Plumbing the depth of NPR's bias in "On the Media"'s selective censure of book censorship

by Lev Tsitrin

The other day I happened to be near my kitchen radio at the moment of a rather indignant discussion of parents agitating to remove LGBT books from school libraries, thus acting as censors, and – perish the thought – interfering in the work of "professional librarians" and "educators" who of course know better.

Since I know a great deal about books and libraries – about how books are made, promoted, and acquired (and the chicanery that goes into each of those steps), I stopped to listen in. It was NPR's *"On the Media" show* that looked back at the passing year, replaying its more significant segments. The full 15% (3 segments out of 19: "*How Books Get Removed from Classrooms and Libraries*," "*Parents vs. Democracy*" and "*Libraries Under Attack*") were given to attempts at LGBT book censorship; apparently, the issue is considered important.

I was glad that book censorship was on NPR's radar – but, knowing a thing or two about it, I assure you that the focus on LGBT books as its touchstone is absurd, and misses the point entirely – for two reasons.

Firstly, there is nothing unreasonable whatsoever about parent's demands that their kids not be exposed to LGBT books, so NPR's indignation is misplaced – the whole "issue" is just a red herring. And secondly, while focusing its reporting energies on this pseudo-issue, NPR refuses to turn its journalistic eye towards the massive, systemic censorship that envelopes the entire book publishing industry. Simply put, *On the Media* is barking up the wrong tree.

But, one thing at a time – first and foremost, why is removing LGBT books from school libraries cannot be considered book censorship?

"*Parents vs. Democracy*" framed Its discussion of law that controls it as pitting state's compelling interest in educated citizenry against parent's right to control their kids' education. Per that analysis, state's interest trumps parental rights – a conclusion reached by considering a hypothetical parent who wishes to keep the child illiterate – yet how can this be extrapolated into the need for LGBT books? To think of it, It can't be: unlike the "three Rs" – reading, writing, and arithmetic – LGBT agenda is by no means mission-critical to education, as is proven by the simple fact that

private,schools cannot be forced into teaching it; nor is it required for homeschooling. In fact, if one is to bring into discussion the compelling state interest at all, it quickly becomes clear that, if anything, LGBT books work counter to state interest: the state has a compelling interest in self-perpetuation – an interest which LGBT agenda does not serve.

The state interest being out of the way, let's consider parents' interest (or that of the kids – as seen by their parents). To judge by those segments, for the protesting parents the key question boils down to this: do those books serve the purpose of apologetics, or of proselytism? And – which is equally important in the context of LGBT books – is the former tantamount to the latter?

To answer this question, we have to understand that we are talking not of *ideas* like evolution or climate change (both of which were brought up in the "*Parents vs. Democracy*" segment) – ideas which reasonable people can discuss, and disagree on – but about instinctive, animal *behavior* of which the kids, given their age, are largely unaware, but which their parents find viscerally objectionable, and reasonably want to shield their kids from it. This is not about narrow-mindedness or broad-mindedness; this is not about progressiveness or conservatism, this is not about the intellectual debate – for a simple reason that mind has nothing whatsoever to do with this. (The segment disingenuously misrepresented LGBT agenda as a yet another "idea" like global warming or evolution – but it isn't, given that it involves animal behavior, not intellectual reasoning.)

Of course, like all books LGBT books are addressed to mind, and try to normalize LGBT lifestyle in a reader's mind. To their authors, this may be a mere defense of their lifestyle against hostile majority; but to parents, the very mention of the subject to their kids may smacks of recruitment, of proselytizing, of "grooming." It is only normal that parents react the way they do, and try to block it. If censorship is

to be defined as exclusion of ideas from the “marketplace of ideas,” than exclusion of LGBT books is not censorship, since this exclusion is it is not about excluding ideas – it is about excluding certain behaviors. Bad ideas can be debated; bad behaviors can only be shunned. This is why one is unlikely to find on any school library shelves books glorifying (or at least normalizing) murder, rape, theft, drugs. Such books likely exist (Marquis de Sade’s name readily comes to mind, for instance) – but should his books be on school libraries’ shelves, Ms. Drabinski and other “professional librarians” interviewed by NPR?

Let’s now move away from the red-herring pseudo-censorship decried by NPR and look into the systemic censorship of books that deal with ideas rather than with instinct-driven, irrational behaviors – censorship that is illegitimate by any standard of free speech, censorship that NPR refuses to report.

First, let’s trace the path which books have to take before reaching their intended reader – and the observe the barriers placed in their path to the “marketplace of ideas”: the libraries and bookstores.

To a great degree, the present-day book-publishing process is the inversion of what it was at the onset of publishing. Back then, the educated class was tiny (perhaps 3% of the population); and world’s population itself was tiny, too. This made it possible to publish everything that was being written, and for a reader, to read everything that was being published. Accordingly, the publication process was simple and straightforward: realizing that he had something to share with the world, the author wrote it down, gave the manuscript to the printer (who, as a rule, was also a publisher), and the book was out – by being handed to a few bookstores in the printer’s town, or sent to a handful of bookstores outside of it. Fairs were a major distribution points for books, too. Author were few, runs were tiny. Of course, there was an extra

wrinkle: in many countries, the publisher had to hand the manuscript over to a censor first – a grave danger to books that touched upon the ever-touchy subject of religion. But that was about it.

Fast forward to today. About every adult in the world is literate – and a great many have a story to tell. While the number of authors skyrocketed, readers' ability to absorb what's being written is the same – or may have actually decreased, given the other media that competes for attention, online and in print (plus, there is plenty of distracting entertainment – like movies and concerts – that also consume one's attention and time). The competition for the reader's attention is, nowadays, intense – while hundreds of years ago, it did not exist at all, societies' ability to write, and to read what was was being written was, back then, in balance.

Today's publishing industry changed accordingly. Authors are no longer just handing their manuscripts to a publisher, assured of publication. In fact, the roles of the author and of the publisher largely flipped: very often, it is the publisher who decides on what subject may be profitable, and which author may be a good fit for the subject – and commissions books for publication. Authors used to be the active actor in publishing; not anymore. The initiative as to what subjects get covered is now firmly in publishers' hands; very often, the author is essentially a publisher's ghost-writer, and books are published not because the author had something to say, but because the publisher wanted to profit from a hot subject. Nowadays, publishing is "just business, nothing personal."

Every component of the publishing process serves that, strictly-business, end. Consider book reviews – the venues for readers (and librarians, as we learn from NPR segments) to get recommendations about which books to buy. Now, if you think that book reviews serve journalistic purpose of uncovering the best titles produced in a recent week or month, and that

reviewers sort all newly-published books in the order of their excellence, taking the dozen that wound up at the top to write up their reviews, informing the reader of what's worthwhile, think again – because you are wrong. A book's quality has nothing whatsoever to do with whether it is reviewed or not. What does matter is how much advertising the publisher buys from the reviewer (the review being simply a free, "baker's dozen" item thrown in to encourage a steady customer) – plus, of course, author's personal connections help too. Way back when, I heard from two different book reviewers a complaint about a monstrous-sized *New York Times*' review of a Norman Mailer' spy novel (as the *Times*' reviewer put it to me when I had a chance to buttonhole him after a public lecture): "If it were not by *him*, it would never have occurred to anybody to review this." He also readily agreed that if books were reviewed just based on merit, our public discourse would be totally different.

The bulk of manuscripts produced today are written because authors had something to say – a fashion that is long in the past. Those manuscripts are "unsolicited" – publishers will not consider them for publication, preferring to operate within their established circle of in-house authors from whom they commission books.

So what if those authors "go it alone," competing with the corporate publisher's product in the "marketplace of ideas" by publishing their books themselves?

The answer is – those books simply won't reach the "marketplace of ideas." The government lends corporate publishers its helping hand of crony capitalism to ward off the danger from the author-publisher. The government refuses author-published books its cataloging services that make a book visible in the "marketplace of ideas" – it provides those *only* to corporate publishers. And, to add the cherry to the cake, since this restriction denies such books "wide circulation," book reviewers like the *New York Times* refuse to

review author-published books, too. Corporations have the "marketplace of ideas" all to themselves.

Thus, over the centuries, book publishing switched from being the tool of spreading ideas, to that of restricting them. Correspondingly, censorship changed, too – from the government's elimination of ideas inconsistent with its' reading of the Scripture, to government's elimination of ideas because publishing them would reduce corporate profits. Having started out as a means of ensuring readers' orthodoxy, book censorship turned into a tool of ensuring corporate control of the book market. In an interesting way, in the case of book publishing we went back to medieval guilds – state-established corporate entities granted a monopoly on producing certain kinds of goods, set up to exclude the outsiders from the market.

Now, one would think that this symbiotic relationship between corporate publishers, government, and reviewers, all designed to keep individual authors away from the mainstream "marketplace of ideas" (and preventing them from earning some money in the process – library acquisition funds to be reserved for corporate publishers only, as are the moneys spent in bookstores), would be of interest to NPR's "*On the Media*" which, according to its "about" tab, "tackles sticky issues with a frankness and transparency" – but no, they are not interested in covering the real, systemic censorship in which our book publishing is soaked through and through. I know it because I asked them to cover it – multiple times, in fact. They'll happily produce a segment after a segment about some faux "censorship" – like the pseudo-censorship of LGBT books, but as to real censorship, the censorship rooted in government's crony capitalism that makes mockery of our much-touted pledge to "liberty for all" – no, the story of *that* censorship NPR's *On the Media* would rather not tell. The absence of free speech – of speech free from corporate control, that is – is apparently not a "sticky issue." if it

is an issue at all, it is an issue that NPR would rather censor.

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