Sanitizing American Library History: Reflections of a Library Historian

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ABSTRACT
Librarianship has a propensity to sanitize its history. As evidence for this statement, this article uses the Library Bill of Rights that the American Library Association adopted in 1939 and the School Library Bill of Rights that the American Association of School Librarians adopted in 1955 as lenses through which to view the profession’s response to selected events in American library history since 1939. By such means, the article attempts to show that librarianship has manifested a consistent desire to control the narrative surrounding libraries and their defense of intellectual freedom and opposition to censorship.

“Why are you talking about that?” one tourist recently asked a Monticello tour guide as he explained that slaves planted and harvested Thomas Jefferson’s vegetables in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. “You should be talking about the plants.” Online another posted a complaint. “For someone like myself, going to Monticello is like an Elvis fan going to Graceland,” he wrote. “Then to have the tour guide essentially make constant reference to what a bad person he really was just ruined it for me.” These responses were not unique to Monticello. “I don’t want to politicize my experience here!” snapped one tourist when told of slave life on George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate. “I didn’t come to hear a lecture on how the white people treated slaves,” griped a visitor to a South Carolina historic plantation (Knowles 2019).

The desire to sanitize history is as old as humankind, and to some extent, everyone has done it. Sometimes the process of sanitizing history takes the form of ignoring, overlooking, or burying unpleasant historical facts, as the examples above amply demonstrate. Sometimes it takes the form of carefully crafting the public narrative that emphasizes some facts and shades others. As a practicing historian for nearly half a century, I see in American librarianship a persistent propensity to sanitize as a consistent thread running throughout its history—a desire to paint the halos in the historical portrait but to avoid the warts.

For example, in 1996 I published *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey* (Wiegand 1996a), probably the most famous person in our profession’s history. In it, I showed that Dewey
was a racist and anti-Semite because of membership rules at his private New York Lake Placid Club and that he was also a sexual harasser driven out of the American Library Association (ALA) by a group of ALA women in 1905 who refused to condone his behavior any longer. Mine was the fourth twentieth-century biography of Dewey but the only one to address the darker side of his life. The first was a 1932 authorized biography his second wife commissioned shortly after Dewey’s death (Dawe 1932). The second was authored by his nephew in the American Library Pioneer series ALA published in 1944 to celebrate librarianship’s heroes (Rider 1944). The third was published in 1978 as part of Libraries Unlimited’s Heritage of Librarianship series (Vann 1978). The research materials available to me were equally available to each of these biographers, but none addressed the more sinister parts of Dewey’s life that were so obvious in his papers. They focused instead on the halos and ignored the warts.

Although Irrepressible Reformer was published 5 years after Anita Hill’s testimony regarding Clarence Thomas’s Supreme Court nomination brought the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace to the nation’s attention, ALA continued to give the Melvil Dewey Award for “achievement for recent creative leadership” in the profession. It was not until the #MeToo movement had started and Anne Ford wrote a piece in the June 2018 issue of American Libraries based on the biography that ALA Council passed a resolution on June 23, 2019, to rename the award because “the behavior demonstrated for decades by Dewey does not represent the stated fundamental values of ALA in equity, diversity, and inclusion” (ALA 2019). One has to wonder what took ALA so long. I think it was the profession’s propensity to focus on the halos and ignore the warts in its history.

To bring more focus to my conclusion, I will use the Library Bill of Rights (LBR) that ALA adopted in 1939 and the School Library Bill of Rights (SLBR) that the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) adopted in 1955 as lenses through which to view the profession’s response to selected events in American library history. By such means, I argue here, librarianship manifests a desire to control the narrative surrounding libraries and their defense of intellectual freedom and opposition to censorship by sanitizing its history. I draw my evidence from research on three recent projects: Part of Our Lives: A People’s History of the American Public Library (Wiegand 2015); The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South: Civil Rights and Local Activism (Wiegand and Wiegand 2018), which I coauthored with my wife, Shirl; and “American Public School Librarianship: From the Common School to the Common Core,” which I am currently writing. Parts of this article are taken from each of these projects.

When ALA adopted an LBR in 1939, it made librarianship’s responsibility to fight censorship and defend intellectual freedom a professional imperative. Books “should be chosen because of value and interest to the people of the community,” it read; selections “should” not be “influenced by the race or nationality or the political or religious views of the writers,” opinions on all sides of an issue “should be represented fairly and adequately,” and library building meeting
rooms “should” be open to all groups engaged in “socially useful and cultural activities” (Robbins 1996, chap. 1). The title parroted the force of law, but the language adopted in its principles was riddled with should statements that brought no penalties for violations.

Although ALA was proud it had publicly taken a stand against censorship and for intellectual freedom, 2 months after adopting the LBR, five black teenagers conducted a sit-in at the all-white Alexandria (VA) Public Library and were arrested and jailed. The incident made national news, but neither the library press nor ALA commented on the incident. Thus, despite the fact that by their very existence segregated public libraries directly violated several of the major principles of the LBR, the profession remained silent. Not until 1962 was the Alexandria Public Library fully integrated (Mitchell-Powell 2015).

In the early 1950s, the California legislature’s Committee on Un-American Activities called for banning from school and public libraries any materials written by authors suspected of being communists or communist sympathizers. To counter this pressure, the School Library Association of California and the California Library Association spearheaded successful efforts to defeat legislative bills they thought violated intellectual freedom principles. But these vocal California librarians constituted a minority, and they concealed a disconnect between the rhetoric of the LBR and the reality of library practice. When Marjorie Fiske undertook a study of library censorship practices in California at mid-decade, she discovered that although the 204 school and public librarians she interviewed from 26 counties had “unequivocal freedom-to-read convictions,” nearly two-thirds practiced self-censorship and one-fifth refused to acquire controversial titles. More than four-fifths of libraries analyzed had circulation restrictions on some materials, and one-third had actually removed controversial materials from their collections (Fiske 1958). “Librarians are probably not trying to suppress so much as they are trying to stay out of trouble,” editorialized the Pasadena (CA) Independent-Star News (1959) when Fiske’s findings were published in 1959, 4 years after AASL had passed an SLBR.

No evidence exists to suggest the situation was any different among public school librarians in other states. Plenty of evidence exists to show that it was not only similar but that it did not change over time. The author of a 1964 dissertation exploring the censorship practices in Nassau County (NY) senior high school libraries discovered about 30% of school librarians “rarely censored,” 10% “usually or habitually censored books which they considered as controversial or questionable,” and 60% fit into a middle group that censored to avoid potential controversy or because it conflicted with personal morals (Farley 1964). In a 1968 survey of 277 secondary Arizona English teachers and librarians about censorship practices, one librarian responded, “Nobody here ever taught anything remotely worth censoring. And if you think that’s bad, you ought to see our library.” One English teacher responded: “Our librarian advises that we do not have a problem because she anticipates that if such books as Catcher in the Rye were in our library, we might have a problem, and she does not put them on the shelves” (Donelson 1969, 29).
A study of self-censorship practices conducted in 1979 sampled high school librarians who were also AASL members. Researchers “reasoned” they were “obviously more professionally concerned librarians, as demonstrated by their membership in the association” (Woods and Salvatore 1981, 103). Responses to lists of frequently challenged books, however, showed these librarians generally either avoided acquiring controversial titles, or, if acquired, limited access to them. About the latter, researchers said, “Although some might defend this practice, it is questionable that so many of these titles should be available only to a restricted audience” (106). The study concluded that although “library media specialists often feel they have succeeded in their attempts to select all kinds of materials covering varied subjects, many of them, in fact, unilaterally failed, based on results reported here. By not owning those materials that are controversial, they are practicing censorship” (108).

In her 1987 dissertation on censorship in Virginia’s senior high school libraries, Laura Smith McMillan concluded all who returned surveys (a 68% response rate) participated in some form of censorship, that they censored fiction more than nonfiction, that nonpurchase was the tactic used most frequently to address controversial materials, and that librarians’ personal convictions were more influential in their decisions than the threat of outside censorship (McMillan 1987). Similarly, mid-1980s research on the attitudes and moral reasoning about censorship among secondary school librarians in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin showed that although librarians with ALA-accredited degrees were more likely to recognize the importance of defending intellectual freedom, “the responses of the school librarians in this study did not reflect the values of their profession” (McDonald 1993, 127).

In 2009, School Library Journal surveyed 655 media specialists about censorship practices and found that 70% “won’t buy certain titles simply because they’re terrified of how parents will respond.” In an article entitled “A Dirty Little Secret: Self-Censorship,” Debra Lau Whelan (2009) summarized the survey and also noted that school librarians often categorized books with African American characters as “street lit,” which, one author said, was “an easy way for some librarians to label a book that they can quickly dismiss as being inferior” (28, 29). Because of budget cuts and job losses in school districts across the nation, school librarians had to choose their battles carefully, Children’s Literature Network cofounder Vicki Palmquist told Whelan. “Each librarian has had to reflect on his or her own situation to determine if they can afford to speak up for their beliefs,” Palmquist said. “They may be sole income earners, parents, [or someone] dependent on medical insurance” (Whelan 2009).

Whelan’s (2009) article angered some school librarians. “Your article takes the stance that self-censorship is unethical,” argued one Maryland school librarian. “I firmly believe that it is unethical for me not to make an effort to protect our students from content that may be harmful to them. . . . How dare you assume that you know what’s best for our students and school communities?” (Coleman 2009, 12). Another librarian reported she created “mature” shelves to isolate potentially controversial materials. Still others offered different solutions to persistent...
problems. “I draw black bikinis on pictures of prehistoric men and women in books because they gross me out,” said one. “I have my limits and believe that children and teenagers should have some limits set too.” Another complained, “ALA doesn’t address the real world” (“Limited Life Shelf” 2010, 15).

The difference between rhetoric and reality that an unsanitized history exposes is especially obvious where issues of race intersect with library practice. Between 1950, when the AASL became an ALA division, and 1969, when it issued Standards for School Media Programs (AASL 1969), the nation experienced the Montgomery bus boycotts, the murder of Emmett Till, hostilities surrounding the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School, lunch counter and public library sit-ins, bombings of schools and churches, and the assassinations of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr. The catalyst for most of this activity was [Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 [1954]], which determined segregated schools were separate but not equal and ordered American public schools to integrate. Throughout this period the AASL, whose membership included librarians of segregated schools, supervisors of school libraries in states supporting segregated systems, and faculty members teaching in library schools at segregated universities, made no official statement supporting Brown or condemning segregated school libraries.

An analysis of Library Literature (an H. W. Wilson Company index) between 1954 and 1969 shows no entries for the 1954 Brown decision. As a subject heading, “Segregation and the Library” did not appear until the 1958–60 edition; its 10 entries included none addressing segregated school libraries. Under the subject heading “Negro and the Library,” before 1969, Library Literature dutifully listed the 42 theses on school libraries authored by library school students at the historically black Atlanta University but nothing else concerning segregated school libraries. During this entire period, Library Literature had no entry for “segregated schools” listed under the “American Association of School Libraries.” Seven of the twenty-two AASL presidents between 1950 and 1971 were from Jim Crow states, including Virginia McJenkin (1964–65), director of the segregated Fulton County (GA) School Libraries and from 1943 to 1947 president of the Georgia Library Association, which refused to admit blacks as members until the late 1960s.

Except for Atlanta University students, school librarianship and its professional associations—including AASL—ignored the subject of segregated school libraries in its literature between 1954 and 1970, a period during which it passed and revised an SLBR. Although segregated school libraries may have been a subject of conversation in conference cloakrooms and hallways, the subject was never discussed in the AASL’s public discourse. I found no article about how to integrate a school library at a formerly segregated school. That so many AASL leaders were from Jim Crow states could not have been coincidental to explain the AASL’s deafening silence. Although many southern state library and education associations to which southern school librarians belonged were segregated, the AASL made no public protest against these racist practices and continued to accept delegates from segregated school library associations as AASL representatives.
At the 1966 ALA midwinter meeting, incoming president Mary Gaver reached out to Atlanta University Library School dean Virginia Lacy Jones to see what ALA could do to help black school librarians. At the time, Jones was particularly concerned about the practice of transferring black school librarians to white schools with poor collections and inferior library programs so principals at the latter could say their faculties were “integrated.” Gaver (1988, 161) later admitted nothing ever came of her discussion with Jones, and neither ALA nor AASL publicly addressed these racist practices.

In 1970, the National Education Association’s Commission on Human Rights and Responsibilities sent a fact-finding team to investigate how federal court civil rights decisions were being implemented. Among their findings was evidence that at certain public schools whites and blacks could not sit at school library tables unless there was an empty chair between them, and in others, blacks were scheduled for library visits at separate times from whites (NEA Task Force III 1970). By that time southern states had opened more than 700 private schools to avoid integration, and officials in those states were attempting to funnel federal funds to them in various ways. In addition, public libraries benefiting from federal funds were frequently supplying these private schools with library services. In Virginia, the Lunenber County Public Library provided service to private academies. In Georgia, the Savannah Public Library provided bookmobile service to the new private schools. Although ALA had voted to censure public and school libraries that provided services to segregated private schools at its 1970 midwinter meeting, it took no action against these public libraries, despite protests from ALA Black Caucus. The AASL said nothing at all (Josey 1971).

Subsequent efforts to recount school librarianship’s history also overlooked these events. When Cora Paul Bomar, North Carolina’s State School Library Advisor from 1950 to 1969 and AASL president in 1962–63, recorded her memories for AASL’s silver anniversary in 1976, she said nothing about race.1 She did the same thing when recalling the history of the Tarheel State’s school libraries for North Carolina Libraries’ fiftieth anniversary issue 16 years later (Bomar 1992). When AASL president Judith Letsinger drafted her introduction to School Media Quarterly’s twenty-fifth anniversary issue in 1976, she wrote: “Remember that you cannot find in the entire world a stronger history of successful support and action for intellectual freedom than you find in the American Library Association.”2 And in the many essays on southern white school library leaders in Pioneers and Leaders in Library Services to Youth: A Biographical Dictionary, only those by James V. Carmichael Jr. take into consideration the issue of race. To all the other biographers, segregated Jim Crow public school libraries were invisible (Miller 2003).

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As part of the “Libraries and the Life of the Mind in America” series of lectures that ALA sponsored for its centennial year in 1975–76, eminent black historian John Hope Franklin—who in the 1950s had to turn down luncheon invitations from fellow researchers at the Library of Congress because nearby restaurants denied him service—delivered an address entitled “Libraries in a Pluralistic Society.” American librarians “have many reasons to be pleased with their contributions to the life of the mind,” he said, but Franklin also reminded his audience that Andrew Carnegie had been complicit with southern whites who segregated their public library services. And “until the recent cases involving public education and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” he noted, “public libraries in the South and in the ghettos of the North were not serving in a manner to promote the healthy growth of a pluralistic society.” He concluded by calling on the profession to recognize its flawed history as a way to help it live up to its high ideals (Franklin 1977, 11–14).

Yet less than 2 years later ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) released The Speaker, a film that depicted a fictitious high school group’s contested decision to invite a controversial eugenicist who believed black people were genetically inferior to whites to speak on their campus. When ALA Executive Board previewed it at the annual conference, “not a person moved,” recalled ALA executive director Robert Wedgeworth. Reaction was so intense it “pitted friend against friend; colleague against colleague” (Morehart and Eberhart 2014). On one side were members who argued the film represented a good way to generate discussion about the importance of defending intellectual freedom. They were led by Judith Krug, a Pittsburgh native who received a library degree from the University of Chicago in 1962 and spent several years as a reference librarian in the Windy City before becoming ALA’s first OIF director in 1967. She held an absolutist position on people’s right to free access to information—no matter how controversial—and a commitment to link that position with ALA policy and librarianship’s professional practice. She did not, however, have any personal experience in southern Jim Crow practices as a librarian or patron nor any direct experiences with the tepid way ALA and AASL had dealt with the issue of segregated library services before the 1970s.

On the other side were members who said the film’s subject was probably racist, certainly highly insensitive. Among them was ALA Black Caucus organizer E. J. Josey, born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia, and from 1959 to 1966 chief librarian at the historically black Savannah State College. At the 1963 ALA conference, he had objected vehemently when ALA sought to honor the Mississippi Library Association’s journal, and he cited the fact that no black Mississippi librarians were allowed to be members of that association. Another was Clara Stanton Jones, Detroit Public Library director who as ALA’s first black president presided over the 1977 conference. Jones had grown up in the 1920s in segregated St. Louis, in the 1930s was educated at the historically black Spelman College in segregated Atlanta, and spent the early years of her professional career serving as an academic librarian in segregated New Orleans. It is not hard to understand why Josey referred to The Speaker as “that goddamned film” and Jones accused the OIF of being “insensitive” (Wiegand and Wiegand 2018, 207–8). That Josey and Jones had lived
as black people in the Jim Crow South—and Krug did not—helps us better understand reasons behind the positions both groups took on the OIF film. That Krug had inherited a sanitized and much muted version of ALA’s history on issues of race, however, may explain her statement to the Chicago Daily News that the association had “been front and center since 1940 in support of the First Amendment” (School Library Journal 1978, 87).

Ironically, opposition to The Speaker showed up differently 37 years later, when OIF hosted an ALA conference program cosponsored by ALA’s Library History Round Table that not only showed the film, it also organized a panel to analyze the librarianship’s reaction to it (McCallon 2014). Several old ALA hands objected. One council member argued there was no point in showing a film that “so few of the current members of ALA were even involved with.” Others called the program “sensationalism.” Still others argued it would only “stir up unnecessary controversy” and “reopen old wounds” (Lear 2014).

That 2014 program occurred just as Shirl and I were putting the finishing touches to The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South. When several years prior to its publication we told a couple of colleagues from other institutions in the South we were working on it, one asked: “You mean southern public libraries were segregated at one time?” Another wanted us to lecture to her Intellectual Freedom class about the heroic defense she assumed that public librarians put up against segregated services. Both had absorbed professional myths made possible by a sanitized discourse and assumed that librarianship’s twenty-first-century rhetoric about opposing censorship, defending intellectual freedom, and offering neutral service to all people characterized its entire history.

Although Anita Hill’s 1991 testimony at Clarence Thomas’s Supreme Court nomination brought the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace to the nation’s attention, ALA largely sidestepped the issue, in part because the narrative the LBR crafted conflicted directly with what was happening in scores of libraries across the country. The best example of this occurred in Minneapolis in 2000, when 47 public library staff members described to a local newspaper their working conditions around the 50 computer terminals they were required to monitor. In the last 3 years, one staff member said, male users obsessed with sex sites monopolized the terminals, and when reminded of their 30-minute time limit (the only authority staff had to monitor their behavior), they frequently responded with profanity. Several were masturbating when approached. In an article subsequently published in the feminist periodical Off Our Backs, reference librarian Wendy Adamson described in graphic detail the sickening images—including bestiality and sadomasochism—that staff saw on sites these men routinely viewed. But when they complained to administrators, she said, staff members were told that the library “supported unfettered access to information,” and if they were “good librarians” they would follow the policy. Repeated complaints brought no change (29).

Three months later, however, convinced that the hard line the administration and ALA’s OIF took was actually forcing regular patrons from the library—“We were watching our users repeatedly assaulted by these images, . . . recoiling in horror,” Adamson said, “and sometimes
literally rushing out of the building” (29)—12 staff members filed a sexual harassment complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Tolerating the environment, they concluded, “carried the message that we were willing to submit to sexual harassment which no other citizens would tolerate . . . Too often, the problem is denied, glossed over, ignored, or simplistically addressed by ineffective official library policies, which wax poetic about the wealth of information available on the Internet, and the importance of making wise choices when we use it” (29). Their EEOC complaint brought heavy criticism that demonstrated the rhetorical power the LBR had honed over decades. In the professional literature, the women were portrayed as censors and professional traitors. From across the country, however, librarians who had endured similar experiences wrote supportive—but mostly private—messages.

A day after they filed the complaint, public library administrators reversed their position. They posted a sign on each terminal indicating it was illegal to display materials considered obscene by Minnesota law, and they authorized security guards to enforce it. “In less than a week,” Adamson reported, most sex site “users left the library, and have not been seen since . . . At MPL, we succeeded in bringing a problem out into the open” (30). Librarians, she said, had a “responsibility to take a part in the larger dialogue in a search for a variety of answers, rather than putting our collective heads in the sand and resolutely clinging to theoretical principles that may be doing more harm than good” (31). In 2002, the EEOC issued a preliminary ruling that public library employee exposure to pornographic internet sites constituted “a hostile work environment.” A year later, the library settled a civil suit brought by plaintiffs for $435,000 (Adamson 2002).

That the LBR narrative continued to perplex librarianship on issues of sexual harassment in the workplace was obvious a decade later. In 2012, the Birmingham (AL) Public Library reached a $150,000 out-of-court settlement brought by an employee arguing she was being forced to work in a sexually hostile environment because of pornography men were viewing on library computers (Faulk 2012). That the library press—serving a profession dedicated to free access to information but probably fearing additional sexual harassment lawsuits that would test librarianship’s commitment to the LBR—failed to report the settlement demonstrates the power this narrative has over librarianship.

These are the kinds of historical facts I deal with as an American library historian that do not easily fit the narratives of our profession and certainly not the narrative in the LBR. But let me also share a personal experience. In 1994, I decided to organize a colloquium on the LBR at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for September 29, 1995. In those days I was reading critical scholarship on race, class, gender, Third World, and sexual orientation perspectives that argue terms like “democracy,” “family values,” and “tolerance” are highly contested and radically contingent. From my perspective as a library historian, so were terms like “censorship” and “intellectual freedom,” but at the time very few library and information studies scholars were applying any of these critical perspectives to library practice, much less to the profession’s core documents (Wiegand 1999). To keynote the colloquium, I asked Gordon Baldwin, the uni-
versity’s Mortimer M. Jackson Professor of Law and the campus’s foremost expert on the First Amendment. His assignment? Analyze the LBR from his perspective as a First Amendment scholar. “Sounds like fun!” he responded.

To respond to Baldwin, I assembled a panel of five, two of whom would take a historical perspective on the LBR, two of whom would represent library constituencies, and one of whom could bridge the library and legal communities. I also invited ALA’s OIF to send a representative to participate, but I received no response. Once the program was in place, I contacted the editors of Library Trends (University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science), who quickly agreed to publish the proceedings. By August 1, 1995, Baldwin had finished the first draft of his keynote, which I forwarded to all panel members. I also sent a copy to the OIF, repeated my invitation to participate, but again, I received no response.

At the colloquium, Baldwin’s keynote was to the point. Language in the LBR, he said, was “vague, wooly, and ambiguous”; it “promises more than anyone can deliver, and its commands do not equate with the law” (Baldwin 1996, 7). One by one, panel members responded, each from her own perspective. When the second-to-last panel member, known throughout the Badger State for resisting censorship efforts, took the podium, she extended greetings to the colloquium from ALA’s OIF. I was taken aback; the OIF would not communicate with me, the colloquium’s organizer, but would communicate with one of its allies whom I had asked to participate on the panel.

The colloquium went well; about 150 people attended. Students generated many questions and my colleagues indicated that they overheard several members of the audience say things like “This was fun”; “I never thought of the Library Bill of Rights in that way before”; “Is that really the law?” If these comments were indicative of audience reception, the colloquium accomplished its purpose—to bring different perspectives (especially legal and historical perspectives) to the LBR.

Once I had all the papers and was ready to send them to Library Trends editors, I again asked the OIF to contribute an epilogue and offered to send the papers. Again I received no response. Library Trends published the proceedings in its Summer 1996 issue (Wiegand 1996b). Although many of the papers were subsequently cited in library literature, the issue itself was never cited in any of the five editions of the Intellectual Freedom Manual that ALA published since, never made the “Selected Bibliography” of relevant titles listed in the Manual’s final pages, even as an “alternative perspective” intellectual freedom proponents might want to consider. Most disappointing to me, however, was the OIF’s obvious refusal to engage Gordon Baldwin’s ideas and conclusions. Krug (2002) herself made no mention of Baldwin or the colloquium in her “ALA and Intellectual Freedom: A Historical Overview” essay in the Intellectual Freedom Manual’s sixth edition issued several years after the colloquium’s proceedings were published. From my perspective, these experiences were further evidence of the librarianship’s propensity to sanitize its history and to control the narrative about censorship and intellectual freedom in professional practice.
In *Part of Our Lives*, I argue that because American public libraries function as public mediation sites for determining local cultural and literary values, librarians cannot comply absolutely with the LBR—a set of guidelines for what librarians should do, not what they “must” do. In “American Public School Librarianship: From the Common School to the Common Core,” I argue the same for school librarians. By taking an absolutist perspective of the LBR, ALA OIF places an impossible burden on librarians that a close look at American library history shows they cannot and do not meet.

I am not here recommending that the profession abandon its defense of intellectual freedom and opposition to censorship. If librarians represent the guidelines of the LBR in the community’s decision-making process, they will carry out their professional responsibilities by making it one of several perspectives the community considers. By mediating local disputes, librarians are actually following a library tradition with a much longer history than the LBR, one that is clearly evident in a history that shows halos and warts. At the same time, however, librarians should not be tagged as “failures” by fellow professionals if local decisions do not accord with the LBR. One wonders how many of the scores of successful public library bond issues since 2000 would have passed had public libraries across the country adhered to the Minneapolis Public Library’s initial response to allowing patrons to freely and openly access pornography on library computers.

I think it is time for librarianship to have a serious dialogue about the limits of the LBR that is not based on a sanitized history. Without an understanding and knowledge of the historical record identified in previous pages, it is difficult for me to see how those preparing the next revision of the LBR or the next edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* can carry on an informed discussion. In a blatant attempt to force this dialogue, I conclude with two challenges. First, I challenge the editors of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*’s next edition to cite this article and encourage their readers to engage it as an alternative perspective. Second, I challenge the editors to commission and publish an essay by a First Amendment scholar (I will be happy to recommend the names of several) who would address for contemporary librarianship what Gordon Baldwin did for my colloquium in 1995. From my perspective, to do anything less is a bit like saying: “You should be talking about the plants.”

**References**


