

## **POLITICALLY CONTROVERSIAL MONOGRAPHS**

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This article explores the hypothesis that book selection and acquisitions policies and methods used in most academic libraries of the southeast United States have the result, intended or unintended, of failing to acquire many politically controversial monographs. It goes on to examine whether small presses and distributors market these books effectively to libraries and then considers how review journals, especially *Choice*, influence the selection process. The study concludes by emphasizing the librarian's professional responsibility to seek out and acquire books on politically controversial issues.

### **SAMPLE STUDY**

In order to test the hypothesis stated above, a representative sample was gathered of 32 English-language monographs published between 1981 and 1987 by Africa World Press, Amana, Claremont, Cleis, Earth Resources Research, Latin American Bureau, Lawrence Hill, Marram, Monthly Review Press, Orbis, and Zed.

Subject areas included Africa (three titles), Latin America (six titles), the Middle East (four titles), Southeast Asia (two titles), United States or international matters (seven titles), women (six titles), and literature (four collections of essays about Africa, the Caribbean, and Argentina).

The titles were found in a US distributor's catalog which appeared in Fall 1987. Descriptions accompanying the citations were used to select titles of broad, current interest that seemed appropriate for undergraduate collections.

During business trips through Alabama, Georgia and Florida in early 1988, the titles were searched against the holdings of 45 general academic libraries, ranging from small community colleges to major universities. The findings were as follows: (see chart on next page)

**Libraries with 90 - 100% of the titles: none**

80 - 89%	2
70 - 79%	2
60 - 69%	2
50 - 59%	none
40 - 49%	1
30 - 39%	1
20 - 29%	3
10 - 19%	7
1 - 9%	15
0%	12
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Total	45

The figures form two clusters: six large research libraries hold 60 to 89% of the titles; 39 smaller libraries hold few or none. No title is held by more than 18 libraries; two are held by only one; the median held is seven; the mean is five.

### **BOOK DISTRIBUTION**

Book distribution has been described metaphorically as many streams constantly flowing from publishers to libraries and readers. But unlike "mainstream" books from large commercial and university presses, books with alternative socioeconomic and political messages encounter obstacles. To examine these difficulties, six small, progressive, American publishers—not the same group that produced the titles discussed above—were asked in 1988 to describe their marketing strategies. Initial letters with questionnaires were followed up by telephone calls.

*Mailings*—The presses reported annual budgets of \$80,000, \$40,000, \$25,000, \$20,000, \$2,000, and \$0 for mailing flyers and catalogs. Most of these promotional materials, however, are sent to private individuals, not to libraries.

*Salesmen*—Only two presses employ sales representatives. One spends \$25,000 annually for a salesman to visit librarians at medium-sized and large universities after searching their card catalogs. The other pays a 14% commission to an agency that sends salesment to visit professors at medium-sized and large universities.

*Exhibits*—Five of the six presses exhibit occasionally at specialized meetings of librarians and professional societies. All avoid large general conferences, where they “get lost” among the large corporations.

*Approval Plans*—Three of the small presses market books to libraries through approval plans. One bookseller includes all titles from three presses in its approval plan. Another includes all titles from one press and about 70% from a second. Other than these arrangements, the presses reported no marketing arrangements with approval plan vendors.

*Distributors*—The only distributor contacted reported no library mailings and no use of approval plans. Occasionally the firm has exhibited at ALA conferences. Its salesmen visit upper-division and higher institutions in some parts of the country but not others.

To look back at the two clusters of libraries in the Southeast for a moment, we can see how little they are helped by these marketing strategies. The librarians and faculty at the 39 undergraduate and master’s level institutions probably are not on the publishers’ mailing lists, rarely meet their salesmen, do not attend the specialized conferences where they exhibit, and cannot afford comprehensive approval plans.

At the six research libraries, chances are not much better. They too do not get the mailings; sales representatives seldom visit the Southeast; travel money to specialized conferences is scarce; and even large approval plans cover small presses very inadequately.

### BOOK REVIEW JOURNALS

Let us turn now to reviews. Five of the small presses send galley proofs or hardbound copies of all their new books to *Choice*, *Library Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*. They estimate that 2% to 50% of these are reviewed, with a median of 20%. Some of these presses suspect, without hard data, that they are getting fewer reviews now than they did five or ten years ago. The sixth press, the smallest, sends books to *Choice*, but few are reviewed.

Patricia E. Sabosik, editor and publisher of *Choice*, said in 1988 that her staff was conducting a study of small presses. Preliminary results showed that *Choice* was doing about as well as it could. She said that the chances of a small press book being reviewed in *Choice*

are better than in other review journals. She noted, however, that space limitations permit only 6,600 books to be reviewed each year. Foreign books, primarily of British and Canadian origin, now comprise 25% of *Choice*'s total. As the total number of books published or distributed in the US continues to rise, she said, small presses may be reviewed in *Choice* even less often.

Exactly half the titles in the sample were reviewed in *Choice*, 16 out of 32. The *Choice* titles were found in Southeastern libraries almost three times more often than those that were not reviewed: 210 holdings as against 75. Three titles in the sample received special commendation from *Choice* as "outstanding academic books." These were the first, sixth and seventh most frequently found books, appearing in 18, 11, and 10 libraries, respectively. On the other hand, one book that received a very unfavorable review in *Choice* also found its way into six libraries.

The *Choice* selection policy, adopted in 1983, states that subject matter must be relevant to undergraduate courses or to noncurricular student interests. It must be appropriately presented for undergraduate use and must demonstrate effective command of the subject and the methodology employed. In carrying out this policy, reviewers see themselves as gatekeepers guarding college libraries across the country from inappropriate books. But who guards libraries from the gatekeepers?

Review journals reject controversial books by (1) giving them very negative reviews, (2) ignoring them, and (3) recommending the book for graduate use only.

*Frontal Attack*—Three books, two of them from the sample, illustrate biased approaches by *Choice* (and other major review journals) to politically controversial material. For example, *South Africa's Transkei: The Political Economy of an "Independent" Bantustan* by Roger Southall (Monthly Review Press, 1983) is a model of good scholarship: 338 well-documented, well-organized, well-written pages, full of tables, maps, notes, followed by an index and an extensive, up-to-date bibliography.

The *Choice* review (November 1983) is negative throughout. The anonymous reviewer labels Southall a "neo-Marxist" and attacks him for daring to criticize a book by "a recognized authority," Newell Stultz. The reviewer quotes Southall out of context as fol-

lows: “[In Stultz’s work] political premises are so profoundly conservative (and many would use unkind terms) that there is little point in confronting his analysis here.”

The actual passage, following two pages in which Southall objectively summarizes Stultz’s work, reads:

*Stultz’s assessment of Transkeian independence is undoubtedly a thoughtful piece which reflects a clearly humanitarian motivation, yet its political premises are so profoundly conservative (and many would use unkind terms) that there is little point in confronting this analysis here. That task has already been undertaken elsewhere, and readers may themselves prefer to make their own judgements as to the relative merits of his own and the present author’s widely contrasting approaches.* (Emphasis added. A footnote cites the journal article where the discussion can be found.)

The reviewer then urges scholars “seeking a more balanced perspective” to consult an older work by three other men instead of Southall’s book. In citing the older work, however, he omits its subtitle, which states that it concerns two other South African homelands, not the Transkei.

The most extraordinary statement in the review, however, reads, “It is unfortunate that the author’s point of view is allowed to intrude so forcefully on the description of events, personalities, and even other authors.” Does the reviewer believe that authors should *not* express their point of view forcefully? Southall is indeed guilty of this charge. He unabashedly states his point of view quite forcefully on the very first page:

the implication of my study is that the bantustan policy is devoid of all progressive political potentialities, and that consequently, support must be unambiguously given to the forces of liberation which are struggling to overthrow apartheid rule.

I suspect that Southall’s unambiguous support for “the forces of liberation” is the real reason why the reviewer does not want this book in our college and university libraries.

*Ignore the Book*—Perhaps a more effective way of keeping politically controversial books out of libraries is simply not to review

them at all. *Pirates and Emperors: International Terrorism in the Real World* by Noam Chomsky (Claremont, 1986) is an example of this approach. The opening paragraph explains the title:

St. Augustine tells the story of a pirate captured by Alexander the Great, who asked him "how he dares molest the sea." "How dare you molest the whole world?" the pirate replied, "because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief; you, doing it with a great navy, are called an Emperor."

This is a book that grinds the teeth and sickens the stomach. Chomsky has assembled page after page of well-documented evidence of terrorism conducted in the Near East by the United States and its client states. Worse than his attacks on our government, however, is the biting scorn that he aims at us—the citizenry, the academic establishment, the press, the Congress—whose gullibility, hypocrisy, subservience, acquiescence, complicity, and jingoism have made these crimes possible. He shows again and again how our vast public relations industry employs Orwellian Newspeak techniques in the "manufacture of consent." When we bombed Libya, for example, newspapers said it "played well in Peoria" and "should strengthen President Reagan's hand in dealing with congress on issues like the military budget and aid to the contras." The book's final paragraphs read:

The fraudulence and cynicism of the propaganda campaign about "international terrorism" has been exposed to the tiny audiences that can be reached by dissident opinion in the United States, but the campaign itself has been a remarkable public relations achievement. With the mass media committed to serve the needs of the state propaganda system, systematically excluding any commentary that might expose what is unfolding before their eyes or any rational discussion of it, the prospects for future successes remain impressive. This service of the educated classes to wholesale international terrorism contributes to massive suffering and brutality, and in the longer term, carries with it serious dangers of superpower confrontation and terminal nuclear war. But such considerations count for little in comparison with the need to ensure that no threat to "stability" and "order" can arise, no challenge to privilege and power.

There is little here to surprise any honest student of history. It is also not surprising that *Choice* did not review this forceful attack on the American propaganda system. It might be disturbing for young people to learn in college that the free press in this democracy deliberately lies to them.

*Recommend for Graduate Study Only*—A third and more sophisticated approach that *Choice* employs is illustrated by another recent Chomsky book, *On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures* (South End Press, 1987), which discusses US foreign policy in Central America. A generally favorable review in *Choice* (October 1987) recommends the book, but only for graduate collections. Reviewer J.D. Martz notes:

Chomsky's ideological position is admittedly revisionist and differs from more orthodox views. . . . This slender volume deserves a thoughtful reading, but readers who lack background in the subject matter may come away with a distorted understanding.

"Orthodox views"? "Distorted understanding"? What nonsense! Is Martz recommending books for American college students or for the Ayatollah? The anonymous reviewer of Southall's book makes similar remarks urging "scholars seeking a more balanced perspective" to read a less offensive book and defending Stultz as "a recognized authority."

Such reviewers should be fired. One of the most important objectives of a college education is to develop the intellectual capacities required for the effective exercise of the rights and duties of citizenship. This is best accomplished in an atmosphere of free inquiry and expression, supported by the widest range of library materials. To deny our college students that freedom in the name of some arbitrary authority or orthodoxy is a form of tyranny.

How is it that we are subjected to such questionable review practices? The *Choice* Selection Policy Draft 1983 declares under its subject guidelines for political science that "strong efforts are made to ensure that *all* viewpoints on controversial or sensitive topics are represented" (emphasis added). That goal has not been achieved. Reviewers, acting with the power of medieval censors under the authority of the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries, can relegate contro-

versial books to the dim cloisters of graduate libraries. They can put them under the interdict with harsh reviews. Or they can simply leave them in limbo by not reviewing them at all.

These biased judgements by *Choice* have enormous consequences. They affect hundreds of undergraduate and graduate collections. They influence members of the public who consult reviews to determine the relative place of a title in this subject field. They are even canonized in *Books for College Libraries*.

In recent years, *Choice* has begun a program of exporting its reviews to foreign libraries in the United Kingdom, the European continent, India and Japan. The United States Information Agency (USIA) has given grants to ALA to carry out USIA projects abroad. Sabosik said one USIA proposal involved distributing *Choice* cards to foreign libraries, but the project had been shelved until after the 1988 national election. So ACRL, ALA and *Choice* have ties to the propaganda ministry.

That *Choice* has been singled out for criticism here does not imply that it rejects politically controversial ideas more than do other review journals. *Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *American Book Review*, and ALA's *Booklist* may be as bad or worse. For example, all those journals published negative reviews of a highly controversial book by Margot Harry, *Attention, MOVE! This is America!* (Banner Press, 1987), an exposé of the Philadelphia Police Department's bombing of the MOVE house in May 1986. *Choice* simply ignored the book. *Attention, MOVE!* received balanced or positive reviews in several other publications, including *Small Press*, "the magazine of independent book publishing" (Sept/Oct 1983), formerly published by Bowker, now by Meckler. An objective study comparing the treatment of politically controversial books by various American review journals is badly needed.

Gary Sanders, President of Liberation Distributors, wrote to me in a personal letter:

If college librarians do not read [*Small Press*], it seems to me that they should, for it comes out bimonthly and gives its pages to books that are seldom reviewed in *Publishers Weekly* or *Library Journal*. . . . Its pages are open to small progressive publishers to a significant degree. . . . If academic librarians were to grasp the built-in biases in some of

the major traditional review publications, they might begin to understand the importance of paying more attention to publications like *Small Press*.

### VALUE OF POLITICALLY CONTROVERSIAL BOOKS

Politically controversial books are different. They produce ideas, not profits. They are not filtered, sanitized, and packaged by the giant corporations that deliver most of the information we receive. These books are our *glasnost*, our *samizdat*, our free voice. Every participant in the chain linking author and reader has a responsibility to bring them into college and university libraries. Publishers and distributors should tell librarians what titles are available and why they are significant. Booksellers should include them in their approval plans, even if they are not big money makers.

Review journals should put aside ideology and guarantee that all viewpoints on controversial or sensitive topics are fairly evaluated. Comprehensive bibliographic essays and collection management reports should consider the whole world, not just the West. They should consider all points of view, not just academic and political orthodoxy. Studies and reviews that fail to consider honestly the intellectual contributions of socialist countries, third world countries, and Western dissidents are instruments of propaganda. The "manufacture of consent" is not a legitimate goal of collection management or the college curriculum.

Regardless of how well publishers, distributors, booksellers, reviewers, and professors call attention to politically controversial materials, the ultimate responsibility for acquiring them remains with librarians. In almost all the 45 libraries studied here, and probably in hundreds more across the country, we have failed in our professional duty to seek out diverse political views.

These books are not expensive. Their absence from our libraries makes a mockery of ALA's vaunted "freedom to read." But we do not even notice that we are censoring our collections. Complacently, we watch our new automated systems stuff the shelves with Henry Kissinger's memoirs.

*Reprinted, with permission and slight editing, from Building the First Century: Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5-8, 1989.*