

Controversial materials in libraries and what to do about them

Controversy is never far away from **Professor Louise Cooke** – it is a subject that has informed her work, research and teaching since she began life as a librarian. Now emeritus Professor of Information and Knowledge Management at Loughborough University, she talks to **Rob Green** about censorship and managing controversial materials in libraries, ahead of her appearance at CILIP's new look Conference on 12-13 July – book and find out more at <https://cilipconference.org.uk>.

LOUISE Cooke will be joining speakers at this year's CILIP Conference, where she will be discussing how and why libraries need to be aware of their responsibilities around "controversial materials" that they hold.

As well as an ethical dilemma there are also legal implications to consider, meaning service leaders need to be sure of their policies and ensure staff are following guidelines.

Louise says: "A good understanding of ethical analytical thinking is a strong basis on which to reach appropriate solutions to ethical dilemmas faced by librarians: whether this is based on the principle of utilitarianism (the pursuit of greatest happiness and least harm), or on Kantian/deontological principles (i.e. examining the inherent 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of a particular course of action based on an agreed set of moral imperatives, for example 'it is wrong to steal')."

"Using this kind of thinking we can more easily determine the action which we feel to be most appropriate and ethical. In terms of access to controversial materials this may involve, for example, ensuring that our users can make an informed choice with regard to the suitability of particular resources for their own purposes based on clear labelling of such resources, or, in the case of internet



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access, providing users with information literacy skills to evaluate the appropriateness of content for their specific needs, and ensuring that librarians are able to unblock content that has been filtered out erroneously."

While there are clear arguments in favour of libraries retaining "controversial" materials and allowing access to it, Louise admits there is a balancing act. She says: "Librarians, of course, need to balance a number of concerns that go well beyond merely avoiding offence. These include (but certainly are

not limited to) the best use of limited resources to meet their users' needs; remaining relevant, empathetic and trustworthy to their local communities (and parent bodies); doing the 'right' thing; and the need to remain at all times within legislative constraints. These considerations all require an ability to use ethical thinking to balance the rights and wrongs of any particular course of action.

"As part of my module teaching, I always encouraged students to differentiate between what is ethical and what is legal. Although often the two will align, this is not always the case: an example may be the use of a 'legal' tax loophole by a billionaire to avoid paying the full rate of tax due on their estate. This may well be legal, but few would defend it as an ethical course of action."

Louise was lead researcher on the 2012-2014 Managing Access to the Internet in Public Libraries' (MAIPLE) project, which eventually led to work on creating IFLA guidelines on managing access to the internet in public libraries. That work began over a decade ago, and Louise points out that the criteria about what constitutes "controversial" material does not remain static.

She says: "It is one of the greatest challenges facing libraries today. A recent example could be given of the controversy currently surrounding the proposed



Louise Cooke.

'rewriting' of Roald Dahl's extensive series of children's books, to replace 'offensive' descriptions of characters using terms such as 'ugly' and 'fat'."

She adds: "Internationally, many different factors come into play and it is not easy to draw generalisations from contexts as varied as those in the US, China, Middle

East, Russia etc. In the UK specifically, I would suggest that there has been a movement from a prominent focus on obscenity, morality and pornography, to a broader focus on materials that could be considered 'harmful' or 'dangerous' (e.g. information relating to self-harm, bomb-making manuals, violence etc.), with the focus further broadening to consider material that could be hurtful, discriminatory or personally offensive (derogatory comments on appearance, or based on specific protected characteristics such as disability, race, gender, sexual orientation etc.), and more latterly to a well-intentioned move to right historical injustices (e.g. 'decolonising' the curriculum)."

And this shift is driven by a number of factors "ranging from a decline in the role of religion and the church in shaping social norms, the influence of more traditional media sources (e.g. hysteria whipped up by the tabloid press to pursue a political agenda), the rise of misinformation and disinformation on the internet, through to the role of social media, 'cancel culture' (perhaps more neutrally defined as 'call-out' culture) and influencer or celebrity culture in shaping the information ecosphere.

"As the range of exposure to different material grows exponentially, so does our ability and inclination to be offended by what we see. On the gentler side, perhaps, a greater awareness of the rights and sensitivities of different groups (arguably a





good thing in its own right) may lead us to condemn material that posits a less liberal perspective than we ourselves hold.”

These changes are not always easy to navigate and there are no shortcuts. Louise says: “Sadly, there is no simple answer here, other than to reiterate the professional duty to undertake regular CPD to ensure that knowledge is current and up-to-date; to review library policies

on a frequent and regular basis, and to seek relevant professional guidance as required when doing so; and above all, to engage with professional bodies such as CILIP and the MLA Guidance on the Management of Controversial Materials in Libraries (<https://bit.ly/3YigkNC>) that are able to provide a more holistic (and perhaps, more neutral) overview of the current landscape. This can also protect individual professionals when facing

difficult decisions regarding controversial materials, and experiencing coercive pressure from vocal and/or opinionated individuals or groups.”

With CILIP Conference focusing on top-of-mind issues for library leaders, Louise’s appearance at the July event will give leaders the opportunity to improve their own understanding of the issues. The ever-changing landscape means that “there are a number of very important reasons why service leaders need to be considering these issues. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, to avoid and/or deal with any legal challenges faced by their service. Having well-crafted, relevant and prominently displayed service policies with regard to controversial materials (and I include here other controversial ‘speech’ issues, such as author invitations to speak and the holding of ‘controversial’ events) offers a level of protection for users, service staff, and service leaders alike.

“Being aware of policy statements from professional organisations such as CILIP can also offer a high level of guidance and protection in the event of controversy. It is undoubtedly the duty of any information service leader to equip staff with the capabilities required to implement such policies, even in the face of local resistance.” **IP**

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