Censorship versus Selection

Every collection development librarian will, at some point, choose not to include certain materials in their libraries’ collections. It is a universal truth that no library can purchase and store every title in perpetuity. The collection development librarian must choose what titles to purchase for the collection, and at the same time which titles to exclude from the collection. Some may view this selection and exclusion of materials as an act of censorship by the librarian. At first, it may seem that the concepts of censorship and selection are intrinsically linked. Both censorship and selection lead to certain materials being excluded from a library’s collection. To get to the difference between censorship and selection, one must take a look at the reasons behind why a collection development librarian chooses to exclude a certain title from the library’s collection.

In his article “Not Censorship but Selection,” Lester Asheim touches on many of the key differences between censorship and selection. Although the article was written nearly 60 years ago, many of the points Asheim makes regarding censorship and selection in libraries still hold true today. Asheim notes that the financial limitations of library budgets and the shelf space limitations of the libraries themselves invariably lead to some titles being rejected by the collection development librarian. As he puts it, “complete representation of every title ever published is an idle dream.” (1953). Realistically, no single library, let alone most public libraries, has the budget or space to acquire every title that their patrons may possibly request. Collection development librarians need to stay within the budget and space allotted to the collection. Some titles
will be selected, some will not. It is not censorship to decline to purchase a title because the library funds do not allow for it.

Asheim also looks at the difference between censorship and selection by examining the different goals a censor has as opposed to the goals of someone who is only concerned with selection. Essentially, the difference between someone who is selecting materials and one who is censoring materials is that the act of selection is not about limiting the kind of information that is available to the library patron. A censor, however, is actively trying to control the information that is available. “The aim of the selector is to promote reading, not to inhibit it; to multiply the points of view which will find expression, not limit them; to be a channel for communication, not a bar against it. (Asheim, 1953)” A librarian who chooses not to purchase or make otherwise available a title because he or she does not want the information to be available in his or her library, or removes a title based on a complaint from the community, is performing an act of censorship. The censor is one who is striving to limit the information that can be obtained by the users of the library.

Unfortunately, the line between that which is censorship and that which is selection is not always immediately clear. One issue that collection management librarians have to deal with is the tendency towards self-censorship. Self-censorship is the removal of or limiting access to a material based on “a librarian’s fear that something might happen (Hill, 2010).” Most libraries have some sort of challenge policy that details steps that should be taken if a patron has a problem with certain materials in the collection. Self-censorship, however, is the act of the librarian taking action against a material before a challenge can be made. Self-censorship is often discussed in the
context of school libraries, but the principle could also be observed in public libraries as well. If a librarian chooses to restrict access to a title in order to preempt complaints from parents or other community members, this is an act of self-censorship. Self-censorship is often based on the fear that the ideas or subject matter contained in a book will be found objectionable or offensive by members of the community. A survey conducted by School Library Journal in 2009 found that 70% of the school librarians interviewed would refrain from purchasing a certain book based on the potential reaction from parents (Hill, 2010). This survey demonstrates that self-censorship is far more common than might be initially assumed. It may be possible that in many cases librarians are blurring the line between self-censorship and selection.

One topic that is frequently debated in the librarianship community is that of Internet filters on library computers. Is imposing limits on the information that can be accessed by the public on library computers a form of censorship? Lester Asheim would probably argue that, yes, this is a form of censorship. When a library chooses to install filtering software on their computers, they are essentially refusing to allow their patrons to access certain kinds of information. The librarians (or perhaps the library board) has taken it upon themselves to determine which kinds of information are worthy of access and which are not. Now, this argument mainly applies to public libraries, rather than school libraries. In schools, where the main users of the library are minors, the librarians have to apply a different set of standards than the librarians at a public library would. There are legal reasons to block certain web pages from computers that are frequently used by children. Because the school librarian is acting in loco parentis, it may be deemed appropriate to apply filters to school library computers.
While it may seem that the difference between censorship and selection is nebulous, there are some ways in which librarians can attempt to ensure that they are not unintentionally censoring their collections. One way to help the librarian avoid censorship is to have a well-defined collection development policy in place for the library. If the library has a good collection development policy with clear goals outlined it will be easier for the librarian to select materials that fit the library’s mission without falling into censorship. Even with a good collection development policy in place, it is probably impossible to build a collection that is perfectly agreeable for all patrons. In fact, if the collection is sufficiently well-rounded, the librarian may find that it is more likely that a patron may find some objectionable material in the collection. It is inevitable that eventually there will be a challenge to a book or other material in the library’s collection. When this happens, it is extremely important for the library to have a clear policy and procedure in place to handle material challenges. Institutions like the National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom can be helpful resources for librarians who are looking for information about book challenges (Hill, 2010).

There is a fine line between censorship and selection when it comes to library materials. The difference between the two becomes even less clear when the librarian is selecting materials for children. However, as long as librarians develop solid collection development policies, follow the guidelines set forth by the American Library Association, and trust their judgment, librarians should be confident that they are selecting materials, not censoring.
References

http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/basics/notcensorship.cfm