

Nora Scheid

Professor Rodriguez

Writing 1010

7 December 2024

### Literary Censorship: Knowledge vs. Ignorance

Book banning, the practice of removing books that are deemed controversial or inappropriate by society, is a topic of persistent debate in the United States. It begs the question: should access to certain books be restricted in the name of protecting societal values, or should intellectual freedom prevail to promote a more inclusive educational environment? Historically, this dissent has been driven by concerns over morality, religious beliefs, and political ideologies. These recent bans have been described by libraries “as a revival of McCarthyism” (Goncalves et al.). Much like the McCarthy era targeting communism, today's censorship focuses on specific themes of racial diversity, gender identity, and LGBTQ+ experiences, being labeled as “inappropriate” or “dangerous” for their children (Krey). The resurgence is indicative of the current state of The United States: severe political polarization. Using fear-based control reflects a troubling trend, where those in power attempt to shape public opinion that challenges patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies (Niehaus). In recent years, specifically, “the 2021–2022 school year saw a drastic increase in book bans across the country, often through mandates from school boards and parent complaints”(Goncalves et al.). These bans have severe implications regarding education, as they undermine teachers' abilities to engage students with diverse perspectives, decreasing opportunities for empathy and overall emotional development. This debate over literary censorship reveals a tension between protecting children from perceived harmful content and ensuring their access to diverse ideas, posing a direct threat to the principles of intellectual freedom and democratic values. Book bans do more than restrict access to literature—they perpetuate a cycle of inequality and hinder the representation of marginalized voices in society. These acts of censorship not only infringe

upon First Amendment rights but stifle opportunities for students to engage with different perspectives. In defending the importance of free access to literature, it becomes evident that the practice of banning books threatens educational quality, intellectual freedom, and social progress in its entirety. To uphold the principles of a free-thinking democracy, it is imperative that communities actively resist censorship and increase digital library access, empowering future generations to engage thoughtfully within the world.

Political and religious ideologies play a significant role in book banning, reflecting a broader attempt to maintain traditional societal norms and perpetuate intellectual homogeneity. Knowledge and power are intertwined; those who control knowledge can control thought, shaping what is considered “good” and “just”— terms defined by those in power. Much like in the past, where political ideologies dictated the limits of acceptable literature, today’s political and religious groups exercise control over which narrative reaches young readers. This enduring influence is reflected in the restrictions placed by advocacy groups like Moms for Liberty, a grassroots conservative group of parents, which capitalize on societal tensions by advocating for the removal of materials that conflict with conservative values (Goncalves et al.). These ideological influences are not only abstract but have taken concrete form in recent legislation, with laws like Florida’s HB 1467 and Tennessee’s HB 2666 reflecting a concerted effort to regulate educational materials (Lowrey). Florida’s directive, for example, mandated that media specialists and school librarians complete specific training before selecting books, thus restricting students' access to a narrow range of certified narratives (Lowrey). Tennessee HB 2666, or “the library bill,” gives the state’s “politically appointed textbook commission power to effectively issue blanket bans of challenged books” (Lowrey). This led to the temporary removal of books such as *Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates*, a story highlighting Clemente's experiences with racism (Lowrey). Such laws illustrate a significant shift in how educational materials are controlled, sparking debates over whether these measures are genuinely protective or politically motivated censorship. By aligning with political movements, conservative religious groups amplify these efforts, suppressing materials that contradict their beliefs. This dynamic reflects a deep-rooted fear of change and a desire to impose their morals on society. Book bans allow these dominant religious and political groups to monopolize the

narratives accessible to young people, thus shaping their understanding of history, morality, and identity, effectively silencing voices that may foster dissent. This connection blurs the line between church and state, pushing religious dogma into public policy and education. Ultimately, this censorship of opposing ideologies impairs societal progress and creates a generation less equipped to engage critically, reinforcing a limited worldview that ultimately aligns with more conservative and traditionalist views.

In this way, book-banning practices reinforce systemic biases by disproportionately targeting diverse literature and marginalized voices. This trend is evident in classic works such as Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" and John Steinbeck "Of Mice and Men," which critics erroneously label as promoting racist ideologies. These claims fundamentally misunderstand the context and purpose of these works. "To Kill a Mockingbird," in particular, exposes the ingrained racial injustice within the American legal system, aiming to provoke critical thought and conversation rather than endorse racism. The book has been challenged due to "complaints... along the lines of "filth" or "obscene" or "harmful to children" or racist despite its clear anti-racist message (Donelson). Under the guise of protecting students, conservative groups targeted these works, along with others that explore experiences outside the dominant cultural narrative. This approach reflects an unwillingness to confront uncomfortable truths about American history, creating a cycle of ignorance and reinforcing systemic biases. The current wave of book bans "(41 %) had LGBTQ+ themes or protagonists, and 659 (40%) had protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color", often labeled as "inappropriate" or "controversial," symbolizing a larger effort to delegitimize the existence of those who don't fit into societal norms (Lowrey). This silencing has far-reaching consequences for the younger generation, who may not see themselves represented in the remaining "approved" literature. Banning books has become a tactic to control what the people in power believe we 'should' be exposed to. This manipulation of available information undermines the foundations of a democratic society that thrives on informed citizens.

It is crucial to recognize these efforts for what they are: not protection but censorship that threatens the core values of free expression and equal representation in our society. This is evident in book-banning attempts across the United States, which threaten intellectual freedom and violate the core

principles of the First Amendment, having detrimental effects on libraries across the United States. The First Amendment, which states, “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press,” is frequently misinterpreted by proponents of book bans. They often justify censorship by claiming to protect youth or uphold community values, disregarding the constitutional right to free speech and access to information. The landmark Supreme Court case *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982) established that books could not be removed "simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books," outlining clear limits of the power of local authorities regarding censorship (Perry). Despite this ruling, we continue to see an alarming increase in challenges to notable literary works. In this case, a school board in New York removed 11 books they deemed "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy," including works by Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Wright (Richardson). After objections arose, a review committee decided that five of the books were to be kept in the libraries (Richardson). However, the board, without an explanation, “banned all but 2 of the 11 books” (Richardson). Many students struggled with this outcome, feeling that it was an infringement upon their First Amendment rights. Furthermore, Tennessee’s HB 2666 even allowed a single challenge from an overprotective parent to initiate statewide book bans (Lowrey), which in turn resulted in the removal of *Maus*, a Holocaust graphic novel, due to concerns over its language and nudity (Lowrey). These legislative actions go beyond the classroom and cast a shadow over libraries—spaces that are meant to offer an inclusive range of perspectives for independent exploration. An education system should not always be a place for intellectual safety. Students should encounter diverse and even uncomfortable viewpoints to deepen their critical thinking skills. As the tension between community pressure and constitutional rights continues, it becomes clear that allowing any group of individuals to dictate what others can read sets a dangerous precedent. The freedom to read is not a privilege to be granted or withheld based on political or ideological leanings; it is a fundamental right that encapsulates the essence of a free-thinking society.

Attempts to restrict this freedom through book banning have proven to be not only unconstitutional but also remarkably ineffective in the digital age. In our modern, interconnected world,

book banning is a process that is severely outdated due to a phenomenon dubbed the Streisand effect. The ineffectiveness of book banning is illustrated by recent research, which found that “there is very little interest in banned books even before they are banned” and that “bans rarely intervene to draw more or less attention to a book,” exposing the futility of censorship attempts, especially in our digital age, where information is free-flowing across many platforms (Goncalves et al.). Moreover, censorship often backfires due to the proclaimed “Streisand effect,” a phenomenon where attempts to suppress information lead to increased public interest (Goncalves et al.). This effect, named after Barbra Streisand, refers to her efforts to suppress photographs of her home, which paradoxically drew more attention to them. In the context of book banning and as Donelson, a respected scholar and former co-editor of *English Journal* with extensive experience analyzing censorship trends, notes in his analysis of censorship incidents, “sometimes an administrator or a board removes the book while it determines the book's innocence or guilt, a fascinating reversal of the American tradition that someone/something is innocent until proven guilty” (Donelson). This premature removal of books before a formal review process is completed can unintentionally draw attention to the banned material. This kind of hasty informal censorship not only violates due process but can also backfire by generating increased interest in the material (Donelson). In a more recent example, *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, a commonly attacked novel, “received more Google searches in the months after a ban than it did preceding,” as outlined in a study researching book engagement after being banned (Goncalves et al.). The publicity surrounding a ban often leads to more people seeking out the book, potentially increasing the readership beyond what it would have been without attempted suppression. This highlights the sheer ineffectiveness of censorship as it paradoxically draws more attention to the very content that is aimed to be restricted.

The counterproductive effect of book banning underscores the futility of book banning and reveals the deeper issue at the heart of censorship efforts. The argument of “protecting children” from what they are reading is inherently flawed and only serves to undermine educational growth and hinder societal progress, ultimately perpetuating ignorance. Many Americans seek to silence the conversation of discourse and the conversations of our past. This silencing “allows them to maintain a false belief in their

own racial innocence, avoid personal blame of the oppression of others, and dodge responsibility to combat racism and oppression" (Lowrey). This impulse to sanitize literature under the "ignorance is bliss" mentality that has no place in academics robs current and future generations of crucial lessons and perspectives that are needed to address current societal issues. As John Stuart Mill, a renowned 19th-century philosopher and one of the most influential thinkers in the history of classical liberalism, argued in his essay *On Liberty*, the validity of truth depends on its exposure to diverse views. Shielding young people from difficult ideas directly contradicts this principle, risking intellectual stagnation and social decline (Niehaus). Mill warns that a society that suppresses dissent cannot grow with history and new ideas: "If he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion" (qtd. in Niehaus). Book banning not only fails to protect children but actively harms their development, representing a misguided attempt to control the narrative and thought, directly opposing the way a democratic society functions. Rather than 'protecting children,' book bans deprive students of important resources that they could relate to their own lives, especially at a time when many may feel isolated in their experiences (Spilka). This strips them of the ability to help them understand their own experiences and struggles, having a "range of negative effects for students" (Spilka). Opponents of book banning pose the question: "How can people expect school to be a place for learning and growth, but at the same time push for restricting material and inhibiting students from educating themselves on timely topics?" (Spilka). This rhetorical question points out the contradiction between schools' educational mission and efforts to restrict access to diverse books and information, exposing the claim of "protecting their children" for what it is: contradictory and disingenuous. Schools are meant to be a place of learning and growth, yet book banning undermines the very purpose of education itself, which is to broaden students' minds and prepare them to engage thoughtfully with their surroundings. Rather than just shielding children from uncomfortable realities, book banning limits their intellectual and emotional growth.

In response to this growing wave of book bans across the United States, digital access to literature has become a powerful tool in countering censorship. Programs like Brooklyn Public Library's Books

Unbanned ensure young people can access diverse perspectives and shape a future where intellectual freedom thrives despite censorship efforts. Amid the growing wave of book censorship across the United States, young readers are demanding their right to read. As simply put by a 21-year-old North Dakota student, "I just want to read what I want," and programs like Books Unbanned directly address these demands by offering a platform for those denied access to diverse literature ("Youth Voices" 15). Launched in April 2022, the program offers free digital library cards to anyone between the ages of 13 and 21 in the US, granting access to Brooklyn Public Library's vast digital collection of over 300,000 e-books and e-audiobooks, including books that are being banned nationwide ("Boston Public Library"). The impact of this has been significant, with nearly 9,300 eCard applications received as of August 2024 and over 271,000 items accessed by April 2024 (Jensen). The success of the Books UnBanned program has inspired other libraries to join the effort, with Seattle Public Library and Boston Public Library offering similar services (Miscigna). Amy Mikel, an experienced librarian who helped design the program, expressed surprise at the emotional impact of the personal stories that were shared by young people, finding it shocking that so many were "begging us for a library card because they had such limited access to books and reading material" (qtd. in Miscigna). Many users, especially those identifying with the LGBTQ+ community, appreciate the privacy of digital access (Miscigna). A nineteen-year-old from Virginia shared their struggles, stating, "There are books that I cannot take home because they would put me in danger" ("Youth Voices" 7). Because of eCards, they can keep themselves safe and read freely. To a twenty-two-year-old living in North Carolina who struggled to find information about LGBTQ+ and trans information in a conservative town, "[the] card gives [them] hope" ("Youth Voices" 9). The impact this program has on children and young people is invaluable. As book-banning attempts continue to rise, it's imperative that organizations such as these continue to play an important role. These initiatives provide alternative access to band or challenge books, ensuring that young people can explore diverse perspectives and ideals, offering a model for other libraries to expand access beyond the confines of their shelves. By leveraging digital platforms, libraries can create a safe space for intellectual freedom and

ensure that even as local censorship efforts intensify, young readers can still access a wide range of literature that reflects diverse experiences.

Book banning is fundamentally wrong and undermines our progression as a democratic society. Academics is a space of intellectual freedom, a privilege that must remain free of censorship in order to fulfill its purpose of shaping independent thinkers. When opinions are left unchallenged, individuals cannot develop perspectives that will contribute actively to a democracy. Censorship, therefore, does more than limit freedom of expression—it weakens a student's ability to question, diverge from, and improve upon previous thought. Exposure to discomfiting ideas is a necessary part of intellectual growth that pushes individuals to deepen their understanding of their own beliefs and those of others. In a politically radicalized era, it is deeply important that we allow the new generation to be exposed to all viewpoints. Increasing digital access to literature as a solution ensures young people can continue exploring diverse perspectives and ideals, even as censorship efforts intensify. As we look towards a more inclusive future, we must prioritize the preservation of intellectual freedom in education, empowering students to move through the world empathetically. Rather than restricting access to diverse voices, we would foster open discourse and a curriculum that challenges students to consider societal issues. By doing so, we prepare new generations to build a more thoughtful democracy—one that prioritizes knowledge over ignorance.



## Cited Sources

- “Boston Public Library Joins Books Unbanned Initiative to Fight Censorship.” *Www.bpl.org*, 28 Sept. 2023, [www.bpl.org/news/boston-public-library-joins-books-unbanned-initiative-to-fight-censorship/](http://www.bpl.org/news/boston-public-library-joins-books-unbanned-initiative-to-fight-censorship/).
- Donelson, Ken. “‘Filth’ and ‘Pure Filth’ in Our Schools--Censorship of Classroom Books in the Last Ten Years.” *The English Journal*, vol. 86, no. 2, 1997, pp. 21–25. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/819668>.
- Emily Richardson. “Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, 2020. [https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL\\_INST/165shvu/cdi\\_britannica\\_eb\\_609523](https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL_INST/165shvu/cdi_britannica_eb_609523)
- Jensen, Kelly. “Why Teens across the Country Are Acquiring Brooklyn Public Library’s Free Digital Cards: Book Censorship News, September 20, 2024.” *BOOK RIOT*, 20 Sept. 2024, [bookriot.com/why-teens-across-the-country-are-acquiring-brooklyn-public-libraris-free-digital-cards/](http://bookriot.com/why-teens-across-the-country-are-acquiring-brooklyn-public-libraris-free-digital-cards/). Accessed 2 Dec. 2024.
- Krey, Zoe. “It’s Time to Turn the Page Away from Literary Censorship.” *University Wire*, Uloop, Inc, 2016. [https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL\\_INST/165shvu/cdi\\_proquest\\_wirefeeds\\_1770394005](https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL_INST/165shvu/cdi_proquest_wirefeeds_1770394005)
- Lowery, Ruth Mc Koy. “But These Are Our Stories! Critical Conversations about Bans on Diverse Literature.” *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2023, pp. 34–47, <https://doi.org/10.58680/rte202332609>.
- Marcelo S O Goncalves, Isabelle Langrock, Jack LaViolette, Katie Spoon, Book bans in political context : Evidence from US schools, *PNAS Nexus*, Volume 3, Issue 6, June 2024, page 197, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae197>
- Misciagna, Vanessa. “Libraries Get Insight on How Censorship, Library Access Impacts Teens.” *Scripps News*, 13 Apr. 2024, [www.scrippsnews.com/us-news/education/libraries-get-insight-on-how-censorship-library-access-impacts-teens](http://www.scrippsnews.com/us-news/education/libraries-get-insight-on-how-censorship-library-access-impacts-teens). Accessed 2 Dec. 2024.

Niehaus, Oliver. "Book Banning Inhibits Education on Both Sides of Political Spectrum." *The Oberlin Review*, 3 Mar. 2023, [oberlinreview.org/29419/opinions/opinions\\_commentary/book-banning-inhibits-education-on-both-sides-of-political-spectrum/](https://oberlinreview.org/29419/opinions/opinions_commentary/book-banning-inhibits-education-on-both-sides-of-political-spectrum/).

Perry, Andrew. "Pico, LGBTQ+ Book Bans, and the Battle for Students' First Amendment Rights." *Law & Sexuality*, vol. 32, 2023, pp. 197-. [https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL\\_INST/165shvu/cdi\\_gale\\_infotracmisc\\_A756838075](https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL_INST/165shvu/cdi_gale_infotracmisc_A756838075)

Scales, P. (2024). Reading not encouraged: A teacher fears students will select 'unacceptable' library books. *School Library Journal*, 70(3), 32. Retrieved from <http://libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/reading-not-encouraged/docview/2933151962/se-2>

Spilka, Joshua. "377 BOOK CHALLENGES TRACKED BY ALA IN 2019-AND THE PROBLEM IS GROWING." *Knowledge Quest*, vol. 50, no. 5, 2022, pp. 30–33. [https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL\\_INST/165shvu/cdi\\_proquest\\_journals\\_2799058696](https://library.search.tulane.edu/permalink/01TUL_INST/165shvu/cdi_proquest_journals_2799058696)

"Youth Voices on Books Unbanned." *Books Unbanned*, 2024, <https://booksunbanned.com/>