

THE QUESTION...

WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH THE
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED SWIMSUIT ISSUE?



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The model for this series of columns is Rushworth Kidder's (1995) How Good People Make Tough Choices. Kidder notes that an ethical choice is not right versus wrong. If it were that easy, the best choice would be made every time. He says that "Tough choices, typically, are those that pit one 'right' value against another." This column will explore the tough choices out there for librarians.

What Does the Field Say?

Expurgation: "includes any deletion, excision, alteration, editing, or obliteration of any part(s) of books or other library resources by the library. By such expurgation, the library is in effect denying access to the complete work and the entire spectrum of ideas

that the work intended to express" (ALA 1990).

The View from the Ivory Tower

The question for both new and experienced librarians in this issue is not as much what you do with the issue as why you made that decision. Remember Lester Asheim's (1953) stance that censors look for what is wrong with a resource, while selectors look for what is worthwhile. Blanket statements fearing censorship or that students "can't handle it" are vague and meaningless to serious discussion. Tossing out the word "inappropriate" also is not helpful.

For my own clarification, I define appropriateness in four ways: reading level, intellectual level, interest level, emotional level. For each level, you should have evidence on which you base your decision; for example, do you have other magazines with swimsuit models? *Jet* magazine's Beauty of the Month comes to mind immediately. To display or not display is a public decision. Everyone knows when the issue is published. You have all of the other issues, why not this one? On the other hand, how can you justify displaying a magazine that will show impressionable young girls that a bathing suit top is made to carry around dangling from one's hand, not to actually wear?

Jumping Off the Ivory Fence

My opinion: Put it out. It's one week, and you will make more of a statement by trying to avoid it than you will by displaying it for one week. You can't predict when and where challenges will occur, and the content that ends up being challenged can be counted on to be a complete surprise. The chances that this issue will create an atmosphere of sexual harassment in a school library is just as likely to occur with this issue as with pictures in other magazines, pictures from an encyclopedia, or with any other resource. Although one could argue that there is no direct curricular link, I would argue that that is true for many resources of interest to students.

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Works Cited

- American Library Association. 1990. "Expurgation of Library Materials: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." <www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=interpretations&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=103213> (accessed 26 Sept. 2006).
- Asheim, L. 1953. "Not Censorship but Selection." *Wilson Library Bulletin* 28, no. 1: 63-67.
- Kidder, R. M. 1995. *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. New York: Morrow.

IF YOU ARE NEW: As a new librarian, you do not know the school or the community very well. Even if you were a classroom teacher in the same school, you are in a different place now. If you ask the principal, you may lose others' perceptions that you have the training and education to select materials. The principal has not been trained in selection. Therefore, this decision is yours to make.

IF YOU ARE MID-CAREER: By mid-career you know the library and community quite well. You know which teachers will be asking for the magazine and who will remove it from your mailbox before you see it. You know the possibility of a challenge, and you have confidence in your ability to select materials. More importantly, your principal has confidence in your ability and trusts your judgment. You know that this decision is yours to make.

1 CHOICE

TOSS IT, HIDE IT, OR OTHERWISE DON'T PUT IT ON THE SHELVES. This includes writing *SI* and asking not to receive it and have your subscription extended by one issue. It still means that you have expurgated part of the spectrum that is *Sports Illustrated*.

THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU TOSS IT: You may destroy your credibility in the event of a future challenge. If you made an effort to not display this issue, why did you not do the same with other books and materials in the process of being challenged?

WHAT IF I DECIDE TO EXPURGATE? You will have to prepare an answer for those who come looking for the magazine. Your answer should give reasons based on selection criteria and instructional validity; for example, that there is no longer any sports-related content in the issue, that it is a special issue and not read for the same reasons as other issues of *SI*. You should not project possible scenarios, such as that it would cause a disciplinary problem. You really don't know that, and it may raise questions about your classroom management skills.

WHAT IF I DECIDE TO EXPURGATE? Your decision not to display this issue is based on your past experience. You may have been talking about this for the last several years, including posing the question to the library advisory committee, to staff, or to other librarians in other schools. Armed with the input, you may have discussed your options and your probable decision with your principal. Your reasons are instructionally based and sound, and the principal will most likely agree with whatever you suggest.

2 CHOICE

TREAT IT LIKE ANY OTHER ISSUE, OPEN AND AVAILABLE TO ALL STUDENTS.

THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU KEEP IT: It is possible that female students could feel an atmosphere that could be construed as sexual harassment, especially if the issue is used by male students to make sexually explicit comments regarding the models, or comparing female students to the models.

WHAT IF I DECIDE TO DISPLAY? You have two choices. Put it out and hope for the best, or put it out and prepare statements that will answer questions as to why you are displaying it. You might be watchful of who reads the magazine and his or her response in order to justify making the same or a different decision next year. You will also have to make sure that the issue is received in a timely fashion, and not making the rounds of the school office staff. You might want to be aware of students or even faculty demonstrating immature behaviors when reading the issue and be ready with strategies to encourage a more mature response.

WHAT IF I DECIDE TO DISPLAY? If this is a new decision, you may have to explain why you have changed your mind. It's an important question either from students or faculty, so you should give a thoughtful answer. You might point out that it does have instructional validity, including fashion studies and some geography, as *SI* travels to different locales for the photo shoots. From previous experiences, if this is not a new decision, you may point out that many girls read the issue to discuss fashion, hairstyles, and makeup. You may also have evidence to show that the issue is read, and therefore is of high interest to students.