

Censorship in Library Collection Development Practices and Civic Participation: A Theoretical Approach

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Libraries have long been defenders of wide-ranging intellectual freedom, steady opponents of any attempts at censorship of the materials contained within their walls, and proponents of vigorous and unfettered debate about all topics, no matter how socially acceptable. When librarians advocate anti-censorship policies, they are essentially talking about the principles contained within their collection development practices, that is, the decisions made by individual librarians – increasingly based on written policy statements approved by library administrators and library boards – about what type of material, in whatever format, enters the library. These decisions, in turn, are based on a variety of factors, chief of which are budgetary considerations, space constraints, and user needs. In the library world, then, censorship debates, for all intents and purposes, are really collection development debates.

To be sure, there may come a day when the issue of censorship in libraries is no longer relevant, simply because there will no longer be limits to a library's acquisitions budget nor to its physical capacity to hold material. In other words, there will no longer be collection development policies. Consider the following scenario from Neal Stephenson's science-fiction novel *Snow Crash* (1993). In a world where national governments have been replaced by competing franchise states, the Library of Congress has merged with the Central Intelligence Agency and "kicked out a big fat stock offering." The business plan of the

new company – called the Central Intelligence Corporation (CIC) – is a simple one, based on the fact that all information is now "in machine-readable form, which is to say, ones and zeroes." Millions of individuals working as freelance stringers upload anything that they think is of value – "[i]t may be gossip, videotape, audiotape, a fragment of a computer disk, a xerox of a document, it can even be a joke based on the latest highly publicized disaster" – while CIC clients, most of whom are corporations, "rifle through the Library looking for useful information, and if they find a use for something [that a stringer] put into it, [that stringer] gets paid." In this world, information literally is money, so much so that stringers compete to upload the most valuable information, knowing that a particularly sought-after piece of information is the difference between survival and starvation, but also knowing that "99 percent of the information in the Library never gets used at all." For example, Hiro, the protagonist of Stephenson's apocalyptic work, once uploaded "an entire first-draft film script that he stole from an agent's wastebasket in Burbank," and because six studios wanted to see it, "he ate and vacationed off that one for six months." On the other hand, his extensive audio and video files about "the rise of Ukrainian nuclear fuzz-grunge collectives in L.A." have never been accessed by anyone, let alone record labels, agents, or rock critics (pp. 21-22). Clearly, collection development policies are non-existent in the mega-library of *Snow*