

Uncovering Implicit Bias: A Journey into Collection Development and Censorship Mitigation

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In 2019 the graphic novel *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe was published, relaying a personal journey of exploration into identity and sexuality through childhood and adolescence. By 2023 it had become one of the most challenged texts in contemporary history with libraries positioned as a central battlefield. The sexual content and imagery in this text is minimal and not more scandalous than other books within collections. However, the LGBTQIA+ aspect was fundamental to the outrage. Republican conservative politicians such as Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, and Missouri State Representative, Ben Baker, have emphatically called for its banning. Libraries have evidently also hesitated to stock it. Consequently, *Gender Queer* has come to illuminate the power of the conservative right that echoes also within libraries by virtue of active ideology, or fear of it.

Anchored in experiences within a regional Queensland library, this paper suggests that complexities pertaining to the conservative right's anti-LGBTQIA+ views are an intricate and formidable presence in the dynamics of collection development. Firstly, conservative ideology manifesting explicitly and indirectly as overt and implicit bias, influences partial collection development. Secondly, the intensity of some actions of those within the conservative right effects a 'fear contagion'- in other words, an unreasonable fear of backlash from the conservative right that adversely impacts equitable and inclusive collections. The ensuing discussion thus puts forward the suggestion that libraries need to strive to overcome these detrimental effects of conservative ideology biases and censoring of alternate texts, in the service of creating truly democratic libraries. In pursuit of this objective the following briefly defines conservative ideology pertaining to gender and then explores what this can mean in relation to censoring and biased library collection development. Discussion then moves to consider the power of the fear contagion generated by this ideology. Subsequently, the associated issue of contradictory collections is also emphasised. Finally, discussion suggests strategies for mitigating the adverse effects of conservative ideology with a view to progressing democratic collections.

Conservative ideology has significant implications for library collection development, as its views on gender can markedly influence the selection, censorship, and accessibility of materials within library collections. Broadly speaking, conservative ideology values established, traditional – that is heteronormative – social and cultural customs, and institutions, believing they provide stability, predictability, and a foundation for moral soundness and societal cohesion. Conservative ideology

accordingly advocates for preserving traditional heterosexual, nuclear family structures as normative (van der Toorn, 2020). These norms are further buttressed by traditional, patriarchal Judaeo-Christian religious structures and biblical interpretations, deeply woven into the psyche of Western culture, that impress heterosexuality as right, natural, and divinely ordained (MacLeod, 2023). By contrast, non-binary/non-heterosexual expressions and lifestyles have commonly been unfavourably regarded, and at worst considered as immoral perversions that have served to justify bigotry, stigmatisation, and violent reactions (Hoffarth et al., 2023; Todd et al., 2020; van der Toorn, 2020).

While degrees of conservative elements in library communities and staff are no doubt highly variable and nuanced, realising their power to reduce representation of diverse viewpoints is important. Conservative staff members, for instance, can be less inclined to acquire or promote materials that challenge their own social or political beliefs, leading to a less diverse collection. This in turn disproportionately impacts marginalised communities whose voices and stories are subject to underrepresentation. There can also be an increased scrutiny and censorship of topics deemed sensitive and controversial, such as those related to LGBTQIA+ identities and lifestyles, alternate spiritual and religious expressions, ethnic diversity, and historical events like colonialism. Whether deliberately (via tactics like 'spine-facing' or decommissioning publication stock prior to shelf-time), or unconsciously exercised (via disregard or disinclination), such biased modes of censorship foster an overrepresentation of traditional, dominant, mainstream perspectives and entrenched stereotypes. The presence and behaviours of conservative staff can also shape an environment where other staff may feel pressure to constrain their acquisition efforts and self-censor their recommendations for collection development. Subsequently, conservative biases interrelate with the challenges of acquiring, displaying, and retaining 'unconventional' materials and literature that appeal to alternate identities and communities - even though such materials and literature align with a library's selection policy and wider community needs.

When it comes to the wider public, we reiterate that certainly conservatism encompasses a spectrum of values, beliefs, and opinions; and not all conservative persons share the same views on censorship or library collections. Some persons who subscribe to conservative views may still advocate for freedom of expression and intellectual diversity within libraries. Nevertheless, strong push back from conservative persons and groups occurs; and while these pockets of outspoken protestors may be relatively small in number, their behaviour and voices can be disturbing, intimidating, and loud. Anecdotally, we have experienced patrons disposing of non-binary literature in library rubbish bins, endured confrontational encounters with outraged patrons over non-binary materials, and dealt with vitriolic social media attacks on inclusivity initiatives. Furthermore, the threat of push-back from organised National and State collectives, such as The Australian Christian

Lobby (Hirst, 2023), Family Voice Australia (d’Lima, 2023), and Women-Up (Woman Up QLD, n.d.), creates a potent undercurrent of tension and trepidation.

Indeed, we seek to emphasise, that the intensity of such negative conservative reactions and behaviours, experienced or anticipated, effects a deep influence upon library staff and catalogue development, which can be conceived of as a pervasive fear contagion. Scientifically understood as an evolutionary biological mechanism, fear contagion conveys the phenomenon whereby individuals rapidly respond to potential threats by mimicking the fear responses of others, even in the absence of explicit information about the threat itself; thus, enhancing the likelihood of survival and procreation (Debic, 2020; de Gelder et al., 2004). In the context of conservative censorship in libraries, fear contagion can be perceived as the phenomenon where a small group of individuals expressing strong opposition to a particular book, can trigger similar sentiments in others - leading to a wider movement to ban or restrict access to that book. This spread of fear and negativity can be further fuelled by misinformation, emotional appeals, and social media amplification that gives rise to outrage. Correlatingly, libraries can also experience fear contagion stemming from the fear of public repercussions, complaints, and pressures to restrict or ban books. This can lead to a situation where libraries and librarians, fearing negative, hostile consequences, choose not to stock books that have been challenged, even if they believe the challenges are unfounded or unfair. Books that might be seen as inflammatory may not be ordered and diverse programming might not be pursued. In other words, the fear of confrontation can lead to covert censorship and the avoidance of democratic collection development by choosing (consciously or not) the path of least resistance to bypass conflict or adverse reactions. Such fear-generated censorship then becomes an accomplice to privileging a small conservative sector over the rights of the larger community to access diverse literature.

The outworking of this complex interplay of conservative ideology, gender bias, and fear further generates contradictory collections. Using *Gender Queer* and *Mein Kampf* as examples we can see how some libraries prefer to stock one text over another when both are controversial. Our research, encompassing a sample of over 60 regional and metropolitan libraries nationwide, reveals that *Mein Kampf* is widely accessible and thus presumably more socially acceptable than the much less available, *Gender Queer*. In general terms, the majority had *Mein Kampf* either online and/or in hardcopy, while *Gender Queer* was present in one-third of catalogues. *Mein Kampf* is unquestionably a notorious text. It has been subject to diverse and often fluctuating ban statuses across countries throughout its history, due to its harmful content and potential to incite racist and sexist/anti-homosexual hatred and violence. *Mein Kampf* is unequivocally a dangerous and inflammatory text that requires robust critical analysis and an understanding of its historical context to avoid

misunderstandings and perpetuating of harmful ideologies. Accordingly, it becomes a concerning incongruity that *Mein Kampf* is more readily available, and ostensibly receives less push-back and calls for removal from library catalogues, than Kobabe's *Gender Queer* - a text designed to create understanding, awareness, and representation for individuals exploring gender identities and sexual orientations.

Yet another troubling example of conservative ideology impacting contradictory collections pertains to the comic book series, *The Boys*, by Garth Ennis. Certainly, these texts are divisive given their depictions of misogyny, sexual assault, excessive violence, and gore. Additionally, the author has been outspoken in relation to his disdain for organised religion (Mancuso, 2016). In 2023, the Australian Classification Board classified *The Boys: Omnibus 1, 3 and 5* as CAT 1 Restricted (print publication) after an appeal from Bernard Gaynor, a known conservative activist in southern Queensland (Parliament of Australia, 2023). Consequently, this text is banned in Queensland and has been removed from all library platforms and shelves. Yet, texts such as *The Leopard* and *The Snowman* by Jo Nesbø, which contain gruesome details of misogyny, violence, torture, and murder are readily and extensively available. As another example, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson also remains prolifically obtainable, despite containing brutal violence and disturbing sexual assault scenes that has elicited scorn from some quarters due to concerns about perpetuating misogyny and rape culture (Brown, 2015). In short, this glaring imbalance within collections, influenced by conservative ideology, underscores the ongoing challenge of navigating content restrictions, ideological biases, and the need for nuanced considerations in library acquisitions to foster diverse and inclusive literary environments.

In light of the above, the following suggests strategies of mitigation as ways of progressing democratic collections.

Upholding Professional Ethics and Library Policies:

Librarians must adhere to professional ethics and library policies that prioritise intellectual freedom and unrestricted access to information. These frameworks serve as safeguards against undue censorship, even when staff members hold conservative views. Promoting deep learning and ongoing professional development related to these policies and associated ethics is crucial. For example, collection development staff could partake in implicit bias testing and complete diversity and inclusion training. Auditing of criteria for collection development ought also to prioritise diversity and inclusivity.

Creating and Sustaining Open Dialogue and Community Engagement:

Establishing open communication and active engagement with the broader community is essential for ensuring that library collections align with the diverse needs of all users. Actively soliciting feedback and addressing concerns from a variety of community members helps mitigate potential biases and ensures collections are reflective of the entire population. Libraries can also cultivate community support by collaborating with organisations and leaders who recognise the significance of intellectual freedom.

Leading by Example: Leading by example facilitates creating a culture that values empathy and diversity and actively works towards maintaining a broad and representative library collection. Fostering open dialogue within the library staff, encouraging diversity training, and setting goals for improving inclusivity are key steps in instilling a genuine commitment to democratic, equitable, and inclusive collections.

Reviewing Collections Regularly: Regularly reviewing the collection is essential to maintaining diversity, inclusivity, and representation of various perspectives; and to identifying areas for further development. Using AI to assess the diversification of the collection is already available to fast-track this process. Automated analysis can provide rapid insights into current and potential gaps where more diverse content is needed.

Building Courage, Resilience, and De-escalation Techniques: Demonstrating courage and resilience in response to potential backlash from the conservative right requires education and empowerment of staff. Libraries can foster these qualities through ongoing training initiatives. For example, staff may need training in de-escalation techniques, including the ability to extricate themselves from potentially aggressive situations and engaging self-care practices. Staff training regarding how to support other staff dealing with challenging clientele may be required – including debriefing and emotional support capacities. Successful resolutions should be celebrated, providing positive reinforcement for the efforts and achievements made.

Acquiring Knowledge of Regulatory Framework and Content Assessment: Staying informed about book challenges and censorship developments is crucial for navigating potential issues. Familiarity with the Australian Classification Board is pivotal. Staff can enhance their understanding through efficient and free online content assessor training. It is important for staff to also be well-versed in the collection development policy and capable of articulating it.

In conclusion, this exploration of the impact of conservative ideology on library collection development underscores the intricate challenges faced within Australian libraries. As this paper has

highlighted, explicit and implicit biases stemming from conservative ideology influences an environment of fear contagion and can disrupt the equilibrium of library collections. Understanding the intricacies of biases is a pivotal first step towards creating democratic libraries. However, the journey towards inclusivity does not end with recognition; it necessitates the cultivation of a library culture that promotes continuous exposure to diversity and embraces a multitude of perspectives. Moreover, cultivating empathy and practicing perspective-taking are essential tools in building compassion and enhancing understanding.

Libraries, as community spaces, play a vital role in facilitating this empathetic growth. As we address biases and censorship, it is imperative to remain open to feedback and demonstrate a willingness to evolve. Embracing a growth mindset ensures that our beliefs and behaviours are subject to positive change as we learn and progress. In the pursuit of truly democratic libraries, where all voices are represented and respected, the strategies proposed in this discussion offer a roadmap for mitigating the detrimental effects of conservative ideology. By upholding professional ethics, fostering open dialogue, and leading by example, libraries can proactively work towards creating collections that are diverse, inclusive, and representative of the varied perspectives within their communities. It is through these intentional efforts that libraries can fulfill their essential role as democratic institutions committed to the free exchange of information and ideas.

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