

Not Doing It: Avoidance and Sex-Related Materials in Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how affective discomfort is connected to librarian and library worker avoidance of collection development tasks when it comes to sex-related information. It is an area of concern given the recent wave of book bans and challenges, and in some cases legal action directed at librarians and library workers in the United States. Most of these challenges have involved materials dealing with sexuality, specifically LGBTQ+ identities and expressions. Though these challenges have mainly played out in public and school libraries, their effect is also being felt in academic libraries. Using patterns found in the literature, this analysis discusses librarians' affective discomfort, uncertainty, and emotional reactivity around sexual issues, its relationship to avoidance of collection development tasks in this area, and how this avoidance can have real-world consequences for vulnerable populations.

Introduction

In the last two years, the library profession in the United States has seen a rising wave of book challenges and proposed bans. These challenges have had an unusual level of rage behind them, including threats of legal action, personal attacks, targeted harassment campaigns, and in one case, even a threat of criminal charges against a library (Gruver, 2021). According to a report by the nonprofit group PEN America, 41% of the challenged books included LGBTQ+ themes or protagonists, 40% had a protagonist of color, and 22% had sexual content (Friedman and Farid Johnson, 2022).

Though librarians all over the country, in many different types of libraries, have met this moment with great courage, it remains appropriate to be concerned about the level of access to materials related to sex, gender, and sexuality that libraries are willing or able to provide. To paraphrase Susan Faludi, the present backlash has been set off not by achievement of full equality, but by the increased possibility that equality might be achieved. This backlash is a pre-emptive strike, designed to stop us long before we reach equality (Faludi, 2006). Which is to say, a backlash is not a sign that we in the library world were actually providing the level of access to these materials that our patrons needed; it is merely a sign that we had started to get marginally closer. In fact, as we will demonstrate in this article, there is significant

evidence to suggest that problems with access to these materials preceded this current sociopolitical backlash.

In this article, we explore librarian research on the topic of collection development as it relates to sex, gender, and sexuality, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ themes, and sexual health education. We chose to focus broadly on sex-related materials, not exclusively on materials related to the LGBTQ+ community or LGBTQ+ sexuality, because through the authors' research and experience, we have observed that when challenges to these materials take place, although the potential *harms caused* by the challenge and its aftermath can vary considerably depending on the community, the *actual concerns* expressed in these challenges do not significantly differ from those expressed in challenges to materials dealing with heterosexual sex. In each case, there is something here that someone objects to seeing in the library, and that something is *a body* (or multiple bodies, or the wrong kind of body) *in a sexual situation* (or the wrong kind of sexual situation). More recent materials challenges in school libraries in particular, have reflected this broad focus, with multi-book challenges that have included LGBTQ+ materials like Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (the most challenged book of 2022 according to the American Library Association) as well as less specific sex-related resources like Erika Moen's *Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being A Human* (Flanagan, 2023). Identities that are perceived to hinge on non-heteronormative sexuality, or the fact of existence in a non-cisgendered body, may often be the starting points for such challenges. But in practice, it is sexuality in general that comes under fire, and therefore we have chosen to maintain a broad focus. However, as noted above the potential harms of these challenges, and the anxieties and chilling effects that ripple out from them, are not evenly distributed. Therefore, in our discussion of potential harms, though we do discuss sexual health generally, we have placed special focus on the LGBTQ+ community.

In this article, we demonstrate that librarians and library workers are neither well-prepared by their training, nor supported systemically, to tackle the barrage of complex emotional and ethical issues that they must face in the course of collecting materials that relate to sex, gender, and sexuality. We believe that this lack of training and institutional support contributes to an overall culture of avoidance and fear in the collection of these materials, a phenomenon often referred to as self-censorship. This article does not enter into a debate as to whether or not censorship is an appropriate term in this context. Instead, we seek to demonstrate that the relationship between affective discomfort and behavioral avoidance, which is well-known in the behavioral sciences, applies to the practice of librarianship in this area. We argue that while we as librarians know what we should be doing, and we may have good intentions, we tend to avoid real change, and this avoidance is enabled and encouraged by a complex system of personal and institutional factors.

While we may be used to thinking of emotions in an active way, as declarative expressions, more often, unexamined, uncomfortable emotions manifest themselves as avoidant behavior. Avoidant behavior is best understood as the absence of behavior: inaction, procrastination, and the use of phrases such as, "I am too busy" and "that is too difficult" and "you just don't understand how things work here." When viewed through this lens, a review of relevant library literature over time demonstrates that affective discomfort in librarians appears to be a significant factor affecting the collection of sex-related materials. Unfortunately, dealing with affective discomfort is neither quick nor easy. It is also not something that any traditional academic program prepares people to do in an organized way. Even within those

programs that train mental health workers, the amount and depth of training related to coping with the trainee's own affective responses can vary. However, useful elements from this type of training could be incorporated into librarian training, particularly in reference, collection management or general management coursework. Best practices for the implementation of such a solution will not be a focus of this paper, though we will make an argument for its importance. This article focuses on an analysis of the existing literature, presenting evidence of the themes of behavioral avoidance and the many factors that nourish and sustain it, as well as the tangible ways that this avoidance affects access to information.

We acknowledge that for some librarians, particularly public librarians, who are not a focus of this analysis, the work environment has become so openly hostile in certain parts of the United States that behavioral avoidance, when it is practiced, can become an understandable matter of survival. Additionally, the authors do not wish to minimize or diminish the extraordinary courage being demonstrated daily by librarians and library workers living on the front lines in these environments, trying to implement best practices while being attacked on social media, accosted in person, and actively threatened with harm (Daly, 2022; Kingkade, 2022). However, these struggles also contribute to a climate of fear that affects all librarians and library workers.

This article discusses how affective discomfort is connected to librarian and library worker avoidance of collection development tasks when it comes to sex-related information. The term "affect" will be used here in its psychological sense, to mean personal attitudes, feelings, biases, etc. In psychological terms, "emotion" refers only to what is expressed. "Affect" refers specifically to what is felt, and is therefore a more precise term, even though the quality of affect is often empirically inferred from emotional expression or specific behaviors. This paper argues that avoidance of the topic of sex is correlated with affective discomfort, and that this discomfort is, in turn, correlated with avoidant behavior which, in effect, ends up restricting patron access to potentially vital sexual health information. This paper is not seeking to make an argument about any single librarian intentionally causing active harm, or about intent of any sort. Rather, it argues that the absence of something, the avoidance of action alone, can cause harm. Neither intent nor awareness on the part of the librarian is required. The avoidance itself creates the problem. Avoidance matters when it comes to this material because, in practice, not dealing with it has the potential to inflict active harm on some of the most vulnerable populations libraries serve, including people with disabilities, transgender and non-binary people, and sexual minorities of all kinds. In the case of trans people, in particular, the potential for harm is greater than many may realize, as reliable sexual health information, in particular information about transition-related care and safer sex, is a survival need in this population.

Historical context and definitions

Over 40 years ago, in 1978, the American Library Association (ALA) added its first statement regarding sex-related materials in libraries to its policy manual. That statement affirmed that providing information about sex and sexual health was part of the mission of the library, and consequently, sex-related materials should be available in libraries (original text quoted in Cohen, 2008). A version of this statement has persisted in every subsequent revision of the ALA policy manual, though the wording has been re-worked over the years (ALA, 2010). Notably, neither of the authors' relevant ALA divisions, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the American Association of School Librarians

(AASL), have policies of their own specifically relating to information about sex and sexual health, though both divisions broadly echo ALA policy. ACRL has the “Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries,” which do not specifically mention sex or sexual health, except to add “sexual orientation” to a list of protected categories against discrimination (ALA, 2006). In the case of AASL, the National School Library Standards do not specifically mention sex or sex education, but do advocate broadly for intellectual freedom and the representation of a range of perspectives (American Association of School Librarians, 2018).

Similarly, and from a more international perspective, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has drafted policy statements broadly supporting intellectual freedom (1999) and warning against censorship (2019). Neither of these policy statements specifically mention sex or sex education, though gender is mentioned. Interestingly, however, IFLA’s 2019 Statement on Censorship is one of the few policy documents we encountered in our research that specifically mentions the possibility of “self-censorship,” which the policy goes on to define as “conscious or unconscious choices by librarians and other information workers not to give access to specific works on the basis of fear or uncertainty about the reaction by authorities or users.” In its recommendations, the 2019 IFLA Statement further urges librarians to “build understanding of the risks of self-censorship.”

The use of this phrase, “self-censorship,” in IFLA policy is notable. When the topic of avoidance as it relates to sex, specifically materials on LGBTQ+ populations, has been discussed in the library literature in the past (as in Antell et al., 2013), the phrase “self-censorship” has often been used. Though IFLA’s policy is careful to acknowledge that such behavior is not always conscious, this phrase tends to provoke a strong reaction in librarian readers, as it is often assumed to imply intentional behavior. As noted in the introduction, it will not be a part of the project of this paper to debate what does or does not constitute censorship, writ large, or whether or not librarians consciously intend to censor or self-censor in their collecting practices. For the purpose of this article, the presence or non-presence of conscious intent does not matter. This analysis focuses on avoidance, and the potential consequences of that avoidance. Avoidance is a behavioral phenomenon that occurs regardless of conscious intent.

Despite the ALA’s continual re-affirmation of its policy statement, implicit endorsement by affiliated professional groups, and similar policy statements by international groups, the few sporadic surveys and research studies that have been conducted since the early 2000s demonstrate that what is affirmed in policy is not playing out in real-world library practice in the United States. These studies point to a discomfort on the part of librarians and library workers to engage with sex-related material, particularly in collection development. A 2007 study of health professions librarians showed that even among those most highly trained in the handling of sensitive health topics, sex is a source of discomfort, lack of knowledge, and fear (Siegel, 2007). Though this discomfort might have some roots in real-world concerns, several studies seem to show a disconnect between what librarians and library staff believe to be true (about ALA policy, about the law, etc.) and what is actually written into policy.

“I just don’t know enough.” Discomfort and the knowledge gap

As noted above, the ALA affirms that all libraries play an active role in providing comprehensive sex-related education materials, programming, etc. The statement does not, however, provide much guidance on what exactly the words “active role” and

“comprehensive” mean in this context (ALA, 2010). The question of what constitutes “comprehensive sex education” is in itself highly political and emotionally charged. It is perilously easy to slide from discussing what comprehensive sex education could be, on a medical or scientific level, to what it should be, on a moral level. What is comprehended by the word “comprehensive” in this case can depend on a multitude of factors, including upbringing, cultural background, religious beliefs, and political position. Librarians and library staff come into libraries with an equally wide variety of pre-existing beliefs on the subject of sex, and a wildly varying level of education on the subject.

Librarians, even those with multiple advanced degrees and professional specializations, are not expected to be experts on any or all of the subjects on which they provide guidance, and health is hardly the only subject area that requires a certain amount of highly specialized knowledge and care to handle in library work. However, sexual health is unique in that even among those people who might be expected to hold subject matter expertise, the knowledge gap is more shockingly enormous than most people realize. To take just one high level example: Medical training on the subject of human sexuality is wildly inconsistent across U.S. medical schools, and most sexologists and sex educators agree that the current level of training is insufficient to prepare physicians for practice (Shindel et al., 2016).

If even trained clinicians are underprepared to tackle sex-related subject matter, it is highly likely that the same is true of librarians and library staff. Though there has been quite a bit of research into consumer health training (or rather, the lack thereof) in professional library degree programs, including multiple studies led by Smith (2006, 2014) and a more recent study by Rubinstein (2017), the authors were not able to find any studies that specifically looked at training related to sexual health or the handling of sex-related materials in those same degree programs, which in itself is telling.

Though the authors were not able to find good data about training on sex-related materials in professional library degree programs, there are data about professional practice. In Cohen’s study of professional librarians, most were not aware that the ALA had a policy of affirming access to sex education and related materials (Cohen, 2008). Siegel suggested that even medical librarians, professionals with subject matter expertise in the area of healthcare, do not feel knowledgeable about sexual health and are uncomfortable with questions on this subject (Siegel, 2007). A larger survey of both professional and non-professional library staff in 2016 revealed that most staff did not believe providing access to sex education materials was part of the library’s role, and many even believed it might be illegal (Martinez et al., 2016). This fear persists across a wide variety of studies, and will be addressed further later in this article.

The ALA policy implies that it is part of a librarian’s job to know what constitutes comprehensive sex education, and exhorts them to “assume a leadership role.” But the evidence discussed in the previous paragraph suggests that this is not something most library staff, professional and otherwise, are educationally prepared to do, express comfort in doing, or even view as their role in the first place. Additionally, the perception that handling sex-related reference questions requires a high degree of specialized knowledge obscures the fact that even those professionals perceived as health specialists do not necessarily have this knowledge. As noted previously, the topic is unique not only in its sensitive, socially taboo status, but in the enormity of the knowledge gap that surrounds it. We argue that these factors are strongly correlated, and that, therefore, it is not enough to address the knowledge gap alone. The discomfort and distress must also be addressed because it is the distress that

causes avoidance.

Discomfort and resource selection

Our major focus in reviewing existing literature is collection development, because this is an area of library work in which this discomfort makes itself evident, and where the stakes tend to be highest in terms of both effect on patrons and consequences for library workers. The debate over materials selection and censorship in library collection management is not new, nor is it unique to sex-related materials. From a practical standpoint, it is obviously not possible for libraries to collect everything. Selection is an inevitability. The question that we have to wrestle with in doing this work is first what ought to (or ought not) guide selection, and then how to put that principle into practice.

In his 2002 piece on collection management and censorship, Doyle argues that Asheim's classic distinction between approaching collection management as a selector, who is looking for reasons to keep a piece of material, as opposed to a censor, who is looking for reasons to reject it, is not useful in practice. As quoted in Doyle, Asheim advocated that the collection be unbiased, even if the librarian is biased – Essentially arguing for libraries to take a position of deliberate neutrality. Doyle acknowledges that putting this principle into practice is a complex endeavor and does not delve further into this complexity. Instead, he sets up a useful argument against what he calls the “steward-librarian” position, which he argues is a form of paternalistic censorship, that is, restricting a patron's access even to those materials a librarian might deem dangerous, for the patron's own good or for the protection of the public, amounts to censorship, and an unacceptable infringement on a library patron's autonomy (Doyle, 2002).

This “stewardship” position is directly relevant to sex-related materials, though these are never discussed by Doyle. The question of restricting access, whether through a so-called “behind the counter” policy, a search engine filter, or simply not collecting particular items, is especially fraught when it comes to sex-related materials. Sex is a personally and politically sensitive topic, subject to social taboos and judgements about pornography and obscenity. Not only are there wide differences of opinion about what makes something pornographic or obscene, there are also potentially even wider differences of opinion as to whether or not materials deemed pornographic are in some way dangerous to the public, or to a particular segment of the public. The subjective judgment of obscenity, and the complexity of deciding whether what is obscene is also dangerous, and if so, to whom, and in what way, are all weighty topics, and beyond the scope of this paper. However, the existence of these debates only serves to underscore the degree of both intellectual and emotional complexity that surrounds sex-related materials, even when they are presented in what a trained educator, health care professional, or librarian would consider to be a developmentally-appropriate context.

To understand why it matters that librarians collect and facilitate access to material that they (or some of their patrons) might view as pornographic, obscene, deviant or dangerous, whether or not these materials are educational, it helps to remember that not so very long ago, it was socially normative in the United States to view material that depicted LGBTQ+ relationships, and especially sexual behavior, as inherently obscene. Homosexual sex is not mentioned in the current Federal legal precedent used to define obscenity (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2015), but homosexuality was considered a disorder by the American Psychiatric Association until its official diagnostic manual was amended to exclude it in 1973. This same

manual, known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM, now in its fifth edition with a new text revision in 2022, still classifies certain types of sexual behavior as disordered to this day. These classifications remain subject to heated debates within the field, as evidenced by discussions that emerged in the literature when the DSM-V was first published (Campbell et al., 2015; First, 2014), and by one of the authors' prior career experience as a psychiatrist.

The view of LGBTQ+ sexuality as inherently obscene was so mainstream in U.S. culture at one point, that materials related to these sexual identities and behaviors were overrepresented in the Library of Congress Delta Collection. The Delta Collection was the official collection of material deemed obscene, often seized in raids, or from the Postal Service due to the Comstock Act and associated state laws. The Comstock Act is a Federal law passed in 1873 that banned the shipping of materials considered "obscene" through the U.S. Postal Service. It has not been enforced for decades, though this may soon change (Perrone, 2023). During enforcement, materials related to behavior that was considered "sexually deviant," from erotica to sexological texts, were housed in the Delta collection until the maintenance of this collection stopped, in roughly 1964 (Adler, 2016). Even today, this relegation to obscene status has marked the way these items are cataloged, and contributes to limitations around access. Because of the outsize influence of the Library of Congress Subject Headings on cataloging in U.S. libraries, these practical access restrictions are both persistent and pervasive. Melissa Adler has written in depth on this dimension of access, and the authors would refer the reader to her extensive work, rather than discuss further here (Adler, 2017). However, it is worth mentioning that the way in which an item is cataloged by the Library of Congress also affects its likelihood of being acquired or kept by the average U.S. librarian, and it is significant that materials related to LGBTQ+ people and their relationships remain disproportionately more likely to have been cataloged in a way that marks them out as obscene.

Fears that LGBTQ+ adults who work with young people will attempt to "groom" them, that is, to prey on them, "convert," or "corrupt" them, persist to this day (Block, 2022; Rogers, 2022). Though librarian scholars such as Cornog argued as late as 2016 that these fears had diminished greatly (Cornog, 2016), the attempts to remove young adult books such as *Gender Queer* from libraries, ongoing all over the United States at the time of this writing, as well as the silencing tactic of labeling librarians and educators as "groomers" on social media (Pendharkar, 2022), are evidence that such fears are still prevalent in the populations served by libraries all over the country. The fears of the public (and the strategic exploitation of those fears by political actors) may lead to backlash, but such instances of public backlash, or even potential backlash, also feed into the personal fears of librarians and library staff, creating a feedback loop that influences librarian behavior, and in turn, the collections, and in turn, patrons.

Martinez et al. drew a link between collection development and library staff attitudes in their 2016 work. Causation is difficult to prove here, but the Martinez group are not the only ones to draw this connection. Nearly a decade before Martinez et al.'s study, Cohen and Siegel also noticed this connection, in 2008 and 2007 respectively. Smith's 2014 work on librarian and library staff's general discomfort with health information, especially when it comes to sensitive or divisive topics, is also relevant here. Additionally, again writing nearly a decade before Martinez, in 2009, Whelan describes one instance of a young adult novel that contained gay sex being repeatedly passed over for purchase. Though she acknowledges

nothing can be concretely proven about the reasons this book was not purchased, she contends that fears of dealing with challenges from the community deter librarians from purchasing LGBTQ+-related materials (Whelan, 2009). More recently, Proctor's 2020 assessment of LGBTQ+ content in the Penn State University Libraries collections found few pre-existing analyses of this nature in academic libraries specifically, and discussed in detail the complexity of performing such an analysis in a multidisciplinary subject area, which is, by its very nature, poorly represented by existing cataloging systems. Her analysis attempted to tackle this complexity through the use of multiple assessment methods, and found notable gaps in her library system's collections (Proctor, 2020).

In a slightly different vein, Drake and Bielefield's 2017 survey of transgender library users' needs reported unmet information needs in multiple categories, with up-to-date medical or physical health information being the most prominent. Drake and Bielefield specifically mention that "libraries were not frequently selected as reliable sources of information by individuals in this study." Qualitative responses to their survey revealed not only concerns about library collections, but also about interactions with librarians, with multiple respondents describing interactions with librarians and library workers ranging from frustrating lack of knowledge about the topic, to borderline hostility (Drake and Bielefield, 2017). In a similar vein, Stewart and Kendrick's work on information barriers among LGBT+ college students in 2019, which itself builds on Lupien's 2007 work, again found that topical, sex-related information was perceived by college students as being difficult to access in academic libraries. Stewart and Kendrick specifically point out that "participants' concerns regarding academic libraries coalesce around their perceptions of the library's collection, rather than the library as physical space" (Stewart and Kendrick, 2019). Because their focus was on surveying student perceptions, rather than looking at collections themselves, one could argue that the problem is one of a knowledge gap on the part of the students, rather than with the resources or the librarians collecting them. However, if we accept that at least one purpose of a library's collection is to serve its users, then the perceptions of these users are sufficient data to argue that their needs are not being met. It is possible that, either instead of or in addition to a problem with selection of resources, libraries have a marketing problem when it comes to sex-related resources. A 2021 study on the use of LGBTQ+-specific research guides in academic and hospital libraries seems to bear out this conclusion. Stevens and Fajardo examined the websites of a total of 187 libraries in the United States and Canada, and found that only about 30% had specific research guides for this material (Stevens and Fajardo, 2021). This finding is alarming, given the uneven way that LGBTQ+-specific topics, and sex-related topics in general, are distributed within the library catalog. As documented by Adler, and more recent work by other cataloging researchers (such as Henry et al., 2022), neither LCSH nor the Dewey Decimal System groups these works very effectively, making curated access points like displays and research guides, as well as librarians and library workers themselves, a crucial resource for access to these materials.

If we assume that the problem is primarily the marketing of resources, not selection, then it is worth asking why the marketing problem exists, and why it seems to persist over time. We have cited Siegel's 2007 work several times in this analysis, but his recent work is instructive in this regard. While most existing research has focused on user perceptions, a 2020 study by Siegel and his team is unique in that it attempted to directly examine librarian confidence and comfort levels in relation to meeting LGBTQ+ information needs. Like the

authors, Siegel et al. posited that the socio-emotional needs of librarians themselves may be an important factor in their ability to meet patron needs. Their analysis is complex and breaks librarian comfort down into three factors: Duty of care/professional responsibility, public visibility, and “shock factor” (a stand-in term for personal biases or shocked reactions that the librarian does not have the training to manage). The Siegel group’s preliminary analysis appears to indicate that while most librarians surveyed seemed to understand themselves as having a professional duty toward LGBTQ+ patrons and research questions on related topics (roughly analogous to a clinician’s duty of care), concerns about public scrutiny of the librarian’s choices, as well as personal discomfort with sex-related topics, were still significant factors. Siegel et al. also found a significant interest in additional training related to cultural competence, resources, and terminology, which aligns with the knowledge gap discussed earlier (Siegel et al., 2020).

Again, how exactly these comfort or discomfort factors influence behavior is difficult to establish. Like any service professional, most librarians probably believe they would err on the side of their professional obligations no matter the scenario. Responses to the Siegel group’s survey questions repeatedly showed this sort of hedging. However, at the same time, user perceptions of these resources as difficult to access, librarians as unlikely to be helpful, and the library environment as unwelcoming, persist. Looking at these two trends together, it seems clear that despite what librarians might like to believe about ourselves, something is wrong. The way this correlation seems to persist over time underlines the importance of librarian and library staff fear and distress when thinking about collection development tasks, and how performing them (or avoiding doing so) affects vulnerable populations.

Discomfort causing active harm

It may not be possible to prove with objective data that librarian and staff discomfort is driving self-censorship in collection development, but there does seem to be a correlation between the two. Because of their already marginalized and even stigmatized status, this correlation would disproportionately affect sexual minorities, a term that includes LGBTQ+ people, as well as those who identify as kinky, practice polyamory, or engage in or identify with any other type of sexual behavior, practice, or identity considered to be outside the cis-hetero-monogamous mainstream. Sexual minorities’ access to any sexual health information is therefore also disproportionately affected, and not having access to that information has tangible consequences for the health and wellbeing of these marginalized groups.

Take transgender people as an example. The gender presentation and sexual behavior of this population is constantly scrutinized as a source of fear and used to fuel discrimination against them. However, one of the things trans people most urgently require in order to survive and thrive is specific, relevant, and accurate information about sexual health. From a healthcare perspective, particularly when it comes to sexual health, trans people are an incredibly vulnerable group. Consider:

- Trans people are at a disproportionately high risk of becoming infected with HIV. The most current data from UNAIDS reports an HIV prevalence rate of 6.9% among trans people in North America and Western Central Europe (UNAIDS: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2020). For comparison, the prevalence rate of HIV in the general population in the United States is well below 1%. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2022).

- Trans people are disproportionately likely to engage in sex work or survival sex (sex in exchange for food, shelter, etc.) compared to the general population (Grant et al., 2011).
- Trans people also report a rate of suicide attempts that is nearly 9 times higher than the general population (James et al., 2016).

In the face of all these risks, trans people also report a lack of health information, particularly sexual health information relevant to their needs. Of course, lack of information is only one small part of what gets in the way of trans people, especially trans youth, getting the healthcare they need. But when a group is this vulnerable, it is difficult to argue that access to information is not important.

Discomfort and the fear of consequences

If we accept the contentions that access to sex-related materials matters, and that librarian discomfort is correlated with decreased access, then it is worth further exploring the complex set of factors that contribute to this discomfort, and its persistence over time. One potential factor we have already explored is the knowledge gap, both in librarians themselves, and in the wider population. Another potential factor is librarian fears and potential misconceptions about law and policy as they relate to sexual materials.

The few studies examining librarian and library staff attitudes toward sexual materials reflect the persistence of fears regarding legal action, specifically lawsuits. Both Cohen in 2008, then Martinez et al in 2016 found that a large number of library staff (particularly professional staff, including librarians) expressed beliefs that acquiring or recommending certain sex-related materials might be illegal, especially if the materials were for a patron under the age of 18, which is the age of majority in the U.S. This finding remains relevant in the academic library space, particularly for undergraduate colleges, where both enrolled students and students in special programs using the library, may be under the age of 18. Despite these fears, cases of actual legal action against librarians remain quite rare in the U.S. Two recent cases involving public librarians are instructive: In Wyoming, an attempt was made to bring criminal charges against public librarians on obscenity grounds over library materials with sex-related content. In the end, a prosecutor declined to make any criminal charges, as these were not supported by probable cause (Gruver, 2021). In Louisiana, a librarian took the unusual step of bringing a lawsuit herself, alleging defamation by a group that had been harassing her, again over library materials with sex-related content. This case remains in litigation at the time of this writing (Pendharkar, 2022). It is worth noting, however, that despite fears to the contrary, no one has yet successfully sued or legally charged a librarian in the U.S. over the choice to acquire and display sex-related materials. In the one outstanding legal case we found at the time of this writing, it was the librarian who brought the lawsuit.

While lawsuits may still (for now) remain relatively rare, the same is not true about other forms of backlash or attempts at censorship, such as book challenges, requests for removal of materials or displays, or community objections to materials or programming. These forms of backlash are becoming more and more common in public and school libraries, although in academic libraries they remain relatively rare, though they have occurred. The current U.S. wave of book challenges, bans, and attacks on librarians themselves, is centered on school and public libraries. Political strategists have so far chosen to frame the issue of censoring

materials as one of protecting children (or, similarly, protecting the rights of parents to protect their children) from some nebulous, theoretical “harm” that might come from being exposed to certain kinds of content (Gabriel, 2022). The strong emotions driven by this rhetoric are in turn driving a wave of book challenges and bans the likes of which has not been seen in decades, according to records kept by the ALA and other organizations (Hollingsworth and Italie, 2022). As alluded to previously, it is also creating a hostile work environment for school and public librarians, who are facing in-person and social media harassment (Hickson, 2022), and in some cases, massive funding cuts and even library closures (Rushing, 2022).

Academic libraries have, so far, not had much part in this wave of hostility. However, it is worth remembering that although they are seemingly exempt from the furor around providing potentially “obscene” material to children that periodically plagues school and public libraries, academic libraries do remain vulnerable to the extent that they rely on government funding. A 2014 case in South Carolina provides a very clear example: In 2013, The College of Charleston chose Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* as the book for its college-wide reading program “College Reads!”, which was administered through the library. The following year, a state legislator who objected to the content of this book proposed cutting the library’s budget by \$52,000. This legislator also proposed a funding cut of just over \$17,000 to the University of South Carolina-Upstate’s library, due to its choice of book for its freshman reading program. The book was *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, a nonfiction history of an LGBTQ+ radio program in South Carolina. The funding cuts passed the house, faced opposition in the senate, but were ultimately approved by the governor at the time, Nikki Haley (Chant, 2014; Cohn, 2014; McNeal, 2015). This case set a dangerous precedent in terms of the use of state funding (or its absence) as a punitive measure directed at academic institutions, specifically over the selection of materials. Viewing such a case through a behavioral lens, it is difficult to believe that these consequences and the news coverage surrounding them, would cause no distress among librarians and library staff.

More recently, the state of Florida has provided a distressing example of the potential vulnerability of the academic library. By leveraging his ability to appoint the members of the board of trustees, in early 2023 Governor Ron DeSantis essentially took over leadership of the New College of Florida, filling seats on the board with appointees who share his views, some of whom interfere markedly with the historical mission of the college (Contreras, 2023). The College’s faculty recently voted to censure the board, after the board took the worrisome step of denying tenure to five faculty members, an action that is well within the power of similar bodies at most colleges and universities (Anderson, 2023). Though there are legitimate criticisms of the tenure process, the intent of tenure has always been to protect academic freedom, and its denial is a clear threat. Although the new board has not yet taken any specific direct action toward New College’s small library as a whole, the recent firing of an out LGBTQ+ librarian with a vague rationale of “restructuring,” should be taken extremely seriously (Gholar, 2023). Therefore, academic librarians are just as vulnerable as their school and public counterparts to the chilling effects of fear, and just as likely to engage in behavioral avoidance.

It is worth asking if librarians and library staff would behave differently if they felt better protected from serious consequences over their collection development decisions, whatever the surrounding political climate may be. Stringer-Stanback attempted to test this idea by looking at collecting practices in areas that had, or had not, enacted anti-discrimination

policies more broadly in the community. Her study found that even in communities that had enacted anti-discrimination policies to protect LGBTQ+ people and their interests, the presence of such policies was not correlated with a change in collecting practices of young adult books on LGBTQ+ subjects. Her results suggest that legal protections in and of themselves do not appear to be correlated with a change in collecting practices (Stringer-Stanback, 2011). This was a small study, and it would be interesting to see more studies of this type, in particular studies examining knowledge gaps about policy and law. If feasible, it would be even more interesting to expand or repeat this research in the current political climate. Stringer-Stanback focused on legal protections, but it would also be interesting to investigate more deeply how much protection and support school and academic librarians and library staff feel they are getting from their professional organizations at the local and national levels.

Particularly at the local level, the amount and type of support that professional organizations are willing or able to provide can vary tremendously. At the national level, the American Library Association has made statements in support of librarians and library staff (Executive Board of the ALA, 2022), and affiliated organizations have echoed these statements, but it is not clear how well this translates to librarians and staff actually feeling protected from harm. Through its Office of Intellectual Freedom, and its legal affiliate, the Freedom to Read Foundation, the ALA does work to provide resources to libraries and librarians under attack. But because most of the attacks on libraries and librarians come at a local level, there are limits to what a national organization can do, particularly in the case of school libraries.

In the United States, there are very few broad, national-level protections for libraries and librarians in general. Those that do exist tend to be case law precedents such as the famous case of *Island Trees School District vs. Pico*, which limited the authority of school boards to censor the content of school libraries, using the protection of the First Amendment (U.S. Supreme Court, 1982). When it comes to school libraries, states are free to delegate authority as they see fit, and often delegate it at the local, municipal level, resulting in a fragmented maze of regulations, which often give the most power to local school boards. Depending on state and county level regulations, school boards may have broad latitude to act as they see fit without much oversight, leaving school librarians in a precarious position. Even in areas where support is strong, a school librarian may have very little recourse if their livelihood is threatened. The fear of job loss is a survival-level fear; it is a powerful motivator. Facing it requires not only support, but deliberate preparation.

In academic libraries, the regulatory situation is, if anything, even more fragmented. In theory, academic libraries and librarians should be protected from attempts at censorship by the principle of academic freedom. In practice, however, what that principle is interpreted to mean, and how much weight it is given, depends greatly on the institution – not only its stated mission and vision, but also on its governance structure, and the extent to which it relies on powerful donors and alumni. In public colleges, members of the board of trustees are often political appointees, and these persons can, if they choose, wield a tremendous amount of power. The situation at New College of Florida, outlined above, is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Private colleges and universities, while relatively free of potential state interference, can nonetheless be subject to the whims of governing boards and powerful donors. This is especially true when it comes to tenure and reappointment decisions, which affect academic librarians with faculty status or similar appointment types.

An academic librarian is just as vulnerable to survival-level fears about their job as their school library counterparts. How supported do academic librarians feel in facing these fears, and how might such support be marshalled or demonstrated? Even in places with a strong local chapter of the ACRL, the issues can be highly institution-specific. However, once again, awareness and deliberate preparation are likely to be helpful.

Conclusions: The need to look within our profession

There is a strong instinct in librarianship to attack fear with knowledge. The assumption seems to be that lack of knowledge causes fear, ergo if the group in question simply knew more, they would be less afraid. However, this assumption reveals more about the personality structure of librarians than it does about what works in practice. Many of the studies cited in this article pointed toward a knowledge gap as the problem and made different types of efforts to address this gap. These studies took place years, even decades apart. And yet, similar access issues persisted in each one, and similar recommendations were given again and again. There is a clear pattern emerging from the literature over the years: as a profession we know what is necessary, but this knowledge has not translated reliably into proactive action.

Research on providing education on controversial topics, especially in health sciences fields, has increasingly observed a phenomenon dubbed the “backfire effect.” The backfire effect occurs when the provision of educational material in an attempt to refute a misconception, instead strengthens a person’s belief in that misconception. Educational psychologist Gregory Trevors and his team contended that effectively counteracting the backfire effect involves dealing with the deep roots of affective responses, including how those responses can be tied to a person’s core identity (2016). Their contention is in line with what we already know about the nature of affective responses like fear. Fear is a visceral, hormonal response. It is ancient and evolutionarily persistent because its purpose is to ensure survival. It is powerful for the same reason.

If we know that it is personally difficult for any human being to learn to cope with powerful affective responses, like the fear response, it would be absurd to expect them to simply turn these affective responses off in order to do their work in a library. The relationship between deep affective responses, like fear, and the day-to-day work process, is not something that is discussed in library school curricula in any organized way. It is not something that receives consistent institutional support across the profession in the form of robust professional development that includes practice-based learning. It is not something for which all library workers across the profession have access to support and guidance through their professional organizations, which can be prohibitively expensive to join. Our contention is that the problem with sex-related materials in libraries is part of a larger problem within the profession: We are not doing a good job of emotionally preparing and supporting librarians and library staff in contending with the real-world intersections of the professional and the personal.

Models for this type of institutional preparation and support already exist in professions which, like librarianship, need to marry high-level technical skill with the gritty realities of interpersonal work. Within the mental health professions, for example, there is a robust tradition of practice-based learning that prepares physicians and therapists for difficult interpersonal interactions and escalating situations. Similar practice-based learning could be incorporated into professional development for librarians and library workers, and could be

more consistently implemented in library science degree programs, particularly in training for reference interactions. Those same programs could also offer more consistent training on gender and sex education issues, including training regarding the use of pronouns, creating and implementing inclusive collection development policies, best practices for collection development and promotion given the complex cataloging of these materials, and promoting awareness of, or offering opportunities to interact with, local sexual health educators and counselors.

Librarianship is a profession that stands at the intersection between information organization and human service. Our training has historically tended to do a better job of addressing one side of this intersection than the other. If we wish to form a better path forward, this must change.

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