



Intellectual Freedom Committee

Oregon Library Association

Soft or Silent Censorship

Tuesday Topics: July 2026

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC.

Overview

Libraries are strongly committed to intellectual freedom and resisting overt censorship. However, more subtle forms of restriction—often called *soft* or *silent censorship*—can be just as impactful. These practices may not involve formal challenges or removals, but they can still limit access, reduce discoverability, or discourage use of materials.

Soft censorship can occur both intentionally and unintentionally, shaped by staff decisions, institutional culture, community pressures, or attempts to avoid controversy. Recognizing these practices is an important step toward ensuring equitable access to information.

What Is Soft or Silent Censorship?

Soft or silent censorship refers to actions or decisions that limit access to materials without formally banning or removing them. These can include:

- Restricting access through placement, policies, or procedures
- Influencing discoverability through cataloging or shelving choices
- Avoiding acquisition of materials due to anticipated complaints
- Applying policies unevenly or subjectively

Unlike overt censorship, these practices are often less visible, making them harder to identify and address.

Common Categories

Hiding or De-emphasizing Materials

- Placing controversial or sensitive items in less visible areas

- Shelving materials in ways that reduce browsing access
- Failing to include materials in displays, booklists, or reader's advisory

Restricted Access Through Physical Control

- Keeping materials behind service desks
- Requiring staff mediation to access certain titles
- Hiding materials
- Applying special handling rules not used for similar items

Avoidance in Collection Development

- Choosing not to purchase materials that otherwise meet collection development criteria
- Avoiding topics, authors, or viewpoints due to anticipated complaints
- Making collection decisions through a personal or subjective lens
- Weeding materials due to viewpoint or subjective criteria

Overly Restrictive or Subjective Policies

- Using vague language in collection development policies that allows bias
- Applying policies inconsistently based on content or viewpoint
- Setting unnecessarily high thresholds for inclusion in controversial subject areas

Why It Matters

Soft censorship can have significant consequences. It limits equitable access by allowing materials to exist within a collection while remaining effectively inaccessible in practice. Soft censorship reduces representation, as marginalized perspectives are more likely to be excluded or minimized. It is a disservice to patrons that they are receiving a filtered or incomplete view of available information. Ultimately, these practices conflict with professional library ethics, which emphasize equitable access, diversity, and the free exchange of ideas. Even well-intentioned decisions—such as avoiding conflict—can unintentionally restrict intellectual freedom.

Real-World Examples

In preparation for this piece, real-world examples were gathered from members of the Intellectual Freedom Committee. These are all examples members have either experienced themselves or have observed in their professional spheres. All examples have been anonymized to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

Example 1: Restricting Access by Format

During the pandemic, when students could no longer browse the library in person, alternative systems were developed to maintain access to reading materials. One approach involved library staff visiting classrooms to help students place individualized requests, then checking out and delivering those materials directly to their desks the following week. In one classroom, an educator expressed strong objections to students selecting graphic novels, stating they were not “real reading,” and sought to limit access to that format.

Despite clear explanations that restricting student choice was inconsistent with the role of the library, the educator persisted in efforts to control access—first by requesting that such materials not be requested, then by asking that they not be checked out. When those requests could not be accommodated, the restrictions continued in practice: graphic novels were removed from students or collected from desks and quietly returned with other materials. This experience highlighted the extent to which individual beliefs about reading can translate into ongoing, active efforts to limit access.

Example 2: Failing to Include Materials on Displays

Several years ago, I began working in a school library where a display of Oregon Battle of the Books (OBOB) titles had been set up by my predecessor before their departure the previous June. The display was the first thing visible upon entering the library and included 15 of the selected titles arranged around a noticeable empty space in the center. That gap marked the absence of *George* (now *Melissa*), a required OBOB title, making its omission both visually obvious and educationally significant within an otherwise complete presentation.

I made it a priority to order and shelve the missing book immediately, ensuring that students had access to the full set of required reading materials.

Example 3: Restricting Physical Access

In a library I worked at, I encountered a pattern of informal censorship in how certain materials were handled. Books with supernatural themes—such as those similar to the *Goosebumps* series—were routinely removed from circulation and marked as belonging to a “Library Hospital,” despite being in good condition.

When reviewing the collection, I discovered boxes of these books stored away in cupboards and back rooms, not due to damage or wear, but because they had been deemed objectionable.

Example 4: Hiding Books

In the course of updating service desk furniture, I discovered a commonly challenged book hidden in the back drawer of a desk. Its placement strongly suggested it had been intentionally removed from circulation and concealed to prevent patrons from accessing it.

This incident reflects another form of informal censorship, where materials are not officially removed but are effectively made unavailable.

Additional Brief Examples

- Limiting religious representation by providing access to the Bible while excluding other religious texts
- Removing posters on diversity and refusing requests to create cultural celebration displays
- Refusing to order or catalog diverse books, and when required, classifying new books incorrectly so they are difficult to find in the catalog

- Pulling mention of planned LGBTQ programming from a weekly report to the City Council, fearing controversy
- Refusing programs or displays under the umbrella of “avoiding endorsements” or “taking a side”
- Cataloging or shelving books at higher grade levels than intended, making them less accessible to younger readers
- Administrators or staff informally removing materials from circulation, such as “checking out” a book indefinitely and keeping it in an office
- Avoiding displays (e.g., Banned Books Week or Pride Month) due to concern about attention or controversy

Strategies for Addressing Soft Censorship

- Review policies regularly to ensure clarity, neutrality, and consistency. Sample policies can be found on the IFC toolkit [here](#).
- Document selection decisions to reinforce alignment with established criteria. [Baker County Library District offers a Materials Selection Compliance Rubric](#).
- Promote transparency in cataloging, access, and display practices. The IFC has offered a variety of [Tuesday Topics](#) on these topics for review.
- Encourage staff awareness of implicit and explicit bias. For additional training support for staff, please see the IFC toolkit section, [Prepare for a Challenge](#). The Oregon Department of Education also offers a resource, [Addressing Challenged Materials in K-12 Education](#).
- Advise staff on how to respond to community pressure. ALA offers a variety of resources on how to fight censorship, available [here](#), including [how to respond to challenges](#).
- Create accountability structures (e.g., peer review, selection committees).
- Address the topic during new staff orientation and during staff development.
- Call out soft censorship when it is identified, and explain why it is unacceptable.
- Actively support diverse perspectives to counterbalance unintentional exclusion. For more information on the importance of diverse and inclusive collections, please review [here](#).

Closing Thoughts

Soft censorship can be difficult to detect because it often operates quietly and without formal acknowledgment. By examining biases and everyday practices—selection decisions, access controls, and policy language—libraries can better align their work with the core values of intellectual freedom, access, and equity.

Do you have examples you’d like to share? Send them to ifc.members@olaweb.org.