"Symbolic annihilation': the experience of being excluded and misrepresented - from mainstream libraries, archives and museums and even from community archives - has severely negative consequences on ones sense of belonging or place in the world."

~ Caswell, Migoni, Geraci and Cifor, 2017

"[Librarians and archivists], both individually and collectively, must commit themselves to ensuring that their records document the lives and experiences of all groups in society, not just the political, economic, social and intellectual elite"

~ Jimerson, 2009

This essay will tackle a research question deserving further investigation within the history of libraries: what is the post-repeal legacy of UK government legislation Section 28 on the availability of LGBT+ collections within English, Welsh and Northern Irish public library collections in the 21st Century?

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Section 28 was legislation introduced in a 1988 UK local government act, part of which stated: “Local Authorities shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality.” This section of the act sought to remove any material that could be construed as ‘promoting homosexuality’ from the shelves of publicly funded institutions,
including libraries (Local Government Act 1988). The act was repealed in 2003 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A literature review was undertaken first in order to establish studies to date that address this subject. An abundance of material was found on the subject of the effect on public libraries during the term of the legislation, and much on the effects of the legislation and repeal on schools and teaching, but far less on the lasting legacy of it for public libraries, confirming that there is a gap in the literature. This is corroborated by Chapman and Birdi (2016), who state as a result of their own literature review into LGBT+ teen fiction in UK public libraries that “little research has been carried out in the United Kingdom on collections of [LGBT+] materials in public libraries.” The majority of sources located showed that LGBT+ public library collections existing prior to Section 28 reduced in size or were eliminated entirely after the introduction of the legislation. However, it also showed that fears around potential repercussions still linger today, with a lack of awareness in many local authorities that the legislation had even been repealed at all.

The database LISTA, Google Scholar, Google, and a search of relevant journals from the City University library catalogue were all used for the literature search. In line with recommendations made by Pickard (2013), a record was kept of all search terms used. This is included as a Glossary at the end of this essay: see Appendix A. Lastly, the bibliographies of relevant works were utilised, again in line with Pickard (2013), who states that “it is important to be familiar with ... secondary sources ... which will then lead you to the primary sources for your review.”

The research question changed multiple times during the literature review, due to the directions that the sources were taking, which according to Pickard (2013) is common: “As you analyse the literature, new avenues will appear and your search will widen; you must not be afraid to adjust your research question.”
The PEO framework was applied in the structuring of this essay, from the City University postgraduate resources website page (City University, 2019).

Background

A brief summary of a few of the most authoritative and informative sources located in the literature review highlights several findings.

Previous to the 1988 legislation, many local authority libraries stocked, and loaned out to play centres, items that had LGBT+ elements or themes, including most notably the Inner London Authority, with Lambeth Library Service and Haringey Borough Council being two of the many local authorities on record as holding LGBT+ literature in their collections (Vincent, 2014). There had been “a boom in the provision of library materials and services for LGBTQI people (for example, the production of booklists [and] displays of LGBTQI-related material), but after 1988 such provision plummeted. Despite legal advice that should have reassured public libraries, many local authorities stopped their services for LGBTQI people” (Vincent, 2015, p.288), self censoring in advance rather than wait for prosecution (Hasted, 2012 quoted in Vincent, 2014).

During the life of the legislation, Phil Brett conducted research into libraries in three London boroughs to find out how they were interpreting the legislation, finding that “the level of provision and service varies according to the politics and governance of the library authority” (Brett, 1992 quoted in Vincent, 2014). A major debate was around the difficulties that public library practitioners had in interpreting the legislation, which is widely agreed to have been deliberately misleading, with “the word ‘promote’ being altogether too vague to offer any clear guidance to local authorities” (Vincent, 2014), with the unknown potential for legal action being a common concern among public library workers (Vincent, 2014; Cooper, 2005). "In one case, a library director even re-arranged the furniture and the shelving sequence in the library so shelves containing books on homosexuality would not be among the first encountered when one entered the building – the
previous arrangement was considered possible “promotion” of homosexuality by the city legal department” (Curry, 2000). In actual fact, there was only ever one case brought to court for the stocking of an LGBT+ themed item, which was dismissed (Vincent, 2014). There was another attempt to invoke Section 28 in 1995, when one local authority used the legislation to justify their refusal to stock a lesbian and gay newspaper (Bamforth, 1997), but they backed down when threatened with legal action. In 1990, three items were removed from a York Public Libraries display on lesbian zines, through fear that the exhibit would contravene Section 28.

Rather, it was the climate of fear that pervaded public libraries that was the overarching effect on collections and practice, leading many to self-censor (Vincent, 2014).

Since the legislations repeal in 2003, some of the titles at the centre of the debate in the late 1980s were still being used to support statements such as “it is wrong for councils to spend their residents’ money promoting homosexuality” (Phibbs, 2009 quoted in Vincent, 2014), and although “provision has restarted there are [still] people working in and using public libraries who still think that Section 28 is extant—and that any positive pro-vision risks breaking the law” (Vincent, 2014; Vincent, 2015).

**Question Terminology**

This essay attempted to measure 'Legacy' by assessing the number and size of LGBT+ collections in public libraries, limiting the analysis to:

- The sizes of collections prior to the introduction of the legislation in 1988
- The life of the legislation from 1988 to 2003
- After the legislations repeal in 2003
The term ‘LGBT+’ is used as an umbrella acronym in this essay to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, queer, intersex and asexual - while also acknowledging any other labels for non-heteronormative and non-heterosexual identities not mentioned in this paragraph.

This essay covers ‘public libraries’ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland only; the legislation was repealed in Scotland in 2000, therefore would require different search and impact measurement parameters, possibly meriting further investigation in its own right. Community libraries are not included as on the whole they are not funded by local or central government, therefore did not fall prey to the legislation. Academic, medical and law libraries are also not included as they are not publicly accessible collections, necessarily employing restrictive membership; they are also not funded by local authorities, so again the legislation was not applicable to these institutions.

Public libraries have the power to construct social memory through what they decide to acquire and catalogue. When the UK saw the introduction of Section 28 in 1988, the impact on libraries was immediate, and the effects are still being felt now, more than three decades after its introduction and even after its repeal. Since 2003, some libraries do stock LGBT+ literature once more, but still often not labelled explicitly as such (one example of an exception to this rule can be seen in Hackney Central Library, London, with their LGBT+ section in the physical stacks). This potentially risks inhibiting patrons seeking to find LGBT+ material easily on the shelves from locating it, contributing to a lack of increase in the discoverability of items in these collections, as if an item is checked out rarely, it runs a higher risk of falling prey to weeding practices. It is of course possible to ask a librarian to do a catalogue search - however, given that in 2019, many people in the UK still find themselves debating the acceptability of LGBT+ identities and existences - an attitude informed partly by legislation such as Section 28 - libraries and the staff providing the services in them can
still exclude, further marginalise, and/or discriminate against many LGBT+ people (Lyttan and Laloo, 2019; Vincent, 2014).

That said, many urban city centre library services are now taking measures to redress the balance, with LGBT+ exhibitions and collection displays being created more often in the 21st Century since repeal, as seen in Brighton, Bedford, Barnsley, East Sussex, West Sussex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and Norfolk (Vincent, 2015; Surrey County Council Libraries, 2019; The National Archives, 2019).

There are also a number of national institutions in the UK who hold, and market, LGBT+ collections. These include:

- Bishopsgate Institute, whose online catalogue brings up 2,880 library results and 3,114 archive results from just one keyword, 'LGBT'. (Bishopsgate Institute, 2019).
- The British Library, whose extensive collection on the history and development of the LGBT+ community includes press cuttings, legal developments, ephemera, oral histories and written first-hand accounts (The British Library, 2020).
- National Archives Kew (The National Archives, 2019).

However, it is also claimed that if there is good work going on, it isn’t being talked about, so we have no way of properly measuring the legacy of Section 28 on public libraries in any sort of robust manner that could perhaps influence policy and collection development in English and Welsh libraries on a mass scale. Pateman (2012, quoted in Vincent, 2014) tells us that “it’s good to hear that there’s lots of LGBT activity in UK public libraries, but it all seems to be below the radar as I don’t hear people talking about it and there is nothing in the professional press. Perhaps it’s a taboo subject (like social class) or a legacy of Section 28?”

The culture of fear in public libraries may still pervade. According to recent research, many practitioners and staff are not even aware that Section 28 was ever repealed, still limiting their
collection development with regards to LGBT+ material 'just in case'. When the legislation was abolished, it was done so with very little coverage, so the news of the repeal was not widely discussed or covered adequately in LIS professional press, much less so in mainstream press (Vincent, 2014; Vincent, 2015).

Further research is needed into the levels of awareness into the repeal, and librarians lingering attitudes towards LGBT+ themed collections, displays and book lists in their libraries, which may still be influenced by the legislation. It is now almost 17 years since Section 28 was repealed, but the effects of it on post-abolition 21st Century collections and library services are still not discussed widely, as evidenced by the literature review. Conversely, in the USA and Canada, where similar (though less far-reaching) legislations have been passed and then repealed later on, research on the legacies is ample and well-documented.

A Masters dissertation on how public libraries can foster greater inclusion for LGBT+ people in post-repeal Section 28 England, Wales and Northern Ireland states that “each library would benefit from [multicultural and gay & lesbian] champion librarians. They would be able to be proactive in the promotion of minority genres and support staff. Champion librarians would have informed views about stock selection, focus groups and offer in-house minority genre training to all staff” (Armstrong, 2006, p.67). However, if the discussion around the effects of the legacy is not happening on a grand scale, it may be difficult to foster and maintain an initiative like this.

Perhaps then, there is an opportunity for further discussion around how to challenge these exclusions, and foster library environments that practice inclusivity by stocking and cataloguing LGBT+ items. It is possible that there is potential for this to be facilitated through the practice of radical cataloguing, which according to Lember, Lipkin and Jung Lee (2013) “seeks to give voice to people and concepts that are difficult to access through library searches.”

Measuring Impact
It is necessary to investigate whether it would be possible to measure the extent to which Section 28 affected LGBT+ collections in public libraries after the repeal of Section 28, with a view to establishing whether, post-repeal, collections have yet reached their pre-legislation levels. It is arguably important, for reasons of inclusivity and social cohesion, to be able to accurately assess by whom the impact has been made, and by whom it has been felt.

There was an issue in this part of the research, in that it was extremely difficult to find publicly accessible records on the exact sizes of LGBT+ collections for local authorities other than the ones mentioned in the literature review - who themselves are clearly trailblazers with regards to undoing the climate of fear around LGBT+ specific collections. This could be in part down to the culture of silence that evidently still pervades around the subject.

An area for further research here would be a study on English, Welsh and Northern Irish public libraries, both quantitative (how many LGBT+ resources do they stock; how are they displayed; how are they marketed; what other initiatives do they run and how regularly), and qualitative (how do librarians feel about LGBT+ collections since repeal, how did they feel about these collections before the legislation and during the term of it; what do they think could be done to increase collection size; do they believe this to be an area that needs discussion or examination; and so on).

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In conclusion, although public library collections, both in terms of size and availability, are widely acknowledged and recorded as having been severely curtailed during the term of the legislation in comparison with pre-legislation levels, and despite English, Welsh and Northern Irish public libraries now being almost 17 years post-repeal, there is very little research into how collections developed after 2003. There is evidently still a climate of fear around LGBT+ narratives in public library collections, with many librarians still erring on the side of caution. Although we have many public libraries running far-reaching and well-marketed campaigns around the acknowledgement
of LGBT+ history in their collections, as evidenced in this essay, there are not many records of the same work being carried out in non-urban areas of the regions in question. This provides an area for further research.

There is also a potential discussion around the proper and appropriate funding of community libraries, in concurrence with the cessation of funding cuts to smaller, non-centralised public libraries in favour of larger central libraries, surrounding the possibility that they are more plugged in to the needs of their immediate LGBT+ communities and what they may want and need to see in their local collections, that mirror back to them their own experiences, thereby fostering social inclusion and a sense of belonging.

Additionally, there is scope for public libraries not just to work towards undoing the legacy of Section 28 by working on acquisition and collection development policies to ensure inclusion of LGBT+ narratives, but to actively and publicly acknowledge the history of Section 28 in their collections and spaces, enabling an awareness of, and diversification in, marginalised LGBT+ collections.

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REFERENCE LIST


Bishopsgate Institute (2019) *Accessing the Collections*. Available at:


City University (2019) *Using a Framework to Structure Your Question*. Available at:


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Appendix A

Glossary of Search Terms Used for the Literature Review

- Section 28 IFLA
- Section 28 CILIP
- Section 28 British Library/Kew Archives/Bishopsgate Institute
- Section 28 libraries/collections
- Section 28 UK public libraries/local authority libraries/council libraries/civic libraries
- Section 28 legacy/effects public libraries
- Section 28 repeal legacy public libraries
- Section 28 abolition/repeal/end/cessation
- Silenced histories/narratives library libraries/library/librarianship UK
- Librarianship/library ethics UK
- Queer/LGBT public library
- Queer/LGBT cataloging/cataloguing
- Queer/LGBT collections
- Queer/LGBT librarianship
- LGBT+ histories libraries/library/librarianship
- Marginalised histories/narratives public library collections
- Minority histories/narratives public library collections

Hybrids of all these search terms were also used.