CENSORSHIP:
THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

by Leonard Hitchcock, Professor Emeritus

Ask a hundred librarians if they approve or disapprove of censorship and ninety-nine will tell you that they disapprove -- and they'll probably do so with some vehemence. Yet certain librarians regularly practice censorship, and do so with the full concurrence of their profession. They don't call it “censorship” however; they call it “redaction.”

“Redaction,” for librarians, means a form of editing in which certain “sensitive” words in a text are removed or rendered illegible. Take for example, a manuscript collection; let’s call it the Collected Papers of John Doe. In that collection there may be a personal letter to Mr. Doe from Richard Roe, or Mr. Doe may discuss in one of his own letters Mr. Roe’s embarrassing conviction for tax fraud. Because Mr. Roe has not given the library permission to make public either his correspondence or his legal troubles, a librarian, in order to protect Mr. Roe’s privacy, redacts from those documents any words that might make him identifiable as either the author of the letter or the guilty party in the tax case. Such censorship is warranted, and therefore deserves to be regarded as good.

Librarians have also been known to engage in redaction that qualifies as bad. In years past, there have been librarians who felt it appropriate to take a felt-tip marker and obliterate from books those words that they regarded as naughty or otherwise objectionable. The profession explicitly forbids this sort of redaction and one hopes it is now a practice of only historical interest.

And then there’s ugly censorship. The Oboler Library has recently acquired a copy of Anthony Shaffer’s Operation Dark Heart, a memoir of covert U.S. intelligence operations in Afghanistan. The author sent the unpublished text of his book to the Army for checking and made the modifications they requested in the interests of national security. The publisher, St. Martin’s Press, then printed, and was about to distribute, 10,000 copies of the book to book dealers when the Defense Intelligence Agency belatedly reviewed the text and found hundreds of passages that it believed should be deleted. The government thereupon purchased the already-printed copies from St. Martin’s, at taxpayers’ expense, and destroyed them. It did so despite its awareness that about a hundred copies had already been sent out to reviewers and editors. Subsequently, the government allowed St. Martin’s to print a second edition of the book in which all of the reputedly-dangerous passages were redacted with black ink. The library has acquired two copies of this edition, one for general circulation, the other for the Friends of Oboler Library collection of censored books in the Special Collections Department.

The government’s clumsy effort to censor Operation Dark Heart is an illuminating case of worst practice. Censorship is most effective when undetected, i.e. when people don’t even know that they’ve been deprived of information. If the fact of censorship becomes known, the next best thing to do is to ensure that the censored content remains secret. In the case of Operation Dark Heart, not only has the fact of censorship been widely publicized, but all of the censored content has become public knowledge.

Shaffer maintains, it should be noted, that all of that content was already part of the public record and that his First Amendment rights have been violated. One analyst with access to the original text has estimated that about 10% of the censored passages have a plausible claim to require redaction.

Whichever may be the case, the availability of the original text has enabled critics to assess the government’s standards of secrecy and their appropriateness, and there’s no doubt that many of the redacted passages concern facts that are readily discoverable, for example, on Wikipedia.

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Censorship, continued from front page —

And some words blacked out, such as the name of actor Ned Beatty, are simply baffling (or was that bear in Toy Story 3 that Beatty voiced actually an undercover operative?).

No one doubts that the censorship of information whose release would directly endanger national or military security is justifiable. But it is also evident that the government has often labeled information as top secret simply in order to prevent the public from learning about practices and policies that it might disapprove of. Whether the redaction of Operation Dark Heart was, on balance, a case of bad censorship, or good censorship, is difficult to ascertain. But it certainly was ugly, and it has further undermined the already-weakened credibility of the government’s decision-making with regard to information classification.

ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING AND BOARD ELECTIONS

You’re invited to attend the annual Friends business meeting on Wednesday, January 5, 2011, from noon to 1 PM in room 268 of the Library. A light lunch will be served.

If you are interested in serving on the FOOL Board of Directors, please contact the Library’s administration office, 282-2997, and submit your self-nomination.

Membership Opportunities:

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Golf in the stacks

Due to popular demand, Oboler Library will host the second annual miniature golf day in the library on Saturday, February 26, 2011.

A miniature golf course, with 18 holes, will be set up on three floors of the library in a variety of interesting and challenging configurations.

Students, faculty, and staff, along with members of the community are invited to try their luck and enjoy the fun of golfing around the book shelves, old book presses, tables and chairs, through narrow walkways strewn with remnants of the library’s bygone era.

Look for announcements and brush up on your techniques. Some say the course has some pretty hard shots!

MEMBERSHIP FORM — Friends Of Oboler Library — FOOL

Friends Of Oboler Library, Idaho State University, 921 S. 8th Ave., Stop 8089, Pocatello, ID 83209-8089

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