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Contemporary Library Censorship Tactics: Reviewing the Literature

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Introduction

Professional organizations report censorship efforts in U.S. libraries at an all-time high. According to the American Library Association (ALA) (2017; 2018; 2019; 2020) libraries reported between 323-377 challenges to their Office of Intellectual Freedom each year from 2016-2019. In 2021, that number rose to 729 challenges (ALA 2022a) and in 2022 there were 1,269 challenges reported (ALA 2023). This trend shows that the number of challenges to U.S. library materials has more than tripled from 2019 to 2022. Furthermore, increasingly these challenge attempts include multiple titles. In 2019, libraries reported 377 challenges which affected 566 unique book titles (ALA 2020). In 2022, the 1,269 reported challenges affected 2,571 unique titles (ALA 2023), representing an increase in over 4.5 times the number of unique titles being challenged.

The broader cultural context fuels the increase in library censorship efforts. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools and businesses to close, people turned to social media to maintain connection with their social communities and address social change (Alter 2023). Social media dramatically changed the way that censorship efforts are carried out in the U.S. (Moses 2022), and the pandemic increased the technology's power (Jaeger et al. 2023a). Periods of rapid social change and upheaval are known to cause increased censorship efforts (Jaeger et al. 2023a), and social changes have frequently occurred in the past decade in the U.S. According to April Dawkins, an assistant professor of library and information sciences at the University of North Carolina ("April Dawkins" 2023), "Recent censorship attempts are often associated with sex and sexuality, critical race theory, ethnicity/race, gender, and nontraditional family structures." (2022, 31). Conservative politicians such as Florida Governor and Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis and Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin have successfully

campaigns on platforms that promote censorship of diverse materials, leading other politicians to follow suit (Moses 2022; Wiggins 2022). Censorship efforts in U.S. libraries affect more than just books, and have targeted events, displays, reading lists, and more. Challenged materials often represent diverse perspectives such as those of the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and the lesbian, gay, bisexual+, trans+, queer, intersex, asexual+ (LGBTQIA+) communities (ALA 2023).

Democratic, pluralistic societies depend on public access to diverse materials. Libraries are one of the few remaining spaces which offer such materials to people who may not have the financial means to acquire them on their own. Censoring diverse materials prevents library patrons from seeing themselves reflected in the media they consume, and from appreciating and accepting diverse members of their communities. Libraries are fundamentally local institutions, and these challenges consequently occur largely at the local school board, municipal, or regional level. As a result, while these censorship battles erupt across the U.S., those caught in the fray of ongoing censorship challenges may struggle to see the larger picture of censorship occurring nationally. This literature review contributes to developing a better understanding of the culture of censorship in the U.S. today and what frameworks may be useful to make sense of these trends, by asking how bodies of knowledge produced and shared by conservative groups regarding library censorship situate future questions regarding moral panics.

Background

American Library Association

The ALA is a professional organization which represents and certifies libraries and librarians in the U.S (ALA Council 2023). According to the organization's Intellectual Freedom

Manual, “A primary goal of the library profession is to facilitate access to all points of view on current and historical issues” (Magi and Garnar 2015, 96). The ALA publishes literature to educate librarians about issues and best practices in their institutions. Kristin Pekoll (2019), assistant director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, shared that in the 1960s U.S. libraries collectively began shifting to community-building and public service provision. Libraries provide opportunities for life-long learning, community building, and identity affirmation. The ALA encourages U.S. librarians to report formal and public censorship attempts, known in the library profession as “challenges,” to their Office of Intellectual Freedom. These reports are voluntary, though, and “An estimated 82-97 percent of censorship incidents go unreported to the ALA” (Pekoll 2019, 95). Thus, the true scope of censorship in U.S. libraries is much greater even than the ALA’s reported numbers. Further, formal challenges are not the only way in which libraries face censorship efforts. Table 1 illustrates the breadth of practices and definitions included in broad conceptualizations of library censorship.

Table 1. Library Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Intellectual Freedom	The human right to freely share and receive information and ideas based on the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Magi and Garnar 2015, 21).
Collection Development Policies	Official library policies determine which titles are appropriate for each institution based on the communities they serve. Per the ALA, these policies should be based on the quality of the content and not the type of content itself (Magi and Garnar 2015).
Book Ban	Removing materials due to formal or public complaint about the subject matter or institutional demand (Pekoll 2019, 90).
Censorship	An attempt, formal or otherwise, to limit access to certain types of materials which would have otherwise met acquisition standards (Magi and Garnar 2015).
Hard (Formal) Censorship	Includes book bans, political or legislative limitations, policy reviews made by institutions or governing boards which change collection development policies in order to limit certain types of materials, expurgation, and placing titles out of reach or access for certain demographics (Magi and Garnar 2015).
Soft (Self, Informal) Censorship	Occurs when collection development staff choose not to purchase or preemptively remove certain materials which may potentially raise controversy, or when potentially controversial titles are made inaccessible due to improper shelving (Dawkins 2018).
Chilling Effect	A type of soft censorship which occurs when librarians or administrators see fellow professionals face backlash as a result of providing certain titles in their institutions, or when they receive vague instructions from legislative bodies in their communities or states which lead to librarians removing or not acquiring materials when they haven't been formally instructed to do so (Alter 2023; Meehan and Friedman 2023; Natanson 2022).
Challenge	Requests the removal of materials from a library based on the challenger's perception of the appropriateness of the content (Pekoll 2019, 89).
Reconsideration Request	One of two main types of challenges. Formal requests for the removal of specific materials following the institution's previously established policies (Magi and Garnar 2015).
Public Challenge	Second main type of challenge. Public statements challenging material's value which are presented to media and others outside the library in order to gain public support for further censorship action (Magi and Garnar 2015).
Obscenity ¹	Legal term based on national standards and determined by a jury. Defined as media which lacks any redeeming value, including literary, artistic, political, or scientific, for individuals of any age (Greenhaus 2023, 78; Magi and Garnar 2015, 109)
Pornography	Subjectively defined by community standards. "A colloquial, popular term referring to the representation of sexual behavior in books, pictures, statues, motion pictures, and other media that is intended to cause sexual excitement." (Magi and Garnar 2015, 301)
Harmful to Minors	Sexually explicit imagery that are protected for adult access "but taken as a whole, lack any serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors." (Magi and Garnar 2015, 300)
Child Pornography	Legally defined on a national level by the courts: "Images and videos depicting actual children engaged in sexual conduct." (Magi and Garnar 2015, 296)

¹ Obscenity laws have a rich legal history in the U.S., far beyond the scope of this literature review. For further reading, see: (Roth v. United States, 354 U.S. 476 1957; Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 1973; Island Trees Sch. Dist. v. Pico by Pico, 457 U.S. 853 1982).

Why Diverse Materials Matter

Researchers argue that access to diverse materials benefits society in several ways. This access allows people to make sense of their own identities. Cameron Pierson suggested that “Historically, members of the LGBTQ community have considered the public library and print sources as the most important resources during the coming-out process.” (2017, 249). Diverse materials also benefit people who are not part of the represented groups. White library patrons, for example, benefit from learning about the different struggles which people of color face as it increases understanding and compassion. As noted by Joshua Spilka (2022), a high school junior fighting against censorship efforts at the time that this quote was taken, “for those who don’t experience certain issues or have the same perspectives as those who do, access to diverse books is a crucial element in learning more about issues other people face in our society.” (32). Children from heterosexual families benefit from hearing stories about LGBTQIA+ family structures as such stories help them develop empathy towards people who are different (Roberts 2017). Students in U.S. public schools benefit from diverse library collections, because “providing a broad range of materials on controversial issues helps students develop analytical skills and learn to make informed decisions based on information from multiple points of view.” (Magi and Garnar 2015, 182).

Therefore, censoring diverse materials results in clear and negative consequences. Successful censorship often silences stories of already historically underrepresented groups (Dawkins 2022). These groups include minority religious groups and members of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities. By silencing their stories, censorship tells marginalized groups that their existence is not appropriate for public consumption. Censorship prevents marginalized individuals from locating themselves in their communities, from organizing for better treatment,

and from expressing themselves. Their social progress in the fight for equality may be stalled (Jaeger et al. 2023a).

Methodology

Defining Moral Panic

Moral panic is a conceptual framework developed by sociologists and criminologists to explain the process through which society labels and amplifies risks posed by perceived threats to their way of life. Stanley Cohen (2011, [1972]) is credited with developing this framework in his seminal work “Folk Devils and Moral Panics.” Cohen defined moral panic as having five key sociological aspects: 1) Concern about a potential or imagined threat; 2) Hostility towards those who embody the perceived threat; 3) Consensus or “widespread (but not necessarily universal) agreement that the threat exists, is serious and that ‘something should be done’” about it (2011 [1972], 24); 4) Disproportionality, which exaggerates the true risk posed by the threat or the potential damage caused by it; and 5) Volatility, by which “the panic erupts and dissipates suddenly and without warning” (24).

Cohen conducted his research in the 1960s and initially published his book in 1972, leading more modern moral panic scholars to criticize his moral panic framework’s usefulness in recent contexts. Sarah Wright-Monod is one such panic scholar who has worked on updating the definitions of the concept in order to better make sense of modern moral panics. She suggests that researchers ask open-ended questions regarding the justifications of the panic, the material conditions surrounding the panic, the cultural context that situates the panic, and how the panic relates to previous panic studies in order to make connections with broader social theories (Wright-Monod 2017). Wright-Monod emphasizes using an inductive analysis of the panic

episode. These two bodies of work provide the framework upon which this research was constructed.

The sheer volatility and rapid increase in library censorship occurring in the U.S. since 2021 lends credence to the possibility that these trends make up an ongoing moral panic episode, played out locally across broad swaths of the country. When adopting the moral panic framework honed by Wright-Monod (2017) it is essential to not presume that any episode is a moral panic before initiating research, but the trends suggested that these censorship efforts are to some degree coordinated and intentional. Wright-Monod suggested that in phase one of any moral panic research, which is what has been carried out as part of this literature review, the moral panic analysis should seek to justify future investigations which apply the moral panic framework to the occurrences (7). In analyzing these episodes, a “reactive sequence” can be seen in which an individual or a small group raises concerns about potentially questionable library materials and programs which are determined to threaten the stability of society, librarians who defend access to diverse materials seem to be labelled as the “folk devils” or signifiers of the societal threat, and powerful bodies both fuel and benefit from the censorship incidents.

Source Selection

Utilizing Wright-Monod’s (2017) recommendation of an inductive research methodology, sources were obtained from a wide range of platforms and voices in order to develop a foundation upon which future moral panic analysis may be constructed. Initial research looked broadly at the cultural discourse surrounding contemporary library censorship. Suitable sources were evaluated for Cohen’s aspects of moral panics, including perceptions of societal threat, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility.

Source selection for this literature review began by analyzing the State of America's Libraries reports by the ALA published annually from 2016-2023. These yearly reports compile challenges reported to the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) as well as other issues facing U.S. libraries. These reports are primarily for use by library professionals and their supporters. For more clarity regarding incidences of library censorship, the OIF's *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy* was consulted to find details regarding reported challenge incidents. These details helped locate popular media coverage regarding the challenges.

To analyze the broader academic discourse situating contemporary library censorship, further research relied on academic databases including Google Scholar and ebscohost to locate peer-reviewed articles from 2010-present, with a specific focus on articles from 2016-present. These searches utilized the terms "library censorship" and "book banning." These searches revealed some criticism regarding the ALA's reporting on these matters, so research was broadened to include other library organizations as well. At the recommendation of Paul Jaegar and colleagues (2023), these external organizations included the EveryLibrary Institute's Book Censorship Database (Tasslyn Magnusson n.d.), PEN America's Banned in the USA report which focuses on censorship in U.S. schools (Meehan and Friedman 2023), and articles published on the editorial website Book Riot ("About Us" n.d.). Together, these sources provided a more holistic perspective for understanding contemporary library censorship in the U.S.

Analysis

What is Different About Current Censorship Efforts?

ALA Trends

In 2018, the ALA shared that “a new, worrisome trend is the use of extreme tactics by would-be censors and pressure groups. These tactics range from an actual book burning in Iowa that targeted LGBTQIA+ books to lawsuits filed to halt libraries’ drag queen story hours and to end community access to curated and authoritative research databases. While these tactics have been given short shrift by the public and the courts, these strategies have often proven successful in chilling the willingness of schools and libraries to provide access to diverse information and ideas.” (2019, 15). During this year the 347 reported challenges affecting 483 unique titles (18) often failed on both institutional and legal levels, yet many resulted in a chilling effect and soft censorship. This suggests that 2018 saw the relatively slow initiation of censorship trends which have become increasingly prevalent.

In 2019, the trends from 2018 carried over as “challenges to library materials and programs addressing issues of concern to those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and related (LGBTQIA+) communities continued unabated in 2019, with a rising number of coordinated, organized challenges to books, programs, speakers, and other library resources that address LGBTQIA+ issues and themes.” (ALA 2020, 14). These challenges reflect pressure groups’ progress in developing more effective censorship tactics. During 2019, the ALA saw total reported challenges increase only slightly from 2018 to 377 total challenges affecting 566 unique titles (5). The following year, 2020, was abnormal on a global scale due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and libraries were no exception as only 156 total challenges were reported, affecting 273 unique titles (ALA and Steve Zalusky 2021, 7).

In 2021, libraries reported a dramatic acceleration of censorship attempts with 729 total challenges reported, affecting 1,597 unique titles (ALA 2022a, 10). According to Stephanie Hlywak, acting director of communications and marketing with the ALA, “in 2021, libraries

found themselves at the center of a culture war as conservative groups led a historic effort to ban and challenge materials that address racism, gender, politics, and sexual identity. These groups sought to pull books from school and public library shelves that share the stories of people who are gay, trans, Black, Indigenous, people of color, immigrants, and refugees.” (ALA 2022a, 2).

The following year, 2022, saw even more escalation against U.S. libraries. According to acting executive director of the ALA Tracie D. Hall: “many libraries and their staffs nationwide—school, public, college and university, special, carceral, and consortial—found themselves contending with reduced funding and staffing, threats to personal safety in the form of bomb scares and to professional livelihoods from firings and job losses, and bills threatening to criminally charge librarians or defund libraries altogether for making certain materials available on their shelves or findable through reference services.” (ALA 2023, 2). This statement suggests that 2022 brought an escalation to contemporary library censorship trends, wherein challenges to diverse materials developed into threats against the institutions and individuals defending people’s right to access them. In 2022 there was a rapid increase in censorship efforts reported to the ALA, with 1,269 total challenges affecting 2,571 unique titles (2023, 4). Comparing data from the 2019 and 2023 State of America’s Libraries reveals that total reported challenges increased by about 366% from 2018-2022, and unique titles challenged increased by about 532%.

Changes to Challenges

Challenges and reconsiderations are crucial aspects of a quality library system. By allowing patrons and community members the opportunity to engage in discourse surrounding materials available, libraries encourage community involvement and can acquire materials which better suit their patrons’ needs. These processes do not inherently constitute censorship. It is the

responsibility of librarians to periodically review their materials to determine whether they are still suitable for their communities. This may mean that titles are removed due to damage, because the information is outdated, or merely because the demand for them has diminished. A properly performed reconsideration process may occur after a title is challenged by the community, which is why the challenge process was established in the first place, but it is not inherently an act of censorship unless reconsideration is decided based on the type of material that is involved (Lambert 2022).

While the challenge and reconsideration processes are not new, the way that they are being executed is. April Dawkins suggested that “what is different now is the singular focus on books that feature characters that represent diverse and previously unrepresented voices in children’s literature.” (2022, 31). Dawkins (2022) noted that another novel trend is that these challenges are not following pre-established procedures: “some administrators are bypassing board policy to preemptively remove books they deem potentially controversial without receiving a formal complaint or request for reconsideration. In other cases, administrators are skipping steps in the process, removing books from classrooms or library collections, and making the determination for retention or removal without input from a committee. Even some members of school boards are failing to follow their own policies and calling for the removal of books without due process.” (33). The official policy of the ALA is that “challenged resources should remain in the collection and accessible during the review process.” (Magi and Garner 2015, 112). This policy is not consistently being followed in contemporary challenges, as many materials are being removed from the shelves prior to their official reconsideration.

Changes in Scope

Another concerning trend is that, according to library professionals and their advocates, a pattern is playing out with these challenges across the country. The editorial *Culture Wars Reach U.S. Libraries* published in the *Education Journal* elaborated on this pattern:

Apparently concerned citizens object to certain books, usually in the areas of race, sex and gender issues. A list of these suspect books is presented to librarians. The Library Board is attacked, with members replaced by conservative appointments for whom using the library is not a prerequisite for membership of the Board. Any librarian who resists is fired. In at least one case, librarians were told that the law does not mandate a county to have a library, with some citizens feeling that no library would be better than one with God-less books of filth in it. (2022, 17)

Librarians who push back against these censorship attempts often face threats to their livelihoods, and the library systems altogether. This would overrule official reconsideration processes by shuffling the power structures at institutions that do not agree to the demands of the censors.

While organized groups have sought to bypass or overrule established library procedures in the past, these efforts may be occurring at an increased rate or with increased efficacy. In the 2015 update to the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, the ALA suggested that library and other board meetings can be derailed by organized efforts. They reported that “some groups may insert themselves into the library’s board and other open public meetings not for the purpose of solving a problem democratically, but to disrupt the proceedings or to seek publicity. This is a shock to many librarians who are accustomed to the principles of civic engagement or other means to conduct business.” (Magi and Garnar 2015, 128). Shocking, sensational tactics which disrupt

public meetings can be seen in many censorship challenges which have occurred in U.S. libraries.

Existing library policies regarding challenges and reconsideration processes are intended to maintain order and to protect the intellectual freedom of the communities they serve. Unfortunately, these policies are often not followed. In Wood County, West Virginia for example, members of a vocal minority group have spoken at library board meetings to push for censorship of books they view as inappropriate for children, such as *Genderqueer* by Maia Kobabe (Garrison 2023), a young-adult graphic memoir about the author's experiences growing up nonbinary and asexual which has spent three years as the most challenged book in U.S. libraries (ALA and Steve Zalusky 2021; ALA 2022; 2023). Concerned citizens attend library and school board meetings and read aloud passages and share illustrations from the books they are challenging without context. In Wood County, these individuals are not following the pre-established procedures of their library and have only filed three formal challenges, which were all denied. Instead, this group sought to undermine the policies of their public library system by disrupting public meetings. These efforts have, so far, failed to get sexual education books removed from their public library. Now this same group is pushing to cut the library's funding, to have elected officials overrule the official decision to keep the books on the shelves, and to elect their own supportive censor to the library and school boards. Furthermore, they have worked with local conservative politicians on a proposal which may lead to library leaders being criminally charged or jailed if they do not comply with the censorship demands (Garrison 2023).

The ALA shared that 2022 saw twelve different states initiate legal efforts "to amend state criminal obscenity statutes in order to permit criminal prosecution of librarians and educators for distributing materials falsely claimed to be illegal and inappropriate for minors."

(2023, 4–5). According to Jaeger, Kettlich, and Taylor, five states have approved criminal penalties for librarians: Arkansas, Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Tennessee (2023). Two others, Idaho and North Dakota, had similar legislation vetoed by their state governors. The approved penalties include up to \$10,000 in fines and up to ten years in prison per violation. These researchers further argued that this trend of librarian criminalization is a novel development that differs from historical censorship movements. Video recordings by library employees have shown police searching public library deliveries and shelves for prohibited materials (Jaeger, Kettlich, and Taylor 2023). These laws, and even just discussion about them by political bodies, lead to a chilling effect. Jaeger shared that “when state legislatures such as Texas began to debate new censorship laws, new book orders by schools and libraries significantly decreased due to the uncertainty about what will be banned and what will be allowed” (2023, 4). Vaguely worded legislation that may not outright ban books also results in a censoring chilling effect. Florida passed laws that established a need for state-wide oversight and approval of materials available in school libraries but did not establish the training and compliance requirements in a timely manner, forcing Florida school librarians to halt purchasing any new materials for over a year (Jaeger et al. 2023).

Librarians are facing threats of legal action on a local level too. The 2022 *State of America's Library Report* shared that “in Wyoming, a group of residents led by a local pastor filed criminal complaints with local prosecutors, requiring the appointment of a special prosecutor who weighed the possibility of prosecuting public library officials for shelving books some said were obscene in sections intended for children and young adults.” (ALA 2022, 6). Ultimately, no charges were filed against the librarians in this instance. Often, these attempts at criminalizing librarians seems built on what the ALA refers to as “an effort to frame any material

with LGBTQIA+ themes or characters as inherently pornographic or unsuitable for minors, even when the materials are intended for children and families and they are age and developmentally appropriate.” (2020, 14). Whether intentionally or not, censors are misinterpreting legal definitions and exaggerating the risk that diverse materials pose.

Some censors are submitting challenges based on lists circulated on social media, often by conservative groups without investigating whether the titles they are concerned about are available in their local library systems (Jaeger et al. 2023). In Bonners Ferry, Idaho, concerned conservative community members have made complaints about over 400 books at the public library, even though none of the books are actually held there (Kingkade 2022). According to the ALA, this group’s threat to sue over these titles led to the library’s insurance being revoked by the insurer and temporarily put the library into jeopardy of closing altogether (2023). Undeterred by the library not having these books, this vocal group has pushed to have these titles preemptively banned from purchase and has campaigned to flip the library board by recalling four of its five members in hopes of replacing them with pro-censorship candidates. The library director left her job due to the stress of these efforts, which negatively impacted on her health (Kingkade 2022). More recently, this library system has made headlines for their decision to shift their young adult section in an effort to prevent 14–18-year-olds from accessing allegedly graphic content, including the frequently challenged title “Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl,” and to appease the censors who used the popular tactic of reading shocking and explicit sections of the book, out of context, aloud at board meetings. The library board has agreed to create a “new adult” section which will be relocated away from any of the children or young adult sections for these books to be held in (Bonsant 2023).

Where is the Censorship Happening?

Trends in U.S. School Libraries

According to the ALA's State of America's Libraries Reports, 62% of reported challenge attempts in U.S. libraries were in schools in 2021 (2022a), up from 50% in 2016 (2017).

Challenges to school library materials are managed differently from challenges to public library materials because school libraries are often overseen by an elected school board and have a more complex chain of command. It is easy for censors to engage in sensational tactics that disrupt school board meetings, and Nancy Jo Lambert pointed out that due to current trends "we're normalizing the use of school libraries as a battleground in political conflicts that have no place in the classroom." (2022). Expanding on those sensational tactics, "parents participating in the agenda of right-wing groups often attempt to circumvent review policies through attention-grabbing antics in school board meetings. These include dramatic and decontextualized readings of passages from the books under attack, extreme accusations such as that YA authors and librarians are pedophiles and "groomers" who are peddling pornography to minors." (Perez 2022). These tactics suggest an exaggeration of risk by misinterpreting the legally recognized definitions of terms such as "pornography" and "pedophilia."

Nicole Carr and Lucas Waldron, reporting for ProPublica, have been investigating school board disruptions occurring across the country and suggested that the last two years have seen an increase in such tactics (2023). Often, these school board disruptions are catalysts that spur challenges to school library materials. After analyzing 90 incidents occurring in 30 states, they found that a minimum of 59 people were arrested between May 2021 and November 2022 for disruptive behavior at school board meetings on charges that were often later dismissed. Carr found that dismissing the charges resulted in at least one censor feeling emboldened to further disrupt official proceedings (Carr 2023). Carr and Waldron noted some patterns as well, the

majority of incidents occurred in suburban school districts and most people involved were white. They found that these incidents rose out of challenges to COVID-19 mask and vaccine mandates and evolved to challenge information about systemic racism as well as LGBTQIA+ identities (Carr and Waldron 2023). Describing similar incidents, Dawkins shared that “Recent challenges to books are often happening in open comment periods during school board meetings with complainants reading inflammatory excerpts from books without context. The reading is often followed by demands for immediate removal of the materials and accusations that librarians or teachers are promoting child pornography, obscenity, or CRT [Critical Race Theory].” (2022, 32).

Trends in U.S. Public Libraries

Public library materials in the U.S. vary widely depending on the demographic that they serve, which is appropriate given the standards put forth by the ALA. According to library researcher Cameron M. Pierson this varying access to materials means that rural library patrons can struggle more to access diverse resources safely and privately than those in more urban library systems. Pierson found that public libraries in diverse, often urban regions have more nonfiction LGBTQIA+ titles available than public libraries in not- diverse areas. Pierson also noted that transgender people struggle similarly in both urban and rural libraries to find representative materials. This is a problem because LGBTQIA+ people, especially those in less-diverse areas where they do not see many other openly LGBTQIA+ people in their communities, often rely on the public library as a resource for coming-out and embracing their identities. Pierson argued that when libraries in rural and less-diverse areas choose not to carry LGBTQIA+ relevant titles either due to hard or soft censorship they are preventing the LGBTQIA+ members of their communities from feeling welcomed (2017). Melissa Adler also noted that the

importance of LGBTQIA+ materials being accessible in rural communities is often overlooked (2015). In at least one instance, a public library lost its funding or closed altogether because it pushed back against demands to censor materials (13 On Your Side Staff 2022). Because libraries are sites that support identity formation, preventing access to relevant materials can inhibit the development of a healthy self-image.

Library censorship efforts are aimed at more than just books. Formal challenges at libraries can be submitted about books, displays, events, resources, book lists, and even social media posts (Magi and Garnar 2015). Conservative censors have targeted story hours, which are events in which books are read aloud usually to children, that feature BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ themes or readers. Authors are often invited to read portions of their books at libraries. In the 2020 the ALA noted a “new and distressing trend of disinviting authors who had been invited to speak or read from their books, solely on the grounds that the authors identify as LGBTQIA+ or because their books include LGBTQIA+ themes.” (2020, 14). In Montana, trans and two-spirit author Adria Jaworth was invited to speak at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Library but had that invitation revoked. The disinvitation was due to a new state law that intended to prohibit drag performances in front of minors, but which is worded vaguely enough that it may also apply to other gender nonconforming people. Jaworth has since joined a lawsuit seeking to challenge the law due to this discrimination (Wadsworth 2023).

Drag queen story hours, a children’s literacy movement that began in 2015, have become recurring targets of censorship. From 2015-2017 these events were held without much contention, but they became more visible towards the end of 2018 and have since led to volatile censorship efforts and laws such as the one that inappropriately affected Jaworth. Renton, Washington saw a protest against a scheduled drag queen story hour at the Fairwood Library in

June 2019, which is recognized as LGBTQIA+ Pride month in the U.S. This protest attracted conservative para-military groups who were openly carrying firearms (Ellis 2023). The ALA shared that in 2019 there were more than thirty reported challenges to drag queen story hours and LGBTQIA+ Pride events in U.S. libraries (2020).

Other library events are also targets of conservative censorship. In North Carolina an LGBTQIA+ Pride-themed craft event held at the Shelby public library drew negative attention and led to censors expressing their ire at the event as well as at a library funding meeting afterwards. According to Shelby Pride's president, who was in attendance, the library event was underway when conservative censors gained entry and began disruptively reciting Christian bible verses. One speaker at the library funding meeting who had attended the event himself referred to LGBTQIA+ existence as a "perverted lifestyle," insisted that he felt the "need to be protecting the children" and expressed concern that "our county is using our taxpayer dollars to promote debauchery and unnatural sex acts against God" (Lemon 2023). Censoring events can have far-reaching effects for those who aren't children, too. A library in Oklahoma voted to cancel programs seeking to raise awareness about sexual assault and a book club for adults which discussed romance novels due to rules prohibiting "displays or programs that focus on anyone's viewpoint on sex and sexuality" passed by the library board (Caldwell 2022).

Some individuals are okay with books being available at their local library but draw the line at displays that highlight certain themes or titles. These challenges to library displays, which are a form of censorship, can be enacted on a local or state level and initiated by community members or legislators. In Orem, Utah the public library system was banned from setting up any heritage-themed displays including ones for Black History Month, Pride Month, and Hispanic Heritage Month and librarians who complained were threatened with disciplinary action (Camp

2023). In Missouri, Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft signed into law rules that put state library funding at risk should they set up displays of “age-inappropriate” materials in youth and young adult sections. The Mid-Continent Public Library in Kansas City, Missouri decided not to create a pride-themed book display due to Ashcroft’s regulation (Ujiyediin 2023). Adopting a different approach, the conservative religious organization CatholicVote publicizes their “Hide the Pride” campaign. “Hide the Pride” aims to convince concerned censors to check out entire LGBTQIA+ Pride displays to keep them from being available to other patrons and then sending letters or emails to the library highlighting why those titles are deemed inappropriate (“CatholicVote Launches ‘Hide the Pride’” 2022).

Who are the Censors?

Library professionals and their advocates indicate that some parties are more interested in censoring materials in school libraries than others. After elaborating on the adverse effects that censorship has on students, Spilka suggested that “both parents and politicians feel it’s their duty to assert control over the information within school libraries” (2022, 31). In an article that explains how censoring diverse materials in libraries silences marginalized voices, April Dawkins argued that in U.S. schools, “challenges can come from parents, students, community members, faculty, and administration” (2022, 32). Dawkins also reported that “some of the recent censorship attempts have been fueled by political rhetoric from elected officials often providing a list of books that should be ‘reviewed’ if not outright banned.” (2022, 31). Librarian Nancy Jo Lambert pointed out that “when politicians circulate book lists or conflate age-relevant, identity-affirming materials with pornography, we are no longer talking about healthy discourse” (2022). This was the case in recent incidents affecting Florida schools reported by Jaeger and colleagues (2023), and “wholesale bans” that eliminate large swaths of school library catalogues

are reported to have occurred in several states according to PEN America (Meehan and Friedman 2023).

Censors circulate lists of potentially objectionable books on social media, with the intent to spur concerned actors to challenge titles at their local libraries. Even when no such concerned actors step forward to submit these challenges, library and local officials are sometimes proactively reviewing titles that appear on these lists. Sometimes politicians themselves create and/or circulate these with the reasoning that certain materials, such as those that represent LGBTQIA+ experiences, are pornographic or obscene (Dawkins 2022). These lists appear on ratings websites, such as BookLooks (2022), which flag certain materials as objectionable for children and share out of context passages from the books for easy perusal. While such websites have been known by the ALA for some time and are referenced in the 2015 update to the Intellectual Freedom Manual, they are gaining popularity as politicians and interest groups share them widely. This is a potential reason for the trend reported by the ALA that in 2022 “90% of reported book challenges were demands to censor multiple titles—and of those demands to censor library books, 40% sought to remove or restrict over 100 books all at once.” (2023, 4). They went on to note that before 2020 most reported challenges were made by individual parents about one single book that their children were reading.

Moms for Liberty is a group that has gained a lot of recent attention for challenging books in school and public libraries. Founded in 2021 in opposition to mask mandates in Florida, they now boast 250 chapters made up of over 100,000 members operating in 42 states (Carey 2023a). After ostensibly succeeding in overturning mask and vaccine mandates in U.S. schools during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the group turned to challenging what they refer to as “woke indoctrination” of children by organizing to have certain subjects, including BIPOC and

LGBTQIA+ experiences, banned from schools and public libraries (“Moms for Liberty” n.d.). The Southern Poverty Law Center has labelled Moms for Liberty an extremist antigovernment organization (Carey 2023b). There have been instances of Moms for Liberty members working closely with conservative paramilitary groups such as the Proud Boys (Gilbert 2023) and in one incident a Moms for Liberty administrator from Lonoke County, Arkansas threatened to commit violence against a school librarian who had opposed censorship efforts during a chapter meeting (Bailey 2022).

While the previously mentioned website BookLooks denounces any affiliation with Moms for Liberty or any other organized group, an investigation by reporter Kelly Jensen found that the LLC for BookLooks was filed in Florida by Emily Maikisch, a member of Moms for Liberty (2022). This suggests that these groups are working together to establish widespread consensus about the threat that certain library materials may pose. According to the Moms for Liberty website the organization was founded by former school board members and their current mission is “fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government.” (“Who We Are” 2023). Parental rights have become a call to action among groups promoting censorship in U.S. libraries.

It is worth noting that the separate groups promoting library censorship often form networks of support with other conservative groups who share similar ideologies. Watson (2019) found that, regarding censorship of LGBTQIA+ and sexual education materials, “over the past decade, a number of anti-sexuality groups funded by similar groups or individuals have coalesced into an international movement directly at odds with intellectual freedom and privacy—and have repeatedly targeted public libraries as sites of freedom” (19). For example,

conservative politicians and presidential hopefuls took the opportunity to express their support of Moms for Liberty at their recent national summit (Carey 2023b).

Why are they Censoring?

Current censorship trends, as previously mentioned, target specific groups that have historically been marginalized. Jaeger explained that materials most frequently targeted represent the BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and Jewish communities, and that the censorship is justified by labelling these materials as obscene (2023). As Jaeger pointed out, this rhetoric echoes historical censorship efforts of influential figures, such as Anthony Comstock who worked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to outlaw the production and circulation of materials which he considered obscene (2023, 5). The rhetoric of defending children from materials perceived as potentially harmful can be seen as a reflection of campaigns spearheaded by Anita Bryant, who helped lead the “Save Our Children” campaign in the 1970s-1980s by arguing that homosexuality threatened children’s safety and worked to make sure that homosexual individuals could not hold jobs as teachers or adopt children (Williams 2018). In essence, current conservative censors are recycling arguments made against diverse materials throughout history by utilizing the power that modern technology and current social climates have given them in an effort to prevent social change. Jaeger suggested that a unifying trait of contemporary library censors is their perception that diverse materials represent a threat to society and that by promoting censorship they are defending against “moral decline” (2023, 4–5). This may be another example of exaggerated societal risk.

The language censors use to defend their efforts reveals much about their motivations and ideologies. Jennifer Steele (2022) studied thirty years of challenges to picture books for children and discovered some recurring themes. In 2017 a picture book titled *Jacob’s New Dress* was

labelled as “a tool of indoctrination to normalize transgender behavior” (Steele 2022, 6). In 2012 there was a challenge to an LGBTQIA+ representative children’s book titled “Uncle Bobby’s Wedding” at a public library in Missouri that claimed the book sought to “glorify homosexual marriage” and possibly “open the door to library books advocating other interests such as white supremacy or pedophilia.” (Steele 2022, 5). Rachel Altobelli and Nancy Jo Lambert pointed out that “children’s books featuring LGBTQ+ characters are often described as being about sex even when they are about cartoon animals who stand several feet away from each other at all times” (2022, 25).

A censor in Llano County, Texas submitted a challenge to 60 books covering topics such as sexual education, LGBTQIA+ existence, and BIPOC issues that she labelled “pornographic filth” in the public library system (“Culture Wars” 2022). A parent attended a school board meeting in Leander, Texas to read an out of context section aloud from an LGBTQIA+ book that was available in the library while wielding a sex toy (Perez 2022). A pastor submitted a public library challenge to a children’s picture book with LGBTQIA+ themes in Upshur, West Virginia because the book is allegedly “a deliberate attempt to indoctrinate young children, especially boys” into an LGBTQIA+ “lifestyle,” and in Loudon County, Virginia a group challenged several LGBTQIA+ titles by claiming that the books further a “political agenda” (ALA 2020, 14). Steele goes on to suggest that “too often, adults fixate on the sexual aspect of LGBTQ parents, queer children, and children in LGBTQ families and object to young children learning about sexuality and sexual relationships” (2022, 7).

A pro-censorship reporter, Carey Martell, from Yamhill County, Oregon, made the case that the perceived political agenda to indoctrinate children stems from the fact that, allegedly,

there are adults who view children becoming homosexual and/or transgender as a positive thing for their political crusade against traditional American culture, because these adults are members of groups that target vulnerable populations of disenfranchised people for recruitment. Becoming gay and/or transgender will always result in some social disenfranchisement because these lifestyles require one to abandon traditional societal norms, and these adults know that. It is the reason why they are encouraging children to abandon the societal norms in the first place, so that these children will be easier to *recruit* into their groups when they are older. (2022, *emphasis added*)

The aforementioned anti-LGBTQIA+ activist Anita Bryant popularized the statement in 1970s that “homosexuals cannot reproduce so they must *recruit*” (Williams 2018, 252, *emphasis added*) which can be seen reflected in Martell’s statements. It is important to note that LGBTQIA+ children are frequently raised in heterosexual, traditional families and do in fact need supportive communities to find their place in the world.

Discussion

What Librarians are Saying

Librarians are in the thick of these censorship conflicts and have offered key insight into what is happening. These efforts don’t just prevent parents’ own children from accessing these materials, they seek to prevent all children and, in some cases, adults from accessing them, often by removing them from library shelves altogether. The majority of U.S. individuals do not support this type of censorship. CBS News reported that 85% of a representative sample of U.S. adults polled believed that books should never be banned for containing political ideas which the respondent disagreed with (Backus and Salvanto 2022). While not exclusively applicable to

libraries, the Associated Press found that 58% of a representative sample of U.S. adults were strongly opposed to prohibiting instruction about books regarding “divisive subjects” in schools (“UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll” 2022). The ALA sponsored another survey of U.S. adult voters and, specifically, parents to analyze support of library censorship and notably found that 61% of parents oppose removal of books from school libraries (ALA 2022b). That ALA poll also showed that 92% of parents view public and school librarians favorably, meaning that those who portray librarians as threats are a small but increasingly vocal minority. As polling suggests that the majority of U.S. adults oppose censorship of diverse materials and support U.S. librarians, groups that coordinate censorship challenges under the guise of “parental rights” appear to impede the rights of parents who want their children to have access to diverse materials.

The social cost of censorship includes limited access to certain materials, even if they are still available at a different library or for purchase. April Dawkins explained this phenomenon:

When censorship attempts are successful, they silence the stories of historically underrepresented people. Access to diverse stories will be limited. Although some in the public point to the ability of students and their parents to just visit the public library or buy the book from the bookstore, removing books from schools means limiting access. Not every student has transportation to a local library or even has a local public library. Many students cannot afford to buy books or do not have access to a bookstore. Limiting access to books in school libraries and classrooms leads to greater inequities in education. Additionally, the rhetoric around book banning, which labels books as disgusting, pornographic, or explicit, may cause students to feel that they are not valued because their stories are being labeled in harmful ways. (2022, 34)

Censorship therefore harms marginalized community members the most, preventing those who cannot afford to go buy a book or travel to a different library system from accessing the materials. It negatively impacts people's understanding of diversity both by damaging the self-esteem of BIPOC and/or LGBTQIA+ individuals and by preventing those who are not parts of those groups from learning about their experiences. The language used by censors that labels BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ materials as obscene may tell individuals that their existence is obscene as well.

Soft censorship can occur when librarians tasked with collection development choose not to purchase books that may cause controversy in their community. According to Dawkins, "9 out of 10 elementary or middle school librarians had chosen not to purchase material because of the potential for controversy" (2018, 8). This will also negatively impact marginalized members of their communities the most. As pointed out in a study of library self-censorship of LGBTQIA+ materials, "although adults have choices about where to live, children and teens aren't so fortunate. Nobody has the privilege of deciding where to be born and raised, and LGBT kids grow up all over the place." (Antell, Strothmann, and Downey 2013, 106). Censoring information about LGBTQIA+ existence from children will not prevent children from meeting children in their communities who come from LGBTQIA+ families (Steele 2022). By preemptively soft censoring materials that represent certain groups, librarians send a message to members of those groups that their stories aren't worth defending.

Lack of access to representative materials has been shown to correlate with adverse mental health outcomes among LGBTQIA+ students (Rickman 2015). In some cases, BIPOC and/or LGBTQIA+ students themselves are leading the fight against censorship in their school

and public libraries with the support of their allied peers. These students know what is at risk when diverse stories are censored and what is being said about their existence (Lambert 2022).

What Students are Saying

Students have been combatting attempted censorship in libraries and schools for many years. One of the foundational cases which established the right to read in U.S. schools, *Pico v. Island Trees Union Free School District Board of Education*, occurred when students initiated and won a lawsuit against their school in 1976 for violating their first amendment rights that reached the Supreme Court (Spilka 2022). Regarding censorship in school libraries, student Joshua Spilka pointed out that:

Instances of book banning aren't random. They're targeted at specific ideas or topics of information. These are issues some adults feel are inappropriate for students to read about and, thus, should be purged from schools so that parents can either educate their child on the issues or not even make students aware of them. However, these issues are often ones many students either experience or struggle with, and topics that students need information about. (2022, 32)

Spilka claimed that students who are fighting against censorship battles are fighting battles that were initiated by adults, and that “while some students are finding their voice and protesting for change, book banning is an issue they shouldn't have to fight against in the first place” (2022, 33).

Aaryan Rawal, a student from Virginia who was 17 at the time explained that the need to organize against censorship of two LGBTQIA+ books in his school library “forced him to miss class and lose sleep.” (Laviertes 2022). Rawal went on to argue that “no student in this country

wants to go to school fighting for their basic rights. Instead of doing statistics homework or hanging out with friends, we were expected to go to school board meetings and lobby school board members for stuff that really shouldn't be up for debate.” Linn Jaster McCormick, who is a student at Oregon Charter Academy, explained to Oregon Public Broadcasting that their school has seen challenges to library books brought up by parents at school board meetings (Chavez 2023). McCormick shared that “It seemed like people weren't taking time to analyze the books, what the contents in them are, what the context of them are. It seemed like they took a second to look at the cover of the book, read the title and make judgments about it. It also worried me because of the fact that a lot of the books they kept mentioning were books discussing queer topics. Those books would be important resources for both individuals like me and other people that I know in the community, and it concerned me that there seemed to be this strong barrage against them, for simply being books on shelves with all the other books.”

In the interest of presenting a more unbiased perspective, grey media reports discussing the opinions of students who support censorship of materials in their schools were sought. These searches were conducted via Google's search engine using the phrases “students who support censorship,” “students who support book bans,” and “conservative students censor books” on August 4, 2023. The Moms for Liberty press pages for pro-censorship views from students were also analyzed. Ultimately, none of these searches yielded results sharing the views of students who support censorship in their libraries. Future research should investigate this further.

Potential Applications for Moral Panic Theory

Censors are portraying non-sexual forms of expression as pornography, obscenity, and child sexual exploitation which distorts the perception of societal risk posed by such materials (Steele 2022). BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ representative materials make up a small fraction of the

total materials available in most libraries. Nonetheless, challenges to library materials disproportionately target those materials which, in turn, may point to the level of disproportionality discussed by Cohen in his original understanding of moral panic (2011 [1972]).

Current support for library censorship of certain materials is not widespread and is instead spearheaded by a vocal minority. Recent polls have shown that 70% of people in the U.S. do not support efforts to have books removed in their public libraries, and this equates to the majority of each political party with 75% of Democrats, 70% of Republicans, and 58% of independents opposed to this type of censorship (ALA 2022b). That poll also found that 74% of parents with children enrolled in U.S. public schools trust school librarians to select age-appropriate materials (ALA 2022b). Another poll conducted by CBS News found that over 80% of people in the U.S. disagree with banning materials in schools that represent BIPOC history and experiences (Fred Backus and Anthony Salvanto 2022). The widely known pro-censorship group Moms for Liberty, with over 100,000 members, represents less than 0.5% of U.S. parents (Carey 2023b). The fact that contemporary library censorship does not have widespread agreement disagrees with Cohen's understanding of moral panic (2011 [1972]), but further investigation might determine whether it aligns with Wright-Monod's updated conceptualization of the theory (2017).

Another way in which current library censorship may align with the moral panic concept is in how volatile these trends are. The rate of censorship has drastically risen in the last three years, and often censorship events occur without seeming logic over books and materials that may not even exist in local library catalogs, or which have been peacefully held in the library for many years. Future research may benefit from analyzing the inception and execution of

individual campaigns to challenge and censor library materials in order to judge the volatility of these efforts using a moral panic framework. By utilizing the inductive research model proposed by Wright-Monod (2017), a more in-depth investigation of individual censorship conflicts may or may not point to a large-scale moral panic episode being carried out over time.

Conclusion

Increasing censorship efforts are taking place across the U.S., and this literature review has provided an analysis of both the grey and academic literature discussing these trends. Library professionals offer a perspective of these challenges from the position of fighting against them, while conservative groups provide a perspective from the position of fighting in favor of censorship of diverse materials. By recycling the phrases used by historical figures such as Anita Bryant and Anthony Comstock, contemporary conservative censors have managed to rapidly mobilize a base of activists who are against LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC inclusive materials being accessible in U.S. libraries. Using terms like “parental rights” and “radical indoctrination,” and by portraying diverse materials as “harmful to children,” these pro-censorship groups and individuals have created networks with politicians and have developed methods of attacking libraries both officially through legislation and individually through formal or public challenges.

While library professionals and their supporters are tasked with combatting volatile censorship efforts in their communities, it may be beneficial for future research to take a holistic approach to understanding contemporary censorship efforts and the broader culture in which they occur. An in-depth inductive analysis of individual censorship incidents may reveal whether contemporary conservative library censorship efforts constitute a moral panic and, if so, what the parameters of the panic discourse are. This literature review could only offer a portion of such an approach but paints a picture of the broader nature of contemporary censorship efforts.

Communities are harmed by censorship of diverse materials. Social change is stifled. Students receive harmful messages that their stories are inappropriate, and communities suffer from a lack of access to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ representative materials. Anyone who relies on the library as a safe space to learn about others can be repressed by a lack of relevant events or displays that make it easier to locate such materials. Individuals whose identities are being debated at library and school board meetings may receive the message that they are not welcome in their communities. These censorship battles create division where diverse materials can create connections. Researching these censorship trends offers examples of how contemporary conservative discourse feeds into cultural divides.

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