

**Community Standards in New Zealand Public  
Libraries: An Exploratory Study.**

**By**

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# **Community Standards in New Zealand Public Libraries: An Exploratory Study**

## **Abstract**

Community standards have been discussed by many authors but none have attempted to investigate their application in public libraries. Public libraries aim to provide information that covers all viewpoints; such information is likely to contain views and opinions that are offensive to many members of the community. The problem of how public librarians define the standards of their communities was central to this research project. In order to investigate this problem a series of interviews were conducted and supported with library policy documents supplied by interviewees. A number of sub topics were also investigated, including how librarians deal with challenging items and whether librarians use any tools or resources to help define community standards. Analysis of interviews and policy documents found that librarians were not able to comprehensively define the standards of their communities. Librarians were divided over whether the demographic differences within their communities had any impact on the standards of their communities.

**Keywords:** Community Standards, Public Libraries, New Zealand, Offensive Material

## Introduction

Community standards are an important issue facing New Zealand public libraries because such standards could influence what material is accepted by the community as decent or fit for the public good. Rather than seizing controversial issues and materials as potential ‘educational moments’, the literature indicates that public libraries tend to shy away in order to deflect negative attention away from their operations. The literature also suggests that it is difficult to define community standards. Therefore this study investigated how public libraries interpret local community standards and apply them to their operations. A qualitative methodology was employed to gather and interpret data from interviews and policy documents collected from public libraries in one urban region in New Zealand. By conducting an analysis exercise, themes and similarities in the data were identified and conclusions made relating to the objectives of the study.

## Research Problem

Public libraries are an important source of information for the general public but due to the wide range of material present in their collections some items are likely to be offensive to some members of the community. Community standards reflect what the community determines to be indecent or objectionable and undeserving of a place on the libraries' shelves. Therefore several issues are raised: whether such items are in line with current community standards and whether the library took these standards into consideration when it acquired the item and subsequently made it accessible to the public. Community standards may mean that restrictions are placed on certain items, which may in effect cause the item to be censored or unused in the library. Community standards are legally difficult to define. Whether an item has breached community standards is not known until a judge or jury has applied a legal test and made a decision. The question of whether librarians in New Zealand apply similar criteria to material when it is purchased or enters the library and how librarians handle the item must be considered. This is because public libraries are primarily concerned with allowing the public free access to information. If the material containing the information is held to be objectionable the library may be called to account by the users of the library.

## Research Objectives and Questions

This study investigated community standards in public libraries in one urban region of New Zealand. In particular this study sought to determine how public libraries incorporate community standards into their policies. The following objectives have been determined during the process of researching this subject. The research seeks to:

- To discover how New Zealand public librarians define the standards of their local community;
- To determine whether library staff members are provided with guidelines as to what material might offend users of the library and how such items are to be handled by staff;
- To explore how the community standards that are applied within public libraries are influenced by local demographics.

To achieve these objectives the proposed research answers the following research questions and sub questions.

**Research Question 1:** How are community standards defined by public librarians?

Sub questions:

- What instruments or guidelines are used to define local standards?
- How do demographic differences within the region impact upon community standards?



- What pressures come from within the community to make library material accessible or to prohibit access to material with respect to whether it is considered fit for public exposure / access?

**Research Question 2:** Are community standards incorporated into library policies and if so what aspects of the operation of the library are affected?

Sub questions:

- Are community standards taken into consideration when the library selects books and resources for the collection?
- Are community standards taken into consideration when the library displays items?
- Are staff provided with guidelines as to what may offend local library users?
- What type of material has caused libraries to receive complaints in the past?
- How do librarians deal with material that may cause controversy within the local community?

## Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms have been identified as vital to this study of community standards in New Zealand public libraries.

**Objectionable:** According to the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, objectionable is defined in the following way:

A publication is objectionable if it describes, depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with matters such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to be injurious to the public good.

**Community Standards:** Neither library and information management (LIM), nor social science, literature has clearly defined the concept of community standards. But the Office of Film and Literature Classification has described a similar concept of the 'public good'.

The public good is more than the public, and it is more than the viewers and readers of material. The public good is concerned with maintaining the well-being of society. It is about regulating images and text which are likely to maintain or instill attitudes that are harmful to society, or which may lead to harmful behaviours.

(Office of Film and Literature Classification, n.d.)

**Censorship:**

“In modern thought, censorship is an effort by a government, private organization, group, or individual to prevent people from reading, seeing, or hearing what maybe considered as dangerous to government or harmful to public morality.”

(Boaz, 2003, p. 469)

**Standard:** This definition of a standard is offered by the New Zealand Oxford Dictionary.

an object or quality or measure serving as a basis or example or principle to which others conform or should conform or by which the accuracy or quality of others is judged (*by present-day standards*).

(Deverson, 2004)

## Literature Review

The following literature review consists of three sections: community standards; censorship and controversial material; and museums and art galleries. Issues in community standards are not limited to the LIM environment and have been researched in other disciplines. Therefore it is important that this literature review covers relevant material from the humanities, law and museum management disciplines.

### Community Standards

Social scientists have been concerned about the methods use to determine community standards when objectionable materials are considered by courts (Linz, Donnerstein, Land, McCall, Scott, Shafer, Klein and Lance 1991, Scott 1991, White 2004). Social scientists such as Linz et al. (1991), Scott (1991), and White (2004) have been troubled that American jurors are required to judge the standards of an entire community using the three-prong obscenity test set out in *Miller v. California* 413 U.S. 15 (1973) – “the Miller test”:

1. whether “the average person, applying contemporary community standards” would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;
2. whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and

3. whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value (White, 2004, p.111).

Linz et al. (1991) and Scott (1991) have evaluated the legal framework for community standards and have concluded that difficulties exist in attempting to establish a single community standard. Linz et al. (1991) found that the personal judgements made by participants in their study were less conservative than the perceived standards of the local community. Scott's research involved a telephone survey of residents and found that the majority of respondents were tolerant but that personal standards were in fact a better judge of community standards than demographics (Scott, 1991). At present much of the social science literature on community standards focuses on obscenity issues and not on religious, racial or political issues.

Further research into community standards has been conducted by Piper (1997) and Engstrom, Hallock, Reimer and Rawls (2002) who have investigated a community standards model offered by Piper in 1996. Piper states that "community standards are shared agreements that define mutual expectations for how the community will function on an interpersonal level, that is, how the members will relate to and treat one another" (Piper, 1997, p.22).

Community standards have also been the subject of research by authors in the LIM field. Serebnick's (1979) conceptual framework for further research on selection and censorship in libraries is an important study within the body of research on community

standards. Serebnick identified six dependent variables that influence censorship and selection in libraries. Serebnick's variables are as follows:

#### Class 1: Librarian Variables

- A. Librarian's attitudes towards censorship and intellectual freedom.
- B. Demographic variables. (e.g.: age & education)
- C. Perceived role of library and librarians in the community.

#### Class 2: Library Variables

- A. Organizational, administrative, and legal structure of the library.
- B. Selection policies.
- C. Budget.

#### Class 3: Community Leader Variables

- A. Community leaders' attitudes toward censorship and intellectual freedom.
- B. Community leaders' interest in and influence over the library.

#### Class 4: Community and Community Action Variables

- A. Census data. (e.g.: size and density of population served, educational levels)

B. Pressure groups in the community.

C. Nature, number and resolution of censorial actions in the community.

#### Class 5: Mass Media Variables

A. Coverage of censorship and intellectual freedom in mass media. (e.g.: book review media, newspapers)

B. Relationship of mass media to the library. (e.g.: which book review journals are read)

#### Class 6: Judicial and Legal Variables

A. Judicial decisions regarding censorship and intellectual freedom.

B. Federal, state and local legislation regarding censorship and intellectual freedom.

(Serebnick, 1979, p116).

These variables suggest that external and internal forces exert pressure on libraries to maintain a high standard of professionalism when dealing with selection and censorship issues. It is important to note the emphasis Serebnick places on community leaders and groups as a source of pressure on libraries.

Studies investigating community standards have been concerned with selection and censorship of material. Byrne (2004) commented on selection policies and argued that

libraries should reflect the interests of their users and that purchasing according to the tastes of the majority to avoid controversial materials would be a dangerous activity. Hannabuss and Allard (2001) offered a similar argument against policies that may marginalise members of the community. Hannabuss & Allard have advised that local consensus and professional judgement should be taken into account when acquiring items even if this results in the censoring of some items.

Curry (1997) compared the attitudes of British and Canadian library directors on issues such as community standards and found that 67% of British respondents agreed that standards should be upheld while only 37% of Canadian directors supported this view. Curry noted that those who disagreed with upholding these standards argued that they are difficult to define.

Moody (2004) found that only 56% of respondents, working as public librarians in Queensland, agreed that local community standards should be taken into account when selecting materials (Moody, 2004, p177). Moody concluded that anticensorship attitudes are not always present in librarians' behaviour and that in fact self censorship to avoid challenges does occur. Schrader (1992) investigated pressures on Canadian public libraries and found that community groups with political or religious views were the most common source of pressure. Such groups wish to impose their views on the community by removing or acquiring material which supports their views. Similar findings have been reached by authors investigating religious groups such as the Moral Majority (Murray



and Woods 1982, Schuman 1982, Berninghausen 1982, Fontaine 1981 and Moody 2005). Serebnick & Quinn (1995), researching diversity of opinion in public library collections, found a significant difference in diversity depending on subject area.

## Censorship & Controversial Material

There has been much literature published in the LIM discipline on censorship and controversial material. Byrne (2000a, 2000b) has published several papers on censorship and has argued that libraries should avoid censorship and make available all types of material. To reinforce his argument Byrne has cited the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) statement on libraries and intellectual freedom. Herrada (2003-4) argued that “historical societies and other institutions documenting local history should be collecting materials relevant to their communities, *especially* if they are controversial” (Herrada, 2003-4, p.43). Doyle (2002) concluded that libraries should contain all material and that we should trust that the public will determine the good from the bad rather than making that decision for them.

The findings of several studies suggest that often public and school libraries will seek a safe position and avoid controversial materials (Woods & Perry-Holmes 1982, Woods & Salvatore quoted in Serebnick 1982, Curry 2001). Woods & Perry-Holmes (1982) used a list of challenged or controversial books as the basis of their study into selection and censorship. They circulated 913 questionnaires to public libraries in the District of Columbia, USA and from the 688 responses found that 79% of the books in their study

were restricted in at least one library (Woods & Perry-Holmes, 1982, p.1713). Woods & Perry-Holmes were concerned that librarians judged what they thought would offend the community.

Curry (2001) conducted an investigation into the relocation of young adult material and found that item relocation was common practice if complaints were received. Curry also commented on the practices (relocating items, moving items to other branches and temporary moving items to closed stacks) of public library directors as a form of inadvertent censorship and has linked mis-shelving of items or relocation with the items' circulation statistics. Curry (1994) conducted an investigation into the controversial book *American Psycho* using a nationwide survey of Canadian public libraries. Curry found that of the 435 libraries surveyed 237 chose not to purchase the item (p.210). Ten libraries decided that *American Psycho* did not meet the standards held by the local community (Curry, 1994). One librarian commented that the book should be quietly entered into the system, "I told my staff not to put it on the new book display or feature it in our new books column" (cited in Curry, 1994, p.215).

Reece's (2005) article entitled 'Multiculturalism and Library Exhibits: Sites of Contested Representation' examined an exhibit held at the American University Library. Reece asked "Who has the power to make a representation? Who is silenced?" (Reece, 2005, p.366). Accordingly the exhibit in question proved to be controversial for this reason. Controversy was expected to surround this exhibit before it was installed and this prediction proved to be true. The exhibit entitled 'Sorrow and Hope in the Holy Land:

Palestine and the Palestinians' was made up of text, objects, photographs, graphics and books from the library's own collection (Reece, 2005, p.367).

Although there was no mention of suicide bombers and scarce reference to violence against Israel the university librarian deemed the exhibit to be excessively divisive and accordingly censored part of the text, yet the public response was mixed with positive and negative comments. The major complaint was that the exhibit was biased and did not cover the Jewish perspective. Reece offered several recommendations for libraries hosting an exhibit; she argued that libraries should make all information available so the viewers can inform themselves accordingly. Importantly Reece stated that "controversy about representations should not be avoided but should be seized as potentially educative moments" (Reece, 2005, p.371). Reece's study is valuable but could be strengthened if a comparison with other controversial exhibits was made.

## Museums and Art Galleries

Museums and art galleries are important social institutions and often tackle controversial material with the intention of promoting debate and public discourse. Similar to public libraries, museums also seek to "affirm standards of excellence, beauty, taste, decency or representativeness shared by the public" through their exhibition and education policies (Rothfield, 2001, p7).

Mazda (2004) argues that museums can engage visitors and enhance their overall experience when visiting a museum. Research conducted at the Science Museum London found it difficult to produce guidelines for defining controversial exhibition areas. Subjects thought to be currently controversial, e.g.: electronic surveillance, were in fact not as challenging to the museum's attendees as topics thought to be overexposed like animal experimentation (Mazda, 2004). Mazda importantly states that visitors regularly think that controversial exhibits are biased and that the visitors' perceptions of those exhibits are coloured by their own personal views.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art's exhibition entitled *Sensation* deliberately sought to challenge and engage the public and attracted much attention in London where vandalism and protesting occurred. A study of audience attitude after viewing *Sensation*, conducted by Halle, Tiso & Yi (2001), found that the artwork thought to be most offensive was not perceived that way by attendees. These artworks were anti-Catholic and seen as 'blasphemous' by nearly 5% of attendees (Halle, Tiso & Yi, 2001, p.141). Artworks found to be most offensive dealt with sexually mutated children and dissected animals, which curators first thought to be unlikely to seriously offend. Interestingly 74% of the exhibits' audience expressed views ranging from positive to very positive (Ibid. p.136).

## **Conclusion**

Controversial items often push the boundaries of contemporary community standards but their value in the library collection and to society is strong. Literature suggests that

legally and conceptually community standards are difficult to define and even harder to predict. However public libraries are often put into a difficult position as they are obliged to offer a range of material representing all view points knowing that doing so may breach community standards. Public libraries do not deliberately set out to offend the local community and seek to reflect their standards in what they acquire and how they display material. Interestingly the literature suggests that potentially objectionable material, for example *American Psycho* and *Sensation*, often proves to be accepted by the majority within the community.

It is important to integrate literature from disciplines such as law, museum management and psychology as much research has been undertaken to establish frameworks for community standards. This study will contribute to a small field discussing public library practices in regard to community standards but from a New Zealand context and will offer an entry point into these issues in New Zealand public libraries.

## Research Description

Community standards are an important set of ideals that must be considered, especially, by public librarians as they have a high level of interaction with the general public.

Research undertaken by social scientists, such as Scott (1991) suggests that community standards are difficult to define. Within the Library and Information Management (LIM) discipline community standards offer several variables for public librarians to consider. The six variables provided by Serebnick (1979) and discussed earlier, were originally intended to provide a framework for the project. However, these variables proved to be unsuitable in this particular circumstance and therefore were not used within the data analysis. The reasons for the change of plan are discussed in the analysis section.

This study has investigated community standards and controversial items in New Zealand public libraries. In particular this study has investigated the implications of community standards on the operations of public libraries, whether certain items are allowed to be placed on display and whether libraries developed policies that incorporate community standards.

This study seeks to investigate community standards by applying a qualitative methodology. Data was gathered by conducting standardized semi structured interviews asking open ended questions and analysing library policy documents. Interviews were conducted with librarians currently working in the following central libraries all of which are located in one urban region: Austin, Woodside, Targos, Cambria and Westbrook

Libraries (names have been changed for ethical reasons). By gathering data from interviews and collection development policies it was possible to compare the libraries' policies and how they are implemented by staff. Data gathered from these sources was coded into categories according to phrases, patterns, themes and relationships between variables.

## **Research Design**

### **Method of Gathering Data**

Semi structured open ended interviews were selected to be the main method of gathering data for this study because they allowed the interviews to be flexible and probe issues which were raised by the interviewees during the course of the interview. Because this study is investigating a very subjective topic it was important that the researcher be able to be reactive to the information that was being offered by the interviewee by reformulating or omitting questions when it was necessary. For example if in response to the question 'how would you define the standards of your local community?' the interviewee stated that he/she used certain criteria to define such standards the researcher would then ask probing questions such as 'tell me more about those criteria' to gather further information.

Interviews were conducted with five librarians currently working in five different libraries around an urban region of one of the cities in New Zealand. The positions held by these librarians ranged from library manager to children's collection manager and collection development team manager. Interviewees were selected because they were capable of answering interview questions with some authority regarding the libraries' policies and because they had some involvement in purchasing materials, writing or revising collection development policies and making decisions on how to deal with difficult items. In order to supplement the information provided in interviews collection



development policies were gathered from four of the five libraries websites and one interviewee supplied documents regarding the library's item review process that were not available publicly to be used as part of the research.

## Research Population

This research project was limited to central public libraries in the following parts of an urban region in New Zealand: Austin, Woodside, Targos, Cambria and Westbrook (then names of these urban centres have been changed to ensure confidentiality). This project was conducted part time over a twenty four week time period and therefore it was important that a manageable research population be selected. The advantage of conducting research on these central libraries was that they are all located in one urban region which made it was possible to compare the practices of five different library systems that serve communities of different demographics and population. According to the 2001 census significant differences in ethnicity, population and education exist within the region. For example Westbrook City has the largest concentration of Maori and Pacific peoples, while Targos and Cambria have the greatest concentration of European descendents. Finally Austin and Woodside City have a higher percentage of Asian peoples than other regions.

A purposive sample of librarians who hold the same position were approached and asked if they would be willing to participate in the interview process. This choice of sample has allowed for comparable data to be gathered. It was appropriate that librarians in a

managerial position were selected for participation in the study as they were more likely to be informed of complaints from the public and be in tune with the values of the local community.

## Ethical Consideration

This research project was undertaken with the highest ethical standards. Because this research project has human subjects it was necessary that it be submitted for ethical approval. Though it was unlikely that the interviews would result in sensitive information being collected it was important that personal privacy be ensured so that interviewees would feel free to speak openly. Each library and location that could be linked to a library in the study was given a pseudonym. To promote good research practice each interviewee was able to check for truthful representation of the data collected during interviews by being offered the chance to review the transcript of his/her interview. Submission for human ethics was scheduled for the week of the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2007 with consideration of the Human Ethics Committees maximum three week time period to review the study.

## Instrumentation

In order to gather data for this project five face to face interviews were conducted. Such interviews were selected as the preferred method of gathering data as they would enrich the data by incorporating body language and facial expressions. As the study was conducted in one urban region and within a reasonable travelling distance there was no

need to conduct local telephone interviews. After identifying suitable librarians a copy of the studies information sheet and consent form was emailed to each person to help explain the significance of the study and what measures were being taken to protect identity of each participant. This allowed all interviewees to speak freely as his/her views were interpreted to represent his/her library. Interviewees were also able to contribute more as they were able to prepare for the interviews and were not left confused by the topic being studied. Interview data was captured using a digital tape recorder but in the event of technology failure paper was also brought along to take notes during the interview.

Interviews were standardized open ended interviews that were repeated at each location. The set of questions was repeated to each interviewee in the same order and with the same wording. By asking open ended questions the interviewee was encouraged to elaborate on the question and offer informative answers. Serebnick's variables, as discussed in the literature review section, were to be used to base interview questions on in order to probe the variables from the librarian's perspective. To complement the data collected by interviewing librarians, library policy documents were obtained from library websites or in person during the interviews. In particular documents that relate to library display policies and item selection were collected as these two areas were likely to be influenced by community standards.

The interview questions that were prepared were originally proposed to reflect Serebnick's conceptual variables. It was felt that as semi structured open ended

interviews were the main method of gathering data the questions should aim to gather data that would investigate the objectives and research questions of the study. Serebnick's conceptual framework, cited in the literature review, was originally going to be used as a framework for coding the data but upon organising and reading the data it became apparent that to do so would be inappropriate. Serebnick's framework has some relevance to this study due to its variables regarding community groups and leaders but it was felt that applying the framework would not give a true representation of what was being represented in the data. Therefore analysis of the data involved drawing out common themes, phrases, items, interpretations and definitions of the issues surrounding community standards and attempting to synthesise them into a response to the relevant research question. Analysis of the interview and policy data was not intended to result in descriptions or case studies

## Pilot Interview

A pilot study was performed prior to gathering data in order to identify any possible problems with the methods of data collection. The pilot interview was conducted with a willing participant to test the interview questions and give the researcher confidence going into data gathering interviews. By conducting a pilot study improvement in the wording of questions and the order and relevance of the questions being asked was to be identified. The content analysis exercise was also be piloted to ensure that the time spent working on the libraries' policy documents is used most effectively. By obtaining a

policy document from another library's website, it was possible to carry out a trial run of the coding process to ensure the researcher gained sufficient coding experience.

## Treatment of Data

After the final data gathering exercise had been completed it was important that the data was organised into a logical order. This ensured that no data was lost or misplaced.

Transcripts were labelled with the interviewee's name and work place to ensure that the correct interview was matched with its location. A similar process of providing location label was employed with the data gathered from the library policy documents. The transcriptions of interviews were carried out before all interviews had been conducted due to some downtime between interviews. After all data had been transcribed and organised it was read thoroughly to gain an understanding of the ideas and themes present in the data.

After the data had been read and understood it was organised into units according to the 11 interview questions that asked to each librarian, each unit contained an interview question with the responses from all interviewees. Because librarians offered information important to some questions at other times in the interview the researcher noted at the time of analysis that crucial quotes or passages could be found at other sections of the transcript. Also important were the comments and questions made after the end of the prepared questions, as mentioned above, which often further explained points that were raised during the course of the interview. These passages were analysed individually and

were referred back to the interview question to which they related. The coding process assigned chunks of data that have similar phrases, patterns, themes and relationships with a code and resulted in the data being organised by the assigned codes. The results of the coding process were used to conduct an analysis of community standards and how they are applied and interpreted by public librarians.

Rather than compare the practices of individual libraries it was more beneficial to use the data gathered to interpret community standards as a broad phenomenon and attempt to understand how they affect the operations of libraries in one urban region region. By gathering data from a different sources within the same institutions it was possible to compare whether there are similarities between the libraries' policies on community standards and how librarians interpret and apply such policies. It was considered to be most beneficial to gather data from two sources as the project's conclusions were enriched by the multiple sources of data.

# **Analysis**

## **Introduction**

Community standards have been discussed by many authors writing in the Library and Information Management discipline as well as in the social sciences and legal fields. Consensus as to how to define the standards of a community has been difficult to obtain. This study has been designed to investigate how public librarians define the standards of their local communities (if possible) and whether these standards influence the operation of the libraries.

Firstly one must define what a standard actually is. Deverson (2004) offers a definition of a standard that is relevant to this study (Please refer to the definitions of relevant terms section). This definition of a standard states that a standard has qualities that can be measured and judged and that it is possible to determine whether something meets the criteria of a standard. This definition has some relevance to the study of community standards in public libraries as community standards, in theory, offer libraries a measure by which to judge whether material selected for inclusion in their collections conform to the quality judged to be acceptable by the community.

### **Description of Libraries Involved in the Study**

The libraries that were selected to be included in the study were of varying sizes. The size of the library was in accord with the populations of the cities that they represented. For

example the largest system had 12 libraries including the central branch, holding about 1,000,000 items, and the smallest had just two branches in total. All libraries seemed to be professional in their approach to providing the best possible range of services and materials for their communities and all referred to collection development policies. Some interviewees in smaller libraries described their library and community as being typical or representative of New Zealand as a whole. However, the largest library in the study was not typical of the average New Zealand library due to the range of material and depth of collection.

The 2001 census confirmed that the main ethnic group in each of the library's regions was European but that there were differences in other ethnic groups among the five locations. Some interviewees felt that the 2001 census<sup>1</sup> was not representative of the current make up of their communities due to changes caused by an influx of new people into a community and people moving from one suburb to another. All interviewees expressed the view that the diversity in their communities made providing a quality library service an interesting challenge to meet. Similarly it would seem that the community of each library had some demographic influence that was unique among the five parts of the region.

The libraries selected to be in the study also offered services such as local history resources and were a source of community information through displays and in some cases important council services were offered by the library through their website. All libraries appeared to be well used at the time of interviews and some interviewees

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of interviews community profile data had not been publicly released for the 2006 Census.



commented on high levels of usage and user satisfaction. Each library acts as a centre for information and knowledge for the local community but in the two smaller library systems, which had two and three branches respectively, emphasis was placed on the library being of great importance to the local community.

### **Reflection upon Interviews**

Interviews conducted for this study lasted from about 30 minutes to an hour. Some interviewees felt that they would be unable to offer relevant information to the study but in fact all interviews contained rich and varied information as many of the interviewees came from different positions within library services. This variety of perspectives is represented in the examples given to explain comments made by the interviewees. After the 11 prepared questions interviewees were asked further questions relating to issues raised during the interviews which resulted in rich data being offered.

The librarians involved all approached the issue of community standards with a sense of caution due to their knowledge of the diversity present in their local community.

'Diversity' was the most common term used by interviewees to describe their local community and one may expect that libraries with diverse collections would experience some form of negative reaction to some of the items but interestingly only two libraries received complaints on any regular basis.

The interview questions that were prepared were originally proposed to reflect Serebnick's conceptual variables. It was felt that as semi structured open ended interviews were the main method of gathering data the questions should aim to gather data that would investigate the objectives and research questions of the study.

## **Research Question 1: How are community standards defined by public librarians?**

Defining how New Zealand public librarians define community standards was one of the central objectives of this study and in order to do so two questions were posed to the five librarians interviewed. These questions were as follows: “How would you describe your local community?” And “How would you define the standards of your community?” (See Appendix 1 for entire interview schedule). In order to better understand the standards of the librarian’s local community it was necessary to discover how the librarians perceived their local communities.

Each of the five librarians indicated that the best way to describe his/her communities was by using the term ‘diverse’ or similar terms which related to the people who resided in their community. The following quotes illustrate this description:

- “Diverse would be the most succinct terminology I could use for it.”
- “Our community is becoming more and more multi: multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi everything.”

Demographic characteristics were also used by librarians to describe their communities, for example:

- “So it’s a very diverse community with different levels of income.”
- “It’s got high levels of employment, better than average incomes and high levels of home ownership”.

Interestingly two librarians also felt that their local communities were very much 'average of New Zealand as a whole' and that their communities represented a cross section or microcosm of New Zealand.

In order to determine whether it would be possible to describe the communities being studied in terms of their outlooks on moral issues, three librarians were probed as to whether their communities were liberal or conservative. The responses to this probe suggest that it is not possible to give a broad label or description, in regard to social standards, to a community in this urban region. For example:

- "Parts of it are very conservative but parts of it are sort of very fairly liberal easy going communities".
- "I think we've got a mix of left and right wing".
- "In terms of materials, you know literature and so on, I would say it's quite liberal".

It is not possible to confidently assert that a community is more liberal or conservative in its views and beliefs, and this has been reflected in the librarian's responses, because of the diversity present in each community.

Diversity between suburbs was also apparent with librarians from Woodside and Westbrook naming suburbs in their communities that were ethnically and demographically opposite. Such suburbs were known to have different expectations of the library. Two librarians were able to state that certain suburbs were more conservative or liberal than other areas within the community which suggests that it may be possible to

describe suburbs in terms of liberalism or conservatism. However it is important to note that one librarian felt that even within a suburb or geographical boundary there was still enormous variation because of external forces causing people to come and go. The descriptions of each community offered by those interviewed help to reinforce why it is difficult to define the standards of each community. This difficulty is because communities are diverse and not made up of people who think alike.

When asked directly “How would you define the standards of your local community?” the librarians interviewed commented that they were not certain that it would be possible to define the standards of their communities. The following quotes illustrate the difficulty in defining community standards:

- “I can’t define the standards of the local community because they are as varied as the demographic is.”
- “How *would* you define the standards?”
- “I’m not entirely certain I can...[we have] nothing written [about community standards that define them].”

Such statements suggest that it is not possible to define community standards by a ‘one size fits all’ definition and that it would be inappropriate to apply such a label when dealing with such a challenging and subjective topic. Two librarians used specific examples to demonstrate the difficulty in defining community standards.

- “Even if you took one quite narrow demographic, lets say you talk about white females between the age of 20 and 25, they are going to have as many standards as any other demographic.”

- "...Families as an entity seem to drive an awful lot of people. I think there are wildly ranging standards within that. Huge differences [in standards] in general but a family focus seems [to be] probably the more noticeable thing in this city."

The above quotations suggest that even within a specific demographic and a specific value that people believe to be important there are countless different standards. This explains why the librarians interviewed were hesitant to attempt to define community standards.

Several interviewees referred back to statements they made when answering interview question 1 which suggest that their communities are open minded and liberal when dealing with the content of library materials. But in some library networks there are branches located in areas where certain issues and subjects must be handled with awareness and care. Two librarians, again from Woodside and Westbrook, commented that certain suburbs contained a higher concentration of religious residents who would object to material containing subjects such as witchcraft. A number of possible influences on community standards arose during the analysis of the responses to this question. These influences were often subjects that have caused problems for the library in the past and subjects that some library users may not like to be confronted with in the library.

These subjects included:

- Witchcraft
- Sexual material
- Swearing or offensive language
- Religion

It is important to note that the above issues and subjects were only mentioned by interviewees as what a small group of users have complained about or are problematic in certain branch libraries. Therefore one can only conclude that it is important to be aware of these issues and subjects when considering the standards of a community but that they do not represent issues or subjects that will be offensive or problematic to the entire community.

Finally, one librarian discussed purchasing material in response to what the community wishes to read, so long as it has been passed by the censor. The librarian also stated that they would not set out to deliberately offend anyone and that items which may cause offence were labelled and not placed on display shelves. This in effect suggests that the library is conforming to the standards of the community by purchasing what the community wants but it is also attempting to appease anybody who may be offended by seeing the items displayed prominently.

**Sub question: What instruments or guidelines are used to define local standards?**

All librarians interviewed stated that their libraries undertook some measures to better understand the local community but that these measures are not aimed at understanding standards. Libraries aimed to understand their local communities in order to provide better services and collections not to determine community standards. When speaking about the library's annual survey work one interviewee commented, "But like I said, [we

were] not looking at standards but looking at what the community is telling us they want and need in their library”. Libraries make no attempt to define community standards through the use of instruments, such as surveys and focus groups, because it would be extremely difficult and time consuming to do so.

Librarians from Austin and Westbrook discussed working closely with their local council, and Cambria planned to do so in the future because the council was active in producing relevant demographic material such as community profiles. Demographic information produced by local councils was used by libraries but often these resources were used to check if their own knowledge of the community was correct or up to date. “Yes we do actually look at it to just verify things but I wouldn’t use it everyday. We might just look at it a couple of times a year to make sure we are on track.”

**Specific instruments used to understand the community.**

Responses to this question suggest that librarians use a number of tools and resources to gain a better understanding of their communities. Feedback from the public through comments made directly to staff, on designated feedback forms and through the library website was seen as most important in gaining an understanding of the community. Two librarians commented on annual surveys that were used by the library to stay in touch with the community, one of which was an annual survey conducted by the Westbrook City council which benefited the library through the space made available for comments by the public. “The benefit for the library is in the comments that we get out of that less than the statistics. The statistics tend to be very consistent that people think libraries are a



good idea which doesn't help us a lot." The Austin Library Network conducted annual surveys targeted a specific 'collection niche' each year by focusing a section of their survey on the people who use that collection. A third librarian commented that they were in the process of implementing a user survey in the near future. The two librarians making use of annual surveys were also involved with running focus groups which were designed to get "input from different social groups, economic groups, and racial groups".

It may seem that only two libraries were implementing tools to understand their communities but this was not the case. Librarians from other smaller libraries stated that local knowledge through their interactions with staff at branches, personal interactions and from simply living in the area allowed them to understand the community very well.

- "I talk to the team leaders that work in those communities and know exactly what those people want and what they like and don't like and what their interests are and their religious beliefs."
- "A lot of it comes through your knowledge of the community. Knowledge of the community comes through personal interactions and other librarian's personal interactions and feedback from that and people's suggestions to buy."

It is important that librarians actively seek to gain a better understanding of the library's local users and in turn this knowledge will help them gain a better understanding of what users want to read and they don't wish to see in the library. Such guidelines or instruments, mentioned above, do not allow librarians to better understand the standards of their community but rather the wants and needs of the community.

**Sub question: How do demographic differences within the urban region impact upon community standards?**

The general consensus among librarians interviewed for this study was that demographic differences in their communities do not have an impact upon the standards of the communities. Librarians felt that it was not possible to conclude that demographics would have any influence on standards. For example several librarians commented that:

- “You can have people of the same demographic who have very different standards.”
- “I don’t think that you can come to those conclusions personally from just using demographics.”
- “I think you can have people of the same demographic who have very different standards whether that’s from their ethnicity, gender, age, background, upbringing, education who knows to varied.”

Demographics can not be used to determine the standards of the community. As mentioned in responses to interview question 2 above even within one demographic multiple standards exist. The following example outlines how the Cambria library is aware of a specific demographic in its community that is prominent but that they can not make a judgement on the demographic as a whole. “Just because someone is elderly you can’t really say that they don’t like those because you’ve also known of old, elderly people who really enjoy some of the more racier fiction.” To make a judgement on what a particular demographic may or may not find offensive would be inappropriate and may cause users to be prevented from access to materials they wish to use.

It is difficult to determine the impact of demographics on community standards. Two librarians compared two suburbs of completely opposite demographics which led to different expectations of the library and its services. The librarian from Woodside felt that there was a possible link between demographics and standards in their community. “Yea you’ve got, say for instance Springfield and Greenville where you’ve got completely different demographics and people and interests and income but it does influence the standards; one will expect very, very good high quality stuff and the other is just glad that you’re there.”

Another librarian who acknowledged a difference in demographics between suburbs in the community was more cautious and felt that even though a suburb of low income earners and strong religious and family values demanded Christian material, it was not possible to conclude that standards were driving the library or demand. Librarians use demographics to understand their communities better in order to provide material that will be well received and valuable to each branch library. For example:

- “...you can tell when we are selecting a book for Greenville because it will go very well there. If we get the same thing for the far end of the valley it won’t move at all because of that income divide as well.”
- “That’s probably where the demographics are driving it but it’s not necessarily driving standards as such.”
- “But I don’t think it’s got anything to do with standards, it’s more interest levels.”

Such comments suggest that the demographics and the interests of the community influence the library rather than the possibility that community standards exist

**Sub question: What pressures come from within the community to make library material accessible or to prohibit access to material with respect to whether it is considered fit for public exposure / access?**

Pressures exerted on the public libraries in this study were quite minimal. Almost all of the libraries received some form of complaint from an individual, but only one library was subject to sustained pressure about a particular item from a group within the community. Of the five libraries studied, two received complaints on a regular basis (Woodside and Austin) while another library (Targos) was subjected to the odd comment from the public regarding certain items. Interestingly the remaining two libraries (Cambria and Westbrook) were not subject to any complaints about the content of library items that the interviewees could recall. Two librarians commented on complaints that were taken to the council rather than the library directly or that ‘threats’ were made to take the complaint to the mayor.

Librarians were asked the question “Are there any groups that seek to pressure you into removing or purchasing material?” and all responded that they did not receive pressure from ‘groups’ but that it came from individual library users. At the end of the interview the librarian representing Austin recalled a Palestinian group lodging a serious complaint. The library received serious pressure from the group in regard to a book kept in the library’s children’s collection entitled *Suicide Bombings in Israel and Palestinian Terrorism*. The librarian felt that the pressure surrounding the item was not to do with the item being in the children’s collection, but that there was no corresponding item about

Israel. The group therefore felt that Palestinian people were being ‘cast in a bad light’. The librarian felt this was untrue as there were books discussing both sides of this issue but they did not have similar names. The nature of the complaint had the potential to become so serious that the library later developed a process to deal with complaints step by step. Another librarian also mentioned an informal group of Christian home schoolers who wanted more Christian material in the library, but that the group was merely requesting that more material suitable for their needs be made available to them.

Complaints from library users within the community that were made known to the library were often in regard to the content of particular items. The following list shows the type of content that was the subject of complaints:

- Witchcraft
- Homosexuality (Specific item was ‘*Gay Times*’)
- Christian Fiction (Library was asked to label all Christian Fiction)
- Sexual Content (Complaint received about a particular sex manual)
- Graphic Imagery

One librarian mentioned that complaints about items were often aimed at two possible outcomes. “They don’t think it should be (A) in the library full stop or (B) in that part of the collection available to a particular demographic. For example children are the obvious ones.” This explanation of what people hope to achieve when they complain was also expressed by other librarians. “If it’s a children’s book and someone has complained that the content of that book is perhaps a little bit too old [to be in the collection] or that the material is a bit too graphic for young readers.” Importantly censorship or removing

access to the item was not mentioned by any librarians as a possible resolution to any complaint.

- “We usually just explain why we have it and we don’t as a rule remove them.”
- “We won’t restrict whether it can be accessed at all.”

Several librarians stated that often a simple explanation from the staff member dealing with the complaint as to why the item was there was enough to put the complainant’s mind at ease. Pressure to acquire certain material was felt by only one librarian who participated in this study. Many libraries receive requests and recommendations to purchase material but this can not be equated to the pressure. One librarian mentioned an attempt to have items donated to the library but stated that donations were only accepted if they fitted the library’s collection development policy.

It is clear that libraries involved in this study do not receive sustained and organised pressure from groups in the community to remove or purchase material, but complaints from individuals were more common in the two largest libraries. Earlier discussion regarding the easy going and open minded nature of communities could help explain the lack of pressure felt by libraries. However further study into this area is required.

## **Research Question 2: Are community standards incorporated into library policies and if so what aspects of the operation of the library are affected?**

In order to determine whether community standards had been incorporated into library policies, collection development policies were gathered from library websites at the times of interviews and the interviewees were asked interview question 7: “Have community standards been incorporated into library policies?” In response to this question three interviewees strongly felt that community standards were not incorporated into library policies. The reason given is that such standards were difficult to define and collection development policies were designed to help libraries purchase the best material for their communities and not to attempt to define community standards.

- “So no I wouldn’t say that there is community standard stuff incorporated in the policies because like I said the standards in our community are so wide ranging that I wouldn’t want to make a ruling on what the community standard was. I think it’s too open to misinterpretation.”
- “We’ve tried not to....But no we have tried to be very clear that we are trying to buy the best range of material.”

The remaining two librarians from, Cambria and Targos, felt that community standards were included in library policies to a certain extent because they judged their communities to be open minded and fairly liberal and the policies of the libraries reflected the need for all information to be made available. “I think it does reflect the

fairly open view that most of the community has of wanting as much information available as possible to them.” This comment suggests that differing interpretations of community standards have been made as two librarians believe that their policies reflect the communities’ standards regarding freedom of information.

Demand for material from the public was mentioned by the majority of interviewees as being one of the main sources of information used by librarians when determining what a community wants and needs.

- “You sort of tend to work off what people ask for and what people want.”
- “...if people are asking for a certain material we will generally buy it.”

Importantly one respondent mentioned that collections would not include material that would encourage people to commit unlawful behaviour even if demand for such material existed. Another stated that demands for material had resulted in the purchasing of material: “We found quite a demand for books that we may never have bought in the past. For instance we have bought recently a number of books on things like gay parenting.”

The only standards mentioned by librarians in interviews and collection development policies were those issued by LIANZA, such as the *statement on access to information* and *statement on intellectual freedom*, and the UNESCO public library manifesto. These standards were used to confirm a library’s stance toward maintaining unlimited access to information, intellectual freedom without censoring material and equality of library services to all people. Legally libraries are not permitted to hold material that has been labelled as objectionable by the Office of Film and Literature Classification which works



under the parameters set by the Films, Videos and Publications Classification Act 1993.

All collection development policies gathered in this study referred to this Act as a guideline in regard to what is legally acceptable material in New Zealand.

It is clear that no librarian was uncomfortable with attempting to define what material the public would find unacceptable and therefore there were no references to community standards or possible standards in collection development policies. Collection development policies work in the opposite direction by attempting to make as much information available as possible to the public. Libraries will limit access to materials only in certain situations. The Westbrook library has specifically stated that certain material will be held in closed stacks or kept behind the main desk. The reason is that material discussing tattoos and piercing, witchcraft, martial arts and other similar topics are in danger of being stolen or and vandalised. The Austin library did not go so far as to name the topics that are restricted, but will hold at the desk material that is not suitable for open shelves.

**Sub question: Are community standards taken into consideration when the library selects books and resources for its collections?**

All librarians interviewed indicated that items were selected according to demand, both anticipated and expressed to a library, and that items were selected because they filled a need within the community. For example the Westbrook library, situated in an area with a large proportion of residents of Maori and Pacific Island descent, specifically stated that

they would purchase items for this demographic in their community. Librarians do not specifically consider community standards when selecting items, again due to the difficulties in defining such standards, but they do deal with a number of important issues when selecting materials.

Firstly, occasionally the public demands that a library purchase a legal item that would cause offence to many of its users. Decisions such as this require the librarians responsible for the selection of items to make informed decisions. One librarian discussed two items which were contentious but also contained much genre merit, and said that the decision making process was very difficult. “We would consciously be putting ourselves up for criticism. I’m sure we would have loads of complaints but we’ve got a segment of the community who are asking to see that item.” The librarian stated that selection was approached with library science and professionalism in mind, and that difficult items were selected after the collection services team as a whole had made a decision based on the pros and cons of buying or not buying that item. In certain cases the librarian will read the item cover to cover to make an informed choice. Similar issues were raised by a second interviewee, who stated that awareness of a subject, in this case witchcraft, that causes problems in certain branches must be carefully managed because some residents wish to access items on the subject in those suburbs.

Secondly the importance of selecting items that provide information covering all viewpoints on any issue was mentioned by all librarians throughout the interviews, and was also a key statement in all of the collection development policies. Although this may

lead to conflict with members of the community and may result in some items not being well used, it is still important that the material representing those viewpoints be contained in the library, e.g.: books dealing with gay parenting. One collection development policy included a statement explaining that not all of the views expressed in collection items were held by the library or its staff. A similar statement was made by another interviewee: "I might not personally agree with what's in that book but I need to give our users a wide range of views on this topic."

Interestingly personal standards or biases were mentioned by three interviewees as important to avoid when purchasing items for the public, because of the likelihood of avoiding material that the selector does not personally agree with. Interviewees did not believe that personal standards were an issue in their libraries but that they were vigilant to prevent them affecting the range of material available to the public.

**Sub question: Are community standards taken into consideration when the library displays items?**

Librarians were asked to following question, in order to determine whether community standards influenced how they displayed material that might cause offence and complaints from the public. "Do you have any policies that control how these items are displayed? Are they allowed to go out on the shelves or restricted in some way?" Library collection development policies were also analysed to discover if any materials were held under certain conditions. Librarians involved in this study commented that if books are

purchased by a library they are displayed or kept in the correct place in the shelves. For example: “If books are there then they go on the shelves.” and “No everything we have pretty much goes out.” Such statements imply that, as to be expected, libraries are adhering to the LIANZA statements regarding intellectual freedom and access to information. One librarian said that restricting access to an item by not displaying it or placing it in a closed stack would be similar to censoring that item. “It’s not for me to say that a person can’t read a book - it’s not my job.” Another librarian expanded upon this statement by stating that in the past items were kept in closed stacks and were never borrowed.

“MS: I’ve seen that some of these books are kept behind and I just wonder if that affects people accessing it.

Librarian: Absolutely. Well it did in our experience; those books did not go out.”

While not all librarians specifically stated that removing or restricting access to an item was similar to censoring that item, there was a general view that items would only be removed in extreme cases.

The reasons for keeping items off display shelves or normal shelves were discussed by all librarians. Their comments suggest that rarely are items kept off display shelves unless their content has been classified as R18, labelled as objectionable by the Office of Film and Literature Classification Office or the material is so sensitive that it would be irresponsible to keep the item on public access shelves. For example:

“...the paedophile index. I actually keep that in the stack mainly because I didn’t really want children grabbing it and looking through and...or not just children, anyone. I just wanted someone who is serious about looking in it to look at it and they will ask for it.”

Vandalism and theft were also mentioned as a valid reason to remove items from public access, as the cost of replacing such items regularly is a misuse of library funds. One librarian stated that his library (Westbrook) had identified a list of subjects - which included tattoos, witchcraft and cult figures - that were judged to be ‘at risk items’ and the library’s collection development policy stated that the library would only purchase a minimum number of items covering these subjects. Another commented that in one particular branch the item, *Staunch: inside New Zealand’s gangs* by Bill Payne, was at risk from theft and it was kept behind the desk. Two librarians stated that if an item caused the public to complain about it regularly enough then it may be removed from open shelves.

Comments from librarians about the way that they display items suggest that community standards do not influence the way items are displayed, but libraries attempt to be sensible by not displaying or shelving items that will be vandalised or stolen. Placing an item behind the desk can be seen as a compromise between the problems of replacing an ‘at risk item’ regularly or not holding that item at all. This statement illustrates this dilemma: “You know we are trying to balance everyone’s interests and trying to ensure that there is as equal access as we can give everyone to those items.” Those people who

wish to vandalise or steal an item are thwarted while patrons with a genuine need can still access the item. Although some items that are kept behind the desk are often graphic and likely to cause offence it is difficult to argue that community standards have influenced the decision to not display them.

The Targos library's approach to displaying items is unique among the libraries involved in the study and deserves to be mentioned. An unwritten policy that controls which items would be placed on display shelves has been implemented. Decisions are made by cataloguing staff as to whether an item contains content that may offend the public, which results in the item receiving a sticker stating why the content may cause offence. Library circulation staff are instructed not to put those items on the library's display shelves. This practice was implemented in response to the library's previous experience with sex manuals being kept behind the desk and not accessed. The librarian has stated that they wish to keep all material out on the shelves to promote access but they compromise as some people will be offended when seeing certain items on display.

**Sub question: Are staff provided with guidelines as to what may offend local library users?**

Specific written guidelines to help identify offensive material were not offered to any staff members of the libraries involved in this research project. All library collection development policy documents and one librarian interviewed stated that, as above, legal classifications set by the Office of Film and Literature Classification were used to

determine what type of material was not appropriate to be purchased. For example one librarian discussed using their collection development policy and “what the chief censor’s office says” to help guide them in the selection of items. It is difficult to offer specific guidelines for such a subjective subject, because each community has been described as diverse and containing many different standards. Therefore, if libraries were to implement a set of guidelines that sought to define offensive materials or subjects, library users who wished to access such material may find it more difficult to do so.

Informal discussions between staff members were cited as being one of the most common methods of determining whether or not an item may be problematic for the general public. For example, two librarians stated that they often discussed specific items either before purchasing them or after they arrived in the library. For example:

- “We have a really team based approach to decisions like that. If someone has got something that they are really struggling with - you know, a decision - they bring it out to the team and we discuss it in a team way.”
- “Because we are a quite small [library]...say the cataloguers might go ‘What do you reckon about this? Should we shove a warning about this or?’ ”

Informal discussions allow library staff to reinforce their own opinions about potentially problematic items by conferring with their colleagues. Because of the difficulties in assuming what will offend library users, it appears that a guideline about offensive material is not as effective as consulting a group of colleagues with specific knowledge of the local community.

Library items such as DVDs, CDs and video games are subject to classification ratings. DVDs and video games with offensive content that are labelled as R18 are held by libraries, and staff are made aware of the library's responsibility to uphold the law when lending such items. Three librarians discussed how their library has processes for lending restricted material; for example, library collection management systems prompted staff to ask for identification when restricted items were brought to the issues desk. An explanation of the library's obligations was discussed by one interviewee as being made known to patrons trying to borrow such items. "We will tell the persons under the age of 18, if they are trying to take something out that clearly should be restricted to over 18, 'that's not legally available'. But otherwise it's parental responsibility." The issue of parental responsibility was raised by a second librarian, and suggests that verbal warnings regarding the content of an item were offered to users. The librarian stated that staff "... caution parents that this is actually quite violent and you might not want to let your children watch it." This suggests that the staff in this particular library will offer warnings to users when restricted items are borrowed.

**Sub Question: What type of material has caused libraries to receive complaints in the past?**

To gather data for this sub question librarians were asked two questions. Firstly, interview question 6: "Are there any particular issues or subjects that are likely to offend your users?" and interview question 11: "Have there been times when the library has been taken by surprise by the subjects that have offended your users?" Librarians



responded by discussing issues or subjects that they believed would be difficult for a local community and, in their experience, what has caused problems in the past. Analysis of the responses to these questions has revealed that a number of subjects and issues are ‘likely’ to be offensive to library user. But again it is inappropriate to speculate as what may offend one person will not offend the next person. The following table shows the issues that were raised in response to interview question 6:

<b>LIBRARY</b>	<b>ISSUES THAT ARE LIKELY TO CAUSE OFFENCE IN THE COMMUNITY</b>
WOODSIDE	WITCHCRAFT, CHILDREN’S MATERIAL DEALING WITH DIVORCE & SAME SEX PARENTING.
TARGOS	GRAPHIC VIOLENCE, GRAPHIC SEX
WESTBROOK	SEXUAL CONTENT, GRAPHIC IMAGERY
AUSTIN	CHILDREN’S MATERIAL, SEXUAL & POLITICAL ISSUES, ABORTION.
CAMBRIA	WITHHOLDING INFORMATION FROM THE PUBLIC.

Children’s materials were raised by two librarians as a source of complaints from the public, for two reasons. Firstly, the diversity in children’s literature now represents families with solo, divorced and gay parents. For some people with strong family and religious values these items are offensive. Witchcraft is also a subject that some religious parents do not want their children to access. In regard to items dealing with same sex parenting and divorced families, the following comment was made:

“A lot of people find that quite offensive. And they don’t think that therefore children should read them. But I can’t see anything wrong. There are lots of children out in the community who do live like that, you know, who do have that set up in their family.”

Secondly, parents are very protective of their children in regard to any material dealing with sexual content. “So anything with sexual content for children obviously. But children, you could go on for hours and hours about that. Things that parent’s don’t want their children to see or have access to.” Children’s collections are one of the main areas of complaints because, even though the community may be open-minded, parents feel the need to question the library to ensure that certain items are suitable for their children to access.

The above table also displays two subjects that would be commonly associated with offensive material - sex and violence. These issues were raised by three librarians as being subjects that some adults found offensive when using the library.

- “I think graphic violence and graphic sex are probably the two that have always been hot topics when it comes to censorship or books - and movies are probably no different.”
- “The only ones that we’ve had individuals complain about in general have been to do with sexual content or graphic imagery...”

The Austin City librarians also experienced regular complaints when they allowed displays to be set up in the library on political issues and abortion. The main reason for

the complaints was that people who disagreed with these displays wished to have their voices heard.

The responses to interview question 6 suggest that determining subjects that are 'likely' to offend such diverse communities is a difficult task. But it is clear that children's literature and the traditionally offensive - sex and violence are subjects that librarians can expect to field complaints about. Also, the responses to interview question 6 show that there are subjects that are problematic to specific communities in the studied urban region. For example, as mentioned earlier, one library dealt with the occasional witchcraft complaints in a particular branch library, while displays on political and abortion caused complaints for one library - as mentioned above. Interestingly, withholding information was cited as a serious cause for complaint by the fifth librarian interviewed who stated "Issues or subjects likely to offend? Not really. It's more if we don't include something that would offend them. If we held back material." This library experienced complaints in relation to community petitions not being displayed in the library which caused an outcry from the public.

Interview question 11 was asked in order to determine whether libraries had preconceived notions of what offensive material was likely to be, and whether complaints about items caused a library to be surprised. As mentioned above in the literature review, studies into controversial art exhibitions found that some of the most offensive works were not what was expected. Similarly, three librarians discussed receiving complaints about items that were totally unexpected and surprising. Again children's material's where the subject of

such complaints. One was about the content of an item, a *My Little Pony* book, which contained a story about ‘shadows’ being stolen. Parents objected to their children reading about shadows, which they interpreted to be souls, being stolen. A second complaint was in regard to a children’s item about Palestinian terrorism. Strangely, the complaint was not about the contents of the item, but that one ethnicity was negatively portrayed. Other items that caused surprising complaints were: all pro George Bush material in one library; incorrect information in a legal textbook; and *Porno* written by Irvine Welsh.

Interestingly, two libraries received almost no complaints that the librarians could recall in their time working at those libraries. This led one librarian to comment “But as I say we’ve had very little complaint in this library of offensive material. So I suppose in a way that has surprised me a little that we have had so few complaints about content of material and so on.”

Analysis of the responses to interview questions 6 and 11 has revealed that certain subjects are likely to cause complaints in the libraries studied. But these complaints will be balanced by those that are very surprising, as discussed above. These trends are consistent with what has been stated throughout the course of the interviews - which is that one can not assume what will be offensive as within each community there are widely-ranging standards. Therefore librarians who receive regular complaints will continue to be surprised at the nature of the complaints they receive.

**Sub question: How do librarians deal with material that may cause controversy within the local community?**

Libraries involved in this study take different approaches to dealing with potentially-challenging items. Often before the item has reached the public it will have been discussed by a group of colleagues and moved from one part of the collection to the other. Libraries are also reactive to the public and will review or move an item as a result of comments made to staff.

The main theme present in the responses to interview question 9: ‘How do you deal with items that may offend people in your community?’ was that libraries would never deal with an item by removing it altogether.

- “I’m loath to remove things because that one person might find it offensive in a community of 100,000 people.”
- “Our overriding response is that we do not like to remove stuff from the collection, period.”

Surprisingly, of the five librarians interviewed, only two librarians stated that they received complaints on any regular basis which resulted in them having to make decisions about the items in question and then explain these decisions to the person complaining.

The Austin library recently developed a specific process for reviewing items as a result of a challenging complaint made to the library. This process allows patrons with concerns

about the contents or classification of an item to seek a review of that item. The library has developed three documents. The first is a form given to the patron to be filled out detailing the nature of his/her issue with the item and the action he/she thinks should be taken. This allows the review team that is assembled to review the item to understand why the patron has an issue with the item. The second document is a fifteen-step guide to the process involved in reviewing the item, from when the library receives the review request to referring the patron to the council's issues resolution office. Finally a set of questions has been developed for the team to use to review the item. When the review is completed the outcome is made known to the library manager for final approval. This library is well equipped to deal with complaints and has developed this process because it regularly receives queries about materials.

A similar review process was mentioned by two other librarians, but it was a more informal process and took place only when the need arose.

- “The collection manager gets the book and has a look at it and then there is a bit of discussion about what the person has said...”
- “What we will do is look at the item and just see if it was unduly offensive.”

While the other three libraries did not field as many complaints, they still evaluated items that they thought were not appropriate for certain collections and made decisions about what to do with them. Moving an item to another collection was mentioned as a way to deal with an item as a result of query from the public, or when the item arrives in the library. This allows the item to remain accessible even by the users of the collection the item was in originally. Most cases of moving an item to another collection refer to

children's or young adult's material. Graphic novels were also mentioned as being items most commonly moved:

- “We’ve done it a few times but not often and that’s generally before it gets to the public space. That will generally be when the children’s buyer, for example, has bought something from overseas and when they receive it physically they can tell its not going to fit their...they don’t think it fits their collection [and] they will offer it to whoever else’s collection it is. Like with some of the graphic novels. They will come and say, ‘ok, this is probably a little bit twitchy for young adults, so let’s put it in the adult fiction collection.’ Which the young adults can get to anyway, but at least we have made our effort.”
- “We do have some children’s graphic novels - the Japanese manga ones - and we found that when a mother said that she had been reading it and she had a look and thought there is bit to much in here for her son, then we moved them up to the next level, and they will always go into the teenage section of the library.”

As mentioned above, one library had an unwritten policy of labelling and not displaying certain items - which effectively dealt with possibly-offensive materials before they reached the public.

All libraries had a slightly different approach to dealing with certain problematic items in order to suit their needs and communities. A formal process was developed in one library, while others dealt with each case when it arose because of the infrequent nature of each complaint. While the methods of dealing with items used by the libraries were different,

all librarians stated that providing as much material to the public as possible was their goal.



## Conclusion

This conclusion is divided into four parts. Firstly there are three sections that focus on the three objectives of the study. These sections discuss the objectives and whether the study was able to find evidence that supports them. When appropriate other researchers mentioned in the literature review have been cited to reinforce the conclusions that have been made in these sections. Conclusions made in this section may or may not support the objectives of the study depending on what had been found after the data analysis. Finally, a section discussing serendipitous findings and further research topics has been offered.

### **Objective 1: To discover how New Zealand public librarians define the standards of their local community**

One could reasonably suggest that community standards are recognised; there are certain subjects, materials and images that would not be purchased by a library because they are considered to be offensive and not appropriate for a public library. But the reality is that it is not possible to determine what will offend people living in our multi-cultural communities. Librarians react to the public and their queries about why material is in the library, and occasionally review material to ensure that they have made the right decisions.

Libraries often judge material as to whether it meets a minimum level of literary or artistic merit, and therefore deserves a place in the collection to provide information on

one side of an argument. The librarians in this study actively sought out material that provided an opposing viewpoint: "We as selectors have to be impartial. We try to present more than one view on an issue. So if we have books, magazines, DVDs, CDs, whatever or material promoting one point of view on the topic, we actively try and find items that give the other point of view against the topic." Byrne (2004) and Hannabuss & Allard (2001), mentioned in the literature review, have argued that a library should avoid purchasing to the taste of the majority. The libraries involved in this study have attempted to follow this principle by purchasing some material that is not borrowed often but is important to be in the collection. For example, items about gay parenting and children's books depicting gay and solo parents can now be found in libraries even though they may not be borrowed frequently.

As the literature review and analysis suggest, determining what the standards of a local community might be is very difficult. Linz et al (1991) reached a similar conclusion regarding the Miller Test - an obscenity test used in the United States of America. Public librarians in New Zealand have sought to avoid getting involved with issues which involve community standards. One librarian stated that the Westbrook library was very hesitant to get involved with any issues regarding standards, and stated that: "Community standards is an evil thing to deal with, and it's one we try to avoid - to be honest."

Such a comment suggests that librarians do not consider determining the standards of the local community to be part of the role of libraries. Libraries seek to provide information

and resources that will be in demand, beneficial to the community and that cover all viewpoints on any given issue. An objective of this study was to discover how New Zealand public librarians determine the standards of their local communities. Analysis of the data gathered has revealed that public librarians recognise that the standards held in their communities are as varied as the demographics of their communities and that to attempt to label a community with a 'one size fits all' statement would not be appropriate.

The difficulties in defining community standards have been discussed throughout the analysis of this research project. One could conclude that a definition of community standards (with regard to library collections) is as follows: community standards are as broad or as narrow as the range of opinions of people living in each community.

As suggested by the literature regarding controversial artworks in museums (Halle, Tiso & Yi, 2001), studies have found that artworks that have been identified as potentially offensive prove to be so. But often totally unexpected works can be the most upsetting to viewers. Similarly librarians discussed items that they deemed to be completely harmless and inoffensive, but complaints were made about those items and librarians had to deal with these complaints in a professional manner. This reinforces the findings that community standards are not encompassed by a simple definition.

**Objective 2: To determine whether library staff members are provided with guidelines as to what material might offend users of the library and how such items are to be handled by staff**

Libraries involved in this study did not provide staff with guidelines or recommendations about what material might cause complaints, apart from what is written in law and judged to be objectionable by the Office of Film and Literature Classification. Of the librarians interviewed, only two discussed occasions where a member of the public had decided to take an item to the Office of Film and Literature Classification for classification. One library was forced to comply with the outcome of the Office's review - which resulted in the item, *Topping from Below*, being labelled as obscene and removed from the library. Classification labels legally required to be displayed on restricted material act as markers for material which must be loaned only to library users who are the correct age. Such items occasionally prompted staff to comment on the challenging and potentially offensive content of an item.

Library staff members, particularly cataloguers and selectors, hold discussions regarding items that were being considered for purchase or had just arrived in the library. Such discussions were aimed at reaching a decision about whether purchasing an item would be a legitimate use of rate-payer's money if it would result in complaints. Discussions or meetings were used to make a judgement on an item that proved difficult for one staff member to handle. Often with particularly challenging material a group decision about an item is more appropriate, as it allows the collective experience of the staff involved to

make a professional judgement. Such a decision will be more respected if the item is challenged, then a decision made by one staff member alone.

Libraries involved in this study have different approaches to handling items that have been the subject of complaints or are likely to attract complaints. Curry (2001) investigated relocating items to other parts of the library in response to complaints, and found that such practice was common. Similar trends have been found in the libraries involved in this study. Some libraries have identified topics where material will be in danger of theft or vandalism. Therefore it is important to distinguish between those items that will be vandalised or stolen because of content and those items the content of which will offend. Interestingly two librarians, from Cambria and Westbrook, stated that they could not recall any complaints about items and therefore handling problematic items in those libraries is not likely to be a factor. The three other libraries that do receive feedback about the content of items have different approaches to handling these items. These approaches (such as a review process, warning stickers, display guidelines, etc.) have been developed in response to the libraries' previous experiences in dealing with complaints and keeping items on open and restricted shelves.

Literature regarding certain issues, such as the conflict between Israel and Palestine discussed by Reece (2005), has found that even well-researched, factually-correct and carefully-presented information on this topic will cause controversy and complaints. Reece discussed a library exhibit at American University which resulted in many negative complaints because the exhibit only portrayed one side of the issue. A similar

reaction was experienced by the Austin City libraries when they purchased a series of items, one of which discussed Palestinian terrorism. The libraries also experienced similar reactions to displays on abortion and the Palestine-Israel conflict. Although libraries do not provide guidelines as to what will offend the public, awareness of these highly divisive issues is crucial. Schrader (1992) researched pressures on public libraries and found that pressures from the groups in the community are likely to be in relation to religious and political issues. Similarities exist between Schrader's findings and the pressures that were exerted on libraries in the study region.

**Objective 3: To explore how the community standards that are applied within public libraries are influenced by local demographics**

The objective stated above assumes that librarians do in fact apply some community standards to their operations. This is not the case. As discussed above, the librarians involved in this study were not able to define the standards of their communities. Demographics were discussed by librarians in this study, but their influence on community standards was inconclusive. No librarian specifically stated that demographics had an influence on community standards. Demographics should not be considered as a tool that can be used to understand community standards because, even within a narrow demographic, various different personal standards are present.

Demographics have been touched upon by other researchers, such as Scott (1991) who researched community standards in a number of states in the USA found that demographics could not be used to indicate what the standards of the community might be. Scott concluded that personal views were a better indicator of standards than demographics. Interestingly Linz et al. (1991) conducted a study into the same community as Scott (1991) and found that rather than being conservative, as was previously thought, individual standards were in fact more liberal than expected.

Like Scott, three librarians involved in this study commented that they did not think it was possible to use demographics to define the standards of their communities. Two librarians from Woodside and Targos (quoted on page 39), felt that there may be some

possible influence on community standards from demographics. The reason for this was that there were suburbs with distinctly different demographic profiles in their communities that had completely different expectations of the local library. These different expectations were regarding the quality of materials and services offered by the branch libraries in these suburbs. Such differences between suburbs illustrate the difficulties in defining the standards of a whole community. The librarian's comments also suggest that demand may be driving a library to provide certain materials (such as Christian fiction) rather than the standards that can be interpreted from demographics.

Demographic information is used by libraries is used to help improve the services and collections of the library. For example if the census or another set of demographic information suggests a large percentage of people in a particular suburb are elderly then the library will be able to ensure that the needs of these residents are being meet.

Demographic information can also allow libraries to stay up to date with changes in their communities. To use demographics to help to define the standards of a community or even a suburb would be inappropriate and inaccurate.



## **Serendipitous findings and further research**

As a result of conducting this study, a number of unexpected findings and areas for further research were revealed. These findings are not linked directly to community standards, but were raised during the responses to a number of interview questions.

Firstly, challenging the way a community perceives and thinks about certain issues through the provision of library material was discussed by two librarians in response to probe questions after the interview had ended. Their comments revealed that some librarians have opposing viewpoints on this point. For example, one librarian used a book display based on the American Library Association's list of banned and challenged books as a teaching tool. The librarian "talked to a class of, I think they were year 7 and 8s, about the books that were there and asked them why they were banned and why they think the people will challenge them. And they did. They found that really interesting and it was great conversation from them as well their ideas." The following passage illustrates how another librarian did not feel comfortable using the library to challenge the way people think:

"MS: Are there ever times when you think you'd like to challenge the way people think on certain issues?"

Librarian: I don't think that, no. No. And I say that again because I don't think that is our legitimate role to necessarily challenge people and what they think. I think our role is to

provide knowledge for them and information for them on as wide a range as possible. But I don't think we should be running that sort of a social experiment.

MS: No.

Librarian: One of our roles is to, as a library, to try and improve the lifestyles and abilities of our community. And that's in supplying a resource not necessarily trying to change how they think. I would be very, very nervous about that, extremely nervous about that."

The issue of whether libraries should be used to provide challenging and thought-provoking discussion among the public is contentious and deserving of further investigation.

A number of areas for further research would explain the issues surrounding community standards and could investigate community standards in other settings in New Zealand.

- This research focused on a diverse urban region of New Zealand. Applying a similar study to a number of libraries in rural areas would allow a comparison between the two to be made. Rural communities are often described as being more conservative.
- An historical study of community standards or the public's reactions to offensive material could investigate whether standards were different in the past by involving retired or elderly public librarians.
- An investigation into the reasons for the lack of complaints in some of the libraries involved in this study suggests that the communities were more open-minded or that the libraries did not contain offensive material. This is despite

the fact that all librarians described their communities as diverse and that they provided information covering all viewpoints.

- One library was well-prepared to deal with a serious complaint through its materials review process. But how well prepared are other libraries? Such a study could involve the public libraries of New Zealand's larger cities.

Serebnick (1979) offered a set of variables (cited on p.10-11) that can be used to determine what influences selection and censorship in libraries. Applying such variables is not easy as communities are diverse and ever-changing and library users come from many different backgrounds. Investigating community standards asked public librarians, involved in the research, to think about how well they know their own communities.

Librarians reading this study maybe intrigued by certain findings, such as the Austin City library's materials review process and the way books are displayed in the Targos library, and reflect on their own practices. The study of community standards is not a futile activity even though community standards maybe an 'evil thing'.

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## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

### Community standards in New Zealand public libraries: An exploratory study

#### Interview Schedule:

1. How would you describe your local community?
2. How would you define the standards of your local community?
3. Do the demographics of your community influence community standards? And if so how?
4. Have you taken any measures to better understand your community and their standards?
5. Are there any groups that seek to pressure you into removing or purchasing material?
6. Are there any particular issues or subjects that are likely to offend your users?
7. Have community standards been incorporated into library policies? And if so in what way?
8. What guidelines are your staff members offered regarding what will offend library users?
9. How do you deal with items that may offend people in your community?
10. Do you have any policies that control how these items are displayed? Are they allowed to go out on the shelves or restricted in some way?
11. And have there been times when the library has been taken by surprise by the subjects that have offended your users?

## Appendix 2: Consent Form

### Consent to participate in research

#### Community standards in New Zealand public libraries: An exploratory study.

I, the undersigned, hereby give consent for the information I have provided by interview towards *Community standards in New Zealand public libraries: An exploratory study* to be used for a research report in partial fulfilment towards a Master of Library and Information Studies degree, and also in any subsequent journal articles or conference presentations. The recorded interview will be electronically wiped within one year after the completion of the project.

I agree that (please tick all that apply):

- I have been given and understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have given from this project before data analysis has commenced (scheduled for 15 April 2007) without having to give reasons or without any penalty
- Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and the research supervisor.
- The published results will not identify me or my institution in any way.
- The proposed interview will be recorded using a digital recorder and a transcript of this interview will be sent to me for verification.

Signed:

Date:

Name of participant:  
(Please print clearly)



## Appendix 3: Information Sheet

Community standards in New Zealand public libraries: An exploratory study

### Information Sheet

Librarian in Charge  
Any Library  
Any Town

Dear Sir/Madam

I am a student at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) studying towards a Master of Library and Information Studies. As part of this degree I am undertaking a research project investigating issues related to the application of community standards to the collections of New Zealand public libraries. This research project has been approved by the School of Information Management's Human Ethics Committee.

Community standards are important because of their potential influence on the materials made available to the public through their local library. I am inviting you to participate in this research because of your role in developing the collections of your library. I wish to conduct and record an interview with you which will last no longer than one hour, and which will be aimed at gathering information to achieve the following objectives:

- To discover how New Zealand public librarians define the standards of their local community.
- To determine whether library staff members are provided with guidelines as to what material might offend users of the library and how such items are to be handled by staff.
- To explore how the community standards that are applied within public libraries are influenced by local demographics.

Should you feel the need to withdraw from this research, you will be able to do so at any time up to the commencement of data analysis, which is scheduled to begin on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2007. To ensure accuracy in my data collection, a copy of your interview transcript will be made available to you for verification. To ensure confidentiality, all opinions and data will be reported in aggregated form in such a way that individual persons or organisations are not identifiable. All interview transcripts and other information will be kept in a locked cabinet and will only be accessible to me and my supervisor and destroyed within one year after the completion of the project.

The research report from this project will be submitted to the School of Information Management for marking and then deposited in the university library for future use by researchers. The results of the research may also be submitted to scholarly journals for publishing or for presentation at a conference. A summary of the key findings will be sent to you upon completion of the project, which should occur on or around the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2007.

If you have any further questions regarding this research project please do not hesitate to contact me at [sullivmax@student.vuw.ac.nz](mailto:sullivmax@student.vuw.ac.nz) or 021 0612030 or my supervisor Dr Dan Dorner, at the School of Information Management on [dan.dorner@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:dan.dorner@vuw.ac.nz) or +64 4 463-5781.

Regards

Max Sullivan

Word Count: 15,819