Responding Intelligently When Would-be Censors Charge: “That Book Can Make Them . . . !”

DAVID L. MARTINSON

Abstract: School administrators and teachers need to recognize that most persons—including would-be censors of school-related media communications—simply do not understand the complexities germane to measuring the impact of the mass media and the specific messages transmitted to broader audiences via a variety of media channels. In particular, what most laypersons fear are the perceived negative short-term effects while they ignore the critically important question of long-term influence. The author argues that administrators and teachers have a responsibility to better inform themselves vis-à-vis media influence so that they are able to effectively respond to concerns of potential censors of school related materials. They need, in point of fact, to become educators in the broadest meaning of that word.

Keywords: censorship, media education, media effects, school communications

For more than thirty-five years I worked as a journalism professor, teaching courses focusing, among other things, on questions of media law and mass communication theory. One of the issues that arose over those years emanated from a student expressing a concern that a particular media presentation had the potential to dramatically impact the behavior of those individuals exposed to it. “A law should be passed,” a student would argue, “prohibiting publication of [the reader can fill in the blank here] because of the negative consequences that might result.”

If college students express such anxieties, it should not be surprising that a sizable number of individuals and ideological groups from various sides of the political spectrum frequently raise concerns about the availability of particular materials at the precollegiate level. The American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom notes that some of the more common reasons for challenging materials focus on concerns relating to sexual content, offensive language, violence, homosexuality, racism, and sex education (Pember and Calvert 2005, 100–1).

Thousands of words have been written—again from nearly every conceivable corner of the ideological spectrum—vis-a-vis the political/philosophical/sociological aspects of this subject. Furthermore, it needs to be readily acknowledged that many of those who are most active and vociferous in their desire to “protect” young people from particular “dangerous” materials are not interested in engaging in a genuine exchange of views and information.

This article discusses how persons concerned with protecting the integrity of the academic decision-making process at the precollegiate level can respond in a more effective and sophisticated manner from a communication theory perspective when confronted by those who may be genuinely concerned that bad things will result if students are exposed to media-related matter that they perceive as dangerous. By focusing on the issue from a communication theory perspective, I avoid taking sides or aligning with any particular ideological group wishing to advance its own agenda. In short, this article provides information from a communication theory perspective that might be useful in answering calls for school censorship in both a logical and prudent manner.

No “Magic Bullet”

Media theorists insist that all concerned—including would-be censors—understand that media messages do not ordinarily function as magic bullets. Credible social science research has demonstrated conclusively that
particular media presentations normally have a rather limited impact (Martinson 2004, 156).

This is not in accordance, of course, with the views of the general population. The general public appears rather steadfast in its belief that the media do, in fact, function as a magic bullet or hypodermic needle. Baran (2001) points out that under such an assumption “the media are . . . [viewed] as corrupting influences . . . and that ‘average’ people are . . . [perceived as] defenseless against . . . [this] influence” (318). He notes that the very names given the theory support such a perspective—the designation magic bullet or hypodermic needle theory provides “symbolism . . . [that] is apparent—media are a dangerous drug or killing force that directly and immediately penetrate a person’s system” (318).

It is interesting to note, in this regard, that an incident that many laypersons continue to cite as supportive of a magic bullet theory—the panic resulting from Orson Welles’s radio broadcast of H. G. Wells’s War of the Worlds on Halloween eve 1938—actually stands as something of a point in time when social science researchers began to reject the magic bullet theory (Martinson 2004, 156). Researchers pointed out that if the magic bullet theory were true, “something resembling universal hysteria should have occurred. After all, creatures from outer space that apparently had the capacity to destroy civilization were invading the earth” (156). Everyone, however, did not panic. In particular, “researchers concluded that ‘critical ability’ was the most significant variable related to . . . [how people responded] to the broadcast” (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 459).

In fact, a paradigm shift took place in which many researchers began to argue that media “effects were quite limited in scope—affecting only a few people or influencing rather trivial thoughts or actions” (Baran and Davis 2003, 128). These limited effects supporters asserted that “media influence was typically less important than that of factors such as social status or education. Those media effects that were found seemed to be isolated and . . . sometimes contradictory” (Baran and Davis, 131). In short, a student who opens Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issue is not automatically going to lose his or her moral perspective.

Some—especially media apologists and media management—are enamored with this limited effects perspective because it tends to absolve the media of any responsibility for those messages communicated to the public. (Management, not surprisingly, is not so quick to cite the limited effects perspective when talking to potential advertisers. Certainly, one could question the wisdom of spending vast amounts of money on media advertising if that advertising was ineffective.)

Educators and other concerned persons who wish to respond intelligently to would-be censors need to be able discuss this issue of media impact with at least some degree of sophistication. They must recognize—and be able to communicate to others—that the media have both a weak and potentially powerful impact (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 459). In particular, one must differentiate between the impact of immediate and singular media messages and the potential "long-term influence on beliefs, attitudes, and behavior that can change shared cultural norms and social institutions” (DeFleur and Dennis, 459).

A point of fact, would-be censors often spend too much time worrying about the proverbial trees while ignoring the forest. In particular, they need to understand that a single media message, as noted, is not going to ordinarily have a dramatic impact. If a television commentator tells the audience to jump on his or her command, few in the audience are going to jump. This is not, unfortunately, as silly as it may sound. When I was in high school, some were arguing that Robin Hood should not be available in the school library because the book taught Communism. (He robbed from the rich to give to the poor.) Does anyone seriously believe that a student who, by chance, read about Robin and his merry men would really become a prime recruiting target for those wishing to overthrow the government?

Contemporary communication theorists contend, as previously suggested, that the major impact of the mass media must be judged in a long-term context. Those concerned about protecting the right of access to a variety of sometimes controversial material at the precollegiate level need to understand—and acknowledge—that parents and other concerned persons have a right and even obligation to be anxious—even though those “worries” are often misdirected. When speaking about the impact of television, for example, highly respected philosopher Sissela Bok (1998) notes that “there is . . . widespread agreement that television habits can be harmful” (53). But, she quickly adds, “it is not easy to sort out how different causal factors interact” (53).

Bok compares examining media effects to efforts to link cigarette smoking with lung cancer. Others do the same. DeFleur and Dennis (1998), for example, cite the U.S. Surgeon General’s contention “that there is no longer any question that a relationship exists between exposure to violent television programs and increased tendencies toward aggressive behavior among individuals viewing such content” (454). Like Bok, they allow “as is the case in the association between smoking and cancer, one cannot predict on an individual basis . . . whether violent programs will cause a particular person to become more aggressive” (454–55). Nevertheless, the U.S. Surgeon General says that “the totality of evidence . . . [exists] for inferring that viewing violent programs raises rates of
aggression among children who are heavy viewers” (DeFleur and Dennis, 455).

The metaphorical logic is clear. A student of firm religious conviction is not going to lose his or her faith simply because he or she is exposed to Playboy. Similarly, a student who smokes a single cigarette is not going to become addicted to nicotine. Furthermore, one cannot predict with certainty how a student who reads Playboy excessively is going to be impacted when that individual reaches maturity—just as it is not possible to predict with certainty that an individual who smokes three packs of cigarettes each day is going to get lung cancer. But would anyone seriously contend that the publication of magazines such as Playboy has not had a significant impact on American culture and mores?

In short, communication researchers would suggest that someone needs to educate would-be school censors to worry less about the individual messages to which students might be exposed and become more concerned with the broader cultural and sociological long-term context in which the media interact with a variety of other potentially significant variables. Communication scholars Folkerts and Lacy (2001) articulate this point well when they suggest that “on the whole, research indicates that media do not have powerful or weak effects; they have contingent effects” (465). That is, as previously suggested, “media content’s impact is dependent on many factors. Some involve the content; some reflect the situation surrounding media use; and some involve the background of the media consumer” (Folkerts and Lacy, 465).

**Getting Down to Specifics**

Despite what has been discussed already, a frustrated would-be censor might confront a teacher or school administrator with a particular horror story about a particular instance when a media message appeared to have resulted in antisocial behavior by a particular person or persons. A rather lengthy list of examples would not be difficult to compile.

Folkerts and Lacy (2001), for example, cite the case of a “movie titled The Program about high school football . . . (in which) one scene showed an initiation ritual in which the players lay down on the center strip of a road while cars whizzed past” (464). Almost predictably, “some teenagers who saw the film imitated the scene and at least one death was reported” (Folkerts and Lacy, 464–65).

In another well-known case, an NBC movie titled Born Innocent contained a scene in which four girls attack a girl in the shower in a state-run home using a “plumber’s helper.” The girl attacked “is shown naked from the waist up, struggling as the older . . . [girls] force her legs apart” (Zelezny 2001, 84). A lawsuit was later brought against NBC on behalf of “a 9-year old girl who, four days after the broadcast, was attacked and artificially raped with a bottle by adolescents at a beach” (Zelezny, 84). Prior to the attack, “the assailants had viewed and discussed the scene in Born Innocent” (Zelezny, 84).

In another case, a lawsuit was brought “by the parents of students who were killed when teenager Michael Carneal went on a shooting rampage in the lobby of Heath High School in Paducah, Ky.” (Pember and Calvert 2005, 57). It is noteworthy that “the plaintiffs argued, among other things, that Carneal had watched the film . . . [The Basketball Diaries] which depicts a student daydreaming about killing a teacher and several classmates” (Pember and Calvert, 57–58).

Even the legendary—and squeaky clean—Walt Disney company has not completely avoided controversies of this sort. An episode of the Mickey Mouse Club had a feature “all about the magic you can create with sound effects” (Zelezny 2001, 87). In one segment viewers were shown that one could “produce the sound of a wheel coming off a car by putting a BB pellet inside a round balloon, filling the balloon with air, and then rotating the BB inside” (Zelezny, 87). A lawsuit developed when “an 11-year old boy tried to repeat what he had seen on TV, using a piece of lead twice the size of a BB” (Zelezny, 87). Tragically, the balloon that the youngster was using burst and shot “the lead into the boy’s eye . . . partially blinding him” (87).

Those concerned about protecting intellectual freedom in the school and student access to a variety of materials will find it helpful to look at how the courts have generally responded to such cases. Courts frequently apply a test drawn from a 1969 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case Brandenburg v. Ohio. In that case the court employed a version of what is commonly known as the “clear-and-present-danger test” to overturn the conviction of Ku Klux Klan members under “an Ohio criminal syndicalism statute . . . for advocating unlawful methods of industrial or political reform” (Middleton, Lee, and Chamberlin 2005). Brandenburg urged that action be taken against African Americans and Jews, arguing that if the government “continues to suppress the white, Caucasian race, it’s possible that there might have to be some revengence [sic] taken” (41).

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that legal sanctions could not be applied to restrict such speech, even if it was advocating “the use of force or of law violation except where such advocacy is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action.” In other words, “even . . . [if an individual] called for specific action . . . speech remains protected until the point when it is actually likely [original emphasis] to incite unlawful action” (Zelezny 2001, 76–77). It is noteworthy that “this . . . interpretation of the clear-and-present-danger test . . . [is] sometimes referred to as the incitement
Educators Need to Educate

The real responsibility falling on school administrators, teachers, and others concerned about protecting the integrity of the learning process when confronted by individuals or groups demanding censorship of particular materials centers around establishing a genuine dialogue in which education takes center stage. This is why at least some knowledge of communication theory and media law is so important.

It is important to emphasize the educator role because, as Jenkinson (1995) states, "parents . . . [and others] have the right to be concerned about what . . . children read and study in school" (71). Jenkinson adds that "teachers and administrators throughout the country have told . . . [him] that disputes over books . . . [and other materials] can frequently be settled amicably when both sides can sit down and talk calmly" (72).

But—and this is of central importance to a viably functioning education system in a pluralistic and democratic society—Jenkinson emphasizes, “the right to complain does not guarantee removal of materials” (71). More specifically, Jenkinson recommends “procedures for handling complaints about books . . . should be written so that no one has the right to remove anything unilaterally” (72). He insists that “any objection that goes beyond the . . . [informal] discussion stage should . . . [require] a formal complaint . . . [and that during the period in which this complaint is being considered] the ‘objectionable’ book . . . should not be removed” (72).

Layne (1995) also speaks to a formal complaint requirement when he suggests that requiring individuals to take this formal step “may convince concerned citizens who actually know very little about a book to abandon their complaint against it” (105). He points out that “in order to complete the . . . [formal complaint] form, complainants need to have read educated critics’ reviews of the book, talked with the teacher regarding the purpose for which the book is being used, considered positive attributes of the book, and recorded specific pages and paragraphs which are objectionable” (105).

Layne (1995) stresses that a policy for responding to complaints, including the formal complaint requirement, must “be in place and effectively communicated to all school personnel . . . prior to a censorship attempt” (104). He argues that having such a policy in place “will not only allow school personnel to react less defensively, but it may also dispel some of the negative feelings of the complainant when he/she realizes the school district has put serious thought into book selection and complaints” (104–05).

Like Jenkinson, Layne (1995) emphasizes that it is important for educators to recognize that concerned parents and others have a right to voice their objections to particular materials that they find objectionable. He suggests “as educators, we must respect parents’ rights to protect their children from books that are harmful” (105). He states, however, that protecting that right is not analogous to providing every individual or group with an ideological ax to grind a means to censor materials that the teacher believes are appropriate in the context of his or her lesson plans.
Layne also provides guidance as to how he personally prepares for those occasions on which an individual or group may voice its objections to a particular book that has been assigned:

As a fifth-grade teacher who has on occasion had a book challenged, I have started asking my students to write personal reactions to books that I feel are potential censorship targets. By keeping copies of student reflections on these books, I am able to see, as are potential censors, what the students really carried away from the text. What can be more valuable in a discussion about how a book is affecting a child than the written reflections of that very child about the book? Teachers can best prepare themselves for censorship attempts by predicting what, if any complaints may be made against a book. While a complaint can be found about any book by someone who searches hard enough, some complaints are more common than others. (104)

In line with the teacher’s role as an educator, Layne (1995) also contends “many times parents’ . . . [and others] fears can be put to rest if they understand the purpose for using a specific book” (104). He emphasizes that it is important that teachers and school administrators listen “carefully to the concerns of a parent or other concerned citizen and explain how the questionable . . . [material] will be handled” (104). Layne also notes, however, that such a prudent approach includes a resolve not to acquiesce “to that one individual or small group . . . [who is determined to] censor a valuable . . . [work] from every child” (105). Again, the goal must stress educating all concerned in the broadest context of the word education in a free and democratic society.

Conclusion

It is essential that supporters of intellectual freedom in our nation’s schools acquire some genuine understanding of communication theory and law so they can respond to calls for school censorship in both a reasoned and effective manner.

REFERENCES

The Hernandez family found a way out of poverty – it started by coming in to a family literacy program. No surprise, given that a majority of adults who learn with their kids improve in everything from language skills to getting their GED. Together, they learn “literacy” isn’t just about reading and writing, it’s about developing skills – skills they use for a better life. Know a family we can help? Or would you like to help? Call 1-877-FAMLIT-1, or visit us at www.famlit.org.

National Center for Family Literacy