Group Therapy — A Case of Discredited Research

Column Editor: Jack G. Montgomery (Associate Professor, Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY) <jack.montgomery@WKU.edu>

Column Editor’s Note: I posted this question to COLLDV-L and received a host of thoughtful answers that span the range of opinion on this complex issue. I sincerely thank all those who weighed in on this question. A similar issue has arisen concerning Disney’s Baby Einstein product. (See the New York Times 10/23/09 issue http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/24/education/24baby.html?_r=1) However, the following answers concern the Bellies’ book. — JM

GRYPE: Submitted Anonymously. In the September 2009 issue of Against the Grain was an article by Steve McKenzie of Catawba College entitled “The case for getting rid of a celebrated book.” It his article, McKenzie discussed the discredited title Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture by Michael Bellies which was first given the Bancroft Literary Prize in 2001. Later in 2002, the prize was withdrawn and the author discredited due to professional scholarly misconduct with regard to the research and its presentation. McKenzie made the case for removing such a book from the library’s collection. Although I understand McKenzie’s argument, I am personally confused as to what our responsibility is in such matters. I would like to hear from other librarians but would like to remain anonymous. Can you help me?

RESPONSE: Submitted by Linwood DeLong (Collections Coordinator, University of Winnipeg Library, Winnipeg, MB, Canada)

I am a Canadian and therefore possibly not totally qualified to weigh in on this one, but because it is an intriguing topic, I will do my best.

To me, the issue should be first and foremost, the quality of the books in our collection. If we discovered that a history book about any topic was full of factual errors, based on faulty research, citing phantom sources, etc., then we would remove the book for those reasons. We remove many old books because they contain outdated information — a book about the U.S. that refers the “48 states and their capitals” would disappear from our shelves, unless it were a famous travel book, such as De Tocqueville’s accounts of his travels.

Books that take a controversial stand — we had a recent, highly publicized case in Canada about a book published by McGill Queen’s University Press that took a very controversial stand about native peoples’ issues — are different. Our library, probably many libraries, bought the book, because it presented this viewpoint and would enable students to study the articulation of the viewpoint and respond to it. At the far end of this spectrum are completely nonsensical books (we all see promotions for self-published books) that are so un-scholarly that they are not useful at all in our collections. We don’t buy those.

We probably have some books in our collection that deny that the Armenian genocide ever occurred. Many of us would dispute this, but propaganda material (if it is clearly understood to be so) can still be useful, again for study and research purposes.

I’m starting to stray a bit from the topic. If we had Arming America in our collection, or a book about a medical topic in which the results were demonstrated to be false because of the use of phantom data or the deliberate misuse of existing data, I would argue for the removal of the book from our collection.

I guess that I am trying to draw a line between factual inaccuracies, misrepresentation of data, etc. and controversial opinions. It appears, from what I saw in the email on COLLDV-L, that Arming America is of the first type.

I enjoy collections development problems or challenges and would be pleased to respond to others, if you think that my response is useful.

RESPONSE: Submitted by Sarah Tusa (Associate Professor, Coordinator of Collection Development & Acquisitions, Mary & John Gray Library, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX)

First of all, I must admit that I am not familiar with the details of the complaints against the author’s research conduct or methodology, but it would seem that the validity of the information presented in the book was very probably tainted by the improper research and invalid presentation of the research results, then that book is very similar to an outdated edition of any other book. If the author were to produce a revised (and corrected) edition, we would definitely withdraw the original edition. Some larger, more comprehensive (probably ARL) libraries might make the argument to keep the original, tainted edition as a part of publishing history. However, I personally would be tempted to withdraw the Arming America book even without the prospect of getting a new, revised edition, for the same reason that we withdraw out-of-date medical books: We at least attempt to minimize the amount of outdated or invalid and/or discredited information that our students can get their hands on in our library.

continued on page 60

Against the Grain / December 2009 - January 2010 <http://www.against-the-grain.com> 59
I don’t consider it censorship, if the errors in research and in the end product are documented. As an integral part of a teaching institution, the library has a responsibility to try to provide the most valid and up-to-date information possible. If we had the space to keep such a book, I suspect that we would put a note in one of the 500 fields of the marc record to cite the documented grievance against the book and place a similar note inside the front cover. To allow this book to be published and then to award it before discovering the problems with the research makes me wonder about the due diligence of those involved in the publishing and then the awards process. However, a book with discredited information does not really have a place in our library, as far as I am concerned. I would, however, take into consideration the extent to which the validity of the information is compromised — and hope that there are reviews to guide in that determination.

RESPONSE: Submitted by Meris Mandernach (Collection Management Librarian/ Chemistry Liaison, JMU Libraries & Educational Technologies, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA)

I think that a discredited book would likely get more use in a library collection due to the hype around the situation. I think that if it falls within the guidelines of the weeding policy then it could be removed, but if not, then it could become a teaching moment and used as an example during instruction of what constitutes scholarly misconduct.

RESPONSE: Submitted by Paul Metz (Assistant to the Dean for Special Projects, University Libraries, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA)

The question you posed on COLLDV-L never came up quite that directly in my 20 years as head of collection development at Virginia Tech, but for what it’s worth here’s some of what I did, and some of what I think I would or would not have done, when/if such issues arose: Fatwa vs. S. Rushdie, we put The Satanic Verses on Reserve for its own protection “room temperature confusion” (if you remember the cold fusion controversy out of Utah), Soviet-style Lamarckian evolution (hopelessly wrong), other discredited science — we never went looking for it because we weren’t going to pull it from the stacks even if we found it. You have to trust your readers, and I think that in the case you cited in your note that’s what I would do — in other words, nothing.

Errata slips sent by the publishers of (usually) scientific journals — we were happy to tip them into the issues, though I’m pretty sure we always followed through and did so.

One of the most interesting issues for me was gift items. I didn’t mind having the very occasional book saying that global warming was all wrong, the occasional DVD from Scientology, the occasional item arguing against any gun regulation, because I think there’s a place for all views even if I find them nutso. But I was cautious and took only the occasional representative piece because I know that in these debates, one side is always much better funded than the other and so to take gifts too actually feeds a bias... just as the rich right in this country has very cleverly done by founding and underwriting innumerable “objective think tanks” like the CATO Institute.

RESPONSE: Submitted Anonymously.

This sort of question came up in my library some years ago regarding a book by Louis Farrakhan. My opinion is that however a librarian may find a book reprehensible, and even if the material therein is considered or proven false, a decision must be made on the basis of the importance of the title for research and teaching. There are many books in the library based on incorrect or deliberately misleading research. Mein Kampf comes to mind. I think as a university library these materials must be made available to established scholars and budding learners. Learning critical thinking and reading is part of the education process. In the case you cite, it appears that the history prize was taken way, which seems right for that body, however it is up to the librarian to decide the importance of the book for his collection. In this case since it is a controversial book I would keep it in the collection.

By the way we kept the Farrakhan book despite the demands of a member of the university community.

RESPONSE: Submitted by John P. Abbott, MS MSL (Coordinator, Collection Management University Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC)

I thank Mr. McKinzie for raising the issue and opening an interesting discussion.

My view is retain it and forget about it. The postmodern library does not pretend to arbitrate absolute quality or accuracy in the materials it holds. If librarians understood deeply the areas in which we collect, we would know that there are thousands of books our shelves containing false or erroneous content. Almost every book I read in an area I understand well contains significant errors due either to typos, poor editing, or insufficient research. By McKinzie’s standard, we would block access to almost all Websites because they are inaccurate and knowingly inaccurate. Students today, after a life of Web-searching, are deeply skeptical and are unlikely to be significantly misled by Bellesiles’ book unless it is the only work they consult for their pro/con Eng 101 paper.

Out of date health works and other works that clearly put a reader in known danger — and hope that there are reviews to guide in that determination.

RESPONSE: Submitted Jack G. Montgomery (Associate Professor, Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky University Libraries, Bowling Green, KY)

This is a familiar topic for me. My friend and colleague, John Budd conducted his own research of Medline from 1966 to August 1997 revealed that 235 articles had been retracted, 86 of which were deemed to be due to misconduct. It was alarming to learn, however, that these 235 articles had been cited 2034 times even after the retraction notice had appeared. This issue speaks to long-term, largely irresolvable problems with the whole process of academic research and ethical standards.

As to this book, my thoughts and suggestions are as follows: I did not remove the discredited book from the shelves as, even as a fraudulent piece of scholarship. It could be an object of study for research on academic fraud. I did however, glue a disclaimer inside the book stating the issue but also stating that the book is retained for historical purposes and warning the patron to use this material at their own risk.

Here is a sample label that was placed across from the title page of Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture.

“Attention: Discredited Research! Please be aware that this book and the research contained within it has been discredited and the research declared fraudulent by the peer-review process. We are retaining this title in our library for historical purposes only. Use this book at your own risk! WKU Libraries.”

RESPONSE: Submitted by Douglas Black (Collection Development Librarian, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI)

While McKinzie does have a point regarding responsibility for our collections, I’d say his argument presents a false dichotomy between avoiding censorship and maintaining our integrity. As knowledge advances and cultural perspectives develop and change, it’s worth recording not only the honest errors arising from what simply had yet to be learned but also the hiccups and blind alleys arising from human nature. While Bellesiles’ intellectual fraud doesn’t rise to the level of Polonmaic texts or Mein Kampf, I think the general principle still applies.

The fact that Arming America is unreliable gives it some value as part of the cultural debate surrounding its topic. From that perspective, it’s reasonably good material for continued on page 61
The science of service.

At Eastern Book Company, we’ve spent more than half a century shaping our unique brand of service. The first step is fulfilling our customers’ orders with unmatched speed and accuracy. Then we custom-fit our operations to our customers’ needs, allowing libraries to streamline processes and maximize budgets. And finally, we cultivate next-generation technologies to help our customers build the libraries their users need.

Eastern Book Company
1-800-937-0331
www.ebc.com

Group Therapy
from page 60

I have been in the librarianship field for 35 years, and the last time I heard, there was still a human right called “Intellectual Freedom” that said we could read what we wanted to read. The part of libraries and librarians is to make available materials for patrons to read, not be judge because of award activity or people groups to pull materials from shelves. When we do this we are taking the “Critical Thinking” development away from our young developing college minds that have not yet encountered all those GOOD or BAD things out in the world yet.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by Christy J. Wrenn
(Director of Library Services, Centenary College of Louisiana, Magale Library, Shreveport, LA)

As well as I remember, our good friend Oprah Winfrey was in this same pickle once when she interviewed John Frey regarding his book “A Million Little Pieces.” Boy was her face RED after the interview! However, her endorsement turned it into one of the top selling books of 2005, but she felt conned by the author. That book was not pulled from bookstore or library shelves.

This is the same type of situation with Steve McKinzie at Catawba College. Mr. McKinzie felt that he had to become one of the Library Police and save a college student(s) from ever reading this book, or using it as a reference in a term paper. According to him, this book did not stack up or was not written in a way that someone else thought that the book should have been written.

Rumors
from page 30

been appointed Director of the Libraries at KAUST (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology). He assumed his duties in September 2009. KAUST is an international, graduate-level research university dedicated to inspiring a new age of scientific achievement. The University is set to open in September 2009 with degrees in 11 fields of study. The core campus is located on more than 36 square kilometers along the Red Sea at Thuwal — about 80 kilometers north of Saudi Arabia’s second largest city, Jeddah. www.kaust.edu.sa/

My son Raymond went to West Point many years ago so I was interested to read that Bryn Geffert, library director and associate professor of history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, has been named Amherst College’s new librarian of the college. Geffert will start work at Amherst on Jan. 21, 2010. Particularly interested in research instruction, in libraries’ efforts to guide the changes afoot in academic publishing and in facilitating the digitization of special collections, Geffert was the “unanimous and enthusiastic choice of the search committee,” according to Amherst Dean of the Faculty Gregory S. Call. Geffert became the director of West Point’s library in 2008 and went on to help open and oversee the institution’s new library. A high school basketball and football official, Geffert also enjoys cross-country skiing and running and expressed delight about moving to a state “that enjoys good snowfalls and the Boston Marathon.” And I would say that’s a good thing! www.amherst.edu/