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Culture Wars and Censorship: delivering ethical library and information services in uncertain times

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Glasgow Life Libraries Learning Programme: Equality, Diversity,
Inclusion Leadership and Inclusive Practice Development

Workshop, Oct 30th 2025



Purpose of session



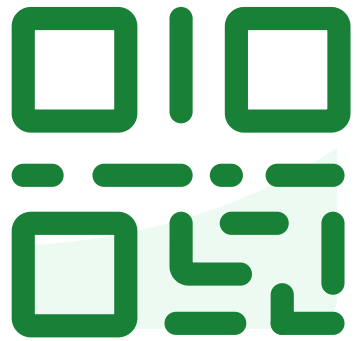
- Interactive discussion
- Opportunity to discuss and explore ethical principles and practices for managing, discussing and dealing with sensitive topics, materials, and requests within libraries, including censorship challenges.
- Opportunity to explore and reflect on how current ethical guidance and principles can support professional practice in uncertain times.
- When it comes to calls for censorship, we must always return to the same question: who are to be the censors, and how might they be expected to reach objective decisions on the basis of fundamentally subjective standards? (Doyle, 2021, p.85).



Interactive elements of session



- The session will utilise SLIDO (an audience interaction tool) to allow you to anonymously participate in discussions.
- We will not require any personal data from you that would identify you and will not be retaining any data from the SLIDO exercises.
- The link to join SLIDO is on the next slide and includes links to a Q&A tab which can be added to throughout.
- Feel free to pop any questions/queries/thoughts in there for group consideration and discussion.
- You can still attend this session without taking part in the voluntary SLIDO exercises.



**Join at slido.com
#2081708**



Uncertain, Sensitive Times...



- A new identity-based conceptualisation of “social justice” has brought with it a mistrust of unfettered speech and appeals for greater intervention from the state. We are left facing that confusing and rare phenomenon: the well-intentioned authoritarian (Doyle, 2021. p.2).
- Cancel culture is a mutated form of political correctness that seeks to police language and thoughts alike... a soft authoritarianism that accentuates the problems of division and intolerance as it attempts to mitigate their effects (Doyle, 2021, p.63).
- Democracies die not only when people are not free to talk but also when people are not willing or able to listen (Harari, 2024, p.136).



Uncertain, Sensitive Times



- Ethical concerns include:
 - Libraries as focal point for “culture wars” issues
 - Censorship challenges to library collections and services
 - Challenges against library events
 - Professional (and wider) debates around library neutrality
 - Yet to be resolved, despite belief in some quarters
 - Calls to decolonise our collections
 - Progressive, necessary, overdue, but were we ready for pushback?

Material challenges in public libraries are at an all time high while also **possessing a huge political and emotional weight** (Yeon & Dudak, 2025, p.539).

Censorship and the library

“There is no issue in librarianship which is more likely to bring libraries on to the pages of the press” (Malley, 1990, p.1).

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COMMENT

Books featuring child sex shouldn't be in school libraries. That's not a 'book ban'

Left-wingers don't need to ban books, because there are no right-wing librarians

 **DAVID HARSANYI**
19 April 2024 • 9:45am

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National library in U-turn over gender-critical book ban



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COMMENT

Without freedom of publishing, culture withers

In the US, attempts to censor and ban books are rising worryingly. Could Britain be heading the same way?

 **BEN LAWRENCE**
27 April 2023 • 7:00am

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Example: Calderdale Council

The Telegraph News Sport Money Travel Business Health Opinion General election Ukraine

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Gender-critical books hidden by 'tinpot censor' librarians

The works removed from public view are all critical of gender ideology and transgender activism and include Kathleen Stock's *Material Girls*

Craig Simpson
31 July 2023 · 6:10pm

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Calderdale libraries at centre of row over gender-critical books removal

8 August 2023




Calderdale Council said the removal of books from libraries such as Halifax central library was not a political decision

- Gender-critical books removed from public view, as a "consequence of an internal human resources matter". Calderdale Council claimed the decision to remove "certain books" was "not a political" one.
- Why was this explanation important, and those specific words chosen?
 - *R v Ealing London Borough Council Ex parte Times Newspapers Ltd (1986) 85 L.G.R. 316*
 - A library decision taken on purely political grounds is "an unlawful abuse of power"
 - At heart of judges' decision in this case was the purpose of a public library or library criteria based on *Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964*.



LA (CILIP) position at the time



- The Library Association commenting on this very case in 1986
 - *“In our view it is manifestly not right that councillors should allow their personal opinions on a political or industrial matter to stand in the way of the right of access of the public to all publications which can reasonably be provided.... The Library Association is deeply concerned that the imposition of these bans constitutes a major breach of the traditional principles that public libraries should be a neutral and non-partisan service”* Library Association Record, 88 (4) 1986, p.163)

The issue of self-censorship

Book selection and censorship: A study of school and public libraries in California (Fiske, 1959).

TABLE 14
LIBRARIANS' PRACTICE IN REGARD TO CONTROVERSIAL
MATERIAL
(Percentages)

Practices	School librarians	County librarians	Municipal librarians	Total
Habitually avoid.....	29	5	17	18
Sometimes avoid ¹	29	45	49	41
Not a criterion.....	38	37	29	34
No opportunity.....	4	13	5	7
Number of respondents.....	51	40	65	156

Note: Categories represent dominant behavioral tendencies synthesized from respondents' explanations of how they handle specific titles.
¹If in spotlight or if avoidance can be justified for another reason.

More recently:

- ... participants [school librarians] expressed increased hesitancy to add books potentially perceived to contain controversial material (Moore & Tudor, 2024, p.2).
- **RSE Workshops taking place in Glasgow (18th February) and Stirling (25th February).**



How confident are you in addressing ethical dilemmas in your library setting?

CILIP's Ethical Principles



1. Human rights, equalities and diversity, and the equitable treatment of users and colleagues
2. The public benefit and the advancement of the wider good of our profession to society
3. Preservation and continuity of access to knowledge
4. Intellectual freedom, including freedom from censorship.
5. Impartiality and the avoidance of inappropriate bias
6. The confidentiality of information provided by clients or users and the right of all individuals to privacy.
7. The development of information skills and information literacy



Which of CILIP's 7 ethical principles do you most identify with in your own professional practice?



Which of CILIP's 7 ethical principles do you think the public most associates the library profession with?



When dealing with ethical issues in your practice, how useful have you found any of CILIP's ethical principles? Why?



Is there anything else that you think would help you to address the ethical challenges discussed today?



Open Q&A

① The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from



A practical tool: managing resistance



- “Seldom... will you encounter an issue in which the range of disagreement follows a simple line from accord to resistance. Often resistant views fall into different categories so that no single line of argument appeals to all those whose views are different from your own. You have to identify not only your audience’s resistance to your ideas but also the causes of that resistance” (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, 2007, p.142).
- Creating a **Scale of Resistance** in advance of making a case, or planning a new initiative, can be useful to allow you reflect on all opinions that might be expressed

Every human interaction has the potential to cause offence (Doyle, 2021, p.35).

A practical tool: managing resistance

Step 1: Identify public position/policy

Accord		Undecided/Neutral		Resistance	
Strongly supportive	Supportive with conditions	Uncertain	Mostly opposed	Strongly opposed	
Reasons	Reasons	Reasons	Reasons	Reasons	
Reasons	Reasons	Reasons	Reasons	Reasons	
Reasons			Reasons		

Step 2: Prepare response/mitigation strategies

For example: how do you address differing “culture wars” viewpoints sensitively and respectfully

Full unpacked example in literature review at: <https://www.cilips.org.uk/reveal>



Concluding thoughts



- In thinking about values and taking action based on values... we walk an intellectual tightrope... We must, in my view, have beliefs and ideals, but we should never seek to impose those beliefs and ideals on the unwilling. There is a vast difference between defending one's values and making others conform to those values (Gorman, 2015, p.5).
- ... unpleasant people are bound to use their speech to advance reactionary ideas, but the human right that enables them to do so is precisely the same right that allows us to counter them (Doyle, 2021, p.6).
- **“A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone.” Jo Godwin**

ARTICLE	9	The Right to Freedom of Expression.
ARTICLE	10	The Right to Freedom of Thought, Religion and Belief.



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