

# The Urge to Censor: Raw Power, Social Control, and the Criminalization of Librarianship

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## ABSTRACT

Censorship is an act of control, driven by a combustible mix of power, privilege, and fear. Large pro-censorship movements historically occur in response to social changes that alarm a privileged population, with the goal of dictating access to information for the entire community according to the personal beliefs of the privileged group. The urge to censor is rooted in the use of raw power to preserve the currently privileged, and censorship will be a threat to libraries as long as privilege seeks to perpetuate itself. With the current censorship movement against many marginalized groups, the intent behind banning access to materials representing the voices and experiences of those populations is to keep them marginalized. The current censorship wave represents not only a threat to intellectual freedom, but to civil rights and human rights. This paper offers eight historical tenets of censorship that shed light on the current censorship movement, which are useful to libraries seeking ways to understand and to navigate the latest threat of book bans. While this new movement has added seemingly unthinkable dimensions, like laws that threaten to imprison librarians for simply doing their jobs, much of what is occurring now is also deeply rooted in past attempts to thwart social change.

## I. Introduction

The movement to censor books in libraries that began near the onset of the pandemic has accelerated to the point that many activists and politicians actively portray the library as a threat. States and local communities have implemented extensive book bans covering an odd assortment of materials, proposed – and in some cases passed – laws that criminalize librarianship, and opted to defund their own libraries over certain materials in the collections (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, and Hodge 2023). While overall perceptions of libraries remain strong, librarians are facing the most sustained, powerful, and wide-ranging censorship effort in a century.

Historically, economic and social upheavals result in popular attempts to curtail the individual rights of marginalized populations, and the past few years have seen the pandemic, economic stagnation and runaway inflation, mass migration, and the terrifying acceleration of climate change (Galston 2018; Inglehart 2016). While schools across the country were closed

for extended periods of time, social media platforms provided a means through which people could organize, refine incendiary rhetoric, and spread misinformation. These platforms amplified pandemic-fueled social upheaval, as evidenced by widespread vaccine resistance and a surge in false narratives peddled by QAnon. They also served as incubators for galvanized censorship efforts across the US, wherein those looking to marginalize certain populations could take advantage of an increasingly chaotic information environment to do so (Jaeger Kettlich et al. 2022). For instance, someone can make a claim against a title – regardless of whether they’ve actually read it – in a social media post that gets shared widely online and, within a matter of days or sometimes even hours, gets repeated around the country at school board and county council meetings by others who also haven’t read this title. It would be hard to imagine a more perfect recipe for an explosion of censorship.

Many librarians have quite reasonably focused on the immediate threats and impacts of these attempts to purge materials from libraries, shut libraries down, and put librarians in jail. However, these current events also fit into much larger trends about censorship. Examining the historical threads interwoven into the current censorship movement reveals that what libraries face now are not random or unprecedented, but part of a long historical progression. Summarizing these historical and cultural trends has the potential to offer avenues by which to better understand what is happening and explore ways to respond to this latest round of threats. While a greater understanding of this broader context will not make the current dangers disappear, it can help librarians determine how best to navigate the very large storm in which they now find themselves.

## II. Censoring, Banning, and Burning in a Democracy

America has a rather paradoxical history when it comes to censorship, both in the abstract and in application. As a matter of principle, on one hand, most Americans hold the First Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of expression, to be nearly sacred; for many Americans, the right to speak one’s mind is the essence of the country (Jaeger Lazar et al. 2023). It is so beloved that most Americans are unaware that the protections only apply to attempts by the federal government to limit individuals’ speech. On the other hand, censorship’s long and vibrant presence in American history has been due to its periodic political popularity. In practice, freedom of expression is often a struggle between tangible political fears related to national security, public morals, and "explicit" content, and intangible political ideals of expression, access, and openness. In short, “[t]he human instinct to censor thrives, as it always will, living in irrepressible conflict with the human instinct to speak” (Smolla 1992, p. 42).

These broader conflicts inherent in censorship efforts obviously have significant implications for libraries, yet, as information institutions, the information-based conflicts inherent in censorship efforts also carry great weight (Jaeger Kettlich et al. 2022). Censorship efforts exist at a confluence of numerous aspects of information: access, policy, literacy, and politics. Decisions made in policy and political realms lead to curtailments of access and literacy. The very nature of censorship efforts blurs these aspects together, and it is vital to pry them apart to examine them. What follows are eight tenets of censorship, through which the current censorship movement can be better understood, viewed, and navigated.

### 1. Censorship Is the Original Information Policy

Censorship goes back as far as the act of writing; ancient civilizations – before the Common Era in Greece, Rome, China, and Jerusalem – left records of organized censorship policies in the time of papyrus scrolls (Manguel 1996). The first censorship campaign for which detailed records have survived was in China in 213 BCE, in which emperor Qin Shi Huang called for the burning of all texts contradicting his preferred version of history, along with the more than 400 authors of those texts. Most governments and religions kept an index of banned materials as a matter of basic policy. As the printing press made texts much more readily reproduced, disseminated, and read, government censorship policies grew with similar speed.

Records indicate that censorship really is the original information policy, and one that has remained popular – often with both governments and citizens – throughout history (Taylor and Jaeger 2022). In the US, there was broad public support for censorship in politics and policy well into the middle of the twentieth century. “At every phase of our history, some Americans have had their liberties violated in spite of the Bill of Rights” and most egregiously during times of war (Slack 2015, p. 259). For instance, the Sedition Act of 1918, the most notable of such laws during wartime, made it illegal to say anything negative about the US, which resulted in many convictions. The recipients of long jail sentences included a member of Congress for questioning military leaders about the war’s progress, a member of the clergy for passing out pacifist literature, a man for criticizing the Red Cross at a restaurant in a private conversation, and a filmmaker for casting the British in a bad light in a film about the American revolution. The Sedition Act was followed by the creation of a military office of censorship during World War II, requiring the press who wanted access “to apply for credentials from the office, which meant they had to play ball with the military” (Goethe 2019, n.p.).

The rest of American history – and the history of every other state in history – abounds with examples of censorship. The instances of states turning against censorship as common practice, either through their populace or their elected officials, are atypical responses to social upheaval. Censorship is not only an ever-present threat to intellectual freedom, it is in all likelihood the longest running information policy that humans have created.

### 2. Censorship Is Raw Hegemonic Power

No matter how censorship is framed by its adherents, it is an act of unbridled hegemonic power. Regardless of whether the hegemon represents the majority of the population or a privileged few, the act of censoring is the intentional removal of the intellectual choice of others. It is a brutal and blunt method of attempting to control access literacy, and discourse, and by extension all other social interactions.

World War II represents a period in history when more books, works of art, historical records, libraries, archives, and museums were destroyed than any other event in human history, with the destruction primarily being direct and intentional (Knuth, 2003). Destroying the information and the information institutions of a culture or a nation is an extreme form of censorship that only highlights the brutality of these acts. The Nazis burned books with great enthusiasm, holding what they called “Feuersprüche,” which means fire

incantations. They would burn books written by authors from cultures and perspectives they intended to annihilate. After that, they systematically pillaged and destroyed every library, archive, and museum in the territory that they conquered, obliterating a large, irreplaceable portion of recorded human history, experience, and expression in the process. Because these actions defined the world's view of the Nazis, when members of the American military liberated a population, they were instructed to immediately reassure it by saying: "We are not book burners" (Rosenberg 2020 p. 216).

The symbolism, gravity, and legacy of these fire incantations is nobly explored in a recent work of fiction called *The Bookshop of the Brokenhearted* (Hillman 2018). The main character, based on the author's long-running interviews with several Holocaust survivors, is a Jewish woman from Hungary who moves to rural Australia after being freed from a Nazi death camp at the end of World War II. She had two goals: getting as far away from Europe as possible and opening a bookshop so she could sell at least 25,000 books or as many books that were destroyed in the *Feuerspruche* in her hometown.

The Russian assault on Ukraine provides a contemporary example of the same brutal power behind censorship. In the areas of Ukraine that Russian forces successfully occupied (before having to flee), the collections of libraries, museums, archives, and schools have been ransacked. Books and other materials in Ukrainian, as well as items about Ukraine's history and culture, have been systematically destroyed to advance the claim that Ukraine never existed, with the ultimate goal of erasing it from history (Jaeger Kettlich et al. 2022).

The exercise of this raw hegemonic power need not be an application of physical force to be successful; it can be drawn entirely from privilege. In the US, that usually derives from white, Christian, high socio-economic privilege. The now-widespread movement to have Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's scathing enslavement narrative *Beloved* removed from high school libraries began when a student who read the book was upset by learning about the horrors of enslavement. The student's mother, Laura Murphy, decided the proper response was to get the book out of schools so other similarly privileged children could remain blissfully ignorant about the genuine horrors of certain major parts of US history. Not only has her work to organize other privileged parents against the book been depressingly successful, it has made her enough of a celebrity that she appears in political ads and at campaign events for pro-censorship candidates.

The power of censorship extends beyond the removal of materials. 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 (Natanson 2023a). Further, in the ten states that have recently passed laws which give parents the ability to review proposed book orders and/or give local authorities the ability to limit access to books, librarians face many new administrative hurdles, directly hindering their ability to acquire materials of any sort. In Florida, the state delayed creating training for school librarians about compliance with new censorship guidelines from the state, rendering school librarians unable to purchase books for more than a year until the training was finally made available (Natanson 2023b). There are many ways to wield the raw power of censorship.

### 3. Censorship Is an Attempt to Prevent Social Change

Detailed studies of those who seek to censor materials in libraries are unified by framing

their activities in terms of defending society from some form of moral decline (Knox 2015). This defense against moral decline, however, is simply packaging a resistance to change or the expansion of rights to others under a different guise. Those launching this defense generally stand to benefit the most from a rigid adherence to the status quo.

The current surge in censorship is focusing heavily on materials written by and exploring the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color), LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/questioning, Intersex, and Asexual, Plus), and Jewish communities. While censorship rhetoric focuses on protecting children from “explicit” materials, the examples given by censorship enthusiasts fall heavily on books by members of these groups. The Indiana legislature has bafflingly offered Ibram X. Kendi’s 2019 book *How to be an Antiracist* as an example of the “obscene” literature it wants to protect its communities from, while the legislature in Missouri has banned *Maus* (Spiegelman 1991), a graphic novel about the Holocaust, as similarly “obscene.” In addition, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has censored the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones, in addition to works by other acclaimed authors, in Florida schools. His misleading rhetoric justifying the censorship, such as “we won’t allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other” (Bridges 2023, n.p.), contributes to the spread of misinformation as well, as he misstates the aims of both CRT and *The 1619 Project*. In the state legislatures that have debated statewide book bans or laws criminalizing librarianship for providing access to banned books, members have not attempted to disguise that their goals truly are to further marginalize the voices of BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and Jewish communities (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, & Hodge 2023).

Most major periods of censorship in the US have followed a similar pattern. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anthony Comstock was the official censor of the US government, working through a position in the Postal Service. His job was to stop the flow of the “obscene,” immoral,” “explicit,” and “indecent” – without the need for specific definitions, of course – and he bestrides that period in American history, being seen by the public as a hero at the time (Jaeger & Taylor 2019). His career totals include the seizure and destruction of hundreds of thousands of pounds of print materials, along with tens of thousands of birth control devices and boxes of medications, as well as a great many convictions and suicides, of which he was proud to note. The list in the previous sentence provides an obvious tipoff to the actual focus of Comstock’s job. Comstock’s role was a reaction to increasing freedom for women in society and campaigns for women’s suffrage and other human rights (Sohn 2021). Comstock primarily focused on materials written by and for women – medical materials for women, women’s fiction, materials related to women’s rights – and the contraceptive devices and medicines that gave women greater autonomy over their own bodies (Cockrell 2019).

His efforts sent enough people to fill 61 passenger train cars to jail, to put it in an appropriate metaphor for Comstock’s day, and among the prominent people he hounded into suicide were female medical practitioners focused on women’s health and well-known advocates for women’s rights, most notably Ira Craddock and Ann Lohman. Comstock’s rhetoric and arguments would be effectively revived in the movement to stop the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) protecting women’s rights in the 1970s (Lepore 2018). Similarly-inclined crusaders in Comstock’s time tried to apply his methods to the passage of felony laws regarding women’s fashion, attempting to make the possession of a pair of high

heels worthy of a year of imprisonment in multiple states (Ford 2021). The impacts of Comstock's campaign are incalculable, as he was the first to realize "that citizens and societies of organized citizens might function as aggressive vigilance groups that directed attention of authorities and, moreover, could and should lobby lawmakers for strong laws governing personal and social behavior" (Cockrell 2019, p. 74). This is the playbook in use by today's censorship movement.

Hysterical claims about the social harm caused by the banned materials have likewise conjoined censorship movements in American history. In 1900, a minister improbably named Washington Gladden published a widely distributed pamphlet decrying books that gave women any sense of empowerment or rights or identity outside of domesticity, claiming that such literature "takes away all relish from the realities of life, breeds discontent and indolence and selfishness" and ultimately makes a woman "a weak, frivolous, petulant, miserable being" (Scheeres & Gilbert 2022, pp. 28-29).

Similar waves of censorship-based resistance to social change are a recurring reaction to changes in popular music that reflect larger demographic changes. The city of Boston banned performances of the opera *Porgy and Bess* because it had a Black cast, and Dvorak's music because he argued for respect and rights for BIPOC peoples (Horowitz 2022). During the Red Scare, members of Congress blocked the performance of Aaron Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait* at the 1953 presidential inauguration (Rosenberg 2020). While Copland was widely acknowledged as America's greatest living composer at that time and had written and spoken very clearly about his opposition to communist ideas as a threat to artistic freedom, he was highly progressive politically, Jewish, and gay, which was more than enough for conservatives to paint him as a red menace. When the Beatles were at the peak of their popularity and seen as the representatives of unsettling major social change, some sarcastic remarks about the Beatles' popularity by John Lennon led to the widespread banning and burning of Beatles records in the US in 1966 (Norman 2006; Spitz 2005), including hundreds of public bonfires, Beatles records in trash bins on streets, the banning of their music from scores of radio stations, and even physical intimidation of the band at tour stops by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). A 1979 riot in Chicago resulted from a "Disco Sucks" event at a Chicago White Sox baseball game, which began with the dynamiting of crates of disco records and went downhill from there (Hyden 2018). LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC artists dominated disco, and despite their increased representation in mainstream culture, bigotry against the LGBTQIA+ community in particular was running very high; hence, dynamite. Hip hop music's progress into the mainstream was also met with widespread censorship efforts in the 1990s as a reaction to Black culture and perspectives gaining much greater exposure among youth, with the then President of the United States even warning against the dangers of rap music (Carlin 2021).

The current attempts to muzzle BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and Jewish perspectives are revivals of censorship's greatest hits from past eras, replicating the approaches that Comstock used so successfully. The American Library Association's (ALA) most recently published list of the "top ten most challenged books" was once again filled with works "that tell the stories of Black and LGBTQ people or by authors in those communities" (Chavez 2022, n.p.).

#### 4. Censorship Targets Access to Impactful Materials

Materials get banned because censors are afraid of them. Censors are afraid of access to

them because the materials have the potential to open minds about the experiences and feelings of others. Librarians know this – and too many of them unfortunately have firsthand experience with people consumed by this fear – but it cannot be bypassed in this discussion.

Books that are targeted by censors are seen as threats, and usually, the threat is increased by the importance and potentially large impact of the work, as can be seen by the four books already mentioned in the discussion above: *Beloved*, *How to be an Anti-Racist*, *Maus*, and *The 1619 Project*. These are significant works. A rundown of the perpetually banned and challenged authors through US history is a rollcall of notables, many of whose works challenged social hierarchies and prevailing attitudes, including Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, Walt Whitman, and Mary Wollstonecraft, among many others.

The new book banning movement seems to be trying to capture both the troublesome classics and the alarming modern titles. Along with *Maus*, the new book ban in Missouri includes works by Kendi, Morrison, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci; much of the 2022 Banned Books Week list; Batman, Shakespeare, and Twain graphic novels; and the Gettysburg Address for good measure; all deemed to be “explicit” in nature (Education Week 2022). In early 2023, the West Virginia state legislature offered an inverse path to the same outcome, requiring all librarians – under threat of criminal prosecution – to promote the undefined but ominous “ideological equality.” Anything not promoting ideological equality, which presumably would include the perspectives of all marginalized groups, thereby should be removed from the library. Simply put, book bans attempt to thwart access to and literacy in empathy.

## 5. Censorship Is Uniquely Human

No other animals can censor information; only humans. Again, this is obvious, but relevant. Almost all the ways in which humans held themselves apart from other animals have been disproven by science in recent decades. Sign language, naming, physical communication, large vocabularies, synchronizing to a beat, making group decisions through communication, large and complex social structures, and so on are all information traits found in other animals (Berns 2017).

As far as we know, the one thing that distinguishes humans from all other animals is literacy and the accompanying ability to communicate ideas through time and across distance; all other human uniqueness and accomplishment flows from literacy (Battles 2015; Wolf 2007). With this truly distinguishing development being definitional of our species, it is vital to acknowledge that the urge to censor – i.e., to make sure that only *some* ideas are communicated through time and across distance – is an aspect of that. It is unhappily linked to literacy and access as part of the development of human societies. “Censorship is a social instinct” (Smolla 1992, p. 4). That does not mean that censorship is necessary or inevitable, but it clearly must be actively guarded against on an ongoing basis.

## 6. Opposition to Censorship Forged the Modern Library

Opposition to censorship was something that libraries had to grow into. In their early forms, libraries were proscriptive in the materials that were provided to patrons and supportive of efforts to censor materials that were seen as detrimental to community health. Strange as it may seem from a contemporary perspective, censorship was widely supported in librarianship and in society as a whole even one hundred years ago (Jaeger and Sarin 2016). Libraries also actively engaged in censorship of their own materials by removing all kinds of

German-language, pacifist, and labor-associated materials during the First World War, for example (Wiegand 1989).

Nevertheless, by the 1930s, libraries were beginning to turn away from their previous support of censorship. Numerous factors affected this reorientation, but a key change was the effect fascist governments were having on public access to information in many parts of the world in the late 1930s, specifically through lethal suppression of expression, closing of libraries, and public book burnings (Gellar 1984; Robbins 1996). The widespread book burnings and other oppressions of expression in 1930s Europe, coupled with the censorship of books in the United States on purely political grounds, like John Steinbeck's 1939 book *The Grapes of Wrath*, led the ALA to draft the Library Bill of Rights. It clearly established the library profession's stance against censorship and for free access to information (ALA 2010; Lincove 1994).

Even during the Cold War, the collections of many libraries were still directly and indirectly influenced by the politics of the McCarthy era, often leading to the silencing of unpopular viewpoints in many library collections (Richards 2001). Although the Library Bill of Rights underwent a major revision in 1948 in response to McCarthyism and again in the 1960s, the relationship between the library profession, social responsibility, social justice, censorship, and democratic responsibility would remain controversial (Robbins 1996; Samek 1996).

During the time of McCarthyism and the Civil Rights movement, the stance against censorship in many libraries forged the public perception about and presentation of libraries in popular media (Jaeger and Kettlich 2020). Prior to the late 1940s, popular media had generally portrayed librarians as meek and unhappy in their careers. Yet, when libraries became the focus of censorship efforts, the presentation morphed rapidly into librarians as strong, intelligent, and determined, with a string of major dramatic, and even some comedic, films starring leading actors portraying heroic librarians in the 1950s and 1960s. Becoming prominent opponents of censorship efforts established the identity of libraries both for people in the profession and outside of it.

While this path toward the protection of access and promotion of literacy has been far from entirely smooth, it is now definitional of librarianship as a profession. Taking this collective professional stance against censorship came to politically and socially define the library in the minds of governments and communities, to the consternation of many political figures enthusiastic about trying to ban materials (Jaeger Zerhusen et al. 2017). For many, the essence of the library is providing access to as wide a variety of materials and perspectives as possible. Book bans advocated for by community groups and imposed by governments on libraries truly go against the elemental principles of librarianship.

## 7. Censorship Will Always Be a Political Challenge for Libraries

While the type of materials being censored and ferocity of the attempts to censor may change, the threat of censorship will always be a looming political problem for libraries. Censorship has literally been around for centuries in the United States, extending well before there was a United States (Steele 2020). Less than a century ago, censorship was largely popular, as many viewed it as a reflection of patriotism. While this may seem strange from a contemporary perspective, the ALA's stance against censorship in the 1930s was actually a bold political assertion (Jaeger and Sarin 2016). The ensuing decades would find libraries



dealing with energized censorship movements against materials related to feminism, civil rights, the Vietnam War, anything remotely critical of capitalism, and anything perceived to be Communist, among others (Foerstel 2002). As Emily Knox (2015) has so ably documented, even when there is not a major censorship movement afoot, random individuals and small groups will still be pursuing innumerable means of trying to deny access to works that they disagree with.

Because the library profession has been reluctant to engage the political world, few books have been written about libraries as political entities (eg, Garceau 1949; Jaeger Gorham et al. 2014; Shavitt 1986). Yet each of these works, separated by decades between them, makes the foundational point that the failure to actively engage with political processes exposes libraries to great jeopardy and undercuts the ability of libraries to fulfill their missions in their communities. Censorship is an especially glaring instance of this problem, as censorship movements continually organize around new types of materials, yet the library profession seems consistently caught off guard and unsure how to respond to them.

While the examples of censorship movements noted above may seem rooted in the past, there have already been two impactful censorship movements in libraries in this millennium. First, the federal law passed in 2000, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), was inspired by fears of the kinds of "obscene" content that children might find on the then-new browseable web. This law mandated filters on all of the computers of libraries that received funds under certain federal programs, and many states were inspired to implement similar laws for state funds, ultimately forcing the implementation of filters on the computers in the great majority of school and public libraries (Jaeger, Bertot, McClure, & Rodriguez 2007; Jaeger & Yan 2009). Many filtering programs over filter in vital spaces like health information, are difficult to set and therefore result in much unintended blocking, or are intentionally designed to target types of content – such as feminism or environmentalism – that are categorically not obscene. Therefore, the laws had a huge impact on the amount of information available online in many libraries (Jaeger, Bertot, & McClure 2004; Jaeger, McClure, & Bertot 2006). ALA mounted a challenge to this law, but the ineffective nature of the legal challenge reflected the limited engagement with political processes preferred by the profession (Jaeger and McClure 2004).

Even more recently, the 9/11 terror attacks were swiftly followed by a series of federal laws that limited access to a wide variety of information, including many previously available government reports. Libraries around the nation had items removed from their collections by government agents, had inquiries from law enforcement organizations about who was reading certain "unpatriotic" materials, and even had to learn how to handle secret Federal Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrants for their patron usage records (Jaeger, Bertot, and McClure 2003; Jaeger, McClure, Bertot, and Snead 2004). While both of these examples are of censorship mandated by federal – rather than state or local – laws, they serve as unmistakable reminders that censorship will always be hanging over libraries like the sword of Damocles. These federal laws from two decades ago even helped to set the stage for the current surge in book bans; in the 2000s, some states passed state laws inspired by CIPA creating stricter filtering standards, and seven of those states are now among the most active in creating book bans and other anti-library laws (Alter 2023).

## 8. Censorship Is Ultimately Driven by Fear

Perhaps the most important driver of censorship is that it is an act of fear perpetuated by the fear that society is changing, the fear that these changes will erode existing privilege and challenge majority beliefs, the fear of people with different cultures and experiences, the fear of having to live in a different world (Knox 2015; Smolla 1992). The specific works being challenged, then or now, are symbolic of the larger fears of change, meaning that defending whatever work is currently being challenged will not end the censorship movement. Even if a particular work survives the challenge, the censors will simply move on to the next set of works they want banned. Every example of censorship movements noted above were fueled by a desire to suppress social change, which means that censorship in most cases is not a necessarily reasoning-based process but something much more primal. The rhetorical claims such as librarians being “the arm of Satan” indicate the level of fear underlying current censorship movement (Fleishman 2023).

The spiraling increase across the nation of laws that are focused on the LGBTQIA+ community, reveal the broader truths of the goals of the current censorship movement. Along with attempts to ban many books by and about LGBTQIA+ people, many state legislatures are currently also considering laws that would ban drag performances in any public venues or entirely (Kindy 2023). That legislative goal is not about limiting access to information for a certain age group, it is about stifling a marginalized population completely. It is raw power and based upon fear.

Libraries find themselves at the center of the current censorship movement – and at the center of many that have come before – because they not only provide access to a wide variety of information, they defend that access. The perceived threat of libraries, especially public libraries, to the privileged extends back well over a century. Dating to the first federal support for public libraries, some conservative members of Congress and some presidents worked through federal legislation and budgeting processes to attempt to restrict the reach or even the existence of public libraries (Chrastka 2017; Jaeger Gorham et al. 2014; Jaeger Zerhusen et al. 2017). The Trump administration went so far as to produce annual budget proposals that would eliminate all federal support for libraries and literacy programs (Douglass et al. 2017). And as state and local governments play ever greater roles in controlling library funding (Chrastka 2016), these anti-library political tactics have blossomed at the local level, culminating in the new censorship movement.

This focus on the library as a place to direct fury at the fear of social change has been a recurring problem for libraries. Consider the following statements by two of the greatest library leaders and champions of intellectual freedom from the twentieth century, the first writing about censorship efforts tied to the Red Scare and the second about censorship efforts tied to civil rights and the Vietnam War:

“If there is one agency above all which has the power to put teeth into the principle of free speech, it is the public library” – Leon Carnovsky, 1950

“Those who fear social change already fear the library” – Everett T. Moore, 1968

These statements resound through the decades with no small amount of relevance to today. Yet, the challenges faced by librarians of those generations in standing up to censorship did

not include the threat of imprisonment. The energized censorship movement of today has created many more legislative weapons and seems quite prepared to use them.

Along with bans of materials, many states have considered or enacted felony laws that would sentence librarians, who are convicted of allowing access to banned materials, up to 5 years in jail for each offence, along with many thousands of dollars in fines (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, and Hodge 2023). This far exceeds loss of a job as a penalty for opposing censorship. In Missouri, as the laws banning materials with great criminal liability to librarians were about to go into effect, librarians reported police officers examining their collections for banned books (KCUR 2022). Again, this started happening *before* the ban went into place. How enormous must the fear of social change be to require this level of legal intimidation against libraries? While librarians cannot eradicate such fears in their communities, it is vital to remember that such driving fear – and in the current context, apparently all-consuming fear – limits how rational a censorship movement is when responding to it.

### III. Practical Frameworks for Effective Opposition in an Age of Unprecedented Attacks

As the calls for criminalizing the practice of librarianship reach a fevered pitch, it is important not to lose sight of the very practical and concrete steps that must be taken immediately to advocate for intellectual freedom – and protect all library workers. This is a broader struggle for a democratic and civil society with the library as a battle ground. Within the field, decades of choices and decisions have eroded libraries' ability to effectively counter these assaults. Due to the systemic lack of investment and advocacy for libraries – and other public institutions – in the post-Reagan era, libraries are particularly vulnerable. Neoliberal policies and practices that pervade American society have weakened the bedrock of the library profession and these inflammatory attacks are opening up new and old fault lines every day (Buschman 2017). Unfortunately, many of the advocacy efforts by and on behalf of libraries do little to demonstrate the actual contributions of libraries (Chrastka 2018; Sweeney and Chrastka 2017), leaving libraries more exposed to attempts to undermine and disempower them.

More research is needed into the motives and means of the current challenges, including taking seriously the language, rhetoric, and political implications of each organized campaign and message. This is a moment of rhetorical disruption, when not only are books being painted as threats to the status quo, but library workers as well, with some accusing them of being "groomers," who seek to indoctrinate small children (Hatzisavidou and Martin 2022; Public Religion Research Institute 2022). Neutrality and milquetoast calls to theoretical democratic principles are not enough to combat the wave of threats facing libraries and library workers (Jaeger Gorham et al. 2013). The current political and rhetorical fight is rooted in a distinct, and deeply partisan, world view, which because of its unwillingness to engage in the political sphere, puts librarians and our communities at risk.

Now is the time to employ new and evolving research in the creation of well-crafted toolkits to equip library workers, educators, and other organizations with the means for effective communication and advocacy. Political communication is exceptionally nuanced, and it is unreasonable to expect librarians to add that skillset to an already overburdened and underfunded labor force. Funding for communications professionals and materials, focused

on not just library promotion but political messaging, should be considered a core part of each library system's operating budget. Political advocacy needs to be added to the LIS curriculum nationally to outfit the next generation of librarians with both the knowledge and skills to respond to these shifting norms (Jaeger and Sarin 2016). Librarians currently working in the field also deserve support with ongoing and accessible professional development related to both the theory and the practice of fighting censorship.

That said, librarians cannot fight these battles alone, and therefore encouraging library "super supporters" to engage in the political sphere is critical (EveryLibrary 2020). Surveys indicate that libraries have strong and broad public support, but if the vocal minority with extremist viewpoints seizes control of local school boards, library boards, budget oversight committees, and local and state politics writ large – libraries are bound to lose (Hylwak 2022). Finding ways to encourage public supporters to meaningfully engage in local political spheres is essential and cannot be overlooked while libraries focus on immediate threats and challenges. These effective attacks at the local level also further clarify the need to advocate for clear state and federal policies protecting intellectual freedom. Lobbying may not currently be at the forefront of the work of librarians or professional organizations, but it needs to advance.

Library workers should not have to fear losing their jobs, their livelihood, or their freedom due to their commitment to intellectual freedom. Individual librarians under attack have come to rely on personal resources or even crowdfunding to access legal representation ("Legal Fees for Librarian Amanda Jones, Organized by Tiffany Whitehead"). Well-coordinated legal defense funds, administered by trusted professional organizations, are an essential defense when activists and politicians seek to use the legal system to threaten librarians simply trying to do their jobs and serve the public.

No one ought to face these challenges alone. It is time to take advantage of the groundswell of labor organizing in the US. Unionizing library workers will not only protect them, but will also provide a nexus for the kind of coordinated action required to effectively challenge these vicious attacks. The pro-censorship organizations currently seeking to control the narrative to not only shape policy, but also to dismantle libraries as a bastion of intellectual freedom, will be less able to threaten the livelihood of individual librarians if they are protected by organized labor. As ALA President-elect for 2023-2024 Emily Drabinski stated, "The most important thing we can be doing right now is building collective power with one another relative to demands that we develop in the struggle together" (Bennett 2022, n.p.).

While the possibility of unionizing library workers may not be achievable – or perhaps, appropriate – in every library system or organization, library leadership and human resource officers need to immediately create explicit policies protecting the jobs of all library workers targeted by organized political campaigns. The threats of legal prosecution, defamation, and potential job losses from these attacks is already having a chilling effect on the field, and the nation is poorer for the loss of dedicated public servants in the face of zealotry and hate (Fleishman 2023). All librarians should, at an absolute minimum, know that the conditions of their employment will be protected when modern book burners darken their doors and inboxes.

Legacy organizations, like the American Library Association (ALA) and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), have been at the very core of these struggles for nearly a century

(Jaeger Sarin et al. 2013). At this time, though, it is also imperative to also look to the work of other organizations joining in the fight like EveryLibrary, PEN America, and Bookriot. This is the time to encourage collaboration, listening, and creative problem-solving from voices both inside and outside of the field – all perspectives are valuable in this battle for libraries, intellectual freedom, and democracy itself.

#### IV. Facing Censorship

These eight tenets of censorship are an attempt to collate the primary strands that undergird contemporary censorship efforts. Various historical periods of censorship in libraries have been documented in much greater detail in the works cited in this paper, but the above themes distill the ways in which core aspects of information – access, policy, literacy, and politics – interact in censorship efforts. These tenets should help to bring some understanding to the censorship movement. What is going on now has tenacious and pernicious historical roots. While the depth of this movement’s roots is troubling, we need to remember that librarians have confronted and thwarted similar movements in the past. That knowledge hopefully brings some comfort to the troubles of today.

Shannon Oltmann (2019) has brilliantly distilled the ideal stance of libraries toward intellectual freedom: “individuals can make their own choices, but cannot compel others to abide by those choices” (p. 113). The heart of censorship is always to remove the ability of others to make intellectual choices. In the current context, censorship also coexists with a great many other intrusions into the work of libraries. The acceleration of censorship efforts is part of a larger network of local, state, and government political and policy intrusions into libraries in the twenty-first century. This network encompasses filtering mandates, the politicization of subject headings and metadata, the evisceration and micromanaging of budgets, a significant expansion of parents’ ability to dictate library activities, the current banning of materials related to the experiences of certain communities, and the threats to put librarians in jail (Jaeger, Bertot, and Gorham 2013; Jaeger Sarin et al. 2016; Work 2016).

Even the arguably most important source of hope for librarians right now – the fact that members of the public overwhelmingly support libraries in the current struggle over censorship – can be undermined at the ballot box. A national poll conducted by the ALA in March 2022 revealed that 70 percent of voters oppose censorship efforts in libraries and 90 percent have an overall positive opinion of libraries. In addition, 75 percent of parents of public school parents trust their school librarians to make the right decisions about materials (Hylwak 2022). And, in those states where the legislatures have debated laws that threaten to imprison librarians who provide access to banned books, the voters strongly oppose the laws (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, and Hodge 2023). That support is welcome and needed; however, in reality, most voters are unlikely to cast a ballot on the single issue of censorship. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis, perhaps currently the most zealous politician regarding education and information restrictions in the US, won his most recent reelection by nearly 20 percentage points – a striking win in a state previously considered evenly split along party lines.

That said, there is hope. Thus far, in many of the states where the legislatures have considered laws with criminal penalties for librarians and educators, with some exceptions like Missouri and Florida, libraries and their supporters have been able to prevent these proposed bills from becoming actual laws to date. Glimmers of hope can also be gleaned

from the ACLU's recent use of a novel legal argument to strike down a school district's removal of books with LGBTQIA+ themes from library shelves. Efforts to combat censorship traditionally rely on First Amendment grounds; the ACLU of Texas, however, has raised the question of whether the school district's action also violates Title IX of the Civil Rights Act. In December 2022, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights opened an investigation into this book ban; the central question in this inquiry is whether the ban constitutes a form of discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation (Taylor 2023). Regardless of the outcome of this particular investigation, the introduction of this additional legal argument opens up a new avenue to challenge censorship efforts.

Nothing else will suffice but to oppose these laws and find legal means of challenging them, otherwise failure to do so will only embolden future efforts to censor books. Examples like the aforementioned successful censorship efforts in Missouri and Florida could turn into bellwethers for other states. In March 2022, Florida's Governor DeSantis signed into law a bill (HB 1467) that requires a certified media specialist to take an annual online training course, designed in part by the pro-censorship group Moms for Liberty, before reviewing every book in the school according to the training's requirements. In response to this law, teachers who fear being prosecuted with a third degree felony have taken to covering their classroom libraries with paper, or taking them home, until the law is more clear (Grant, 2023; Salum 2023).

The current situation, both in Florida and nationally, is stressful for librarians, who are distracted from the actual work that libraries need to do. Nevertheless, the exploration of these issues conveys this necessity, both in principle and practice, namely that – opposition to censorship efforts demands time and effort. And a weak response to the current censorship movement will likely make things worse for libraries in the longer term. While our field tends to frame censorship campaigns as challenges to intellectual freedom, this new censorship movement is an outright attack on prominent marginalized populations in the United States. This is a fight about books that embodies a fight about civil rights and human rights, and who in our society will be allowed to have them. Defending our institutions against this movement seems daunting and rightly so, given the threat of imprisonment. But if we do not work collectively within our field and with other organizations and professions dedicated to protecting the rights of the marginalized, the new censorship will only continue to expand in its power and privilege over our institutions and the entire country.

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