
Beacon for Freedom for Expression: Censorship and “Reference activism” in a Global Perspective

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Abstract:

In this paper I discuss the international censorship database Beacon for Freedom of Expression (www.beaconforfreedom.org) as a resource that combines reference librarianship and activism. I will examine the internet-based database as both a product of and a tool for reference librarianship by exploring examples of database content and international collaboration between librarianship and activism. The goals of the database are to document historic and current censorship in a global perspective, provide a collaborative learning resource, and facilitate dialogue about censorship and freedom of expression. Thus, I argue that with continued international collaboration and promotion, the database has the potential to help people to do something, make something, and change something.

Reference librarianship illustrates one of the ways that the library delivers access to information, while reference services encompass many forms of information management. This interaction is not neutral but rather directly and indirectly mediated by the library staff and thus presents an opportunity to advocate implicit and explicit values. In this way, reference services are important not only to the flow of knowledge and information, but also the transfer of values. Reference tools designed specifically to preserve and give access to information of a political nature enhance the opportunity to advocate political values. This is particularly so when the highlighted values also reflect principles central to the library's role in social infrastructures that empower people and strengthen democratic values.

Beacon for Freedom of Expression is an example of a reference tool that is founded on principles of advocacy and activism. According to Oxford English Dictionary, activism is a “policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; specifically the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.”¹ In the mid-1990s, the Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression initiated the database as a monument to censored media around the world. The idea was to collaborate with national and university libraries and press-freedom organizations to preserve data about censorship in a global perspective and thus illustrate that throughout history and all over the world, censorship has threatened free expression and access to information. The database

¹ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1957?redirectedFrom=activism#eid>

combines reference data and information collected by an international network of freedom of expression advocates. The result is a reference tool that reflects censorship trends, as well as highlights freedom of expression and access to information.

Preservation and transfer of knowledge are core values of the library. They are also implicit aspects of access to information and central goals of Beacon for Freedom of Expression. The database is a poignant example of what collaboration between librarianship and activism can create. The maintenance and promotion of this unique reference tool relies on sharing information about current and historic censorship, and thus illustrates how reference librarianship can successfully coexist with activism, while being rooted in the library's core principles of promoting access to information and the free flow of knowledge.

Keywords: Censorship, freedom of expression, activism, reference, database

Is reference a form of activism? How does this relate to the social role of reference librarianship in the transfer of knowledge? How do reference services help people to do something, make something, or change something?

Beacon for Freedom for Expression Censorship and “Reference activism” in a Global Perspective

In this paper I discuss the international censorship database Beacon for Freedom of Expression (www.beaconforfreedom.org) as a resource that combines reference librarianship and activism. I will examine the internet-based database as both a product of and a tool for reference librarianship by exploring examples of database content and international collaboration between librarianship and activism. The goals of the database are to document historic and current censorship in a global perspective, provide a collaborative learning resource, and facilitate dialogue about censorship and freedom of expression. Thus, I argue that with continued international collaboration and promotion, the database has the potential to help people to do something, make something, and change something.

The Library as Infrastructure: The Library and Activism

Access to education and information are important pillars of social and personal development. This makes libraries, along with schools, a vital component of social infrastructure. The notion that libraries are part of a democracy/democratizing infrastructure has long been promoted by international organizations, such as IFLA and UNESCO. UNESCO has emphasized the importance of libraries as institutions that democratize information and knowledge: noting that libraries help to "empower people so that they can access and contribute to information and knowledge flows."² The priorities have included strengthening the "information structures" services, programs, standards and institutions, which promote access to information and knowledge.³

² http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=4562&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

³ Other important aspects are Archives, Community Multimedia Centres, E-Governance, Ethical Issues of Information Society, Freedom of Information, Information Processing Tools, Internet Governance, Libraries, PC Refurbishment, and Public Domain Information. According to UNESCO, library and archives are important social actors in information structures and especially at the local level. UNAL (UNESCO Network of Associated Libraries) was established in 1990 to promote cooperation between public libraries in areas such as human rights, peace and illiteracy and environmental protection. The network consists of about 500 libraries.
http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1506&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

IFLA and FAIFE

IFLA's statement of purpose acknowledges the role of libraries in social infrastructure. IFLA includes as core values: "The belief that people, communities and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas and artwork for their social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic well-being" *⁴ IFLA's Committee on Access to information and freedom of expression (FAIFE) reports on threats intellectual freedom in the library sector worldwide.⁵ Since 2001, IFLA/FAIFE has published *World Report* series, a collection of papers with reports on intellectual freedom in individual member countries.

The Library and the transfer of values

According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, activism is a "policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; specifically the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change."⁶ Let me suggest that there are two important criteria for reference activism: active participation and vigorous campaigning to bring about change (political or social). In many ways these values are implicit in the *raison d'être* of libraries today. Nevertheless it requires that we acknowledge that facilitating access to information and knowledge is an opportunity to transfer values. As the library plays an important role in social and personal development, reference activism involves choosing certain values for calculated reasons with a desired outcome in mind.

Reference librarianship illustrates one of the ways that the library delivers access to information, while reference services encompass many forms of information management. This interaction is not neutral but rather directly and indirectly mediated by the library staff and thus presents an opportunity to advocate implicit and explicit values. In this way, reference services are important not only to the flow of knowledge and information, but also the transfer of values. Reference tools designed specifically to preserve and give access to information of a political nature enhance the opportunity to advocate political values. This is particularly so when the highlighted values also reflect principles central to the library's role in social infrastructures that empower people and strengthen democratic values.

The library's main tasks are preserving, archiving, and providing access to information. Moreover, it is also a place where new knowledge emerges, making it also a productive institution. These tasks make the library a symbol for the free flow of ideas and freedom of expression. The services of the library help to create informed citizens and thus the library is important to anti-censorship work. As Jeffrey Garrett notes in a review of books about the destruction of libraries—also referred bibliocide, bibliocaust or biblioclasm—the library is not only society's "soft" symbolic infrastructure (Garrett 2009). The library is closely related to its content and services.

As an institution dedicated to access to information, the library is an ideal institution for promoting censorship awareness and freedom of expression. This explains why Beacon of Freedom of Expression is managed by the National Library, but it does not explain how the resource emerged.

Censorship

Censorship—the control of free expression and freedom of speech—is as old as social life, and still exists in many forms and in all parts of the world. In ancient societies censorship was considered a legitimate instrument for regulating the moral and political life of the population. The term censor can be traced to the office of censor established in Rome in 443 BC. Censorship can be direct, indirect and self-imposed, and fueled by political, moral or religious ideologies. As a result of the 1948 [United](#)

⁴ http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=19488&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁵ On FAIFE's website intellectual freedom is described as: [...] The individual's right to have and express opinions and to seek and receive information. Intellectual Freedom is the foundation of democracy." Spirit of Freedom is the core of the library concept. <http://www.ifla.org/en/about-faife>

⁶ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1957?redirectedFrom=activism#eid>

[Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) freedom of expression is regarded a basic human right. Article 19 of the declaration states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.ⁱ

Beacon for Freedom of Expression

The international censorship database [Beacon for Freedom of Expression](#) is a free internet-based resource contains almost 50 000 references to censored books, newspapers and other media types, as well as literature on censorship. Beacon has three goals:

- Preserve information about historic and current censorship in a global perspective.
- Provide a collaborative learning resource for researchers, students and activists.
- Facilitate dialogue about censorship, freedom of expression and human rights through its website and programs.

The books, newspapers, radio/television broadcasts & websites registered in the Beacon database have been censored:

- On moral, religious or political grounds
- By a state, governing authority or state-related body

The database is a product of international collaboration and illustrates how civil society and activist organizations, libraries and archives can co-create resources that help raise awareness about historic and current censorship, as well as promote freedom of expression.

Background and Vision

Beacon was created as a tool for access to knowledge and information, and was dedicated to the [New Library of Alexandria](#) in Egypt in 2003. In 1997 the Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression (NFFE 1995-2001) completed a worldwide survey to identify the availability of information sources on current and historical censorship. The survey confirmed that the information is often available as printed lists or in manual files. The NFFE also concluded that historical records of censored books and newspapers are managed by state agencies, university or national libraries.

Based on the NFFE's study, author and illustrator Mette Newth, took the initiative to create a censorship database to celebrate the opening of the New Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The idea was to harvest the very content of the database from other civil society and activist organizations, as well as from libraries and archives through ongoing international cooperation and dialogue.⁷

The result was a prototype for an international database that was built up around several historical examples of censorship in [Russia](#), [Lithuania](#), South Africa, and [Norway](#) particularly during World War II, and the Catholic Church's [Index Librorum Prohibitorum](#). The Index Librorum Prohibitorum is a notable example of historic censorship, as it is considered the first systematic inventory of banned literature. The first list was issued in 1559 and the last of the twenty lists was published as late as 1948 and withdrawn in 1966.

⁷ The first campaign to track material for the database focused on contact with libraries in different countries and especially where there has been a history of authoritarian political regimes, that is, places where censorship was a direct result of a prolonged exercise of state authority. Letters were sent to several hundred organizations as well as national and university libraries. Thirty countries from all continents were included in the pilot project. The project creators, focused on countries where there were partners and available information. The database was produced in cooperation with faculty and students at the Faculty of Journalism, Library and Information Science, Oslo University College (OUC).

In addition to examples of historic censorship, the database preserves data about current censorship from, among others, the [International Freedom of Expression \(IFEX\)](#), a global network that works to defend and promote free expression. Members of the IFEX network include journalists' associations, human rights organizations, and other non-governmental actors that promote freedom of expression and democracy in their respective countries. IFEX creates Daily Digest and IFEX This Week, updates about freedom of expression and censorship around the globe. Based on reports from member organizations and their own research, IFEX covers important issues, such as access to information, censorship, digital rights, freedom of assembly, and laws affecting free expression. Often, they report on direct censorship, such as authorities that confiscate books, block websites and interrupt broadcasts.

The IFEX network and communiqué are concrete examples of what activism, reporting and data collection, as well as democratization processes at the micro-level, on the ground. Civil society and activist organizations form an international network to report threats to freedom of expression. Their efforts are democracy in practice or, at the least, instrumental gestures of democracy that protect access to information and freedom of expression. The reports that circulate globally bring to light data that otherwise might go unnoticed. The content of the reports often exemplify why it is necessary to campaign for free expression and fight censorship. Here is an example of the headlines from the communiqué 12 January 2011:

- Tunisia: Government resorts to hacking to stamp out coverage of unrest
- Thailand: Emergency decree lifted but rights violations continue
- United Kingdom: Government vows to reform "laughing stock" libel law
- Turkey: Kurdish editor gets 138 years
- Somalia: Armed groups and politicians behind attacks on journalists, says NUSOJ
- International: UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize open for nominations⁸

12 January 2011

GOVERNMENT RESORTS TO HACKING TO STAMP OUT COVERAGE OF UNREST

Alongside the protests came the media repression. In late December, authorities confiscated from newsstands the 24 December edition of "Al-Mawkif", an opposition weekly, and the 25 December issue of opposition paper "Al-Tariq al-Jadid", reports the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Both issues contained extensive coverage of the events that unfolded in Sidi Bouzid.⁹

Beacon's focus is global and allows the possibility to compare censorship trends in and between countries. This is its uniqueness as a reference tool, and echoes the library's nature in many ways.

What are the *glocal* implications of censorship?

An important aspect of reference activism today focuses on how we can think and act *glocally* to highlight important issues in the library. Censorship is an example of a "glocal" issue. Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes that "People's lives are neither wholly global nor wholly local—they are *glocal*" (Eriksen 2010: 318). Glocality can also refer to the local manifestations of global issues, processes, and circumstances. In terms of censorship, glocality has several dimensions and can apply to how we share, access, experience, interpret, and preserve information and ideas globally and locally.

In the library, one has access to the world in one place, so to speak. More and more there are opportunities to read the same literature, see the same film and television programs and experience the

⁸ IFEX Communiqué Vol. 20 No. 02 | 12 January 2011

⁹ http://www.ifex.org/tunisia/2011/01/12/censorship_of_unrest/

same events. At the same time, having more access to information about the world highlights differences in the world more than before. Although we increasingly have access to similar cultural products and information, we often interpret and understand experiences from our local and national perspectives. Like ideas and values, books, films and other cultural expressions can create different reactions in different places. Thus, because there are varying limits and conditions for freedom of expression in different societies, there are different kinds of censorship and different censorship practices around the world. The Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression was concerned with censorship in a global perspective. It was in the aftermath of the Rushdie controversy and with the reconstruction of the New Library of Alexandria in mind that Beacon for Freedom of Expression was conceived.

The Rushdie Affair: More censorship, more activism, more information?

The Rushdie Affair is perhaps the most well-known example of the global implications of censorship. At the center of the international controversy were Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie and his novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in September 1988 by Viking Penguin. After months of violence and protests against the novel in several countries, on February 14, 1989 Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared a *fatwa*—a death sentence—for Rushdie and his publishers. Rushdie and his family went into hiding and were placed under armed protection. In July 1991 Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of the novel, was murdered in Tokyo. That same year the Italian translator Ettore Capriolo was attacked in Milan. In October 1993, William Nygaard, Rushdie's Norwegian publisher was shot.

The Rushdie Affair became a symbol of the global censorship and the global campaign against censorship. The case includes every conceivable form of censorship, direct, indirect, self-censorship, intimidation and violence. One book was the thread that joined together individuals, events, and different ideas across borders. Criticism of Rushdie was global; however there was also global support. The International Rushdie Defence Committee was started in London, just a few days after the death order was issued in 1989, but within a short time, there were national committees in Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States. Nearly 25 years later, the Rushdie Affair is still a symbol of the global aspects of censorship.¹⁰ Although the case is a well-known, it is by no means exceptional. The Rushdie Affair had a great impact on censorship advocacy and activism, and led to the establishment of the International Parliament of Writers, which worked to protect the physical safety of writers, as well as their freedom of expression.

More reference activism

It is perhaps easier than you think to combine activism and reference librarianship. I am here today suggesting that reference services should not only include activist organizations amongst their trusted sources, but perhaps see activist organizations as one of their most valuable sources when it comes to particular value-based subjects. The professionalization of activism has made such organizations unique sources of alternative information. Here are a few tips for combining activism and reference librarianship for censorship and freedom of expression.

1. Look for regular updates about censorship from a global perspective.

Subscribe to periodic updates from IFEX, Index on Censorship, Freemuse, Article 19 and Sampsonia Way, which are informative sources of censorship information with a global perspective. The organizations facilitate dialogue, raise awareness, campaign on behalf of and support persecuted writers and artists. The organization [Article 19](#), inspired the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, writes and promotes policies and laws that protect free expression around the world. [Freemuse](#)

¹⁰ Sadly, there are many examples of censorship leading to severe persecution and forced exile. In 1994, just a few years into the Rushdie Affair, Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin went into hiding after widespread protests and receiving death threats because of her novel *Lajja* (Shame)(1993), which was later banned in Bangladesh and India.

reports on music censorship around the world and campaigns on behalf of persecuted artists. [Index on Censorship](#) is both an international organization and a journal that promotes freedom of expression. [Sampsonia Way](#) is an online magazine sponsored by City of Asylum Pittsburg, which aims to create a “thriving community for writers, readers and neighbors”. Sampsonia Way and Index on Censorship report news about threats to freedom of expression around the world, and support persecuted writers by publishing original works.

PEN International

PEN international, founded in 1921, promotes writing and freedom of expression. It is an organization for poets, playwrights, essayists, editors and novelists, and has more than 20,000 members in more than 100 countries. The international charter is implemented by the more than 100 national PEN centers around the world. PEN has been active on the international stage promoting censorship and as early as 1933 publically opposed the burning of books in Germany under the Nazi regime. PEN campaigns for persecuted and imprisoned writers all over the world. “Whatever we do and wherever it takes place, we aim to connect the individual to the international, and to connect cultures and languages to readers and writers wherever they live and whatever their circumstances.” The organization’s structure and work illustrate glocality, connecting localities to global issues and processes.

2. Learn about [ICORN](#) and Cities of Refuge in your country.

Get to know ICORN, the Guest Writers and their work. Are there guest writers and member cities in or from your country or area? Invite ICORN guest writers to your institution to discuss their work and or censorship. Look for appropriate opportunities to promote guest writers to your colleagues and users. International Cities of Refuge Network

ICORN, International Cities of Refuge Network, describes an association of cities around the world that provide a persecuted “guest writer” with a safe place to stay and work for a period of time. ICORN guest writers include poets, journalists, cartoonists and translators are from around the world, including Kenya, Yemen, Zimbabwe, Iran, Nagaland, India, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Serbia, Syria, China and Bangladesh, among other places. More than 40 cities in approximately 14 countries are in the network. According to ICORN, “The ICORN member cities and their guest writers connect in a global network of solidarity, creativity and mutual interaction.” The work of ICORN is an example of thinking globally and acting locally to address censorship and exile as a global issue.

3. Share information about [Beacon for Freedom of Expression](#) and submit information about censored media for registration in the database.

Use the international censorship database when looking for information on censored books and censorship. Refer colleagues, students and others to [Beacon](#) for censorship information. Also, help us add information to the database. Look up your country or check for censored material in the database. Submit information about censorship in your country and region or information that seems to be missing for review and eventual registration in the database. Remember that Beacon registers examples of direct censorship by a state, governing authority or state-related body. Beacon does not preserve information about indirect censorship, music or film. We welcome information about censored books, newspapers, radio/television broadcasts and websites.

4. Learn more about activist and advocacy organizations related to your specific field of interest and responsibility, as well as about freedom of expression and anti-censorship activism.

Global freedom of expression and anti-censorship organizations document censorship, collect data, write policy documents, and offer support to national and regional organizations, as well as global organizations such as the UN. Their work highlights the common challenges of censorship. Beacon is

one of several actors that collect, preserve and disseminate information about censorship. The Society of Concerned Citizens, the File Room, Beacon, Freemuse, and Global Voices Advocacy are other net-based initiatives. The File Room is a searchable net-based censorship archive that started as an artist's project by Muntadas, and was originally an art installation produced by Randolph Street Gallery.¹¹ Freemuse focuses on advocacy, policy work and public awareness about music censorship. Global Voices Advocacy is working to defend free speech online for bloggers and average citizens. They are also creating a database of threatened bloggers and journalists.

These examples illustrate how NGOs have become important sources of data and information. Furthermore, as Beacon illustrates, activism can also produce tools, interfaces, and services for preserving and retrieving specific kinds of data.

Concluding remarks

The database is a poignant example of what collaboration between librarianship and activism can create. The maintenance and promotion of this unique reference tool relies on sharing information about current and historic censorship, and thus illustrates how reference librarianship can successfully coexist with activism, while being rooted in the library's core principles of promoting access to information and the free flow of knowledge. Preservation and transfer of knowledge are core values of the library. They are also implicit aspects of access to information and central goals of Beacon for Freedom of Expression.

Now the library has become a cause for activism. Libraries Without Borders, founded in 2007 in France at the initiative of Patrick Weil, describes itself as "one of the leading NGOs working in knowledge and culture-based development in the world and supporting libraries in developing countries". They believe that access to information and the dissemination of culture are two key—yet under-invested components—of human and economic development, and the spread of democratic practices and human rights. The organization also emphasizes the connection between development, democracy and human rights.

"Through creating and reinforcing libraries, training librarians, distributing books, supporting local publishing and designing library networks, Libraries Without Borders actively promotes access to knowledge throughout the world."

Beacon for Freedom of Expression is an example of a reference tool that is founded on principles of advocacy and activism for information and knowledge. In the mid-1990s, the Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression initiated the database as a monument to censored media around the world. The idea was to collaborate with national and university libraries and press-freedom organizations to preserve data about censorship in a global perspective and thus illustrate that throughout history and all over the world, censorship has threatened free expression and access to information. The database combines reference data and information collected by an international network of freedom of expression advocates. The result is a reference tool that reflects censorship trends, as well as highlights freedom of expression and access to information.

When we focus locally on censorship as a global issue it reminds us that access to information and freedom of expression are not yet universal rights practiced everywhere in the world. As international librarians—managing international collections—we have a responsibility to consider the challenges to freedom of expression that directly affect access to information. Censorship—in its many forms—is such a challenge, and its effects are more *glocal* than ever before. For me, this development is evidence that the library will continue to play an important role in the social infrastructure of our societies. Preserving, promoting and giving access to information help to create informed publics. Thus the library's core functions will remain invaluable, particularly in a world where censorship continually threatens freedom of expression, without which access to information, ideas and knowledge would be meaningless.

¹¹Randolph Street Gallery was a non-profit artist run center in Chicago, IL, (1979-1998). The School of Art and Design and the Electronic Visualization Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Chicago also supported the File Room.

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