The Restriction of Access to LGBT Materials Within American Libraries:

Why It Happens and How It Can Be Improved

Tyler Wilmoth

East Carolina University

Abstract

This paper explores and discusses the many factors that affect access to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) materials within different types of libraries. There are many alleged reasons for the restriction to access of these materials including factors such as budget restrictions, political atmosphere in the community, and self-censorship. There are many ways for librarians to take action as well. These actions range from as extreme as partnering with an organization such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to take legal action, to simply ensuring LGBT materials are available and clearly displayed. There are many resources for librarians such as long-standing reference works as well as professional organizations such as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) section of the American Library Association (ALA). Blame is placed in many places, but ultimately it is up to each librarian to uphold the values and policies of the ALA and actively ensure access to and availability of LGBT materials within their libraries.

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"Restricted Access" is a scary term for many, as so much information is available in today's technologically advanced world. Restricted access in a library? That is a concept that seems improbable at best. However, access issues—especially in regards to restricted access to library materials—can be described as restriction by the library through censorship or not offering certain materials that they have considered to be offensive. Likewise, in the realm of access issues is the other side of restriction, which is restricting access of the materials found in the library from certain people or groups of people (Rubin, 2016). Access issues for the LGBT community is still an issue, even in 2016. This seems unlikely considering the immense evolution of society's overall attitudes towards LGBT individuals. It seems even more unlikely due to the fact that the American Library Association passed in 1993 (and revised in 2008) the "Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression or Sexual Orientation" policy (American Library Association, 2008). This policy states that LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) individuals have a right to the library's information and services as well as access to materials containing LGBT subject matter.

Filling in the Blanks

So what is causing the disparity? According to one study, there are four major factors that influence the quantity and/or existence of LGBT materials in American school libraries: enrollment, location (suburb, rural, or city), political affiliation (Democrat or Republican), and level of demographic diversity (Oltmann, 2015). Ultimately, the larger the enrollment, the higher the chances of having a larger amount of demographic diversity. Also, political affiliation tends to correlate with location with more rural areas leaning Republican, or conservative, and more

cities leaning Democrat, or liberal. The study demonstrated that all schools within the focus group had some kind of presence of LGBT materials in their libraries, but the more extensive collections were within liberal schools with high enrollment whereas the lower enrollment, more conservative and rural schools had less materials. Less than half of the thousands of students surveyed in the 2011 National School Climate survey were able to find some kind of LGBT resources in their school's library (Hughes-Hassell et. al., 2013). Upon discovery of this startling statistic, researchers set forth to discover reasoning behind this. After conducting research and interviews, the team discovered that much blame fell to the individual librarians within the schools because they were actively "under-collecting LGBTQ-themed young adult literature" (Hughes-Hassell et. al., 2013). This type of activity, while it can be viewed as passive, can in reality be extremely detrimental to *all* of the students at these particular schools. By providing access to LGBT materials and therefore "normalizing" this minority group, everyone wins because the potential for a more accepting environment arises. Not only will it bring information and hope to those struggling with their sexuality or gender identity, but it will have the power to educate others to become allies and overall, create a safe and accepting environment.

Selection Procedures

It has been argued that the selection procedures of libraries and librarians in developing their catalog can be condensed down to three different types of procedures. These procedures include user-centered evaluation, physical assessment, and subject assessment through usage of materials and relevancy to the institution's goals (Moss, 2008). In user-centered evaluation, the patrons, or users, of the library are asked about content they would like to see and use through various forms of communication which can include in-person conversations, online surveys through a website or social media, as well as surveys of patrons who are physically in the library.

This route of selecting materials could have the best outcome for LGBT individuals as they could have a voice in the selection of library materials. Perhaps one reason that librarians do not actively collect and promote LGBT materials is because they are just not aware that it is a need. This could be for many reasons, including not personally knowing anyone that identifies as LGBT. In physical assessment, the librarian can physically examine materials and notice what types of materials are being used the most and are in need of repair or replacement. This is a difficult method however, as new information is being produced every day and a particular material, even though it is used a lot, does not necessarily exempt it from being outdated. It is also difficult to physically assess specific subjects by simply looking through the materials in a library's collection. Subject assessment can be conducted in several different ways, which are much more effective than physical assessment. These procedures include "check-lists, book reviews, citations analysis, evaluating class curriculums or the bibliographies of graduate theses, and interlibrary loan requests" (Moss, 2008). By looking at bestsellers lists within a subject as well as material lists compiled by authoritative scholars on a subject, one can easily assess which materials would be the most helpful, informative, and accurate within that subject. All three of these methods should be combined as they each have their benefits. However, whichever method is chosen, it is apparent that librarians should actively research for themselves and talk with their patrons about potential materials for their libraries when it comes to LGBT materials. It is a sensitive subject that many students may not want to openly discuss, so discretion (perhaps through the use of a suggestion box or anonymous online suggestion page) should play a major part in implementing these materials.

Censorship

Failure to implement LGBT materials because of ignorance or no demand is one reason LGBT materials can be scarce in school libraries. However, there is a fine line between this and censorship. In one 2010 instance, a 15-year old made major waves after writing a post on his personal blog about an incident that occurred while seeking LGBT materials at his school's library. Not only were there no materials to be found, but his librarian informed him that if he desired to read "inappropriate titles" he should look elsewhere such as a bookstore (Pierce Garry, 2015). A multitude of librarians reached out to the student in support and in shock of the way his librarian dismissed him. However, the fact that this happens proves that it does happen. There are people and even librarians that do not uphold their duties and commitments as a professional. The student, Brent, stated in his blog post that "The world needs more librarians who are devoted to finding the right book to put in the right person's lap, not librarians who think they can decide what is "inappropriate" and what is not based on their personal prejudices" (Pierce Garry, 2015). The job of a librarian is to lead people to the information they seek, and as Brent stated, personal prejudices and influences should not be a factor that keeps from people the information they want and need. Self-censorship is the act of not acquiring certain materials in order to avoid controversy or because the librarian is opposed to the materials in some way—and this is almost impossible to pinpoint as there are really no methods in place to do so and it is doubtful that librarians practicing self-censorship would admit to it (Pierce Garry, 2015). In most cases, the access to these materials can be saved only by the integrity of the librarians themselves.

Acquisition Troubles

Many believe it is possible that the absence of LGBT materials can be caused by poor acquisition research on the part of the librarians. Not that this is forgivable either, but perhaps it is better than blatant censorship due to prejudice? A study conducted by librarians from Wichita

State University was completed to discover the amount of truth to the statement that there is an absence of good LGBT materials because there is an absence of good materials altogether. The study itself conducted a survey or Caldecott, Newberry, Printz, and Rainbow List books available at 673 institutions across the United States. The Caldecott, Newberry, and Printz awards recognize excellency in literature for children through teen material. The Rainbow List is published by the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Roundtable (GLBTRT) each year to recognize excellence in LGBT writing for young people. For the Caldecott, the institutions held an average of 7.99 out of 10 titles checked; for the Newberry, the institutions held an average of 8.03 out of 10 titles checked; for the Printz, the institutions held an average of 5.03 out of 10 titles checked; and as for the Rainbow List, the institutions held an average of 18.2 out of the 237 titles on the list with numbers from individual institutions ranging from 0 to 155 (Williams & Deyoe, 2015). There is a significant gap in the percentages when it comes to titles held from the Rainbow List. While the books recognized for excellency in other areas can be found at every library, the Rainbow List books were few and far between in many cases. The researchers attribute this gap to many reasons including lack of need for these titles, limited budgets (in which resources should go to the wider population), unfamiliarity with this emerging literature as discussed earlier, and limited time to devote to collection development, especially in understaffed libraries (Williams & Deyoe, 2015). These are all substantial reasons for the lack of LGBT materials in the library. Ultimately, however, the responsibility to bring quality and quantity LGBT materials into the library lies in the hands of the librarian, as at times, information is not even available online within some institutions.

Filtering the Internet

The internet is a fantastic tool for information scientists, researchers, students, and really

everyone that knows how to properly use it. In the age of the internet, libraries are information

centers in K-12 schools, communities, as well as colleges and universities. However, many

libraries have filters blocking users from content containing profanity—with good intentions that

is—for the protection of its users. However, some lines are drawn that are not in line with the

spirit and policy of the American Library Association when it comes to informational sites about

the LGBT community.

Inappropriate Filtering

One high school senior found out about unnecessary filtering the hard way at her school

library in Georgia. Nowmee Shehab decided to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at her school and

was using the library to do research on sites such as the Trevor Project (a suicide prevention

network geared towards LGBT individuals), It Gets Better (a video project in which "out" LGBT

individuals share their stories to assure young viewers that as life goes on it does in fact "get

better"), and the National Gay-Straight Alliance itself. One day, much to her surprise, Shehab

found that the sites had been blocked by the school's network administration. The school is now

facing a legal battle with the American Civil Liberties Union due to the fact that the

"educational, nonsexual websites with a pro-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender viewpoint"

are still blocked while those with opposing views remain available through the school's network

(ACLU, 2012). Making anything from the LGBT spectrum into profanity by blocking sites that

are only informational, inspirational, and ultimately life-saving is a detrimental blow to the

LGBT community and to the community as a whole. Advancing the complicated issue of

filtering in schools is the Children's Internet Protection Act that requires schools and libraries to

filter content in order to receive the "e-rate" for internet services which is a reduced rate for

eligible schools and libraries (Federal Communications Commission, 2016). The intentions of

the act are to protect minors from accessing information that is found to be obscene or harmful to

minors, but the problem with this is that there are really no clear guidelines as to the extent of

information that should be filtered. This allows the communities where each institution exists to

determine what is "obscene" and what is not, and unfortunately, many individuals and

communities across the country perceive anything positive about the LGBT community to be

offensive for many different reasons. These reasons can range from religious beliefs to personal

prejudices but are usually aligned with the four factors mentioned earlier: enrollment, location,

political affiliation, and level of demographic diversity (Oltmann, 2015). And it does get worse

in some areas—the problem does not always end with filtering at an institution. In many cases,

this filtering follows the student home.

Taking Filtering Home

In many of today's K-12 educational institutions, students are given a personal device

(usually laptop or tablet) by the school for them to use in class and in most cases, take home.

This brings about another altogether divisive issue. Many schools that distribute these devices

not only have the school network filtered, but have software installed on the devices that

continue to block the same sites at home that are blocked at school. The issue is so divisive

because of an infinite loop: the schools own the computers, yet the schools are publicly funded

by the taxpayers which are the parents of the children. The ACLU argues that this is infringing

upon the rights of the students while they are not at school, especially when the site being

blocked are not appropriately chosen as in the Georgia Case (ACLU, 2012).

Fighting Back

Librarians however have the power and ability to right these injustices when it comes to inappropriately blocked sites that should be available to users at their institution. One particular librarian did just that. Karyn Storts-Brinks discovered quickly when helping student with research papers on what she referred to as "contemporary topics" that sites such as the ones listed earlier, as well as the Human Rights Campaign and even links through an academic library's website were blocked by the school's network. In addition, she found that links about why homosexuality was bad and immoral as well as conversion therapy websites were not blocked at all. Storts-Brinks eventually involved the ACLU in a major court case that ended in the sites being unblocked and the stipulation that were the sites ever to be blocked again, the case would return to court (Storts-Brinks, 2010). Although this librarian had many difficulties and road blocks throughout the process, including being told she was wrong by superiors as well as the Education Networks of America (the organization that determines what should and should not be blocked) she persevered all in the name of information science—making information available to those who desire it. Libraries and librarians not only have the potential to fight unnecessary censorship such as this, but can open the door for information centers—libraries—to become safe spaces for everyone looking for information, especially those that are marginalized in the LGBT community.

Turning the Page: Libraries as Safe Zones

When some kind of social justice is achieved, it is always helpful to take it one step further. In many schools, public libraries, and offices within universities and colleges, one can find "Safe Zone" signage letting people know that the person behind the door is a safe person to talk to about LGBT issues. As centers of free and equal access, spearheaded by the ALA, libraries should be an obvious safe zone for anyone needing help with information. It should not

be that patrons are afraid to ask questions about topics that are important to them. Libraries can

be a two-pronged advocate for LGBT patrons. "By being visibly gay-friendly, libraries can not

only give hope to a population that often has very little in terms of support, but can also educate

the general public, leading to greater acceptance and tolerance" (Day, 2013). Libraries are

already viewed as safe places for many people. Many marginalized groups of people are able to

find solace in books and information, which may lead them to others sharing similar experiences.

The potential for educating the community on the issue while creating a safe space at the same

time is something that could be viewed as unique to libraries themselves. Suzie Day, student at

Curtin University suggests that there are simple things libraries can do to increase the visibility

of LGBT materials such as spine labeling and creating reading lists for patrons (2013). Visibility

is just as important as any other factor to promote the equality and normalization of the LGBT

Community.

Resources for Librarians

The subject of LGBT materials access is the center of a specific round table group,

mentioned earlier, as part of the ALA: the GLBTRT. On the main page of their website is a link

to a document that contains a list of books compiled by GLBTRT members called the *LGBTQ K-*

12 Education Guide. This guide provides a list of books, films, and organizations for the purpose

of giving librarians a "jumping-off place" when it comes to diving into LGBT materials for

libraries and how to better the lives of patrons and users that identify as such (GLBTRT, 2016).

Librarians have so many tools provided for them through credible and reputable organizations

such as the ALA. Because of the amount of resources available, no library should be without

these tools, materials, and knowledge on the subject.

Divide and Conquer

Because of the small percentage of the population that identifies as LGBT, the number of librarians who have taken active roles in promoting access to LGBT materials is also limited (Lupien, 2007). The most important thing to take away from the discussion is that librarians must work together and build upon the research and experiences of other librarians in order to make sure that every library has the right information for inquiring minds. The safe spaces for the individuals in the LGBT community can only be successful if librarians work towards undoing unnecessary censorship and prejudices within their systems if they exist.

Librarians as Advocates

For librarians still unsure how to approach the subject, a great place to start is the book *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service and Access.* This book contains 22 fully referenced papers on the subject as well as 16 individual profiles which give personal accounts of interactions within all three types of libraries with regards to accessing LGBT materials (Dunford, 2011).

One of the main purposes of libraries and librarians is to provide as much available information as possible to all patrons. Although cultural views on the LGBT community have changed exponentially since the American Library Associations' policy was passed in 1993, there is still a lot of restriction of information when it comes to this subject. Librarians should be seeking to expand this section of their libraries or making one if it is not already in place. This is not true for just one type of library as public, school, and academic libraries should all have information for the LGBT community including history, culture, biographies, and more.

This issue is of very high importance for after completing a large amount of searching for materials relating to the LGBT community over a timespan of years, one could come to the conclusion that many places simply do not care to have an exhaustive set of materials on the

subject. One particular high school library in a very rural community had zero materials on the

subject and the community college next door had some, but they were minimal. Many larger

academic and public libraries have a vast amount of materials in their collections and it seems as

though a majority of academic libraries are taking very progressive steps towards complete

LGBT inclusion, but in many instances, there could be more. Without reputable and reliable

materials in these rural locations when growing up LGBT, it makes it more difficult for students

struggling with their sexuality to be able to discuss it with anyone or learn about themselves as

an LGBT individual and as a minority. Learning about the history of a minority is important to

finding one's place in their communities and within themselves. One goal as librarians should be

to see that there is no limit to the materials on the subject so that everyone may have access to

information that could help them and even save a life as suicide is all too common within the

LGBT community.

Conclusions

Many problems with current library and reference practices with regards to LGBT

individuals continue to exist in today's world. With the idea that the reference services in an

academic library are one of the first interactions students have with the library, it is observed that

easily accessible materials and reference services for LGBT patrons can be described by the

words limited, isolated, fragmented, and buried, mainly in content that encompasses

heteronormativity as the only form of gender expression (Mehra & Braquet, 2011). A frightening

research point from the article is that most college-aged LGBT individuals seek information

primarily from the internet when beginning the coming out process and this can be discouraging

because of "information overload" and "lack of quality control" of resources. A major reason for

the internet being a starting point for these individuals is because of the aspect of anonymity that

comes along with it. The article's researchers conclude that libraries and librarians should actively promote community engagement efforts in order to become more relevant to LGBT patrons by implementing several strategies including: access to relevant electronic sources, integration of LGBT topics in user instruction, library commons as an LGBT safe space, and building community partnerships to develop appropriate LGBT services.

When faced with issues such as filtering, it is of utmost importance for librarians to remain objective and unbiased in all situations. The unnecessary filtering of and limited access to LGBT materials is due in large part to cultural ignorance and intolerance that is often due to the religious beliefs of the individuals or organizations implementing the filtering (Pierce Garry, 2015). Research and studies however have concluded that wider access to these materials have only a positive impact and withholding access only causes distress and unfairness to patrons and communities. The positives far outweigh the negatives when it comes to having a substantial section of positive LGBT materials and resources—that is to say that having this availability will progress communities and institutions rather than harm them. School libraries have the largest problem with this particular access issue, which is a travesty as these are institutions where students spend a large amount of time during their most formative years. There are many resources for librarians to combat this, however, and it is not only their duty to do as such but it is their responsibility as in many cases, librarians are the individuals with the power to create change in these situations.

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