

*Censoring Culture: Contemporary Threats to Free Expression*, edited by Robert Atkins and Svetlana Mintcheva. New York: The New Press, 2006

reviewed by Mark Hudson

In *Censoring Culture*, Robert Atkins and Svetlana Mintcheva have brought together a very wide-ranging collection of essays, interviews and discussions – many of which will be highly relevant to librarians struggling to defend intellectual freedom and the public sphere in the twentieth-first century. If commitment to the abstract ideals of intellectual freedom defined the core of the library profession’s ethical position in the latter half of the twentieth century, librarians in the new century will have to start thinking beyond “banned books” if we want to fully understand the social and cultural forces stifling the creativity, critical thinking and unfettered debate necessary for a democratic society. The goal of *Censoring Culture* is “the expansion of the very notion of censorship” – i.e., to broaden the debate “by exposing the mechanisms that limit free speech today as part of a complex system of economic, political, cultural, and/or social arrangements.” Only the ability to identify and understand this covert “censorship in camouflage,” the editors argue, will make possible “a proactive approach based on dealing directly with the structural conditions that ensure future censorship.” It’s time for the library profession to sit up and take notice.

The book is organized into five sections, each of which exhaustively explores one aspect of this expanded notion of censorship. In part one, the economic foundations of censorship are thoroughly outlined and analyzed, as they manifest themselves in the art world, the music industry, the world of book publishing and book selling, and the corporate mass media in general. All librarians should take particular note of New Press founder André Schiffrin’s analysis of “market censorship” in the book publishing industry, and those developing popular music collections should take a keen interest in Siva Vaidhyanathan’s “American Music Challenges the Copyright Tradition,” which historically contextualizes the notion of “protectable expression” in American popular music from blues to rap. Dee Dee Halleck’s essay on how the military-industrial complex has morphed into a “military-media-industrial” complex promoting positive images of the U.S. military should be essential reading for librarians seeking to counter these images in their collections with materials providing critical perspectives on war and militarism.

Part two considers the internet and the struggles going on between citizens and media owners over control of the decentralized “creative commons” given birth by cyberspace. Lawrence Lessig, in “Creativity and Real Space,” suggests that the very architecture of cyberspace – i.e., the lack of physical constraints on the movement of digital content – makes the

consolidation of centralized control more difficult for media owners than it is in real space, and he argues that network designers should continue to build a “libertarian presumption” into the architecture of cyberspace. Also noteworthy and relevant is Giselle Fahimian’s essay on *Adbusters* and other marketing parodists, “culture jammers” and practitioners of “electronic civil disobedience,” which argues that such movements have the potential to dismantle unjust intellectual property laws and shape a more “diverse and creative culture” – goals that ought to be shared by the library profession, given our stated commitment in the Library Bill of Rights to “cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.”

Part three explores the ways that the highly subjective notion of “protecting children” has become a major justification for censorship, even as the U.S. consistently fails to protect them from such threats to their well-being as poverty, low-quality education, physical abuse and lack of adequate healthcare. In “Protection or Politics? The Use and Abuse of Children,” Svetlana Mintcheva argues that “sexual abuse is, in spite of its prominence in the cultural consciousness, a relatively minor problem compared to other types of child abuse,” and that “the panic around child pornography has reached such proportions that the rationale for criminalizing it – that children are abused while producing the images – has been forgotten.” The result is that any photography of nude children – or even of children fully clothed if it is “deemed arousing to pedophiles” – can lead to charges of child pornography, sometimes with disastrously life-altering consequences, as the stories in “Not a Pretty Picture” relate. Thus, while the sexual abuse of children and the production of child pornography are certainly despicable activities, the current legal approach “forces us to look at images of children from the point of view of the pedophile, thus creating and expanding the idea of the sexualized child.”

As librarians will recall, the fear that children will be harmed by any exposure to sexual images was the primary rationale for the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which requires all libraries receiving E-rate assistance to filter or block online images deemed “obscene” or “harmful to minors.” Libraries have also been forced to censor materials, displays and exhibits that refer to adolescent sexual activity, or to lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgendered themes, on the specious grounds that children and adolescents will be harmed by exposure to such themes. In the long term, such censorship cannot be effectively countered if we do not forthrightly challenge the irrationality used to justify it. As Judith Levine notes in “Censorship: The Sexual Media and the Ambivalence of Knowing,” in recent years “censorship proponents have advertised nearly every assault on speech as a defense of children.”

Part four, “Cultural Diversity and Hate Speech,” also contains some relevant and useful contributions, although Randall Kennedy’s defense of whites who use the N-word in “Pitfalls in Fighting ‘Nigger’” is unconvincing, and the editors could almost certainly have found a more insightful contributor

on this particular topic – e.g., filmmaker Spike Lee, whom Kennedy excoriates in his essay for suggesting that African-Americans have more of a right to use the word than whites do. John Leanos’s story about the violent reaction to his artwork critiquing the U.S. military’s propagandistic use of Patrick Tillman’s death in Afghanistan casts a revealing light on the repressive ideological atmosphere of post-9/11 America, as does the interview regarding the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition, which included the work of an Anglo-Israeli artist and peace activist exploring the issue of ideological exploitation of the Holocaust.

Part five, “Self-Censorship,” deserves particularly close attention from librarians, since we, perhaps even more than other cultural workers, have a responsibility to recognize and counter the censor within ourselves. As the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association states: “We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.” The personal narratives of artists and writers in “The Ubiquitous Censor” provide insights readily applicable to the work of librarians, while J.M. Coetzee, in “Taking Offense,” remarks on how “the censor-figure is involuntarily incorporated into the interior, psychic life, bringing with it humiliation, self-disgust, and shame.” Psychoanalyst Janice Lieberman also explores the interior psychic aspect of self-censorship, arguing that it is rooted in defense mechanisms that “lead us to distort what we think, say, or do in order to protect ourselves from facing what is too uncomfortable to face.” This section of the book is inconclusive but, like the others, it leaves the reader with an abundance of ideas to consider, debate and develop further.

*Censoring Culture* also provides an excellent guide to additional reading, since many of the contributors have written more extensively on the topics briefly covered in it. It is strongly recommended for both public and academic libraries, and it should be on every librarian’s professional bookshelf as well. “Censorship in camouflage” is here, and without the kind of understanding provided by this fine collection of short pieces, librarians will be defenseless in the face of it.