

Power/Knowledge, Intellectual Freedom and Censorship in Libraries

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Abstract

This article examines censorship and intellectual freedom in libraries through Foucault's concept of knowledge/power and discourse. Foucault recognizes libraries as one of the institutions that control discourse. Discourse is controlled if certain resources are censored, which inhibits intellectual freedom. The paper discusses the roles of various agencies and individuals in library collection development to show how power/knowledge dynamics play out in libraries. To better understand it in the local context, the movements by government agencies to censor certain materials from circulation in the Philippines were discussed. Censorship poses implications for the knowledge that library users can discover in the library. The library, librarian, library users, library collection, and other institutions or agencies have varying degrees of power over discourse and, at the same time, the knowledge that they hold implies that power. A comprehensive intellectual freedom policy for libraries is recommended to help balance power/knowledge dynamics in libraries.

Keywords: Power/Knowledge, Discourse, Intellectual freedom, Censorship

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are expected to promote intellectual freedom through their diverse collections where discourse is propagated. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) declared in their Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom (1999) that “human beings have a fundamental right to access to expressions of knowledge, creative thought and intellectual activity, and to express their views publicly” (para. 2). Intellectual freedom is at the core of the librarianship profession (IFLA, 1999), and it is defined by the American Library Association (ALA) (n.d.b) as the “right to access information from all points of view, in all formats, and without restriction” (para. 10). In the Philippines, the Code of Ethics for Philippine Librarians (Professional Regulatory Board for Librarians [PRBFL], 2006), which also promotes intellectual freedom, stated Section 1.3 that “librarians shall uphold and promote the right to information...” The National Competency-Based Standards for Filipino Librarians (NCBSFL)

(PRBFL, 2015) also stipulates, under the domain of Ethics and Values and Personal Competencies, that librarians are expected to understand and promote intellectual freedom and freedom of information. The 2025 revised competency standards, now referred to as the National Competency-Based Standards for Filipino Library and Information Science Professionals (NCBSFLISP), does not make any explicit mention of intellectual freedom but it does mention under the Information Sources Domain that access must be provided to resources “without bias and prejudice” and the recognition of the librarian’s role in facilitating access to information under the Information Services Domain (PRBFL, 2025).

Conversely, censorship in libraries inhibits intellectual freedom. It is the “prohibition of the production, distribution, circulation, or display of a work by a governing authority on grounds that it contains objectionable or dangerous material” (Reitz, 2013). Censorship is further recognized as involving the

“silencing of viewpoints” (Smolla & Nimmer, 2006, as cited in Ademodi, 2011, p. 19). With censorship, users are unable to gain access to certain ideas and concepts that might give them alternative perspectives on a certain topic. Censorship directly impedes intellectual freedom that libraries are supposed to be promoting. Librarians are expected to reject censorship as it contrasts with the libraries’ core mission to provide access to information (IFLA, 2012)

Despite the mandate for libraries and librarians to promote intellectual freedom, censorship persists in different forms (IFLA, 2025). Government agencies can implement legislation that censors certain materials, such as the memos released by government agencies in the Philippines in 2021 to prevent the circulation of specific publications due to their content. Library boards can make decisions on the library’s collection and access policies. Library users themselves, such as parents and community members, may also have their own sentiments and opinions on which resources should be made accessible by libraries, as in the cases of book banning in the United States and Australia.

The contrast between censorship and intellectual freedom places the role of libraries in the spotlight with their mission to provide access to information. Library collections are developed by librarians with various agencies and groups in accordance with existing laws and policies, and the community that the library serves. This demonstrates the power of certain people to determine which information is made available to library users and consequently shapes discourse. This aligns with Foucault’s view of the library as an institution that controls discourse (Foucault, 1971/2005). If certain materials are effectively censored, then the ideas and concepts within them are bound to be inaccessible and excluded from discussions among library users, which defeats the intellectual freedom mission of the library. The library wields power over what sort of knowledge users may obtain through their collections.

Given this, this paper explores the relationship between censorship and intellectual freedom in libraries through Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge and discourse. The roles of various agencies and individuals in library collection development are discussed alongside ALA’s documented cases of censorship to illustrate how the dynamics of power/knowledge are expressed in libraries. Specifically, the case of censorship in Philippine libraries in 2021 is examined to understand how power/knowledge and discourse are exhibited in the local context.

Role of Libraries in Discourse and Intellectual Freedom

Foucault argued that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures...” (1971/2005, p. 316). Also, Foucault recognizes the library as one of the institutions that control and reinforce discourse. The library preserves the continuity of discourse through its collection of resources with varied perspectives from different time periods (Radford & Radford, 2001). Providing access to these materials constitutes intellectual freedom. On the other hand, we have to acknowledge that despite the libraries’ best efforts in collecting and preserving information resources, there is a limit to how much collection each library can maintain. This highlights the library’s power to legitimize knowledge and truth (Radford, 1992), which is manifested in how discourse is influenced by the availability of information resources. In this case, if censorship is enforced in libraries, it is worth pondering how much control is exercised over discourse.

Libraries have a certain control over discourse not only through the availability of resources but also through the “rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution” (Foucault, 1971/2005, p. 320). The very act of classification performed in libraries is a form of control – libraries control how resources are arranged within them (Radford & Radford, 2001). Radford (2003) referred to the arrangement of materials within libraries following a certain classification scheme as *discursive formations* based on Foucault’s definition of the term. Discursive formations are tangible and can be directly experienced, in this context, through the actual placement of books on the shelves based on the subject that they have been assigned. Classification of materials could very well affect the user’s search process, and their placement on the shelves could affect how much a user may find when they visit a certain section pertaining to their topic of interest.

“The library collection is not only a place where discourse is controlled through organizational procedures but, also, the library itself, through its architecture and furnishings, becomes a visible monument to this discursive order and control” (Radford & Radford, 2001, p. 305). The location of each section of the library could determine how much information a person might find. For instance, library users may freely browse open shelves and, in turn, find related information on other books on the same shelf, unlike in a closed-shelf setup. The rules enforced inside the library illustrate the library’s control over user behavior. The library can determine access privileges

through its policies. Thus, the library is an institution of control that has the power to shape discourse. Still, as someone who can exercise intellectual freedom, the interpretation of the knowledge contained within libraries remains up to the user.

POWER/KNOWLEDGE AND CENSORSHIP IN LIBRARIES

Foucault (1975/1995) posited that “power and knowledge directly imply one another” (p. 27). Power and knowledge are inevitably entwined. The library as a repository of knowledge is a place that holds power. Librarians, who are recognized as the stewards of knowledge, hold power over what knowledge may be found inside the library. Similarly, the knowledge that library users may obtain from the collection empowers them. Yet power/knowledge in the library is more than just the librarians and users.

What happens when there are certain actors, such as the government, that impose restrictions on the library to censor materials? In such cases of censorship, Pierre’s (2005) interpretation of Foucault in the academic library context rings true. He remarked that, “Knowledge can be withheld as an exercise of power, and power can be imposed through knowledge if its transmission is curtailed” (p. 152). Should censorship take place, the library resources in question will be pulled out, and the knowledge contained within them will be effectively withheld.

Pierre (2005) goes on to say that the second statement holds true in modern academic libraries and points out the power that publishers have over library acquisitions because they dictate subscription fees and resource costs. While libraries do promote intellectual freedom and provide access to a variety of materials, we must acknowledge that it is financially and physically impossible to acquire every material available. To address this, libraries have their collection development policies to guide them in selecting and acquiring resources. Each library serves a particular community, and the collection must cater to their information needs. This begs the question: how does library selection differ from censorship?

Censorship or Selection?

Censorship in the context of libraries, based on the earlier definition, is the prohibition of access to certain materials decided by a governing authority. In ALA’s definition (n.d.b), this governing authority could be a person, group, or organization/business. People who decide what is prohibited are called *censors*. It can be argued that librarians are acting as censors since the very act of selection in libraries means that not all materials

may be acquired in a particular field.

However, as mentioned earlier, selection is made due to both financial and space constraints. Selection criteria exist to guide librarians in selecting resources. Asheim (1953) noted that what differentiates selection from censorship is their approach towards the materials in question. Selection assumes a positive approach and evaluates the value of materials as a whole. Meanwhile, censorship assumes a negative approach by finding vulnerability wherever it may be found inside a material and only focusing on those portions. “Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect – not the right – but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading” (Asheim, 1953, p. 67). Asheim refers instead to librarians as selectors. Selectors might be unable to make everything available for their users that might hinder one’s freedom to read what they want; nevertheless, librarians strive to provide various materials showing different perspectives on the same topic as much as possible within the constraints.

Asheim (1953) mentioned that a selector “looks for values, for strengths, for virtues” (p. 66). Doyle (2002) critiques this statement by arguing that the selector is the same as a censor in instances where they reject a book based on conflict with their personal values. He emphasized that it was unclear whose set of values, strengths, and virtues should be used as the standard in selection. In another article by Asheim (1983, as cited in Doyle, 2002), the values and virtues are removed and instead refers to the ideal as the *unbiased selection*. The unbiased selection refers to the provision of a balanced library collection that covers a variety of viewpoints on different topics “whether the librarian likes it or not” (Asheim, 1983, as cited in Doyle, 2002, p. 19). It ensures that readers are provided with unrestricted access to different materials, and what they choose to do with their right to access these materials is up to them.

In contrast, Hole (1985, as cited in Doyle, 2002) contends that the censorship that librarians do during the selection process, especially when it involves harmful materials such as bomb-making manuals, is at times morally justified. Hole’s perspective counters that of Asheim’s, but both illustrate the power that librarians have in deciding which information resources become part of the library’s collection. In the first place, they are also primarily responsible for crafting the collection development policy (CDP), although in other cases, the CDP falls under the purview of the library board, which includes members of the community. In the end, Doyle (2002) agreed with Asheim’s position on providing a balanced collection because it empowers patrons to distinguish good from bad in these materials, rather

than leaving a select few to decide for them. Selection policies must be properly set in place to ensure that the library's collection does not restrict intellectual freedom.

Challenged Books vs Intellectual Freedom

Librarians may be the ones in charge of developing the collection, but libraries ultimately exist to provide access to the community they serve, which is why each library has its collection tailored to the needs of its user community. Consequently, the user community has the power to provide their suggestions and insights for library selection. For this reason, their feedback is solicited. Still, it is the librarian's prerogative whether user feedback is considered.

Apart from that, users can exercise their power through challenging the resources available in the library. Challenge is when a specific person or group files their contention about a library material for it to be removed or restricted (ALA, n.d.b). It is a form of expressing censorship given its purpose to restrict access to certain materials. Based on the recent report of ALA (2024, 2026), 2025 has the second-highest recorded number of total challenges with 4,235 unique titles, while 2023 remains the highest with 4,240 unique titles.

ALA observed that there is a notable increase in the percentage of organized censorship attempts, with 92% of the total challenges in 2025 from pressure groups (ALA, 2026). These cases show organized attempts to remove books about "race, history, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health" (ALA, n.d.a, para. 6) in contrast with the majority of challenges prior to 2020, which mostly came from parents. The common factor among all challenges is "political or religious disagreement" (p. 7) with the perspectives present in the targeted books (ALA, 2026). These organized challenges to censor multiple titles directly infringe on intellectual freedom because there is intent to remove them from both school and public libraries. Should these cases be successful in censoring certain titles, it would effectively lead to limiting access to those materials.

Even though parents and other groups or individuals have the right to express their opinions regarding the materials that they want to challenge, they are still bound by the procedures of the library regarding such issues. It is specified in the ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual under the section on Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors that parents can only restrict access for their own child and not other children—the reason why challenged books usually do not get banned because banning also removes the rights of other children to access the same book (Magi & Garnar, 2015). Libraries are still bound by their mission

to advocate for intellectual freedom despite these challenges. Their power stems from the existence of library policies on how to handle book challenges and the guidelines from ALA, the national library organization, that has power over libraries. This also showed how librarians' knowledge about censorship and intellectual freedom policies empowered them to counter the challenges forwarded by the challengers

Problems arise when self-censorship is exercised by librarians to preempt challenges on controversial materials, which circles back to the issue of selection. And unlike challenges submitted by parents, concerned individuals or pressure groups, there are no formal records on self-censorship (Whelan, 2009). Self-censorship could occur during the selection process before acquisition or after acquisition through the placement of materials in a different or restricted section, or mismatched labeling (Whelan, 2009). In the case of children's or young adult literature, Whelan (2009) exemplifies that certain titles might be moved instead to the adult section which limits children's access. Such instances further demonstrate the power of librarians over the library collection and how they exert their control even under the circumstance that they acquired the allegedly controversial titles.

Censorship in the Philippines

In the Philippines, censorship memos from government agencies were released following the creation of the National Taskforce to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). There is the Commission on Higher Education in Cordillera Administrative Region (CHED-CAR) Regional Memorandum 113, series of 2021 and *Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino* (KWF) Memorandum 2022-0663 (De Vera, 2021; Villanueva, 2022). Both memos sought the removal of "subversive" materials from circulation.

The memo from KWF was eventually voided because censorship is not part of its function (Boiser & Aurelio, 2022). Nevertheless, the fact that KWF attempted to ban five (5) books remains. The reason cited was due to the subversive and anti-government nature of the content of the books. The following are the books:

1. *Teatro Politikol Dos* by Malou Jacob;
2. *Kalatas: Mga Kwentong Bayan at Kwentong Buhay* by Rommel B. Rodriguez;
3. *Tawid-diwa sa Pananagisag ni Bienvenido Lumbea: Ang Bayan, ang Manunulat, at ang Magasing Sagisag sa Imahinatibong Yugto ng Batas Militar 1975-1979* by Dexter B. Cayanes;

4. *May Hadlang ang Umaga* by Reuel M. Aguila.

Specific passages from the books were highlighted to emphasize which parts are subversive such as the passage in *Teatro Politikal Dos* that described EDSA as “the best thing that happened after fifteen years of Martial Law” (Jacob, 2022, as cited in Mongaya, 2022, para. 7). The book authored by Cayanes was banned because it referenced works of communist rebel leaders Jose Ma. Sison and Julieta de Lima, and works on Marxism. Looking back on the distinction between selection and censorship, this is an act of censorship since the books were not evaluated as a whole for their content, but rather specific parts were targeted for banning. This banning attempt openly opposed the narratives presented in the books that express the experiences of Filipinos during the martial law period. This is an attempt to control the narratives available about Martial Law, which infringes on intellectual freedom.

The other incident was the memo released by CHED-CAR on October 21, 2021, and their director, Demetrio Anduyan Jr., urged for the removal of “subversive” materials from the libraries and information services of higher education institutions (HEIs) (De Vera, 2021). The initiative was dubbed as *Ugnayang Laban sa Impormasyong Rendido at Akdang Dulot-Terrorismo* (ULIRAT), which is part of the actions discussed during the Cordillera ELCAC task force meeting. Subversive materials were defined in the memo as “literatures, references, publications, resources, and items that contain pervasive ideologies of the Communist-Terrorist Groups (CTGs)” (De Vera, 2021). The memorandum itself is an act of censorship as it pushes for the removal of the so-called subversive materials. By doing so, they are restricting access to materials that they claim to influence the reader’s consciousness and may radicalize them. Schools were directed to turn over such materials to the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) and provide a list of all items. This initiative shows that CHED-CAR used its power over HEIs in their region to control the knowledge that students can access.

Different groups and individuals released statements denouncing KWF’s and CHED-CAR’s memo. Faculty members from the University of the Philippines’ Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature found it ironic that KWF, the agency tasked to promote Philippine languages, released the memo to ban books written in our local languages during *Buwan ng Wika* (Mongaya, 2022). Rey Salvosa, former University of Cordilleras president, criticized the memo from CHED-CAR, saying that the education system exists so students would learn how to think for themselves on what is right and wrong (De Vera, 2021). He also mentioned that

“When an institution decides what you can and cannot read, that is the same thing as telling you what you can or cannot think about” (para. 14). Professor Mary Grace Golfo-Barcelona, the Dean of UP School of Library and Information Studies at that time, stressed that libraries should denounce all forms of censorship (Perez-Rubio & de Santos, 2021). She said that censorship goes against the Code of Ethics for Registered Librarians and IFLA’s Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers. The faculty of UP SLIS (2021) collectively released a statement denouncing the banning of books from libraries arguing that . These statements show how censorship efforts by government agencies infringe on intellectual freedom. The different groups voiced their opinions and pushed back against these efforts.

Power/Knowledge and Discourse

Foucault (1982) wrote that to understand power relations, “we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations” (p. 780). Thus, this paper explored how librarians and concerned groups struggled against censorship campaigns to protect the intellectual freedom of readers. Each group has its own stake in the issue of censorship in libraries. As Ademodi (2011) put it, there are many stakeholders on this issue, and they include the following as presented in the above incidents:

- the government’s stake lies in materials that may affect national security or government interest;
- the librarians’ stake manifests in the selection of materials within the library’s physical and financial constraints;
- library patron’s stake concerns restrictions placed on their access to knowledge through book bans;
- and the community’s stake emerges when their societal and religious values are not aligned with the materials available in the library.

Friction between these groups in the context of a censorship attempt demonstrated the power relations between them.

Another point that Foucault (1982) made was that “The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (p. 789). This directly relates to how those in power can determine the knowledge available in the libraries, which in turn influences discourse. The Philippine censorship attempts in 2021 and 2022 targeted allegedly subversive materials. If the government actually

succeeded in censoring all those ‘radical’ materials and those on martial law, they could very well control the discourse on these topics and consequently control how society views the issues based solely on what materials are available for circulation. In the case of book challenges in the United States, persistent censorship campaigns by pressure groups are making librarians hesitate to acquire so-called controversial materials. Any form of censorship enforced in libraries controls discourse and prevents people from speaking about the censored topics, which is a direct opposition to intellectual freedom.

CONCLUSION

From within the spaces of the library, users set forth on a journey to find and create knowledge. Users can gain knowledge not only through perusing the available materials in the collection but also through the arrangement of the materials themselves (Radford, 1992). The arrangement of materials in the library provides insight into the library itself. The resources found in the library form a complex network with each other. The book is a system of references to other resources; “it is a node within a network” (Foucault, 1969/2002, p. 19). The continuity of discourse lies in referencing old texts, to which the library holds the key, and how they relate to each other and to the present. It is very much like how this paper attempted to explain censorship and intellectual freedom in libraries using Foucault’s concept despite it being written more than a decade ago. This paper contributes to the discourse of applying Foucault to the field of Library and Information Science.

The library is not just a place where knowledge may be found. It is also a place where knowledge is created. Libraries provide spaces for the continuous production of discourse which supports their mission to foster intellectual freedom. Despite the control that libraries have within their spaces through their policies, users have the freedom to read what they want and express themselves. Librarians have the responsibility to oppose censorship to allow users this freedom despite external pressures.

The discussion mainly focuses on the library’s physical spaces and physical collection. The dynamics of censorship and discourse in the digital landscape were not included. Other researchers may explore how information retrieval tools such as the online public access catalog could affect users’ access to materials. There is also the matter of database subscription access and discoverability.

Only a few studies tackle intellectual freedom in libraries here in the Philippines. Colleges and universities have their own policies on academic freedom, and some academic libraries have collection development policies that address or at least mention intellectual freedom (Icaonapo & Dar Juan, 2023). Overall, we lack a comprehensive policy on intellectual freedom for libraries aside from the brief mention of it in the Code of Ethics for Librarians and NCBSFL. It is recommended to have an overarching policy on intellectual freedom that can support libraries should censorship be attempted again in our country in the future.

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