

The league of decency and other myths

Alex Byrne, chair, IFLA Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression

Just over a year from the commencement of Australia's internet censorship regime, the *Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act*, early information is that the Australian Broadcasting Authority and the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) have, thankfully, administered the online services provisions with a light hand. The ABA Annual Report for 1999–2000 shows that: 'Of the 160 completed investigations, 93 resulted in the location of prohibited or potentially prohibited content, while the other 67 located content that was not prohibited or potentially prohibited. Around one-third of complaints related to content which was found to be hosted in Australia ... The remaining two-thirds of complaints concerned content that was hosted outside Australia' [<http://www.aba.gov.au/about/information/an99-00>].

However, despite evidence that community concern about the internet has generated few complaints, the South Australian Government has introduced the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) (Miscellaneous) Amendment Bill 2000*, which includes far-reaching provisions in relation to online services. If enacted, those provisions would make it illegal to provide online information that would not be illegal offline. By making it a criminal offence to make available online material that would be classified 'R', the legislation would require police to take action on material that has not been classified. It would require police to make a judgement about the offensiveness of material — a judgement they are not trained to make. While a court might eventually rule the material not offensive, the hapless provider of access, who might be one of our colleagues, may have had to finance a defence and live with the shame of facing charges of making offensive material available.

This means, in effect, that only material that would be classified 'MA' may be safely made available. Under OFLC guidelines, this means that material on adult themes may be treated only in a 'discreet' manner 'with little or no detail and generally brief'. Such material includes 'suicide, crime, corruption, marital problems, emotional trauma, drug and alcohol dependency, death and serious illness, racism, religious issues'. *What else is there to talk about?*

But this is not a joke. At the time of writing, Suicide Prevention Australia is preparing for its annual conference. Topics include the hidden problem of suicide among older men as well as the frightening levels of suicide among younger people and among Aboriginal Australians. These are serious matters for our nation which need to be discussed openly and bravely.

Doubtless, the South Australian Government has no intention to censor serious discussion of suicide. However, the internet censorship legislation it is proposing has the potential to be misused to prevent discussion of topics that the government of the day may find disturbing or uncomfortable. It is not hard to imagine that a topic such as mandatory sentencing could be viewed as unacceptable. As information professionals, we must firmly reject such im-

positions and defend our communities' rights to receive and impart opinions without hindrance.

There is reason for concern. Over the past year, censorship in its various forms has featured regularly in Australian and overseas newspapers. We have seen many controversies relating to films, books, music and advertisements as well as the internet. For example, some have claimed that tragic episodes of violence have been incited by the music of such singers as Eminem: 'Hi kids, do you like violence? Well, can you stick nine-inch nails to each one of my eyelids?' This has led to recent moves by the state and federal Attorneys-General of Australia to tighten the voluntary code requiring labelling of compact discs.

Others have feared the harm that might be done to children by dwelling in the magic world of Harry Potter, leading to calls to ban J K Rowling's books from school libraries in Australia. This defies common-sense: how can writing that attracts kids to read 700-page books be harmful?

Many of those who seek to limit access desire a less challenging time, a time of shared values. Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York, for example, has moved to establish a Decency Commission. Composed of 'upright' citizens, it would 'set decency standards for those institutions that are using your money, the taxpayers' money'. Similar wishes motivate those who would set decency standards for our library collections, who would filter the internet, which is opening wonderful worlds for our clients. This decency of 'polite society' shows scant respect for those who are different.

Fortunately, there are brave and determined fighters for freedom of expression and of access to information. They include Deloris Wilson, a high school librarian in northern Louisiana who has recently been awarded the PEN America First Amendment Award. As the citation notes, Wilson's struggle began on 2 May 1996 when the principal of West Monroe High School ordered her to remove four books from library shelves: *Heartbreak and roses: real life stories of troubled love*; *Gays in or out of the military*; *Everything you need to know about incest*; and *Everything you need to know about abstinence*. When Wilson protested, she was told to remove all books with sexual content from the library. In response, she pulled over 200 books, including several Bibles. Wilson and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit in October 1996 against the Ouachita Parish School Board over the books' removal. A settlement was finally reached in August 1999, leading to the return of the banned books to the library.

Along with PEN, let us celebrate all our colleagues who take a stand, publicly and privately, to ensure ready access to information and the liberty to express and hear a diversity of views. Let us stand against well-intentioned but dangerous legislation such as that proposed in South Australia. Our libraries should continue to be gateways to new worlds! ■

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