Content Warnings and Censorship

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Abstract

Applying a content warning to metadata and archival descriptions is a practice that libraries are increasingly embracing, even though the American Library Association considers content labeling to be censorship under the Library Bill of Rights. The language that is used in a content warning – "offensive" or "harmful" – carries important implications for the responsibility the library is assuming and the actions it might take. The decision to apply a content warning should consider a range of questions these warnings pose and be prepared to respond to the inherent tension they create with librarianship's commitment to intellectual freedom and anti-censorship.

American society regularly acts out one of its moral panics through a desire to ban library books. This may feel increasingly quaint in the internet era, but censorship of libraries is a "big tent" symbolic strategy that has become a predictable front on which cultural and political battles are waged. Library censorship is not a trivial issue because it is closely related to free speech, which is protected by the First Amendment in the United States and is deeply ingrained in America's culture. The profession of librarianship has developed

strong cultural and professional bulwarks against censorship to support librarians.

Librarians have historically been proud to embrace the aphorism that a good library

collection will contain something to offend everyone.[1] Unfortunately, librarians are

sometimes among those who claim they are offended and as a result, react and take

censorious actions. Applying a content warning (or label) is a practice that libraries are

increasingly embracing, even though it is closely related to censorship or even an act

censorship itself. Under the professional values of librarianship the practice of using

prejudicial content labels is condemned as "the censor's tool."[2] Any defense of content

warnings should be able to respond to the inherent tension they create with the

profession's commitment to intellectual freedom and anti-censorship.

Offensive speech is protected under the First Amendment, including speech that creates

"grief, anger, or fear" in the hearer.[3] Harmful speech, even hate speech, is protected speech

in most cases.[4] In addition to its legal protections, it is the value our culture places on free

speech that underpins librarianship's opposition to censorship. But now we are living in a

moment when calls for limiting free speech are common. Libraries are vulnerable targets at

such a time. As we have long been to one degree or another. As library philosopher Charles

Broadfield wrote in 1949, "The library exists for the sake of freedom of thought. But no

sooner has this principle been enunciated than it runs into complex theoretical and

practical difficulties placed in its way by a world whose propensities are authoritarian."[5]

The library profession in America expresses its persistent, core values through the

American Library Association (ALA). Among those values intellectual freedom stands at the

top. Intellectual freedom came to be foundational to the profession beginning in the late 1930's and was codified through the ALA in the Library Bill of Rights (1939), Code of Ethics (1939), Freedom to Read Statement (1953), and the establishment in 1940 of the Committee on Intellectual Freedom and later the Office of Intellectual Freedom (1967).[6] Five of the six articles in the Library Bill of Rights pertain to intellectual freedom and censorship. Intellectual freedom is a right held by the reader that the library defends and upholds. Simply put, it means that the library itself takes no moral or political position with regard to the ideas contained within its collections or what books a reader chooses to read.

These ALA statements are supplemented by interpretations that address specific applications and are designed to support librarians in defending against pressures to restrict intellectual freedom. For example, in 1951 the New Jersey Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution sought to label books which "advocate or favor communism" in the library. In response, the ALA Council endorsed a resolution by the Committee on Intellectual Freedom against labeling.[7] In 2015 ALA Council endorsed and published "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,"[8] one of five Library Bill of Rights interpretations that make up the ALA's Statements and Policies on Censorship.[9] The Interpretation distinguishes between viewpoint-neutral labels and labels that are prejudicial.

> Viewpoint-neutral directional labels are a convenience designed to save time. These are different in intent from attempts to prejudice, discourage, or encourage users to access particular library resources or to restrict access to library resources. Labeling as an attempt to prejudice attitudes is a censor's tool. The American Library

Association opposes labeling as a means of predisposing people's attitudes toward library resources. [...] Prejudicial labeling systems assume that the libraries have the institutional wisdom to determine what is appropriate or inappropriate for its users to access. ... Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the resource, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the resource, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users.[10]

A Labeling and Rating Systems Q&A adds additional guidance and rationale: "Including notes in the bibliographic record regarding what may be objectionable content assumes all members of the community hold the same values. No one person should take responsibility for judging what is offensive. Such voluntary labeling in bibliographic records and catalogs violates the Library Bill of Rights."[11] The core idea here – that the library is not the reader's moral guardian – is central to the ALA's Freedom to Read Statement, which was first adopted in 1953 and has been amended and readopted multiple times since. The Freedom to Read Statement also addresses content labeling: "We trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe. We do not believe they are prepared to sacrifice their heritage of a free press in order to be 'protected' against what others think may be bad for them. ... It is not in the public interest to force a reader to accept the prejudgment of a label characterizing any expression or its author as subversive or dangerous."[12]

The ALA also opposes prejudicial content labels because they inhibit access, which it considers censorship. As defined in the Intellectual Freedom Manual, censorship is "A

decision made by a governing authority or its representative(s) to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library resource based on a person or group's disapproval of its content or its author/creator."[13] Emily Knox links censorship and intellectual freedom in saying, "At its heart, the practice of censorship is predicated on who gets to decide what certain people or groups should know."[14] Any librarian or archivist creating and applying a content warning on behalf of their institution ("governing authority") is doing so from a position of power vis a vis their readers. Although less true in 2022 than it was in 1940, libraries and archives do still have power over access to knowledge. Our commitment to intellectual freedom and anti-censorship mean that we do not wield that power to prejudice or inhibit access.

Unsurprisingly, content labels are never advocated for, nor adopted, under the banner of censorship. Labeling advocates, like would-be book censors, seek to distance themselves from censorship and claim that labeling is not a form of censorship.[15] On the contrary, they argue, labeling, relocation or removal of certain books are simply "legitimate, commonsense measures for counteracting the possible harm."[16] In this "common sense" defense, the challenger asserts that his or her own moral judgment reflects the social and moral norms that should be held by all right-thinking readers. David Bromwich explains both the impulse to censor and the need to justify it: "Most people (the highly literate are among the worst) believe that what is good for them will be good for others. ... a regime of censorship must claim to derive its authority from settled knowledge and not opinion."[17] Challengers also make the case that context doesn't matter; if the words or images are offensive, the context of how they're used is irrelevant. They are simply taboo and not to be

encountered. In all these cases, the would-be censors "failed to distinguish between using nasty words in order to wound, profane, or disparage, and mentioning nasty words in order to teach about the problems they represent."[18] Library-sponsored content warnings similarly justify the warnings as counteracting possible harm caused by offensive words and upholding self-evidently correct social and moral norms.

From offense to harm

Feeling offended is a well-understood and familiar emotion in everyday life. All of us are offended on occasion and know what it means to give offense, even if unintentionally. Offense is a subjective condition of a negative mental state. It may or may not be caused by wrongful conduct on someone's part.[19] Taking offense at library content is a simplified case to analyze because it does not happen as a result of a personal interaction or wrongful conduct on the library's part. Given this, what would a "potentially offensive" library content warning mean? It is likely shorthand for "we believe this content has some significant likelihood of offending the sensibilities of some of our readers." If a library states (or concedes) its content is "potentially offensive," the qualifier "potentially" is doing important work. It makes explicit the subjectivity inherent in whether a given word, idea, or its expression is offensive. The qualifier defines a distance between the library and the reader. The distancing serves several purposes that are clarifying and reassuring for the reader. "Potentially offensive" disassociates the values of the institution from the collections it manages and disseminates. It also makes explicit that the library does not claim to know what any given individual will find offensive. Finally, it conveys that any

offense taken was not intentional and is not personal. The reader gets to decide what's offensive, but the critical flipside of that is that the library will not do anything about it. The library will not remove the "offensive" book because that offense resides in the reader and not the book itself.[20]

Despite the library profession's position opposing content warnings, their use has gone from non-existent or very rare to widely adopted in just the past few years.[21] The backstory dates to at least the 1990's when contextualization of Indigenous archival materials and descriptions began to be an active topic of discussion.[22] "Protocols for Native American Archival Materials" documented the work of a 2006 meeting convened to identify best professional practices for culturally responsive care of these collections, including guidelines for informing patrons about potentially offensive content.[23] Some of these issues discussed in the context of Indigenous collections have subsequently explored in relation to archives in general.[24]

The 2016 American election was a precipitating event that brought ideas originating in critical information studies further into the teaching and practice of librarianship. In 2017 UCLA LIS professor Michelle Caswell published an influential paper, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," a personal reflection on the impact the election had on her pedagogy.[25] The earliest widely-referenced "potentially harmful content" warning was written in 2018 by Temple University's Special Collections Research Center (the statement's effective date was June 2019).[26] Princeton University Library formed an "Inclusive Description Working Group" in May 2019,[27] and a number of Princeton

archivists co-authored the report, "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia," which was published October 2019.[28] Princeton's "Statement on Language in Archival Description" was published in December 2019.[29] In late 2019 a Simmons College Library content warning, "A Note on Dated and Potentially Harmful Language," was published.[30] All of these documents reference the Temple statement.

The country's "racial reckoning" in summer 2020 was the second precipitating event that led to widespread adoption of content warnings, all of which follow in the footsteps of the 2019 documents.[31] In 2020-21 two professional associations (ACRL RBMS and SAA) introduced the concept that metadata was "potentially harmful" or "harmful" into their codes of ethics for the first time.[32] It also became common to see "harm" and "violence" in describing library metadata or collections apart from content warnings themselves.[33]

The idea of harmful speech, or words as violence, has roots in the expansion of regulations of hate speech on college campuses in the late 1980's[34] and the concurrent scholarly elaboration of the concept of hate speech. In *Words That Wound* (1993), Mari Matsuda identifies three elements in defining racist speech: a message of racial inferiority; a message directed against a historically repressed group; and a message that is persecutory, hateful and degrading.[35] She emphasizes how important context is to understanding what is degrading and what is not.[36] In the context of hate speech, to label it "offensive" is itself offensive, and inappropriate. Charles Lawrence also makes that point when he says, "The word offensive is used as if we were speaking of a difference in taste, as if I should learn to be less sensitive to words that 'offend' me. I cannot help but believe that those people who

speak of offense – those who argue that this speech must go unchecked – do not understand the great difference between offense and injury."[37] The intentionality of interpersonal hate speech is the source of its power to cause psychological harm. Richard Delgado writes, "There can be little doubt that the dignitary affront of racial insults, except perhaps those that are overheard, is intentional and therefore most reprehensible."[38] The problem with analogizing the impact of hate speech to the impact of passively encountered librarian-authored metadata is that they are in fact quite far apart in their likelihood to cause real psychological harm to a person.

Both "potentially offensive" and "harmful" reflect assessments that there is some likelihood that a reader may react negatively to words, images or ideas they encounter in the library. In both cases the words, images or ideas stay the same over time while reader and librarian reaction to them evolves. Thus, warnings can only ever be the subjective judgment of a library employee at a given moment in time about what may be "offensive" or "harmful." Why are "offensive" and "harmful" so different, then, especially if they are frequently used synonymously? At least part of the answer lies in the words or ideas that inspired the content warning. Historically, the majority of content warnings have been related to sexuality, often words or content judged to be "obscene" or age-inappropriate and thus possibly offensive to some readers or their parents, or to members of the local community.[39] Some libraries create what are in effect content labels for these materials by segregating them in access-controlled locations.[40] The library metadata or content that is driving library-created content warnings now do not belong to the categories of profane, vulgar, or obscene words.[41] They are far more likely to be outdated descriptive terms for

groups of people and related concepts.[42] For example, the University of Nebraska Omaha's Statement on Harmful Materials defines "harmful" as "racial, gender, sexual, religious, and other language and imagery that are offensive by today's standards."[43] This is language whose meaning and moral valence has changed over time. Just as with authors of books judged by someone to be "obscene" or inappropriate, when these descriptive metadata were created by librarians and archivists, it was with the intent to communicate to readers. Librarians used the language of their day (or sometimes a past day in the case of slow-changing LC subject headings), the language of the resource itself, or both, to enable discovery.

Another important distinction between "offensive" and "harmful" is that the message the library sends by issuing a warning about potentially offensive content is very different from the message it sends when it warns about harmful content. The library alerting the reader to its harmful metadata or content is making a more objective claim about its negative impact on the reader. When Yale University Library, as an example, says in its warning: "[w]e acknowledge that our existing description may contain language that is racist, sexist, colonialist, homophobic, or uses other *offensive terms that may cause harm*,"[44] it is converting a subjective experience (offense) into an objective impact (harm). The move from offense to harm shifts responsibility for the unpleasant state the reader may experience based on their own sensibilities (they took offense) from the reader to the library, which acknowledges the offense is both real and damaging. "Potentially offensive" sends the message: we remain agnostic as to whether or not this item causes offense.

"Harmful" sends the message: we do have an opinion, which is that we believe these words are in fact offensive and, additionally, may be damaging to our readers.

The idea of harmful language

Like offense, harm – including both physical and psychological harm – is also a well understood concept in everyday life. What is less well understood, even logically, is what is meant by "harm" when the causes are words or ideas passively encountered in the library. A close analog is the trigger warning, which is designed to prevent or minimize psychological distress related to recollection of painful events in a student's (or reader's) life. "Harm" in trigger – or content – warnings is using the language of what Bromwich terms "therapeutic culture." A concept like harm has significant power, especially in an academic setting where universities still act *in loco parentis*. Critically, the victim is the ultimate arbiter of harm, and in a therapeutic culture it's not comfortable to challenge a self-described victim. "An argument is refutable. A symptom is not."[45]

Joel Feinberg's research on the concept of harm makes clear that elevated claims about harm are misguided: "Not everything that we dislike or resent, and wish to avoid, is harmful to us." As examples he lists transitory disappointments and disillusionments, wounded pride, hurt feelings, aroused anger, shocked sensibility, alarm, disgust, and frustration.[46] Any of these emotions could conceivably be a reaction to library metadata. He concludes, however, that only "if the experience is severe, prolonged, or constantly

repeated, the mental suffering it causes may become obsessive and incapacitating, and therefore harmful."[47]

The notion that words and ideas can be harmful likely predates even the first book burning in 430 BCE.[48] Echoing modern definitions of hate speech, Thomas Aquinas defined "wrongful language" (*iniuria verborum*) as committing one of four types of moral transgression against another person: affront, defamation, tale-bearing, or taunting. As he wrote in his *Summa Theologica*, "words are not injurious to others as sounds but as signs, and their signification depends on the speaker's inward intention."[49] In pre-modern Europe, heretical ideas were seen as a threat to both Church and State. The framework used to regulate language was heresy legislation. "Heresy law provided the basis for most continental systems of press censorship, which principally targeted misliked ideas: mostly, but not exclusively, religious ones. The best-known and most important of such systems was, of course, the Roman Church's Index of forbidden books, first promulgated in 1559, and regularly updated thereafter."[50] Defanging heresy underpins the First Amendment's linking of freedom of speech and the press with the free exercise of religion, thus defining censorship as an unlawful exercise of government authority. Aquinas's wrongful speech required intent or carelessness on the part of the speaker in committing a moral transgression against another person. Heresy, on the other hand, can infect a person who simply encounters a forbidden idea. "Harm" in the context of words or ideas also implies that they can act as a contagion.

The belief that harm is caused by ideas passively encountered is alive and well in modern-era theocratic, authoritarian and totalitarian societies. The assumption that ideas are harmful and therefore need to be controlled is deeply held by those governments and their populations, with the predictable result of diminished free exchange of ideas in the public sphere. Ideas challenge, and so weaken, the prevailing orthodoxy because they open channels to question religious or political pieties and authority. That books contain dangerous ideas - with the potential to spread to an ideologically vulnerable population - underlies all book burnings in history. "[C]ensors often perceive themselves as protecting the land and its most vulnerable members – women, children, the poor – from corrosion and corruption, paternally sheltering them from scandalous and disturbing emotions and pictures."[51] Under totalitarianism, the state goes beyond censorship to attempt to control the language itself. It defines permissible and impermissible concepts by creating its own Newspeak, redefining words so their everyday meanings become eclipsed by official meanings as defined by the regime.[52] These deformed words and slogans act as levers of social control that those in power use to justify their legitimacy. Use of that language is a signal that one is on the "inside," or at least politically reliable. But a language denuded of its everyday meanings is a language made confusing and ambiguous, useful as a tool but much less useful for communicating ideas. It is above all a language that everyone recognizes has been hijacked for political purposes.

J.M. Coetzee discusses Valentin Turchin's idea of socially crucial words taking on a double meaning, the "theoretical" official sense and the "practical" sense that more accurately reflects reality.[53] This doubling of meaning seems to be happening to "harm" and is being

used by libraries with its theoretical, not practical, meaning. The idea of harmful library

metadata is not simply benign hyperbole, however. It has ethical consequences. It goes

without saying that there is a vast amount of actual harm suffered in the world every day.

When a respected institution in society asserts that the words in its catalog may cause

"harm" to its readers, the power of harm's practical meaning is not simply conferred on the

new context; rather, it is trivialized through being used theoretically (or metaphorically).

When everything is harmful nothing is. But the more pertinent problem is that that it

weakens libraries' commitment to intellectual freedom. As Jonathan Haidt and Greg

Lukianoff conclude in their analysis of the idea of words as violence, "Blurring the line

between real violence and metaphorical violence is directly challenging the boundary

between protected and unprotected speech."[54]

"Harm" and the impetus to act

The language that is used in a library content warning (potentially offensive, potentially

harmful, or harmful) carries implications for actions the library might take. The impetus to

act is raised as the "temperature" of the warning goes up or when the library appears to be

taking institutional responsibility for the "harm" it's causing its readers. In the case of

harmful content warnings, the intent to act can be part of the warning. They are

communicating, "we know we have a big problem and it will take time to address." The

National Archives' (NARA) *The Archivist's Task Force on Racism Report to the Archivist*

recommended adding an "advisory notice" to all catalog search results to "create a space

for NARA to share with the public our ultimate goals for reparative description."[55] The

banner that was implemented in 2021 (reading "NARA's Statement on Potentially Harmful Content") links to a full content warning.[56]

What have libraries traditionally done when a member of their community reported that they were offended by something in the library? The library, importantly, relied on its preexisting policy when it responded, "Thank you for your inquiry but this library will not remove - or label - material in our collection because it offends you." If a reader were to complain today about being "harmed" by library content, could the library so easily provide the same response? That is, "Thank you for your inquiry but this library will not remove – or label – materials in our collection because it harmed you." That may be harder to do if the library has already provided a harmful content warning, but also because it sounds like quite a bad thing for the library to harm a reader. While it is a point of pride for a library to claim its collection contains something to offend everyone, it would be odd indeed for a library to say the same about a collection that contained something to harm everyone. "Your words offend me" may elicit an apology, or a sympathetic "I appreciate that you feel that way." "Your words harm me" not only makes an apology a lot less optional but also clearly invites a retraction of what was said. That valence of culpability is absent with offense, where the library concedes no such thing. The use of "harm" escalates the content warning by assigning the library agency and responsibility for the negative impact of its metadata and for continuing to disseminate it.

Concern about words as harmful leads naturally to the impulse to restrict or access speech. While content warnings are not the same as challenges to books in the library, developing a

policy around actions the library will take will prompt similar questions. Having a policy in place about content challenges is important and recommended by the ALA because it supports the library staff in managing challenges.[57] Knox explains the dual purpose of clearly defined policies around intellectual freedom and how to respond to challenges. "In order to challenge the inclusion of a particular item in library collections, patrons are required to proceed through a series of bureaucratic hoops that collectively mitigate their views regarding the material vis-a-vis the symbolic power of the librarians and other administrators."[58] The creation of the policy and its use thus serve to educate both the library's community and library workers about the ethics of librarianship. "The analytic nature of these arguments is in direct contrast to the more 'emotional' justifications made by the challengers."[59] Knox reminds us that nowhere in the Intellectual Freedom Manual is it recommended that librarians consider removing or relocating books from their collections.

The library that has already applied a content warning, or invites it as an option, has more impetus to take some action in response to a complaint rather than simply educating the challenger. Indiana University's "harmful language statement" offers the opportunity for users to anonymously report offensive language or content. "[R]eporting offensive content could result in adding a content warning where users would encounter the reported item."[60] Does this happen after one complaint? Or only if the librarian agrees with the complaint? In another example, the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) "is committed to working with its partners to assess and update descriptions that are harmful."[61] Even though the DPLA's policy is clear that the holding library will decide what to do with such

reports, there is the clear presumption that the default position of partner institutions is to take action.

Censorship is so anathema in our profession that most of us probably feel confident that our libraries' actual actions, beyond warnings, will be limited to contextualizing metadata and archival descriptions. We probably feel confident that we will always privilege our core purpose in keeping the full historical and cultural record available to readers *even when* some readers claim they are harmed by it. But it is not hard to imagine scenarios that would test this resolve. For example, imagine an archive holds a collection whose descriptive metadata has been labeled "harmful" by the archive. If a group associated with the subject of the collection then tells the library that the collection itself is perpetuating their oppression, thus causing them ongoing harm, and it should be made inaccessible to the public, what does the library do? It has already conceded the point that the collection or its metadata is harmful. It is certainly worth the time to be prepared to respond to challenges such as this that have some relationship to "harmful" content warnings.[62] The utility of this policy work is independent of the motivation of the challengers or whether they are inside or outside the profession.

Other actions may be prompted when metadata is considered harmful and the scale of the problem is very large, as with archival descriptions. Automated, or partially automated, approaches to changing or modifying metadata is then incentivized. Given the scale of the National Archives, automated replacement is one of the tools proposed to be used ("Explore the implementation of a find-and-replace feature in DAS [Description and

Authority Service] that allows for searches across all descriptions and replacing and/or adding a value."[63]) *The Archivist's Task Force* report sets as the expectation that "[a]ll recommendations are grounded in the understanding that NARA has a responsibility to eliminate racist language in archival descriptions." The Task Force recognizes that will require "solving technical constraints of the Catalog." Yet their goal also encompasses implied meanings, which are far more subjective and so much less amenable to an automated approach: "By racist language, the ADS [Archival Description Subgroup] means not only explicitly harmful terms, such as racial slurs, but also information that implies and reinforces damaging stereotypes of BIPOC individuals and communities while valorizing and protecting White people."[64] The Duke University Library highlights the human role in the process, but that it can be supported by computer programs that help identify metadata for potential intervention: "Although much of this work can be computerized, decolonization is a fundamentally human and fundamentally community-centered practice."[65] Manual review assisted by automated flagging of terms may result in much more remediation than intended, however, when words in categories as broad and subjective as "Aggrandizement" and "GenderTerms" are used to create the master "to do" list.[66] Computational, or AI-aided, approaches could also have other unintended consequences.[67]

While weeding is a topic distinct from content warnings, they can both be vehicles for the censorious impulse based on perceived harm. One librarian described their approach to weeding: "Out of respect for all patrons, the library staff hoped that no individual would view the presence of a book in the stacks as a microaggression or psychological trigger."[68]

While this is just a single example, the relevant question facing the profession is how "equity audits" or "decolonization" of collections will define actions not just in regard to future acquisitions but with past acquisitions.[69] In June 2019 ALA revised "Evaluating Library Collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" to include reference to "outdated, offensive, or harmful" content and "offensive or controversial" content creators as part of its Interpretation guidance that "Rather than removing these resources, libraries should consider ways to educate users and create context for how those views, opinions, and concepts have changed over time."[70] If we do go down the path of weeding library collections to minimize "harm," or to shape collections that reflect the world we prefer to see in the future or the world we prefer the past to have been, it likely won't result in certain books disappearing entirely from the historical record. But it is still censorship. It also does not reflect our profession's respect for readers and their intellectual freedom envisioned in the Library Bill of Rights or the Freedom to Read Statement.

Several examples outside academic libraries are also instructive. Bias reporting mechanisms at university campuses, which invite concerns based on the concept of speech as violence with the goal to promote inclusion and belonging, can also lead to the impulse to censor. George Washington University's removal (later reinstated) of a Chinese-Australian artist's posters based on student complaints is a recent example of this phenomenon.[71] Students who perceived the posters to be prompting physical or verbal violence, thus risking their safety, were making a claim that should not have been the only factor in considering how to respond. Academic freedom clearly argued in favor of the posters being displayed, even if some students were offended by them. Another example is

the numerous cases of faculty who have had complaints lodged against them related to their speech and whose university administrations subsequently initiated investigations, suspensions, required trainings, and other professional or personal consequences.[72]

Classroom trigger warnings have also been criticized as infringing on academic freedom for reasons similar to the library profession's objections to content labels. An American Association of University Professors (AAUP) report analogized trigger warnings to library content warnings, and endorsed the ALA position on prejudicial labeling. The report concluded that trigger warnings in the classroom are "infantilizing and anti-intellectual" and "interfere with faculty academic freedom." "The classroom is not the appropriate venue to treat PTSD. …. Faculty should, of course, be sensitive that such reactions may occur in their classrooms, but they should not be held responsible for them."[73] This question of responsibility for a student's or reader's negative emotion sits at the heart of the difference between offense and harm, and the role that the librarian or teacher vis a vis the potential to cause that negative emotion or its impact. The rhetorical escalation from offense to harm (i.e., speech as violence) substantially complicates any calculation about appropriate actions to take because, as in all these scenarios, it rhetorically elevates the challenger's case.

Contextualization and content warnings

Updating, or contextualizing, metadata is a closely related issue to content warnings and central to their origin story. Updating subject headings has long been a standard library

practice, as well as a locus of activism in the profession.[74] While words evolve naturally in

response to changing norms and through linguistic evolution, they live on unchanged in

library collections and catalogs. Updating subject headings in the catalog and

contextualizing archival descriptions in finding aids or digital collections can support the

library's responsibility to enable communication between people over space and time.

Ensuring discoverability means that it is our job to enable readers to find materials using

the words they know and not be forced to use the language of the past, some of which may

be offensive but often is just obscure. While prior LC subject headings are still accessible to

support discovery through "see" references, archival descriptions are more akin to

historical records themselves. Kate Holterhoff describes approaches that archivists have

developed in response to the challenge of contextualizing sensitive materials, including

"heavy editing" and "richly narrated." [75]

Image-rich collections, such as digitized yearbooks, are another example of content where

extra care is appropriate and reasonable library practices have emerged. Textbook images

are inherently more powerful than words on a page and can reflect negatively on living

people and the parent institution's reputation. Since these materials have begun to be

digitized, libraries have taken a careful approach, often including content warnings.[76]

Oliver Batchelor quotes a USA Today study of digitized yearbooks: "We found questionable

photos virtually everywhere we looked."[77] After a yearbook scandal resulted in the

temporary removal of some content from its digital library, Hollins University Library

issued what serves as a model of a balanced three-part content warning: a statement that

the materials in the collection may be offensive and why; a disclaimer that the content does

not reflect the values of the institution; and an assertion of the importance of preserving

the historical record. The institution also supplemented the collection with additional

contextual content.[78] Indigenous cultural heritage collections are another example where

contextualization is appropriate and the practices well-elaborated in the profession, as

evidenced in part by creation of the Indigenous cultural heritage digital platform,

Mukurtu.[79]

A context statement highlighting for readers that the language in the finding aid and

archives is recognized to be of the time it was created and that it has inherent historical

value is not a content warning. The process of contextualization does invite certain risks,

however. For example, if the archivist were to step too much into the historian's shoes

when adding interpretation to outdated or potentially offensive descriptions, or were to

engage in attempts to "critique the past," as Holterhoff characterizes one possible goal of

contextualization.[80] Contextualization that expresses a personal (or institutional) judgment

about language or content could easily be characterized as "prejudicial" because it is telling

readers either what the archivist thinks or what the reader should think. Holterhoff

discusses this tension, and while she supports adding identity tags, she cautions, "adding

digital tags addressing identity politics related to race, class, gender, and religion, beyond

the most blatant examples of bigotry, moves the archive away from objective and mimetic

documentation of the past and into the realm of subjective editorializing."[81] The archivist

might ask herself: Is my contextualization helping to build an archive that future historians

will find optimally useful? Because descriptions themselves have historical value Kirsten

Wright recommends, that "what archivists must do is provide context—primarily through

descriptive processes, including descriptions of how and why the records were created, how they came to be in the repository ….These processes ….make clear the historical and policy context in which these words were used. But the records themselves must be left as they are."[82] Here we recall again that while librarian-created metadata may contain painful words, those words do not reflect malice, past or present. The language in library collections may in fact reflect malice, but that in itself documents human history. In this complex space, evolving scholarship and practice will ultimately guide, and also constrain, individual or institutional decision-making around contextualizing, enhancing, or changing metadata.[83] The emerging best practices recognize the subjectivity of archival descriptions. They identify goals that are within the bounds of reasonable effort and appropriate actions given the mission of the archive.

"Taxonomic reparations" is a related, but distinct, topic to contextualization. Taxonomic reparations is concerned with *ideas* that are harmful because of the worldview they represent rather than specific words necessarily being offensive in themselves.[84] Three U.S. memory institution participants in the 2016 Mandela Dialogues wrote, "For us, memory work is not just about remembering the past, but about reckoning with it – that is, establishing facts, acknowledging, apologizing, stopping ongoing violence, and repairing the harm that was done through both material and immaterial forms of reparation."[85] This area of metadata remediation is directly concerned with historical interpretation and contextualization (addressing too much, too little, and not the right kind). It extends beyond metadata per se: OCLC *Reimagine Descriptive Workflows* report cites the 2021 Cataloguing Code of Ethics, which "identifies white supremacy as one of the factors that

influences cataloging standards and practices."[86] One problem is characterized as "over-description" by *The Archivist's Task Force* report: the OurDocuments.gov website "uses adulatory and excessive language to document the historical contributions of White, wealthy men."[87] In the Auditing Archival Description for Harmful Language project at Duke, "aggrandizement" is identified as one of the categories of harmful language, encompassing words like "acclaimed," "celebrated," "eminent." Clearly those words aren't harmful in and of themselves; they are said to be harmful because of the worldview they represent. "Fixing" this metadata is at the least a highly subjective, explicitly political project because it moves from harmful words to harmful ideas.[88]

The new content warnings: on whose behalf?

Whether or not it is appropriate for employees of a library to express their own values through their work is a longstanding debate in American librarianship. Since its emergence in the 1960's, "social responsibility" librarianship has stood in tension with the Library Bill of Rights.[89] The clearly evident passion of librarians who author content warnings reflects a sympathetic identification with a hypothetical harmed, or vulnerable, reader. The urgency and intensity of these warnings does raise the question of whether the offense may be more keenly felt by the librarians than readers who experience the metadata or documents in the course of their study or research. Identity-focused terms and ideas, as progressive liberal concerns, may inspire a modern-day librarian's personal feelings of offense more readily than do "obscene" or sexual terms and ideas, which tend to be socially conservative concerns.

A possible complementary motivation is social signaling: the desire to put on the record the librarian's allyship or personal allegiances. A part of the reason for the transition from spare to more prevalent use of content warnings, as well as the changed nature of the warnings' language, could simply be that "harm" in the context of words-as-violence (or silence-as-violence depending on the circumstance), is currently ideologically fashionable.[90] Librarians may or may not in fact feel that some readers' emotional states actually need such protections, but they do wish to signal to *all* readers that the librarians and archivists know that these words and/or ideas are not acceptable in contemporary society. Not only that, but that they are themselves offended. Stepping back from personal motivation, a content warning could be viewed as a vehicle to express our profession's collective shame and penitence for past racism, colonialism, and sexism as reflected in our catalogs. This can be seen as an understandable impulse, because even passively encountering such language can be uncomfortable to the modern eye. But while any individual librarian can say how appalled they are at how racist and colonialist our ancestors were, content warnings are in fact the library speaking. That should entail a calculation that recognizes the distinction between personal views, professional views and an institutional position.

Anchoring our actions in our professional values

An American college or university library inherits – to its great benefit – the core values of its parent institution, higher education, and the country. Prominent among the values

shared by the library profession and higher education, and closely related to free speech, is academic freedom, which governs speech protections in the academy. Intellectual freedom, as articulated in the Freedom to Read Statement, is closely aligned with the idea of academic freedom. Academic freedom is not only about rights, however; the rights it protects are accompanied by an ethic of responsibility to the truth-seeking purpose of scholarship and education.[91] Because of its centrality to the university's mission, any limitations on academic freedom should first of all not negatively affect the educational purpose. "Protecting" students from ideas that they don't agree with, or that offend them, is an example of a limitation on academic freedom. Similarly, academic libraries employing content warnings is a limitation on intellectual freedom. Before implementing either a trigger warning or a content warning, librarians, faculty, and other representatives of the university should ask themselves whether it negatively affects the educational mission.

The library also inherits the academy's core value of impartiality as the philosophy by which scholars search for new knowledge and train students to do the same. Impartiality is not the same as neutrality.[92] Impartiality reflects the scholar or librarian seeking the best-informed path *as guided by their own professional judgment*. Librarians, like academic faculty, should model both academic freedom and impartiality for students because it is not second nature to be open to, and to learn from, ideas with which you vehemently disagree or that offend you. It is easier to decide that those ideas harm you and you should be protected from them, but that is fundamentally an anti-academic notion. The way we develop our collections, and describe them, should always be mindful of what a university is all about, reflecting both academic freedom and librarians' impartiality. There should be

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no moral vanity in how we present ourselves to readers. The practice of aspiring to

impartiality serves as a mental check on an inclination to see our mission as encompassing

the moral education of students or other library users.

Libraries also hold a special identity apart from our parent institutions because we share

common values with libraries outside academia. Librarianship can take great pride in being

a profession that defends and enacts the virtue of tolerance. We aspire to model that virtue

in service to all our readers so that they may freely explore whatever they are interested in

exploring. As Broadfield wrote in 1948, "To value an opinion which, while not

demonstrably false, appears to be so, which arouses dislike, or which cannot be shown to

be useful, requires tolerance. All opinion is objectionable to some, therefore tolerance

relates to all opinion."[93] Censorship, and censoriousness, is an expression of intolerance.

Even when invoking a higher virtue like social justice, censoriousness is still embedded in

any expressions, or actions, that presume that our perspective is the only factually or

morally correct one. Unlike libraries distancing themselves from reader reactions to

"offensive" content in the library, when librarians label words as harmful it relativizes the

value of anti-censorship. It almost requires the library to balance the value of anti-

censorship against the "harm" that could be inflicted on readers.[94] But it is impossible to

measure that harm because it is potential, subjective and, certainly highly variable over

time.

As librarians and archivists we are stewards of the historical record but we are not

ourselves historians (even if we happen to be so by training). It is not our job to write,

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rewrite, or provide our own gloss on history. It is our job to enable others to have direct access to cultural artifacts, so that they can build new knowledge that contributes to future readers' understanding of our world. Like the historian, each of us as an individual library worker can only stand at but one moment in the long stream of our profession before and after us. This inspires the humility and "long now" perspective shared by our two professions, just as the miles of stacks in a research library can inspire epistemic humility in library visitors. The record of intellectual and creative expression is written in its own languages and voices. It is an ahistorical idea to assert that archaic or currently unacceptable terms are unacceptable in some kind of absolute sense. Readers using our catalogs, or researchers using our archives, are unlikely to miss the historical context and cues in the library's catalog and descriptive metadata. It is philistinism and ahistorical to imply that the works of someone with a "privileged" identity is to be discredited rather than that they may carry important knowledge. The question of when and how to apply today's moral lens to the historical record should be a nuanced one, and especially so because "the condescension of posterity"[95] is such an easy, and satisfying, stance to assume.

Consideration of a content warning proposed by library workers should follow the same or similar process, and be subject to similar scrutiny, as responding to an external request to remove or label library materials. To support the assessment, the policy should prompt key questions, such as: Is this needed for our readers? Does it undermine our values and our readers' intellectual freedom? What happens to the warnings in the future? Are they regularly reassessed as to their need? Will those labels feel as right a decade or several decades from now as they do today? Labeling is an active act; it is speech in itself. Like

trigger warnings, content warnings are reductionist. They flatten and oversimplify. A warning about racist language implicitly reduces that work to that topic, when the actual work is likely to be far more complex. Once we have strayed from the ALA's professional guidelines on content labeling, what are our and our successors' guideposts to make decisions about these labels in the future? Some of today's language will also become outdated. Will the warnings just cover more and more of our metadata and collections? Ideally, we will be able to come to a consensus that content warnings should not be added willy-nilly across our metadata or collections "just in case," or because individual librarians desire to actively express their concerns about the language in our catalogs or collections. The risk of real "harm," and its nature, should be discussed. Our profession's position on prejudicial labeling should set a high bar to make the case to apply a content warning.

Developing an approach that reflects the context and the mission of our library or archive is also critical. A blanket content warning on an entire collection, as the National Archives has done, is a prejudicial content label that carries additional important messages based on its broad-brush approach and its context. Do readers who may have arrived at a document in the Archives through an internet search understand that the banner content warning is generally applied across the entire database? Encountering a content warning on the Declaration of Independence or Constitution will seem odd to many readers, certainly to a non-American reader. They may rightly wonder, "why is the US government warning me about this? Is there something wrong or false about it?" Or, "Why is America ashamed of its founding documents?" The Archives banner content warning is saying to its readers: "Enter with caution."

A library has a special relationship with its users. It is the library's mission to sustain that relationship and to cultivate it with more people. When we warn readers about "harmful" content in our libraries we are speaking on their behalf, at a distance, about the negative impact a possible personal offense may have on them. The trust, and conversation, between the library and the reader should reflect respect of each for the other. A "harmful" content warning steps into the reader's head and so breaks that trust. Users of the library are endowed with freedom of thought, and freedom of thought means the capacity to encounter even shocking words or ideas without expecting an institution (parent) to protect them. In a college or university context, we should not make presumptions about the nature of the influence that a student's identity or personal background might have on their perspective. If the library provides a content warning because it assumes that a student from a Central American country could be "harmed" by seeing the subject heading "illegal alien," that library is not respecting the student's maturity, or their capacity to maintain the mental distance that enables them to perhaps see it as offensive, yes, but not destabilizing. Do we really want to encourage our readers to approach our collections with their emotions primed for taking offense? If the student were in fact to be offended and complained, that is an opportunity for a librarian to explain how subject headings work, as well as librarians' role in changing them over time.

It is condescending to be cautioned about exposure to words and ideas "for your own good." Paternalism is not neutral to the person experiencing it. It can feel belittling or demeaning because adults – especially students – reasonably want to assert their own

moral independence.[96] Being told before they see something that it is "harmful" does not respect their moral independence. It is inserting someone else's moral judgment. "Prejudicial labeling systems assume that the libraries have the institutional wisdom to determine what is appropriate or inappropriate for its users to access. They presuppose that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine."[97] Labeling our metadata or collections as "harmful" unfairly impugns forbearer librarians and treats our readers like children. We cannot be good stewards of our collections if each of us prioritizes our individual academic freedom over defense of our readers' intellectual freedom. We would not be living up to our shared values if we allowed our professional actions to be driven by the emotions that words in our libraries engender in us or we imagine they engender in our readers. Heightened emotion is congenial to the impulse to censor or to request censorship. Moral certainty is congenial to the impulse to censor. And it is always harder to stand on principle and resist censoriousness when the desire for it is your own or it comes from your ideological compatriots.

The ALA's position on censorship reflects the near-absolutist position on free speech in the US Bill of Rights, which is shared by few countries in the world, past or present. Content warnings in libraries could be defended as librarians taking a more power-centric view of free speech. That is, that we can – and should – be censorious on behalf of those who historically or currently have less power. But with power always comes the temptation to abuse it. Which is why the ardent opponent of censorship, and defender of free speech, responds to those concerns with two questions: "Who gets to decide what is censored?" And, "Who might the decider be in the future?"

Democracy needs strong, trusted institutions to persist. Libraries and universities are at the heart of a healthy democracy and so our actions carry extra weight for our collective future. When everything is seen through a political lens, including non-partisan institutions in our society like universities and libraries, then everything those institutions do is at risk of falling prey to those who use politically motivated reasoning. This will quickly erode that institution's authority and influence in the broader society. If we do aspire to strengthen our libraries, which like all institutions are easier to tear down than to rebuild, we should think about the potential damage that could be done to their – and our own – integrity when we apply content warnings. Failure to uphold our own profession's core values almost by definition erodes our stature and credibility as cultural heritage institutions. Because books are symbols of free expression and have been for a very long time, libraries are the foremost institution charged with upholding the values of intellectual freedom and anti-censorship that a free society associates with books. We benefit every day from this legacy as we seek to strengthen libraries as a public good. It is our symbolic and cultural capital, and it is valuable and powerful. We dip our toe into the warm pool of censorship at our peril.

[1] Attributed to librarian Jo Godwin. "Something to Offend Everyone," April 9, 2019, https://www.bklynlibrary.org/podcasts/something-offend-everyone.

[2] "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, July 13, 2015, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretation/labeling-systems.

[3] "Hate Speech and Hate Crime," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, December 12, 2017, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/hate.

[4] Hate speech is a category of speech that is only not protected under the First Amendment if it is directly linked to causing imminent harm ("when it directly incites imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group.") (cite: "Hate Speech and Hate Crime.")

[5] A. Broadfield, *A Philosophy of Librarianship.* (London: Grafton, 1949), 11.

[6] Of course, these values have deeper roots in the profession. "Every reader his book. Every book its reader." S. R. (Shiyali Ramamrita). Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science.*, Publication Series / Madras Library Association, no. 2 (London: Goldston, 1931). "Library Bill of Rights," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, June 30, 2006, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill., "Professional Ethics," Text, Tools, Publications & Resources, May 19, 2017, https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics., "The Freedom to Read Statement," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, July 26, 2006, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement.

[7] Trina Magi et al., *Intellectual Freedom Manual: Ninth Edition* (American Library Association, 2015), 140, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsb-ebooks/detail.action?docID=2068950.

[8] "Labeling Systems."

[9] "First Amendment and Censorship," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, June 13, 2008, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship.

[10] "Labeling Systems."

[11] "Labeling and Rating Systems Q&A," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, May 29, 2007, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/labelingratingqa.

[12] "The Freedom to Read Statement."

[13] Magi et al., *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 248.

[14] Emily Knox, "'The Books Will Still Be in the Library': Narrow Definitions of Censorship in the Discourse of Challengers," *Library Trends* 62, no. 4 (2014): 742, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2014.0020.

[15] Knox, 745–47. While modern definitions of content warnings are markedly different from content labels, *The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist* defines content warning as an example of a trigger warning: "A verbal or written notice that precedes potentially sensitive content. Such notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own well-being." ("The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist," April 20, 2021, 28, https://www.archives.gov/files/news/archivists-task-force-on-racism-report.pdf.)

[16] Knox, "'The Books Will Still Be in the Library,'" 749.

[17] David Bromwich, "What Are We Allowed to Say?," *London Review of Books*, September 21, 2016, 1, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n18/david-bromwich/what-are-we-allowed-to-say.

[18] Conor Friedersdorf, "The Educators Who Decided That Context Doesn't Matter," The Atlantic, February 7, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/logical-end-language-policing/621500/.

[19] Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law: Volume 2: Offense to Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1093/0195052153.001.0001.

[20] "Books cannot be legitimately banned on the grounds of offensiveness, by virtue of the standard of reasonable avoidability." Feinberg, 45.

[21] A "List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description" is "a compilation of statements from libraries and archives on harmful or offensive language in description and bias in cataloging. This list includes statements about problematic language in both description and resources themselves, as statements about resources will frequently discuss the description of those resources." "List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description – Cataloging Lab," updated March 2022, https://cataloginglab.org/list-of-statements-on-bias-in-library-and-archives-description/.

[22] See bibliography in "Protocols for Native American Archival Materials," April 2007, https://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/protocols.html.

[23] See the subsection "Providing Context." "Protocols for Native American Archival Materials."

[24] "CritCat.Org: Resources," CritCat.org, May 1, 2021, https://critcat.org/resources/.

[25] "It is clear we cannot – and should not – conduct business as usual between sobs." Michelle Caswell, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July 2017): 222–35, https://doi.org/10.1086/692299.

[26] "Temple University Libraries | SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful," June 2019, https://library.temple.edu/policies/scrc-statement-on-potentially-harmful-language-in-archival-description-and-cataloging.

[27] Armando Suárez, "Inclusive Description Working Group," *This Side of Metadata* (blog), February 28, 2020, https://blogs.princeton.edu/techsvs/2020/02/28/inclusive-description-working-group/.

[28] Alexis A. Antracoli et al., "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources," October 2019, https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf.

[29] "Statement on Language in Archival Description."

[30] Molly Copeland, "LibGuides: The Boston Globe Library Newspaper Clipping Files: Anatomy of a Newspaper Clipping File," December 2019, https://simmonslis.libguides.com/newspaper-clippings/fileguide.

[31] "List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description – Cataloging Lab."

[32] "ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians | RBMS - Rare Books & Manuscripts Section," http://web.archive.org/web/20190625013600/https://rbms.info/standards/code_of_ethics/. "As stewards of the cultural record, practitioners also bear a responsibility to represent historically underrepresented and marginalized voices, recognizing that diversity is complex and intersectional, and that silences, gaps, and poor description resulting from historical biases have the potential to do great harm." The prior version did not reference harm. "ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians | RBMS - Rare Books & Manuscripts Section."

The concept of "harm" in archival description was introduced in the August 2020 revision of the SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics ("SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics | Society of American Archivists," 2020, https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics.) "Develop and follow professional standards that promote transparency and mitigate harm." and "As stewards of the historical record, archivists should be mindful of the ways in which their professional work can function both as harmful force and reparative resource." added in August 2020 revision. The prior version did not reference harm. "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics | Society of American Archivists," July 30, 2020, http://web.archive.org/web/20200730111856/https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics.

[33] For example, "There is violence in the records." Kirsten Wright, "Archival Interventions and the Language We Use," *Archival Science* 19, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 333, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09306-y.

[34] Jack M. Battaglia, "Regulation of Hate Speech by Educational Institutions: A Proposed Policy," *Santa Clara Law Review* 31, no. 2 (1991 1990): 345–92.

[35] Matsuda, Mari J., "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story," in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 36.

[36] Matsuda, Mari J., 40.

[37] Lawrence, Charles, "If He Hollers Let Him Go," in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 74.

[38] Delgado, Richard, "Words That Wound: A Tort for Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name Calling," in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview press, 1993), 94.

[39] Peter Gellatly, *Sex Magazines in the Library Collection: A Scholarly Study of Sex in Serials and Periodicals : A Monographic Supplement to the Serials Librarian (Volume 4, 1979/1980) / Edited with an Introd. by Peter Gellatly.* (New York: Haworth Press, 1981).

[40] Valerie Nye, *True Stories of Censorship Battles in America's Libraries* (Chicago, IL: ALA Editions, 2012), 62.

[41] Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 190–248.

[42] Characterizations of words and ideas justifying content warnings include: ableist, American imperialist ideologies, biased, colonialist, derogatory, homophobic, inappropriate, misogynoir, objectionable, prejudiced, problematic, racist, sexist, stereotyped, violent views and opinions, white supremacist ideologies, xenophobic opinions and attitudes.

[43] "Archives and Special Collections Policies," University of Nebraska Omaha, December 17, 2021, https://www.unomaha.edu/criss-library/about-us/library-policies/archives-policies.php.

[44] Emphasis added. Christine Weideman, "Guide to Using Special Collections at Yale University: Statement on Harmful Language in Archival Description," November 2020, https://guides.library.yale.edu/specialcollections/statementondescription.

[45] David Bromwich, "The New Campus Censors," November 5, 2017, 3, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-new-campus-censors/.

[46] Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law Volume 1: Harm to Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 45–46, https://doi.org/10.1093/0195046641.001.0001.

[47] Feinberg, 46.

48 Ariel Dorfman, "The Futility of Censorship | Ariel Dorfman," April 7, 2022, 32, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/04/07/the-futility-of-censorship-dangerous-ideas-eric-berkowitz/.

49 Debora Shuger, "The Regulation of Language in Medieval Theology: The Summa Theologica of St Thomas Aquinas," in *Censorship Moments: Reading Texts in the History of Censorship and Freedom of Expression*, ed. Geoff Kemp, Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 33–38, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472593078.ch-005.

50 Shuger, 34.

51 Dorfman, "The Futility of Censorship | Ariel Dorfman," 32.

52 Viktor Klemperer said of Nazi Germany, "Words, idioms and sentence structures [were] imposed … in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously." Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI, Lingua Tertii Imperii : A Philologist's Notebook / Victor Klemperer ; Translated by Martin Brady* (London ; Athlone Press, 2000), 15.

53 J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship / J.M. Coetzee.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 133.

54 Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, "Why It's a Bad Idea to Tell Students Words Are Violence," The Atlantic, July 18, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/07/why-its-a-bad-idea-to-tell-students-words-are-violence/533970/.

55 "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist," 12.

56 "Potentially Harmful Content Alert: See NARA's Statement," which links to https://www.archives.gov/research/reparative-description/harmful-content.

57 ; Magi et al., *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 77–99.

58 Emily J. M. Knox, "Supporting Intellectual Freedom: Symbolic Capital and Practical Philosophy in Librarianship," *The Library Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (January 2014): 14, https://doi.org/10.1086/674033.

59 Knox, 15.

60 Brianna McLaughlin and Juliet L. Hardesty, "Content Warnings and Harmful Language Statements: Embedding Empathy in the Research Process," October 27, 2021, https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/26863.

61 The DPLA does in fact indicate its partner libraries may or may not respond, and here helpfully references "potential harm" in that context (though not other contexts). "DPLA's Statement on Potentially Harmful Content," Digital Public Library of America, n.d., https://dp.la/about/harmful-language-statement.

62 Society of American Archivists Protocols take a more restrictive approach to Native American records, including closing records and collections and altering descriptions, than archival communities in the UK and Australia. Alicia Chilcott, "Towards Protocols for Describing Racially Offensive Language in UK Public Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 359–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09314-y.

63 "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist," 13.

64 "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist," 12.

65 Noah Huffman, "Auditing Archival Description for Harmful Language: A Computer and Community Effort," *Bitstreams: The Digital Collections Blog* (blog), August 26, 2021, https://blogs.library.duke.edu/bitstreams/2021/08/26/auditing-archival-description-for-harmful-language/.

66 Huffman.

67 Rachel L. Frick and Merrilee Profitt, "Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-Informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice" (Dublin OH: OCLC, April 2022), https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/2022/oclcresearch-reimagine-descriptive-workflows-a4.pdf.

68 "The Brennan Library [at Lasell College] eliminated potentially offensive items. In the midst of a campus climate emphasizing inclusivity, acceptance of alternative points of view, and tolerance toward the variety of cultures represented in the student body, the library could not condone the retention of materials representing antiquated perspectives. In response to questions about the importance of keeping such items for historical perspective, library staff felt prepared to point patrons to contemporary works that include historical overviews of topics such as race, gender, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues." Lydia A. Sampson, Amy Thurlow, and Del Hornbuckle, "Extreme Makeover: How We Decreased Our Collection by 40% and Simultaneously Increased It by 50% in 10 Months," in *Roll with the Times, or the Times Roll Over*

You: Charleston Conference Proceedings, 2016 (Purdue University Press, 2017), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/62521.

69 Melissa Gonzalez, "Diversity Collection Audit & Assessment: Further Reading," June 2022, https://libguides.uwf.edu/c.php?g=1057279&p=8079152; "Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity: A Framework" (draft document), 2022, 4–5, https://acrl.ala.org/RacialEquityFramework/.

70 "Evaluating Library Collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," June 25, 2019, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/evaluatinglibrary. "Evaluating Library Collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," captured July 24, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180724162356/http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/evaluatinglibrary.

71 "Opinion | Another University Learns the Hard Way about Chinese Censorship on Campus," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/09/another-university-learns-hard-way-about-chinese-censorship-campus/.

72 FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) tracks instances that relate to academic freedom ("Scholars Under Fire – Full Text - FIRE," n.d., https://www.thefire.org/research/publications/miscellaneous-publications/scholars-under-fire/scholars-under-fire-full-text/.).

73 AAUP, "On Trigger Warnings," AAUP, September 8, 2014, https://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings.

74 Adam L. Schiff, "SACO Participants' Manual" (Library of Congress Cataloging Distribution Service, 2001), https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/documents/sacomanual.pdf. Sanford Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People / by Sanford Berman.* (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1971).

75 Kate Holterhoff, "From Disclaimer to Critique: Race and the Digital Image Archivist," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 011, no. 3 (August 28, 2017): para. 5.

76 Wake Forest University Special Collections and Archives, "Insensitive and Discriminatory Content in Wake Forest's Howler Yearbooks and Other Records," ZSR Library, n.d., https://zsr.wfu.edu/special/research/guides/insensitive-and-discriminatory-content-in-wake-forests-howler-yearbooks-and-other-records/.

77 Oliver Batchelor, "Navigating the Campus Past: College Yearbook Controversies," *Reference Services Review* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 5–14, https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-09-2019-0059.

78 "This digital archive includes all copies of the Spinster without abridgement or exclusions. Images contained in the digital archives and in the originally published yearbooks contain, in some years, pictures or content that is offensive and is not condoned by the University. We maintain the full contents of each issue of the yearbook for historical accuracy but we believe it is important to provide additional educational context to learn from these depictions or incidents of cultural appropriation. We have linked to educational materials from the specific yearbooks where the issue has arisen. Hollins encourages you to visit https://libguides.hollins.edu/blackface to learn more about the history of blackface and its impact." "The Spinster | Hollins Publications | Hollins University," n.d., https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/spinster/.

79 "Mukurtu," Mukurtu CMS, n.d., https://mukurtu.org/.

80 Holterhoff, "From Disclaimer to Critique," para. 5.

81 Holterhoff, para. 22.

82 Wright, "Archival Interventions and the Language We Use," 345.

83 For example: Chilcott, "Towards Protocols for Describing Racially Offensive Language in UK Public Archives"; Wright, "Archival Interventions and the Language We Use"; Holterhoff, "From Disclaimer to Critique"; Frick and Profitt, "Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-Informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice"; Wilson Special Collections Library, "University Libraries Releases Guide to Conscious Editing for Finding Aids and Catalog Records – UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries," 2022, https://library.unc.edu/2022/06/conscious-editing-guide/. "Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices in UCLA Library Special Collections | UCLA Library," n.d., https://www.library.ucla.edu/location/library-special-collections/discover-collections/toward-ethical-inclusive-descriptive-practices-ucla-library-special-collections.

84 Also known as "auditing legacy descriptions" and "reparative processing." Melissa Adler, "The Case for Taxonomic Reparations," *KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION* 43, no. 8 (2016): 630–40, https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2016-8-630; Alexis A. Antracoli et al., "Archives for Black Lives in

Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources," 7–8; "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist."

[85] Johnson, Doria D., Drake, Jarrett M., and Caswell, Michelle, "From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and Back Again: Towards a Liberation Theology for Memory Work," in *Reflections from the 2016 Mandela Dialogues*, 2016, 2, https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues.

[86] Frick and Profitt, "Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-Informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice," 15.

[87] The Archivist's Task Force on Racism report recommends reconsidering More Product Less Process to achieve Reparative Description goals. "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism. Report to the Archivist," 84–85.

[88] This is an example of the implications of "harmful" ideas rather than words, in the domain of librarianship. "Harmful Detours and Healing Redirects," Urban Libraries Council, updated August 17, 2021, https://www.urbanlibraries.org/resources/harmful-detours-and-healing-redirects.

[89] David K. Berninghausen, *The Flight from Reason: Essays on Intellectual Freedom in the Academy, the Press, and the Library / David K. Berninghausen.* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1975), 32.

[90] Sophia Leung said in a talk at the University of Michigan, "when you choose inaction, you choose to perpetuate the same cycle of harm and violence that many of you claim to want to change." "The 'Ordinary' Existence of White Supremacy In Libraries, Feat Sofia Leung - August 26th, 2021 - U-M Library MediaSpace | MiVideo," August 26, 2021, https://lib.mivideo.it.umich.edu/media/t/1_lxqpxusy.

[91] "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," AAUP, July 10, 2006, https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure.

[92] Neutrality is a much-debated topic that often - but not always - runs aground on semantic confusion. Broadfield, *A Philosophy of Librarianship.*, 78–79. De-Shalit explores Leo Strauss's ideas on the important differences between impartiality and neutrality; Avner De-Shalit, "Teaching Political Philosophy and Academic Neutrality," *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 97–120, https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878505049837.

[93] Broadfield, *A Philosophy of Librarianship.*, 70.

[94] "[This article] considers the balancing act between reproducing this language and potentially causing offence and distress, and not providing full and accurate information if it is not displayed." Wright, "Archival Interventions and the Language We Use." 331.

[95] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 12.

[96] Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law Volume 3: Harm to Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 27, 32, 39–40, https://doi.org/10.1093/0195059239.001.0001.

[97] "Labeling Systems."