, the Library Bill of Rights had been received with no objection. The Intellectual Freedom Committee was also accepted with no problem. The attitudes of some librarians, however, began to change as the two began to function" (144). This was evidenced by letters to ALA Bulletin, Library Journal, and ALA headquarters indicating extreme dissatisfaction with the

current trends in literature. Thomison offered *Forever Amber*, with its preponderance of sex, as an example:

"The book's popularity, and the problem of to buy or not to buy, was grist for many discussions, letters and speeches. In a number of cases, it is difficult to discern the difference between censorship efforts by the public and book selection by the librarian. The result was often the same, and in many cases the reasoning seemed very similar" (145).

One explanation for this discrepancy was that "librarians' relatively new role as activists in the cause of freedom of inquiry had only partially overtaken their role as guardians of public taste and morals" (Robbins, "Censorship" 74).

The Intellectual Freedom Committee was paying attention. "As early as the 1953 Westchester conference, IFC leadership – worried about the effects on school and public librarians of loyalty programs, investigative committees, and the many widely publicized censorship conflicts – had proposed that research on the topic might be undertaken" (Robbins, "Censorship" 95). With a grant from the Fund for the Republic and the sponsorship of the School of Librarianship of the University of California the project was conducted from 1956 to 1958, headed by Marjorie Fiske.

Marjorie Fiske was a distinguished sociologist and teacher at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, in the Department of Sociology and the School of Librarianship. "Often working with large interdisciplinary teams of social and behavioral scientists, she sought a method that would allow the research subjects to 'speak for themselves' in the final results" (Kiefer).

In her introduction to her report Fiske explained:

"The impetus for this study developed from the questions librarians and others concerned with the freedom to read asked themselves about the effects on library policy and practices of the investigations of national and state un-American activities committees, state education committees, and the widely publicized book-centered conflicts which have taken place in California since the end of World War II. The study itself was viewed as controversial both inside and outside the profession of librarianship. Nearly two years of discussion and persistent effort on the part of the Intellectual Freedom Committee and a special planning committee of the California Library Association, as well as the faculty of the School of Librarianship of the University of California, were required before the decision to undertake it was finally made" (1).

## **Findings**

When the study finally did proceed, Fiske's team conducted 204 interviews in 26 communities with school librarians and administrators, and municipal and county librarians. The end result was *Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California*. In it, Fiske pointed out that at least as far back as the Elizabethan era people have been concerned with the dilemma of quality

versus demand (or education versus entertainment). This dilemma is something which librarians have continually struggled with in their book selection process. "Two-thirds of the public librarians who contributed to this study used the words quality and demand as they discussed library objectives, and by far the greatest weight was to be found on the side of demand" (Fiske 11). This orientation was often justified on the grounds that public libraries are supported by taxes and thus should provide what is most requested. It also helped to lighten the librarians' task load by spending less time researching potential purchases. They could more easily justify their budget with higher circulation figures and, "book selection becomes 'a snap' – the desk staff pass along patron requests, you read the newspapers of the area, visit the bookshops to find out what is popular, and if you miss something a patron wants you can always dash out and buy it" (Fiske 13). Fiske also noted that librarians spoke only briefly about how they know their community's needs. Based on these vague comments, Fiske pointed to a need for reliable methods of determining community needs and interests as well as the absence of systematic efforts towards appraisals of current holdings.

The debate between quality and demand lead to the concept of balance. Within the context of library schools the term "balance" was most frequently used to describe a well-rounded collection. "Prescriptions for building basic collections for public or school libraries illustrate this concept by recommending definite proportions for various categories of subject matter with little regard for community differences" (Fiske 15). Fiske found that the term "balance" carried a professional sanction for public librarians, but that upon further examination the term turned out to be "a semantic convenience embracing a great variety of rationales for book selection" (15). In fact, many librarians used "balance" to express the goals of whatever aspect of book selection they found most difficult. For some it meant weeding old books, for others it meant providing all sides of an issue, or it could have meant a balance between actual and potential wishes of the patrons. One librarian said, "We talk a lot about balance, but it is really a semantic absurdity. What it boils down to is that you provide as much as you can of what anybody wants" (Fiske 16). This sort of approach revealed that book selection practices were frequently found to differ from professional theory and established standards. Fiske also reported wide variance in the use and perceived value of written book selection policies.

While Fiske viewed avoidance of controversial books to be the equivalent of self-censorship she explained that the librarians interviewed did not speak of censorship because they have "adopted an even more positivistic semantic philosophy" (Fiske 63). Instead of worrying about whether books were controversial the librarians interviewed said that "library materials must be in 'good taste,' they must be 'suitable' or they must be 'appropriate.' In school libraries or public library systems, the equivalent was likely to be the irreproachable statement, 'Our materials must supplement the curriculum'" (Fiske 63).

The report also discussed the discrepancy between theory and practice as it pertains to controversial materials. Although close to half of the librarians interviewed in Fiske's study expressed unequivocal freedom-to-read convictions.

"when it comes to actual practice, nearly two-thirds of all librarians who have a say in book selection reported instances where the controversiality of a book or author resulted in a decision not to buy. Nearly one-fifth habitually avoid buying any material which is known to be controversial or which they believe might become controversial" (Fiske 65).

However, Fiske found that librarians who had received professional training in librarianship were more

likely to disregard the controversiality of materials when making their selections than librarians who had not had professional training. "Even more decisive than professional training is length of work experience. Librarians relatively new to the profession tend to be much less restrictive than their more experienced colleagues" (Fiske 68).

Fiske found that in 82 percent of the circulating libraries studied, restrictions were placed on the circulation or distribution of materials. The most common forms of restriction were moving the items to the librarian's office, placing the materials on reserve so that they have to be specifically requested, and placing questionable materials under or behind the front desk. Additionally, nearly one-third of the circulating libraries reported that controversial items had been permanently removed from the collection. The librarians interviewed practiced self-censorship to avoid controversy and external censorship.

Librarians did not feel they could turn to either their state or national professional association for help against censorship. Two-thirds of the school librarians belonged to the School Library Association of California (SLAC), almost half belonged to the California Library Association (CLA) and more than three-fourths of the municipal and county librarians belonged to CLA. Despite this involvement, the most common complaint was that, "the two state groups (the CLA and the SLAC) do not come to grips with controversial issues either on the local or the state level. Members do not feel that they will be backed up by the profession in the event of local controversy" (Fiske 104). Thomison backed up this fear in his history of the American Library Association. "What was the recourse when the Library Bill of Rights had been violated? What could be done to help the librarian under attack? The answer unfortunately was very little. The only force was moral force" (Thomison 145).

Fiske found a general lack of self-esteem among librarians which also inhibited their ability to take a stand against censors. "Our respondents believe that the public holds both librarians and libraries in low repute. On the whole, they share the public's allegedly low opinion of the profession" (Fiske 109). An analysis of the observations about what kinds of people librarians believe themselves to be found that "Four negative traits were mentioned for every positive one" (Fiske 110). While they admired within themselves a respect for ideas, knowledge, and intellectual freedom, they did not feel strong enough individually or professionally to assert these qualities "in the face of public disapproval or indifference" (Fiske 110).

#### Reactions

Fiske first reported her findings at a symposium entitled "The Climate of Book Selection: Social Influence on School and Public Libraries." Robbins explained that "the findings Fiske unveiled at the symposium were widely reported in the press....Major library journals, however, were strangely silent on the report in 1958" (98). Fiske's book, *Book Selection and Censorship*, was published in 1959 and awarded the annual Library Literature Award sponsored jointly by the American Library Association and the Canadian Library Association ("News and Notes" 692).

Various reviewers latched on to different aspects of the report. Eleanor Smith wrote in *Library Journal* that the report's finding that librarians tend to be timid and were self-censors was not entirely surprising. However, "This is embarrassing to librarians as professional status seekers because it may overshadow the more positive findings of the study: When librarians are threatened by real outside censorship, they usually offer strong resistance" (Smith 223). She went on to argue,

"The fault, if it is a fault not to live up to the Library Bill of Rights in serving the public, lies within the librarians themselves for the most part, as these interviews clearly show. They seem to lack

confidence in their ability to select the best books as well as the courage to defend their collections" (Smith 224).

David Sabsay claimed that the report "is a serious indictment of our philosophy and our integrity which we cannot ignore" (Sabsay 222). He said that Fiske's report proved that it is not simply timidity that causes instances of self-censorship, but a lack of understanding of the purposes and goals of librarianship. However, Leon Carnovsky, in his review argued that the library bill of rights and policy statements "are slender reeds...not enough to protect a librarian when his professional existence may be imperiled" (Carnovsky 157).

Others focused on policy, blaming Fiske's findings of the discrepancy between theory and practice on a lack of written selection policy. "This inconsistency is hardly surprising when one discovers the conspicuous absence of rules and policies on book selection" (Jahoda 151). In his editorial in the ALA Bulletin, A. L. McNeal, then Chairman of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee, suggested that first and foremost, "In order that the librarian at the local level may have full support it seems desirable to have well-established, written book selection policies, which are understood by his staff and known to his board or governing body" (McNeal 359).

Some reviewers looked to library education as the answer to the issue of librarians' self-censorship. "In the long run, it is to the improvement of formal education for librarianship that we must look for an upgrading of the profession, and therefore of the professional image" (Sabsay 223). Asheim suggested that Fiske had overlooked changes in library education over the years. "The education being given to younger librarians stresses professional responsibilities rather than skills and techniques" (540). However, he did allow another possibility, that being "the librarians with longer practical experience have become worn down and discouraged by the lack of support from their communities, and even overt attack and repudiation by their supervising authorities, in the matter of freedom to read" (Asheim 540).

A review from a sociology journal defended the librarians, "Whatever faults these California librarians might have – and Fiske spells them out clearly and sympathetically – they often do a better job than their community would prefer" (Lee 303).

While there were mixed reactions to the results and questions about what to do about them, most contemporary reviewers gave the work high praise and recommended it to a wide variety of readers. In *Public Opinion Quarterly* Marie Johoda wrote, "Miss Fiske's book will undoubtedly be read with profit by librarians and sociologists. I wish it one additional group of readers: high school and college teachers might find it a most stimulating text to acquaint their students with the ideas and difficulties of democratic institutions" (152). In the *American Journal of Sociology* Lester Asheim said, "While this study is primarily concerned with the librarian and his attitude toward the collection of materials which is his charge, it throws a good deal of light on the American educational system and on the temper of our society" (540). And in *Social Problems* Melvin DeFleur wrote, "This is a carefully prepared, readable account of a major social problem. It should be of considerable interest to the educated layman, the civic leader, the educator, students of occupational sociology, community organization, mass communication and especially to librarians themselves" (94).

Fiske's report had shown the profession that, at least in California, its proposed ideals were not consistently in practice. Surprisingly, there was little discussion of the report beyond the initial book reviews. While Fiske's study was at least in part initiated by ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee, I

was unable to find any ALA response to the study in my search of the library literature other than McNeal's *ALA Bulletin* editorial. *A History of the American Library Association, 1876-1972* does not mention the Fiske report. In fact, in its summary sections on intellectual freedom it skips from 1953 to 1967.

### Words speak louder than actions

While ALA may not have addressed the Fiske Report head on, it did continue to support intellectual freedom, publishing the Robert B. Downs-edited The First Freedom: Liberty and Justice in the World of Books and Reading in 1960. Downs was president of ALA 1952-1953 and a vocal advocate for intellectual freedom throughout his career. The First Freedom was produced as a response to McCarthyism's lingering effects. Downs explained that the book was made up of the "most notable writings in the field of censorship and intellectual freedom over approximately the past half century" (qtd. in Robbins, "Censorship" 102). Robbins very aptly points out how the juxtaposition of Fiske's Book Selection and Censorship and Downs's The First Freedom epitomized the dichotomy of the library profession's varying degrees of acceptance of and adherence to the Library Bill of Rights. "Fiske's book testified that librarians were not putting into practice the code of freedom....Downs's The First Freedom, on the other hand, exemplified the celebrated public role that ALA had achieved in the defense of intellectual freedom in the 1950s" (Robbins 102-103).

ALA has continued to build the reputation of libraries and librarians as defenders of intellectual freedom and crusaders against censorship. In 1967 ALA Established its Office for Intellectual Freedom. In 1972 Busha conducted a survey examining the attitudes of mid-western public librarians toward intellectual freedom and censorship based on Fiske's work. He came to much the same conclusion as Fiske did 14 years earlier. He reported "that mid-western public librarians did not hesitate to express agreement with clichés of intellectual freedom but that many of them apparently did not feel strong enough as professionals to assert these principles in the face of real or anticipated censorship pressures" (Busha 300).

In 1982 ALA launched <u>Banned Books Week</u> in response to an increase in book challenges. "BBW stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of unorthodox or unpopular viewpoints for all who wish to read and access them" ("Banned"). This campaign highlights librarians' role in fighting censorship. "Fortunately, while some books were banned or restricted, in a majority of cases the books were not banned, all thanks to the efforts of librarians, teachers, booksellers, and members of the community to retain the books in the library collections" ("Banned"). Yet, in 2002 Ken P. Coley published <u>Moving toward a Method to Test for Self-Censorship by School Library Media Specialists</u>. Studying public high school libraries in Texas, he found that "over 80 percent of the schools in the study show signs that self-censorship has occurred during the collection development process" (Coley).

These studies show that while our public image may have evolved radically over the last 60 years, our private practice still struggles with the same issues of social and community pressures, personal values and professional purpose.

#### Conclusion

ALA as a professional organization has declared strong support for intellectual freedom. However, it is important to remember that this is a relatively new turn of events.

"The truth hurts, but the concept of intellectual freedom simply did not spring forth, Athena-like

from the head of Zeus, as a fully-formulated principle of American librarianship. In fact, intellectual freedom as a significant principle of librarianship is a recently-evolved concept...When our profession set out to formalize its beliefs, it often did so in reaction to particular issues and events" (Chadwell 20).

Robbins also reminded us that "In the early days of their profession librarians themselves preached the need to protect their readers by carefully screening what they made available to them" ("Dismissal" 161). When the Library Bill of Rights was strengthened in 1948 it was done in resistance to a coercive notion of Americanism, in opposition to censorship and out of librarians' desire to guard their professional prerogatives in book selection and collection building. It established as its foundation the values of pluralistic democracy – values of diversity, tolerance, and openness. "These values were not universally accepted, however, not even by all librarians, many of whom could not relinquish their role as protectors of taste and morals in exchange for the role of guarantor of access to ideas" (Robbins, "Dismissal" 161).

In her 1960 review of Fiske's book, Margaret Kateley said,

"This volume should be in the office of every head librarian and school administrator. It should stimulate further research into the character of the library as a public institution. Aspects of the problem particularly deserving of attention are the public image of the library and the status of the librarian, criteria for book selection, the personnel shortage in libraries, factors influencing financial support of libraries, and administrative problems of school libraries" (Kateley 136-137).

These concerns sound alarmingly contemporary.

My goal with this post was to share a bit of library history in the hopes that it would grant some perspective and elaborate the complexity and nuance of the issues raised. Unlike many of my other posts, this is not a call to arms, but a call to reflect, to remember that things haven't always been what they are today, that even today they may not be what you assume, and that there are many grey areas worth exploring.

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