

Not Defeated, or Attacks on Literacy Are Attacks on Liberty: Identifying and Confronting the Political, Legal, and Technological Changes Promoting and Sustaining the Censorship Movement

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ABSTRACT

As the energized, closely coordinated, and politically empowered censorship movement continues to grind across the United States, education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions are confronting different challenges from it. Public libraries face book bans; schools have their curricula altered; museum exhibits are censored; public media is defunded. A series of legal, political, and technological changes has increased the power of this censorship movement. While the parallel attacks on education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions focus on different functions of these institutions, they are unified by goals of erasing the representation of marginalized populations and undermining the literacy of the general population. This article attempts to identify and explore unities within the facets and actions of the censorship movement as a means to better understand their goals and tactics, as well as ways to respond effectively.

Introduction

Given the swift and wide-ranging successes of the censorship movement currently reshaping the contents of library collections and events, museum content, gallery exhibitions, school curricula, public media, and government websites, it can seem as if it appeared from nowhere during the pandemic to relentlessly consume the presence and representations of marginalized populations across the US. However, an interrelated series of technological, legal, and political changes has enhanced the ferocity and the scope of the movement.

This movement is focused on eliminating representations and perspectives of certain populations, as well as the institutions that provide access to these representations and perspectives (Jaeger 2026). The movement does not care one iota what the institution calls itself. Education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions all share significant commonalities in their missions. In the current political context, libraries, museums, schools, archives, public media, and galleries are practically indistinguishable to those working to

censor and erase cultures. Their differences in the materials they provide access to and the educational activities they offer are irrelevant to those who seek to holistically prevent access and education.

The marginalized populations being targeted include Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and beyond (LGBTQIA+); disabled; immigrant; and Jewish populations (Jaeger 2025a; Jaeger et al. 2023a; Jaeger et al. 2023b; Padrón et al. 2025). The censorship movement wishes to rob those who are marginalized of their voices and their ability to participate in society, with the goal of ensuring that these perspectives are driven from the general culture. The changes that have expanded the inclusion and rights of marginalized populations are viewed by the Trump administration and the censorship movement as having robbed them of their rightful dominance over culture (Stanley 2018, 2024).

Simultaneously targeting education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions at local, state, and national levels has thus far proven a distressingly effective method for achieving their goals of widespread censorship. While BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities have thus far faced the most prominent efforts, the movement seeks to erase all the groups they fear and prevent others from learning about them as well. Ultimately, they seek to make marginalized populations—even the largest marginalized populations—disappear while trying to ensure that people do not even realize that any population has been erased (Jaeger 2026). Thus far, public libraries and public schools have received the greatest amount of attention from the censorship movement. What is happening to these libraries and schools will continue to spread inexorably to all these other kinds of education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions if the censorship movement continues unabated.

All these institutions, from the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and the Smithsonian at the national level to the smallest local public libraries and public schools, are equally vulnerable to being targeted by the censorship movement. Recognizing the commonalities in the threats to all education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions has the potential to help these institutions work collectively to craft responses and narratives and to close the menacing, gaping vulnerabilities they face from these movements.

Under Many Pressures

Pinpointing a single specific starting point for such a large movement is likely impossible, but the series of changes that coalesced to create unprecedented pressures on education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions can be explored in related categories. It is also important to note that these specific legal, political, and technological changes have occurred within a general environment that has been far more receptive to and supportive of disinformation and far more resistant to the idea of education and authority (Jaeger 2025a, 2025b, 2026). The upsets of the pandemic and the proliferation of medical disinformation—often propagated by the first Trump administration—have exacerbated the impacts of these legal, policy, and technological changes. When the sitting vice president of the United States asserts that “universities are the enemy” (Svrluga et al. 2024, A6), it is much easier to use the forces of law and politics to drastically alter school curricula, library collections, museum exhibitions, and public media programming.

a. Social Media and the Presence of Marginalized Populations

One of the largest drivers of the censorship movement is the increase in the availability and accessibility of materials representing marginalized populations. The recent explosion of censorship is, ironically enough, heavily fueled by the efforts of publishers to create more books that represent the lives and stories of marginalized communities that have long been underrepresented in publishing (Nyby and Ellis 2023). As libraries have increased their collections of works by LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC authors to better serve their patrons and to better represent their communities, the likelihood of censors encountering books about marginalized populations has skyrocketed (Ishizuka 2018; Jefferson and Dziedzic-Elliot 2023; Knox 2026).

The presence of books representing the lives of marginalized populations in library collections makes not only the books themselves but also the library as an institution inevitable targets for those promoting cultural erasure (Engström et al. 2024; Knox 2026). Public schools also began to change their curricula in reaction to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to teach a more inclusive version of US culture and history, which provided another avenue by which the lives of marginalized populations were brought to the attention of those who fear them, particularly during the period of pandemic-induced homeschooling, when many parents witnessed the learning experiences of their children.

The need to better represent populations previously neglected by publishers was also reflected in changes to curricula at all levels of education and in the stories told through museum displays and collections. These activities have been packaged by censors under the meaningless catchall term of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). By demonizing the idea of DEI, the censors can justify erasing the populations whose presence has been increasing in public contexts. At the federal level, the second Trump administration has used fear of DEI to alter the programming of the Kennedy Center for the Arts in 2025, dissolve the President's Commission on the Arts and Humanities, eviscerate the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), sideline the Commission on Fine Arts, and require White House approval of guidelines, plans for future work, and content of current exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution museums (Kennicott 2025a, C1–3; Kennicott 2025b, E1, E7–8; Kingsberry 2025, E2–3; Smee 2025, E1, E16–18). The second Trump administration has not only tried to purge government agencies of what it calls DEI programs and the people involved in them, but has also promised to create a restitution fund for people claiming to have been harmed by DEI programs (Bendavid and Wootson 2025, A1, A8).

The increased presence of books, exhibitions, and lessons from marginalized perspectives and representing marginalized lives in library collections, museums, and school curricula has also occurred in conjunction with social media making the lives and activities of marginalized populations far more visible and well known to others. In 2022, former President Barack Obama explained this growing anger at people with different beliefs: “Forty years ago, if you were a conservative in rural Texas, you weren’t necessarily offended by what was going on in San Francisco’s Castro District, because you didn’t know what was going on” (quoted in McQuade 2025, 8). Now, being able to instantly view the experiences of previously marginalized populations through social media makes those lives “a direct affront to their traditions, their belief systems, their place in society” to people who had never previously thought about the experiences of marginalized people (quoted in McQuade 2025, 8).

This ability to encounter marginalized lives and experiences through social media plays no small part in the legislative efforts in many places to limit social media use by minors. Nationalist politicians have turned this greater awareness of marginalized lives into a very successful fear-based narrative to justify their statements and policies. BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, immigrants, non-Christians, and disabled people are thus turned into “an existential threat” whose goal is “to deny America as a Christian nation, deprecate America as a White nation” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019).

b. Astroturfing, Censorship Scripts, and Online Erasure Academies

Recent revolutions in technology have also made it possible for astroturf organizations to create limitless fake grassroots movements in communities across the nation. Most of the current censorship actions are taken by organized groups, primarily formed since 2021, that exist to use social media to spread claims about what should be censored and connect those calls for censorship to local and state legislators (Friedman 2022; Weber 2023). These groups are established to falsely appear to be local organizations, a tactic known as “astroturfing” in contrast to a true grassroots movement (Stewart 2025). Rather than a group of community residents organically joining together in the classic grassroots sense, astroturf organizations are leadership-driven national groups using faux grassroots aesthetics to prompt individuals to participate in preplanned, coordinated actions. No Left Turn in Education, Parents Defending Education, and, most successfully, Moms for Liberty, are astroturf organizations that have driven the censorship movement (Bader 2021; Stewart 2025; Stroshane 2022). Moms for Liberty officially claims to have been founded by three typical concerned mothers. However, all were politically connected and active before starting the group; one of those everyday mothers is married to the former chair of the Republican Party of Florida (Knowles and Natanson 2023; Stewart 2025).

The enormous expansion of censorship in recent years has been built through these astroturf organizations. The ALA notes that before the rise of the current censorship movement, “the vast majority of challenges to library books and resources were brought by a single parent who sought to remove or restrict access to a book their child was reading” (2026, par. 5). Now, the calls for censorship are “evidence of a well-organized movement, the goals of which include removing books about race, history, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health from America’s public and school libraries” (American Library Association 2026, par. 5). Another innovation driven by the astroturf organizations has been moving the focus of censorship efforts from a single book to an entire set of books. By 2022, 90 percent of censorship efforts included multiple books, and 40 percent included more than one hundred books (McArdle 2023). As a result of such organizations and the trainings, PEN America summarizes that this censorship movement “seeks to impose restrictions on all students and families based on the preferences of a few parents or community members” and “is an organized effort by advocacy groups and state politicians with the ultimate intention of limiting access to certain stories, perspectives, and information” (Meehan et al. 2023, par. 1).

Since 2020, the censorship movement has developed a sophisticated playbook for local discussions of books. The move to censor materials in a school or library often begins with irate speakers at public meetings or hearings of the public library board of trustees or the school board (Friedman 2022). Using signs or props—such as a quote from a book out of context on a sign or an enlarged image from the book itself—targeted titles are included in a larger set of angry accusations against specific marginalized populations and the institution

that supports them. Pro-censorship speakers delegitimize the expertise of teachers, librarians, and the public school as an institution, while also arguing that the BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ perspectives represent a danger to children (Bowman and Spiering 2026). A dramatic reading of a small passage from the book, entirely out of context and designed to give the wrong impression, usually completes the performance (Jennings-Roche 2023).

The lines of attack and talking points are often provided by the astroturf organizations (Stewart 2025). Those advocating for censorship are guided to hold public protests in front of the school or library, encourage local media to provide news coverage of the protests, and push the narrative of the threats posed by the book on social media platforms and on local websites.

Not only do these astroturf organizations provide a preexisting framework to plug outrage into, but censors can also take online training courses to be more effective super-censors (Stewart 2025). Some enthusiastic censors pledge to use what they learn from these training courses to challenge at least one book a week; even being publicly proved wrong about the content of a book does not deter further attempts to have books banned (Natanson 2022; Natanson 2023). While these tactics have primarily been used in the context of libraries and schools thus far, there is no reason to expect they will not be translated into similar attacks on institutions like museums and galleries.

c. Supreme Court Decisions and Project 2025

Another set of changes that are greatly assisting the censorship movement are the massive alterations of law and policy resulting from recent Supreme Court decisions and the Project 2025 policy blueprint. The most relevant legal changes fueling the censorship movement begin with the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The holding removed all limitations on campaign contributions, claiming that spending money was a form of freedom of expression.

The result has given the wealthy infinite ability to try to sway elections. Elon Musk—the world's richest man and owner of SpaceX, Tesla, and X, among other things—spent about \$300 million of his own money toward supporting Trump's reelection campaign (Schouten et al. 2024). Musk genuinely seems to agree with Trump on most issues, but he was also likely ensuring that extremely lucrative contracts held by his companies with the federal government would continue. Simultaneously, the billionaire owners of major technology companies curtailed fact-checking activities in their corporations and donated many millions of dollars to Trump's reelection campaign and inaugural fund, including the leaders of Amazon, Meta, and OpenAI (Folkenflik 2025; Mullin 2025; Passantino 2024; Isaac and Schleifer 2025; Slisco 2024). Even the astroturf groups that are so central to censorship and erasure at the local level are funded primarily by the billionaire families that own several major American corporate entities (Stewart 2025).

Along with allowing a small number of the hyperwealthy elite to underwrite the censorship movement, the Supreme Court also handed them a permission slip for their censoring and erasing. By ending affirmative action in higher education admissions in its 2023 decision, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, the Supreme Court gave legal backing to the campaign to end anything that could be labeled DEI. By the end of the 2023–2024 academic year, more than fifty major public colleges and universities had discontinued hundreds of race-conscious scholarships worth tens of millions of dollars due

to efforts by state legislatures or Attorneys General in states like Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin (Johnson 2024).

The battle plan for censorship and erasure, known as Project 2025 (Heritage Foundation 2024), builds a huge number of policy changes on these Supreme Court holdings. The second Trump administration implemented scores of Project 2025 recommendations, many of which were designed to gain control over government information and knowledge infrastructures, to dramatically reshape what information is available and who it represents, and to wholly eliminate programs and agencies, like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), that promote access to information (Curliss et al. 2025; Jaeger 2025b). Since taking office in January 2025, the second Trump administration has made seismic reductions to the independence and accuracy of government information and knowledge infrastructures to eliminate representations of and protections for marginalized populations.

Many of the policies specifically punish already vulnerable communities by eliminating health care, housing, and other core aspects of the social safety net (Ryan et al. 2026). Not only does it promote the banning of any terms related to civil rights and applying any civil rights protections, but Project 2025 also ties marginalized populations and the federal programs that serve them directly to fraud, waste, and abuse that need to be eliminated. Two examples of this are instituting a lifetime cap on benefits from Medicaid and eliminating federal oversight over the educational rights of disabled students, both of which would significantly harm disabled Americans (Doherty 2025; Ives-Rublee and Doherty 2024; Murphy 2024; Turner 2025). As disability policy expert Casey Doherty has so perfectly observed of Project 2025, “The cruelty is the point” (2025, 1).

The confluent strands of these legal and policy changes are neatly encapsulated in President Trump’s order for widespread censorship of materials in Department of Defense school libraries, the schools on military bases that serve children of military personnel and are the only schools the executive branch has direct control over (Cochran 2025; *New York Times* 2025). The executive order censored materials available in the school libraries and classrooms and banned many topics from lessons, activities, and organizations. The school libraries were closed while the books were reviewed for compliance, and those deemed non-compliant were removed. The banned books list issued by the Department of Defense for these libraries overwhelmingly focused on LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC populations, as well as using intentionally nebulous terms such as “gender ideology” and “discriminatory equity ideology” against biographies, books about identity, books about puberty, and even psychology books (EveryLibrary 2025a).

d. Access and Literacy

This censorship movement is not only working to limit access to materials, but also to limit the long-term ability to understand materials. Project 2025 recommends sending teachers and librarians to jail, as well as forcing them to be registered as sex offenders, if banned books are found in their libraries or classrooms. Since 2021, many US states have passed laws that put them well down this path, creating legal jeopardy for librarians and teachers simply because a book on a state or local banned book list is present in a school or library (Jaeger 2025a; Jaeger et al. 2023a; Jaeger et al. 2023b). These laws are intentionally written so vaguely that anyone working at a library could be held legally accountable for a banned book discovered on site, even if patrons cannot access it. These laws can include jail sentences of up to ten years and fines of up to \$10,000 *per book*, harsher penalties than many

violent crimes. While they have not yet been actively extended to other kinds of institutions, they could readily be applied to museums, galleries, or archives.

In 2025, scores of bills were introduced in state legislatures across the US that threaten library professionals with incarceration (EveryLibrary 2025b). Laws such as these have not been part of previous censorship movements in the US, and they demonstrate how emboldened those seeking to censor and erase marginalized populations have become (Jaeger 2025a). The symbolic and practical power of these laws criminalizing librarianship cannot be overstated, as jailing librarians is historically an action taken by dictators as they consolidate power (Kalder 2018; Vaidhyathan 2004).

In July 2025, at the behest of President Trump, Congress took back public media funding that had already been approved. The Republicans in Congress who voted to take away this previously approved funding justified these actions with claims that public media did not really represent America, was too liberal, or served no purpose. All these claims were taken directly from Trump's Executive Order "Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media," which orders the end of federal support for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) (2025). None admitted that—despite PBS being one of the most trusted institutions in the US for decades—the far-right has long distrusted PBS and NPR for their focus on public education (Bennet 1987; Croteau et al. 1996; Hoynes 2002; Phillips 2007; White 1994; Zansberg 1994).

Since the debut of *Sesame Street* in 1970, PBS has built a huge range of programs that teach general literacy to children, along with introducing specific literacies like science and math. For adults, PBS works to continually expand knowledge of politics, law, and history, as well as lifelong literacies in areas of constant change such as science and technology. Along with removing access to materials about marginalized populations from schools, libraries, and museums, the evisceration of public media, if successful, would take away a key resource through which people not only learn but also learn to ask questions. Courts are limiting these attempts to defund public media, but the intent to limit access, education, and literacy is unmistakable (Kunzelman 2026; Noyer 2026).

As democracies depend on an educated population, the parallel focus on materials in collections, curricula in schools, and education through public media is a coordinated attack on literacy. And since a literate population is essential to democracy, attacking literacy is attacking liberty (Jaeger and Taylor 2021).

Conclusion: Not Defeated

In response to threats to its federal funding, PBS adopted the new slogan "Defunded, Not Defeated." That attitude is admirable and could be of great use to libraries, schools, museums, archives, and other entities targeted by censorship, as well as the populations subject to erasure. Tell those who seek to erase you that you refuse to be erased.

While they are experiencing different types and levels of impact thus far, all education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions in the US are threatened by the energized and aggressive censorship movement. With its focus on removing the representations of marginalized populations and reducing overall literacy, the censorship movement is not going to leave any institution alone simply because it is not called a library or a school. All these institutions, however, can share insights into the threats they face and learn from the experiences and responses of other institutions that are currently being targeted.

There is terror in knowing the extent of the movement and how it operates, but there can be power in such knowledge for the institutions that the movement is targeting as well. The success of this movement has been greatly enhanced by major changes in law, politics, and technology. However, being attentive to the ways in which the movement is advocating for and deploying such changes will be vital in tracking its efforts, responding to its impacts, and seeking alterations to law, policy, and technology that support the institutions rather than the censorship movement. As those seeking to censor and erase marginalized populations have shown that all types of education, knowledge, memory, and cultural heritage institutions are within their sights, coordinating responses and building collective awareness are in the best interests of all these institutions.

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