The Political Librarian

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This Issue

The national elections have brought political change (some might add turmoil) and very likely increased challenges to the library community. We are fortunate to have garnered articles that provide perspective and delineation to those challenges, and in some instances offer practical applications to overcome them. The array of challenges issuing forth from our internecine, politicized culture wars center on the censorship of books. Organized efforts to ban and challenge books based on resistance to allegedly obscene or offensive materials concerning racism, LGBTQIA+ issues, and content thought to be harmful to children, has been trending upward for the past five years, or more.

Our opening piece, "A Confluence of Trends in Library Censorship," by Michael Nyby and Richard Ellis follows Canadian library censorship trends by conservative reactionary groups pushing an exclusionary anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-racial justice agenda. Their analysis of their study shows that the Canadian reactionary right has followed in the steps of the success of American anti-library movements. The information provided in this study will benefit those wishing to build public support against these movements by using compelling, fact-based arguments. The piece references EveryLibrary Institute's Demographics of Book Bans white paper, which appeared in the Spring Issue of The Political Librarian, and Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson's Database of Book Bans and Challenges in the United States.

The second article by Kathleen McEvoy, "Divisive Politics and Threats to Academic Libraries," is a clarion call to the academic community to respond to core threats against academic freedom at colleges and university libraries. She argues that recent changes to state legislation and policies affect collection development, tenure, library programming, funding, dual enrollment, and the accreditation process, etc. McEvoy points out that the politicization of educational content has placed the future of academic inquiry and scholarship in jeopardy. Campaigns determined to undermine DEI and CRT principles, and to limit the teaching on humanities, social sciences, sociology and gender studies call for a robust response from the academic community. She believes that academic librarians are in a good position to leverage their technical acumen and knowledge of analytics to influence administrative priorities and help drive decision making and policies at college and university campuses.

The third piece is a white paper "Access to Online Subscription Content in K12 Schools through the School Library," co-authored by Connie Williams, Jo Melinson and Mary Ann Harlan. This whitepaper raises awareness about how special interest organizations are advocating for tighter controls on school library databases, which they claim contain inappropriate, pornographic materials. They warn that this push for restrictions can result in the removal of specific publications or indexes or the implementation of stop words and excessive filtering within database search functionalities. They argue convincingly that over-filtering, using stop words, and content censorship in school databases ultimately reduces students' access to resources aligned with educational and curriculum standards. Such measures limit the scope of available information and impede the development of critical thinking and informed citi-

zenship among students. The inclusion in their white paper of a list of defined terms, existing federal laws that apply to school libraries, and relevant court decisions merit our attention. The piece ends with helpful policy suggestions in response to current policies, and a list of proactive policies that should be established.

The final four articles are reflections and a guide based on hardscrabble experience.

The first of these pieces is Shari Henry's "Tip O'Neill was Right: The power of local politics." Recognizing that we are facing a war against censorship and criminalizing librarians for selecting certain titles and content, Henry advises librarians "to use our positions to model democracy in action" in order to promote free expression at a local and personal level. Henry urges librarians to build deeper relationships with other free speech advocates, diversity organizations, community groups, churches and with elected officials, at both local and state levels. Never has there been a more urgent time for librarians to particiapte in the political process locally.

The second piece by Michelle R. Mears, "Missouri Public Library Levy Campaigns: My Experience and Advice for Directors," is a guide for any librarian intent on conducting an advocacy campaign to turn out voters in support of increased tax funding for their library. This piece was written as a journal of the experience and advice for library directors who must travel through the thicket of written and unwritten rules designed to restrict what a library director can say and do during a levy campaign.

Anne Ake's, "A Warning from East Berlin on Book Censorship," recounts her experience as a military wife living in West Berlin between 1979 and 1983, and crossing over into East Berlin, where she witnessed the disturbing realities of book censorship. She uses that experience as a stepping stone into a wider historical overview of censorship from Roman times to more recent examples of book bannings in the United States. The question she has us ponder is whether our children are best educated through the suppression of materials or by unsuppressed access to knowledge.

In recent years librarians have been harassed, bullied, and threatened into silence by groups that have inspired a slew of censorious legislation and policies against them. Our final piece, "A Conflict between Religious Extremism and Intellectual Freedom at Ground Zero" by Lacie Sutherland is a courageous yet harrowing narrative. It documents the political animus and vitriol that infiltrated one Alabama public library. Sutherland recounts the escalating events that resulted in her final dismissal, and that of her fellow librarians who stood against the policy changes. Groups such as Clean Up Alabama, which push a Christian Nationalist agenda, were able to exert enough pressure on a public library to force resignations from its directors, force firings of library staff, and change policies at the state legislative level.

Andrew T. Sulavik, MLIS, ThD
Series Editor

A Confluence of Trends in Library Censorship

MICHAEL J. NYBY AND RICHARD H. ELLIS

ABSTRACT

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of library censorship efforts differed widely between the USA and Canada. Between 2015 and 2021, Canadian libraries most commonly experienced challenges to materials perceived to be racist, while USA libraries dealt primarily with challenges to sexual content and pro-LGBTQIA+ content. However, both countries experienced a notable increase in library censorship movements in the years following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon, driven in large part by conservative reactionary groups pushing an exclusionary anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-racial justice agenda, has resulted in a precipitous rise in documented challenges to library resources in both countries. The resulting data show that both the nature of challenges and titles challenged have become strikingly similar in recent years. This study examines the data documenting library resistance in the USA and Canada to illustrate how the countries' once distinct library censorship trends have converged, putting LGBTQIA+ resources in both USA and Canadian libraries in jeopardy.

Introduction

In the years following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries in both the USA and Canada experienced a startling rise in challenges to library resources and events. In the USA, this wave of censorship efforts was primarily driven by resistance to materials concerning racism or racial equity and LGBTQIA+ issues. This should not come as a surprise, as both these themes were prevalent in book banning attempts prior to the pandemic (American Library Association, 2023). In Canada, recent censorship efforts have primarily centered on resources and events concerning LGBTQIA+ issues, in rather stark contrast to earlier censorship trends. Prior to the pandemic, Canadian libraries most commonly experienced challenges to materials perceived to be racist, and the most common title challenged in Canada prior to 2021 was singled out for its perceived transphobia (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024a). This study examines the data collected on library censorship in the USA and Canada, comparing trends in both countries through both a broad and demographic lens to evaluate how the nature of challenges has evolved between 2015 and 2023. The resulting analysis indicates that conservative activist organizations in Canada have mimicked the actions of similar USA organizations to more effectively foment resistance to intellectual freedom in libraries.

Background

Both the American Library Association (ALA) and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) have maintained efforts to collect data on library censorship for many years. Both organizations rely on voluntary reporting by library workers through the use of publicly available online forms and publish annual reports highlighting details and titles from the aggregated data. In the USA, this report comes in the form of the annual "Banned Books Field Report", in publication since 2004. Canada's first aggregated reports were published online starting in 2007 by the now-defunct Canadian Library Association, and the effort was continued by the CFLA upon its establishment in 2016 (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024c). In the ensuing years, other organizations have spearheaded their own efforts at collecting and publicly disseminating data on library censorship. In 2021, both the PEN America Index of School Book Bans and Dr. Tasslyn Magnusson's Book Censorship Database became publicly available. In 2022, the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) at Toronto Metropolitan University began the Library Challenges Database. In 2023, the CFE and CFLA partnered to merge their collection efforts into the Canadian Library Challenges Database (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024d). These multiple sources of information on the phenomenon of library censorship with their varying methodologies and foci provide opportunities for further research and analysis on the subject.

All of the organizations involved in these efforts have remarked upon the striking increase in censorship efforts in the last few years, specifically singling out the resistance to LGBTQIA+ and anti-racist resources (Nyby, 2024; American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023; Meehan & Friedman, 2023; EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). Representatives from both the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Committee have emphasized that the influence of conservative activist groups has played no small part in the unprecedented rise in anti-library activity, specifically referencing USA groups Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, and MassResistance along with Canadian groups Action4Canada, Save Canada, and Concerned Citizens Canada (American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023; Nyby, 2024). The ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom (2022) noted that in 2021, these groups began to distribute lists of objectionable resources, and in a parallel move, Canadian activist group Action4Canada began distributing materials specifically calling out a list of LGBTQIA+-positive titles curated by the SOGI 123 initiative. This list of titles was featured on a pseudo-legal "notice of personal liability" distributed by Action4Canada members to libraries and schools across the country threatening legal action against individual library workers if any of the listed titles were present within the library's collection. This notice was so widely distributed it prompted an official response from the CFLA (Intellectual Freedom Committee, 2022).

Although there was no publicly available data in mid-2022 indicating that library censorship efforts in Canada were on the rise, library workers across the country began to realize that the tide had turned. After witnessing the startling rise in library challenges and vitriolic anti-library rhetoric reported in the USA the previous year, many workers in Canadian libraries anticipated a similar movement to develop in their own country. However, few were prepared for the sudden onset and severity of challenges that arose in 2022, the largest part of which were specifically to LGBTQIA+ resources. At the time of this writing, two years have passed since the initial rise in library challenges in Canada, three years since the USA saw its large post-COVID jump. Although the rate of challenges appears to have plateaued in the USA, there is not yet any indication that the parallel Canadian movement is abating.

Literature Review

> *It is difficult for an academic researcher to write confidently about the state of intellectual freedom in relation to libraries because very little scholarly, data-based research exists that would inform a comprehensive analysis about the contemporary situation. Publications about intellectual freedom or censorship in relation to libraries are frequently philosophical (including ethics and values); legal (laws and court cases); descriptive of policy, as opposed to analytical; or theoretical or are isolated accounts of individual or institutional incidents. There appears to be no single scholarly source of research data about levels of access to content in libraries* (Dresang, 2006, p. 171).

The relative lack of quantitative studies of challenges to books and programs in North American libraries has often been noted (Steele, 2022; Nyby, 2023; Kortora, 2000, Pinsky & Brenner, 2023), but the lack of Canadian examples has largely been passed over. In part, this absence reflects the lack of systematic collection of data, noted as early as 1995 (Schrader, 1995) and only addressed in 2007 by the Advisory Committee on Intellectual Freedom of the Canadian Library Association (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024b).

Even with the annual publication of data since 2007 (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024c) and annual descriptive reports, Canadian scholars tended to rely on longer data sets from the USA data supplied by the American Library Association (Aucoin, 2021). The present paper draws on Canadian reports from the database developed from the Canadian reports and supplemented by data from the Canadian Library Challenges Database (CLCD), a joint effort of the CFLA and the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) at Toronto Metropolitan University.

The USA data includes information on challenges in schools, largely from media accounts, (American Library Association, 2024), as well as self-reported data from public libraries, generating a literature that has an emphasis on schools and curriculum (Donelson, 1990; Donelson, 1997; Knox, 2014). However, it is not clear that the separate data streams present different pictures of the character of the totality of challenges (Narayanaswamy & Weaver, 2015).

While the Canadian data lacks strong representation from the K-12 sector, Beaudry & Samek (2023) offer a discursive account of the current pressures on Canadian schools.

Though it has been noted that quantitative studies on library censorship are rare, comparative studies on this issue between the USA and Canada are practically nonexistent. Oltmann, Samek, & Cooke (2023) discussed how Canadian, USA, and UK views on intellectual freedom and social responsibility differ and align.

It has been supposed that the USA experience has far reaching effects (Pinsky & Brenner, 2023), but no comprehensive examination of that proposition has been undertaken. On the political side, there are parallel Canadian organizations (Action4Canada is quite similar to Moms for Liberty) that use similar tactics, but despite their pervasive popularity and rate of activity throughout the country, they have not had the success of their USA counterparts in influencing policy or library collections (Ellis, 2023). Laats & Meehan (2024) describe how the actions of USA groups such as Moms for Liberty are a continuation of a well-documented history of book-banning attempts by conservative activists, which is closely associated with the tradition of resistance on the part of USA conservatives to the "transformative" nature of young adult and juvenile literature in general (Gaffney, 2017, p.53). There is not a similar history of precursors to Action4Canada.

Methodology

Because of the stark difference in nature and volume of challenges reported in Canada starting in 2022, Canadian results are often separated into two separate time periods in the analysis. Though figures from the entire 2015-2023 reference period are often presented, separate representations for the 2015-2021 and 2022-2023 subperiods are more often used. This practice is used to illustrate how trends in Canada have shifted significantly in the later reference subperiod, aligning more closely with trends from the USA. In some instances, USA data were also separated into corresponding subperiods in order to better illustrate the trend alignment.

The broad comparison of library censorship trends utilizes several data sources. All figures pertaining to library challenges in Canada between 2015-2021 are gleaned from the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey Database. This dataset included a small number of partial reports that did not include enough information to properly analyze based on the study methodology. These challenges were not included in the study. Figures pertaining to library challenges in Canada between 2022 and 2023 are gleaned from the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey Database and the Canadian Library Challenges Database jointly maintained by the CFLA and CFE. All figures related to challenges in the USA are gleaned from the ALA's Book Ban Data, maintained by the Office of Intellectual Freedom. These datasets are compilations of intellectual freedom challenges voluntarily reported by library workers between 2015 and 2023. The challenges include formal and informal challenges to library resources (books, events, programming, etc.). Formal challenges generally embody an event in which a complainant follows the library's policy for reconsideration, usually a "Request for Reconsideration" form. Informal challenges encompass a range of manifestations, including but not limited to vandalism, protests, or in-person confrontations with library workers.

For the demographic comparison, the CFLA/CFE data are compared to the analysis from the *Demographics of Book Bans* white paper (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024), which uses the dataset of book bans reported between 2021 and 2022 as provided by the Book Censorship Database (Magnusson, 2021-present). Despite the longer reference period, the Canadian dataset contains 626 records compared to 7,795 records in the USA dataset. The difference in volume is partially explained by Canada's smaller population, and partially explained by the broader criteria for inclusion in the Book Censorship Database.

The demographic analysis used for the Canadian 2015-2021 time period was originally compiled for earlier research (Nyby, 2023), though the results have been modified to include forty-nine challenges dating from 2021 that were reported to the CFLA after the study was completed. In this earlier study, the reporting libraries' postal codes were cross-referenced against 2016 Canadian census data in order to classify each library into one of three levels within five separate demographic categories. These categories were determined by various census datapoints: city size was determined by the population of the municipality in which the postal code was located; educational attainment level was determined by the percentage of residents within the postal code's aggregate dissemination area (ADA) who held a bachelor's degree or higher; income level was determined by the median household income of the postal code's ADA, age level was determined by the median age of the postal code's ADA; political representation was determined by the party affiliation of the member of parliament for the ADA's federal electoral riding. These same categories were used for demographic analysis of the Canadian 2022-2023 dataset, though several adjustments were made. First, the 2022-2023 data was cross-referenced against the 2021 Canadian census of population. Second, owing to slightly differing data fields in the Canadian Library Challenges Database,

postal-code level data was no longer available. Instead, municipality-level data were used to demographically classify each reporting library. Third, the level thresholds within each applicable demographic category were adjusted to match the 2021 census median levels. Lastly, owing to the presence of areas represented by parties not present in the earlier sample (Green Party of Canada and Bloc Québecois), two more classification levels were added to the political representation demographic category.

Limitations

As with most quantitative research into library challenges, the most prominent limitation concerns the nature and size of the sample. The ALA estimates that only between three and eighteen percent of challenges in the USA are reported (Doyle, 2017), and recent research indicates that the Canadian rate likely falls within the same range (Nyby et al., 2024). Compounding this, perceptions on what constitutes a challenge and library policies concerning challenge reporting may vary widely, leading to an overrepresentation of certain individual libraries or library systems within the sample. Given these considerations, the results should not be interpreted as definitive or conclusive findings. Rather, the trends outlined in the results are best viewed as illustrations of what is indicated by the best available data.

The provenance of the data used in the demographic comparison may act as a confounding factor. While the Canadian dataset focuses on censorship attempts in the form of challenges to resources and programs as reported by library workers, the USA dataset focuses on successful book bans in schools and libraries as reported by various media outlets (Magnusson, 2021-present). The differing natures of the data in question may belie differing motivations in censorship efforts, and may also partially explain the difference in volume between the two datasets. As such, the demographic analysis cannot be seen as a perfectly analogous comparison of effective censorship, but rather a comparison of areas within the two nations in which book banning behavior or tendencies are more likely to be present. However, it must be noted that successful bans are fairly uncommon in Canada, so it may be that this is the most valid possible comparison, given the available data.

Results

Broad Comparison

Both the USA and Canada experienced large increases in library censorship attempts in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic (American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2024; Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024; Centre for Free Expression, 2024). In the USA, the ALA collected a few hundred reported challenges each year between 2015 and 2019, but experienced a stark drop-off to only 156 reported challenges in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by a large influx of 729 reported challenges in 2021, a 75.2% increase over the previous five-year high of 416 challenges. The USA total further increased to over 1200 reported challenges in both 2022 and 2023 (fig. 1). The CFLA received between thirty-three and sixty-one challenges in the five years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced a similar dip in 2020. However, the post-pandemic rise in challenges was somewhat more gradual in Canada, with 2021 seeing seventy-eight reported challenges—a 28% rise over the previous five-year peak of sixty-one.

Total Reported Challenges, USA: 2015-2023

Year	Value
2015	275
2016	323
2017	416
2018	347
2019	377
2020	156
2021	729
2022	1269
2023	1247
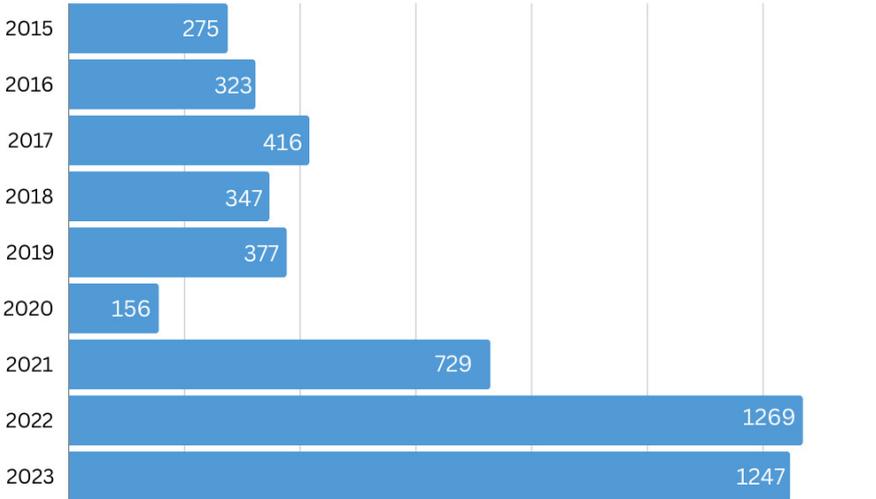
Figure 1: Total reported challenges to library resources in the USA, 2015-2023

Total Reported Challenges, Canada: 2015-2023

Year	Value
2015	33
2016	59
2017	58
2018	38
2019	61
2020	27
2021	78
2022	133
2023	197
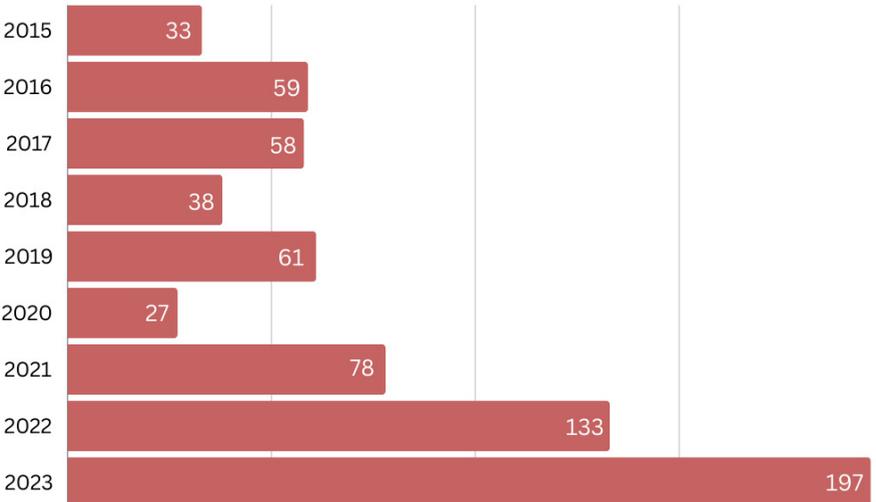
Figure 2: Total reported challenges to library resources in Canada, 2015-2023

Canada experienced a much more dramatic rise in reported challenges in 2022 and again in 2023 with 133 and 197 reports, respectively (fig. 2). These totals by themselves do not make for a perfect comparison, given the order-of-magnitude difference in raw numbers. However, they can be extrapolated out to a challenges-per-100,000-population rate which provides a much clearer picture of how trends in both countries compare (fig. 3). In the five pre-pandemic years, the USA and Canada experienced an average rate of 0.107 and 0.135 challenges per 100,000 population, respectively. The lowest rate for both countries was reached in 2020, but in 2021 both countries saw significant increases, with the USA reporting at a rate of 0.219 challenges per 100,000 and Canada at a rate of 0.202 per 100,000. Despite the similarity of these two figures, the difference in base 2015-2019 rates adds some important context. The 2021 Canadian rate represents an increase by 49.6% over the average rate of 2015-2019, but the USA increased its rate by 104.7%. Canada's larger jump appeared in 2022, and the Canadian rate even surpassed the USA rate in 2023.

Reported Challenges per 100,000 pop.: USA vs Canada
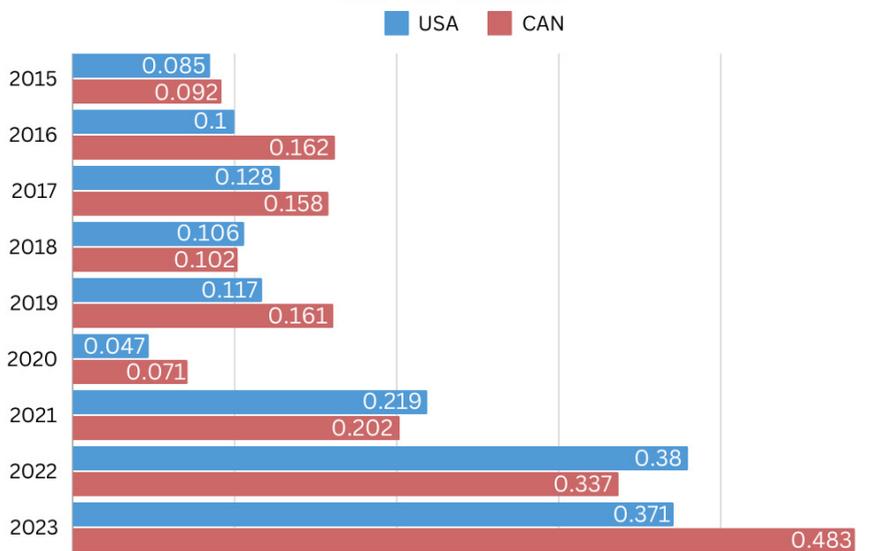
Figure 3: Comparison of challenge rates per 100,000 population.

Library associations from both countries attribute the stark post-pandemic rise in challenges to the actions of reactionary conservative popular movements (ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2022; ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023; Nyby, 2024). In the USA, the ALA reported that these movements advocated resistance primarily to resources tackling racial equity and LGBTQIA+ issues (ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2022; ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2023). Though Canadian libraries did experience a small bump in challenges to materials on racial equity (a rise from zero challenges between 2015-2021 to five challenges between 2022-2023), Canada's similar post-pandemic reactionary movements focused more narrowly on LGBTQIA+ issues.

Both countries recorded large jumps in challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources in the years after the pandemic (fig. 4), though it is worth noting the difference in how those trends developed. In the USA, the rate of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources rose gradually between 2015-2021 and jumped to nearly half of all reported challenges in 2022. In contrast, Canadian challenges of the same nature remained at a steady low level, ranging between 5.1-12.1%, in the years preceding the pandemic. These challenges dropped to an extremely low level in 2020 before returning in 2021 to slightly above the earlier peak, then rising very suddenly to unprecedented levels in the following two years (fig. 5). In 2023, the Canadian rate of 49.7% of all challenges even surpassed the peak USA rate of 49.6% set in 2022. This, in conjunction with the earlier observation that Canada has now surpassed the USA in reported challenges per 100,000 population, indicates that at least, on a per capita basis, this trend is now affecting Canadian Libraries at least as severely as their counterparts in the USA.

LGBTQIA+ Challenges: Percentage share of all reported challenges

USA   CAN

Year	USA	CAN
2015	12.3%	12.1%
2016	9.8%	5.1%
2017	17.8%	6.9%
2018	22.1%	7.9%
2019	34.6%	9.8%
2020	23.9%	3.7%
2021	26.5%	12.8%
2022	49.6%	29.3%
2023	44.1%	49.7%
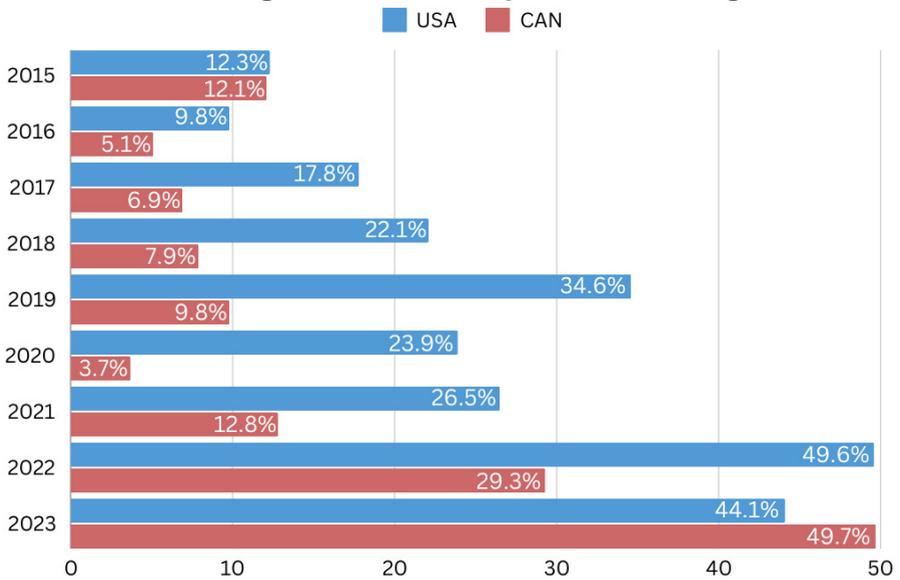
Figure 4: Comparison of incidence rates of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources.

LGBTQIA+ Challenge Trend Lines
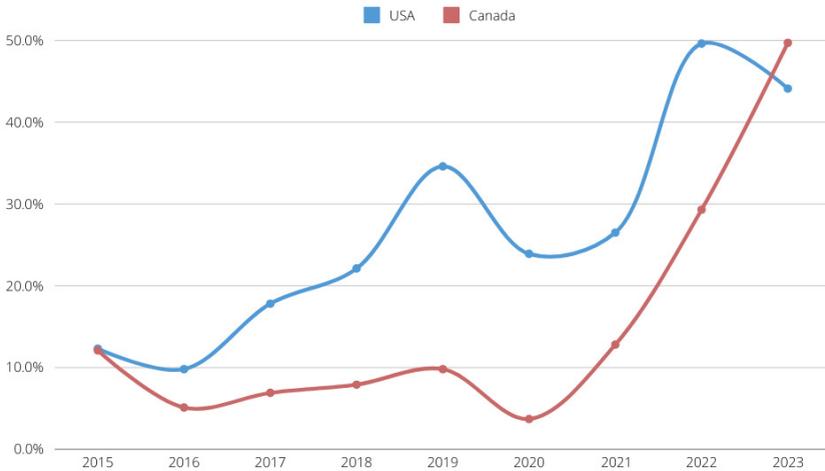
Figure 5: Trend line comparison of incidence rates of challenges to LGBTQIA+ resources.

An analysis of titles challenged in both countries provides perhaps the strongest evidence that reactionary movements in the USA have had a strong influence on similar movements in Canada. Between 2015 and 2021, challenges to 2,727 unique titles were reported in the USA, compared to 303 unique titles in Canada. In 2022 and 2023, challenges to 5,573 unique titles were reported in the USA, compared to only 202 in Canada. It is curious that while the USA saw an increase in both challenges and unique titles, Canada experienced an increase in rate of challenges and a large decrease in unique titles. Title-level data also provides the opportunity to analyze the titles challenged in both countries. Between 2015 and 2021, data from the two countries shared only twenty-three common titles, seven of which involved LGBTQIA+ issues. These twenty-three titles represent a mere 6.5% of all Canadian reported challenges for this period. The number of shared titles jumps to sixty-two in the 2022-2023 period, thirty-five of which involved LGBTQIA+ issues. Shared titles in this period now comprise 30.7%, or nearly a third, of the Canadian whole.

Further analysis of the shared titles reveals more evidence of cross-border influence. *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe is the only one of the USA's ten most frequently challenged titles from the 2015-2021 period that was also challenged in Canada. In fact, of the forty-two unique entries in the combined ALA Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists ranging from 2015 to 2021, only five (11.9%) were challenged in Canada in the same time frame (American Library Association, 2023). In contrast, five of the USA's ten most frequently challenged titles appear on the list of 2022-2023 shared titles, and six of the fourteen titles (42.9%) that appear on the 2022 and 2023 ALA Top Ten Most Challenged Books lists were also challenged in Canada during the same time period. The percentages of shared titles that appear in the top 1% and 5% of the USA's most frequently challenged titles grow significantly in the later period as well (table 1). These multiple dimensions of title analysis indicate that not only is Canada experiencing a higher volume and rate of challenges to comparatively fewer titles, but the list of titles itself has evolved to more closely resemble that of the USA.

	2015–2021	2022–2023
Number of shared titles	23	62
Number of shared titles that appear in USA top 10 most challenged	1	5
Percentage of shared titles that appear in USA top 1% most challenged	20%	23%
Percentage of shared titles that appear in USA top 5% most challenged	35%	40%

Table 1: Analysis of titles challenged in both USA and Canada

Demographic Comparison

The available data allow for three dimensions of comparison: educational attainment, income level, and political lean. Broadly, the EveryLibrary Institute (2024) found that areas in the USA affected by book bans tended to have a higher-than-average level of educational attainment, a higher-than-average median income, and a higher concentration of registered republicans. Two of these trends held true in Canada as well, but the most common political leaning of areas reporting book challenges was towards the Liberal Party of Canada (which is more analogous to the Democratic party of the USA).

In the USA, 37.5% of adults over the age of twenty-five hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 28.5% in Canada in 2016 and 32.9% in 2021. Areas affected by book bans and challenges in both countries had a notably higher average level of education (fig. 6). This figure stood at 41.7% for areas affected by book bans in the USA (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). In Canada, the figure stood at 43.3% in the earlier 2015-2021 time frame but fell to 36.3% in 2022-2023—more than half of the way back to the national average.

Education Level: USA vs Canada
Based on percentage of residents over 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher
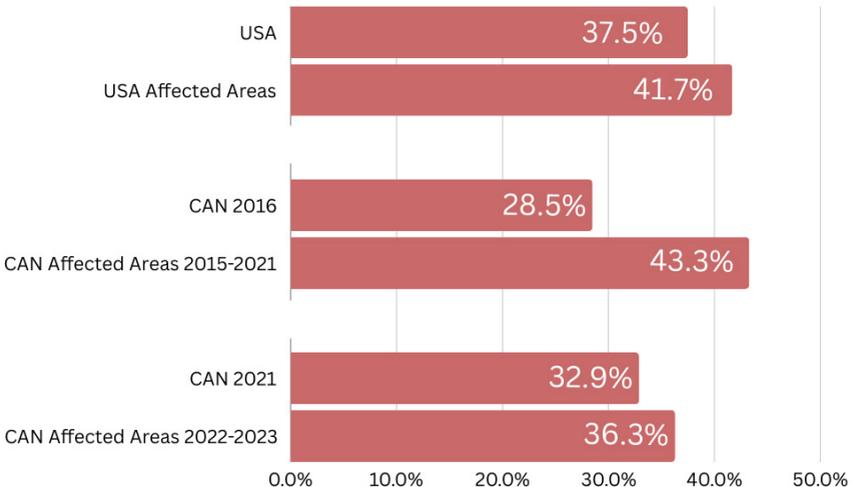
Figure 6: Comparison of educational attainment levels in both countries.

Higher income appears to correlate with higher incidence of bans and challenges in the USA, but does not seem to have any notable effect on challenge behavior in Canada (fig. 7) Areas in the USA affected by book bans had a median income of $90,448 USD, 21.2% higher than the national median of $74,580 USD (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). The median household income of Canadian areas affected by library challenges between 2015-2021 stood at $70,236 CAD—a mere $100 less than the 2015 national median of $70,336 CAD. In 2022-2023, affected areas had a median household income of only $1000 more than the 2021 national median ($85,000 CAD vs $84,000 CAD). The income differences in Canada are so slight that the numbers should be read as statistically equivalent.

Median Income: USA vs Canada

Figure 7: Comparison of median household income in both countries.

The EveryLibrary Institute (2024) reported that areas affected by book bans disproportionately leaned Republican. Based on county-level voting results from the 2020 Presidential election, 62% of affected areas voted Republican while 36% voted Democrat. This stands in contrast to the general political makeup of the country, where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans 38.8% to 29.4% (fig. 8). In Canada, areas represented by the governing Liberal Party comprised a disproportionately large percentage of affected areas during the 2015-2021 period, but the numbers regressed a close simulacrum of the general political landscape in the 2022-2023 time period (figs. 9 and 10). In the 2015-2021 period, 71.8% areas affected by challenges were represented by the governing Liberal Party of Canada, 17.4 percentage points more than the actual proportion of seats held by the Liberal Party at the time. In contrast, during the 2022-2023 period, the Liberal Party controlled 48.3% of parliamentary seats and 51.1% of affected areas, a difference of only 2.8 percentage points. In fact, in the later period, the differential between representation in parliament and representation in affected areas varied by no more than three percentage points for any party.

USA: Political Lean

Affected Areas - Electoral Results

Other/None
2%

Democratic Party
36%

Republican Party
62%

Overall - Political Affiliation

Republican Party
29.4%

Other/None
31.8%

Democratic Party
38.8%
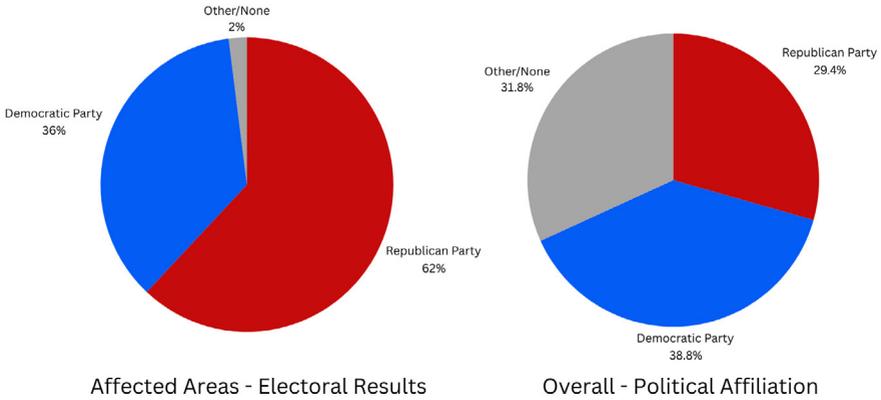
Figure 8: Political lean for affected areas and overall population of USA.

Canada: Political Representation 2015-2021

Liberal Party of Canada
Conservative Party of Canada
New Democratic Party
Bloc Québecois
Green Party of Canada

Affected Areas

NDP
14.1%

CPC
14.1%

LPC
71.8%

Overall

BQ GPC
3% 0.3%

NDP
13%

CPC
29.3%

LPC
54.4%
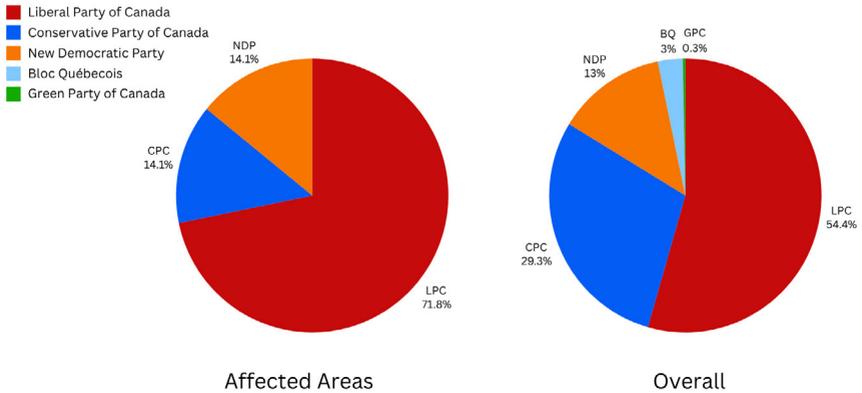
Figure 9: Political representation for affected areas and overall makeup of Canada in 2015-2021

Canada: Political Representation 2022-2023

Legend:
- Liberal Party of Canada
- Conservative Party of Canada
- New Democratic Party
- Bloc Québecois
- Green Party of Canada

Affected Areas
- GPC 0.9%
- BQ 3.7%
- NDP 4.4%
- CPC 39.9%
- LPC 51.1%

Overall
- GPC 0.6%
- BQ 6.5%
- NDP 7.4%
- CPC 37.2%
- LPC 48.3%
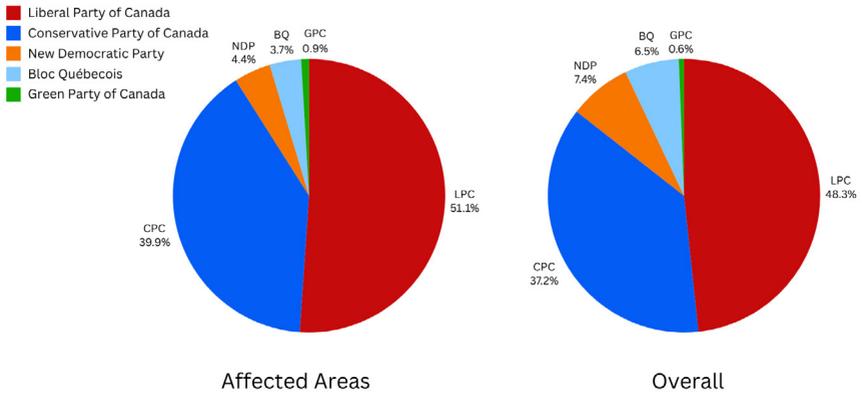
Figure 10: Political representation for affected areas and overall makeup of Canada in 2022-2023

Discussion

From a demographic perspective, the comparison of national trends shows that Canadian challenge behavior during the earlier period varied from that of the USA, but drifted more towards the USA model in the later period. This trend exists in two of the three examined demographic dimensions. A differential of almost fifteen percentage points existed between the Canadian national average educational attainment level and that of affected areas in the 2015-2021 period. However, this same differential in the 2022-2023 period was only 3.4 percentage points, much closer to the USA differential of 4.2 percentage points. We also see that the overall political lean of affected areas became more conservative in Canada during the later time period. Median income within Canadian affected areas has not changed much between the two time periods, nor has there been a shift towards USA trends. This comes as no surprise, as previous research has found that income has little or no bearing on the nature or volume of library challenges in Canada (Nyby, 2023).

The trend that is apparent in an isolated demographic analysis of Canadian library challenge behavior is one of regression to the mean. In two demographic dimensions, the demographic makeup of areas most affected by challenges more closely reflected that of the overall demographic makeup of the country in the later 2022-2023 time period. Given that increased resistance to pro-LGBTQIA+ library resources has been the major driver in the rise in Canadian challenges, a closer analysis reveals how this phenomenon is reflected specifically in challenges of this nature. One way of finding which demographic profiles were more likely to challenge these resources is to compare each demographic classification's share of overall challenges with its share of challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ resources specifically (fig. 12).

Difference in share of challenges to LGBTQIA+ Works						
	2015–2021			**2022-2023**		
Age Level	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**
Young	29.4%	9.7%	**-19.7%**	24.9%	15.0%	-9.9%
Medium	34.7%	48.4%	**13.7%**	49.5%	60.9%	**11.4%**
Old	35.9%	41.9%	6%	25.5%	24.1%	-1.4%
Education	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**
Low	15%	35.5%	**20.5%**	21.8%	27.8%	6.0%
Medium	18.4%	22.6%	-4.2%	29.9%	29.3%	-0.6%
High	66.7%	41.9%	**-24.8%**	48.3%	42.9%	-5.4%
Income	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**
Low	23.2%	41.9%	**18.7%**	7.8%	7.5%	-0.3%
Medium	62.1%	41.9%	**-20.2%**	67.9%	73.7%	5.8%
High	14.7%	16.1%	1.4%	24.3%	18.8%	-5.5%
City Size	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**
Small	10.7%	25.8%	**15.1%**	25.2%	29.3%	4.1%
Medium	35.3%	48.4%	**13.1%**	31.2%	37.6%	6.4%
Large	54%	25.8%	**-28.2%**	43.6%	33.1%	**-10.5%**
Representation	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**	**% of whole**	**% of LGBTQ**	**Differential**
LPC	71.8%	48.4%	**-23.4%**	51.1%	45.9%	-5.2%
CPC	14.1%	38.7%	**24.6%**	39.9%	44.4%	4.5%
NDP	14.1%	12.9%	-1.2%	4.4%	6.8%	2.4%
BQ	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	1.5%	-2.2%
GPC	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	1.5%	0.6%

Table 2: Shares of overall challenges and challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ resources within each demographic level, 2015-2021 and 2022-2023, Canada. Areas in which the differential between the two shares is more than ten percentage points are highlighted.

As can be seen in table 2, eleven out of fifteen existing classifications either underreported or overreported challenges of this nature by over ten percentage points, with a maximum differential of over twenty-eight points. This indicates that during this time period, libraries in areas with certain demographic profiles were significantly more likely than others to experience challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ resources. In contrast, in the 2022-2023 time

period, only two out of seventeen existing demographic classifications experienced a differ-ential of over ten percentage points, with a maximum differential of only 11.4 points. The data reflects information shared in the comments attached to many of the period's reported challenges, particularly to drag storytime events. Several reports cite protestors arriving from "out-of-town" or "outside the area," others mention social media as a driving force in organizing resistance, and many specifically cite several influential right-wing groups—such as Action4Canada and Save Canada—who actively encourage and organize library protests in many communities (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2024a). As a result, resis-tance to library materials appeared to spread more evenly throughout the demographic spec-trum of communities.

What is curious is that prior to 2022, the general makeup of library censorship attempts in Canada leaned toward the progressive end of the ideological spectrum, especially when compared to data from the United States. This trend extends well beyond the boundaries of this study's reference period, as Peavoy (2004) noted that even more than a decade earlier that materials in Canada were more likely to be challenged "in the interest of minority protection" (p. 130). Between 2015 and 2021, the most common challenges in Canada were to materi-als containing perceived racism (especially towards Indigenous peoples), and challenges to homophobic and transphobic materials slightly outnumbered challenges to pro-LGBTQIA+ materials. With this background, the shift in recent years seems even more dramatic. Within two years, the ideological makeup of Canadian library challenges flipped, resulting in a data-set that now appears to be even more conservative than that of the United States—primarily driven by populist anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment. This turnaround is even more striking when taken in conjunction with Canada's historically more accepting stance of non-heteronorma-tive identities (Poushter & Kent, 2020).

Given that the sudden about-face in Canadian library censorship trends closely followed a historic increase in similar challenges in the United States, it is difficult to imagine anything other than cross-border influence as the likely catalyst. However, the timing of the rise of reactionary homophobia and transphobia and the choice of libraries as the staging area for this particular culture war battle in both countries remains an open question. Higgins (2023) posits that the economic instability of the COVID-19 era served to embolden an authoritar-ian right wing that attributed societal instability to "people they perceive as their enemies: 'threats'...to their ways of life, security, and moral values" (p. 122). According to Higgins, these groups have created an "appraisal of the trans 'enemy' as a figure of fascist propaganda" (p.120). Though the movement's anti-trans rhetoric has been especially pronounced, trans-gender communities are not the sole targets of enmity. Hate crime statistics from the USA and Canada both show large increases in reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation and on race/ethnicity (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2024). Engström et al (2024) postulate that in such a sociopolitical climate, it is likely that the library's stated objective of supporting pluralism and minority rights, compounded by concerted efforts to increase the representation of racialized, non-heteronormative, and non-cisnormative peo-ples in library services, has allowed the institution to become a natural target for those with authoritarian tendencies. And of course, the targeting of children's resources in particular tracks with the longstanding tendency on the part of the right to legitimize discrimination under the guise of "protecting children" (Niedwiecki, 2014). Padrón (2024) points out that of course the only children ostensibly being protected by this practice are cis- and heteronorma-tive children; LGBTQIA+ youth are conspicuously absent from the equation.

Conclusion

Despite the seeming inevitability of the current state of affairs given such a confluence of events and conditions, many libraries and library workers have been unprepared for the recent flood of protests, challenges, and other antagonistic actions. Decades of neoliberal austerity have left many public libraries understaffed and overwhelmed, often lacking the personnel and resources necessary to create a strategy for responding to resistance efforts. Meanwhile, the deprofessionalization of school libraries has left many schools without a qualified library worker who can effectively defend a collection against censorship (Carlson, 2017). Considering the vulnerability of libraries after years of governmental neglect, it is no wonder that the institution should be selected as a focus point for reactionary ire in the United States. It is only natural that the Canadian reactionary right, after seeing the political success of American anti-library movements, simply followed suit.

The data and sociopolitical context combined serve as a reminder that libraries serve as a mirror to society and are often a flashpoint for public sentiment. The deepening polarization of popular views on subjects pertaining to diversity—whether within the context of race, sexuality, gender expression, or otherwise—are reflected both in library services and the public reaction to those services. But despite the likelihood of resistance, the continued commitment to intellectual freedom is necessary if libraries wish to amplify the voices of vulnerable groups. As Jefferson & Dziedzic-Elliot (2023) note, "a backlash is not a sign that we in the library world were actually providing the level of access to these materials that our patrons needed; it is merely a sign that we had started to get marginally closer" (p. 39).

The analysis included in this study provides the empirical basis for a narrative that can be a catalyzing force for support and advocacy: the library, once our most trusted public institution (Horrigan, 2017), is under attack. Strong and unwavering public support may be the best defense against aggressive anti-library movements, but that support may be difficult to establish without a compelling argument. This study is presented with the hope that the information included herein may be used as a tool to help build that argument and aid libraries in securing a sustainable and inclusive future.

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Divisive Politics and Threats to Academic Libraries

KATHLEEN MCEVOY

ABSTRACT

Libraries and the expertise of library professionals have been under direct, political threat since 2021. Book bans and criminalization efforts have targeted both library professionals and educators in schools and public libraries, but higher education and academic librarians will not escape the societal dividers being wedged into place. If the goal is to destabilize society and shake the foundations of democracy, libraries, schools, and colleges and universities will continue to find themselves in the crosshairs of this cultural conflict. Humanities, Liberal Arts, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion have been maligned and are being diminished, language itself is being redefined to fit a narrative. Research freedoms are being tested and information literacy faces an onslaught of mis- and disinformation and partisan investigations. While there will be no direct attacks on academic library professionals, self-censorship, program and course elimination, and conservative scrutiny of funding, endowments, and research areas will impact academic libraries and their content and technology providers. These same provocations can serve as catalysts for library professionals to step up, provide resources, and serve the needs of their institutions. In an information war, information professionals are the best guides within the academic community to confront these assaults.

Academic librarianship has long been concerned with core topics such as open access, digital preservation, and copyright. While these remain critical issues for the profession, it's also important for library leaders to address the politicization of thought that is impacting the larger scholarly community. As information professionals, librarians are uniquely positioned to leverage our expertise to help solve the problems being encountered on campus. By understanding the pain points currently at play in higher education and by doubling down on the power of information, technology, and collaboration, academic librarians can set a path for their institutions rather than being reactive to social and political turbulence.

Libraries of all types are under threat, and academic institutions are no exception. Issues including censorship, anti-access, and discrimination are impacting school, public, and academic libraries, as well as their professional organizations and content and technology providers. State legislation impacting print books have been proposed and passed, but legislation also affects collection development, tenure, library programming, funding, the accreditation process, professional certifications, contract language, and affirmative defense protections for library professionals.

Academic librarians are experiencing an increasingly complex and evolving set of threats to the profession. The politicization of educational content, coupled with movements that seek to undermine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles, and limit the teaching of the humanities, social sciences including sociology and gender studies, call for a robust response from the academic library community. These challenges are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper societal divisions that penetrate the core of academic inquiry and freedom. The profession finds itself at a juncture where the response will be vital to the future of academic inquiry and scholarship.

Anti-library groups and their campaigns targeting public libraries and schools have created a climate of professional self-censorship, online and in-person attacks on teachers and librarians, and the vilification of the profession's accrediting association. The preservation of intellectual freedom and the commitment to providing access to a diverse range of perspectives and information is under scrutiny. Academic librarians must be proactive in addressing these issues and standing up for the values of intellectual freedom, access to information, the importance of libraries in society and their own profession.

Threats to DEI are Core Threats to Academic Libraries

The divisive lexicon of American politics in 2024 includes attacks on academic institutions, faculty, university leadership, and endowments. For academic librarians, emerging and reactivated threats include mandated shifts from the social sciences and the humanities to STEM at state-funded universities, the introduction of outcomes-based curriculum, the elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and other programs or courses of study, threats to research, and the elimination of tenure and the freedom of thought it protects. State funding for higher education is being leveraged to alter programs, staffing, and even institutional directions.

Campus speech, academic freedoms, and student protests have been brought into a larger anti-elite, anti-DEI campaign, which pushes an oft-repeated narrative that conservative thought is being suppressed in academia. In a January 13, 2024 Op-ed in *The Hill*, entitled, "Higher education needs to reform itself. It also needs to defend itself,"[1] PEN America Freedom to Learn Program Director Jeremy C. Young wrote about bills that have passed in multiple states that he called "higher education gag orders," amounting to "government censorship," and an expanding effort to "undermine the university governance structures that protect academic freedom." The common element in many of these efforts is the people advancing an anti-academic agenda. "While there are very real problems on college campuses...bad-faith actors are using this as a pretext to promote a longstanding and largely unrelated political agenda that is hostile to higher education as a whole," which Young called a "coordinated attack."

This pressure on the academy is not only at the local and state level. The current Republican Speaker of the House, Rep. Mike Johnson, has blamed "the academy"[2] for the Republican Party losing "more highly educated voters." He said universities "are run by liberals almost entirely and sometimes by radical liberals," and claimed, "students are being indoctrinated rather than educated." A report published by the University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement entitled, "The Politics of the Professoriate: A Social Media Approach"[3] reviewed the existing literature and faculty social media and draws a different conclusion. "American higher education has long been considered a politically progressive space and for good reason... This perception that American colleges and universities

are progressive and thus inherently liberal has, however, made them a consistent target of conservatives on and off campuses, who have alleged discrimination against conservative students and faculty members and who have argued that campuses have become spaces of indoctrination, not education... Progressive and conservative researchers have explored both phenomena...and identified no evidence that conservative students or faculty are discriminated against in college. The idea that liberal faculty are indoctrinating students has been similarly debunked... This lack of evidence, however, has not stopped the publication of many books and the careers of many conservative commentators and politicians who continue to advance the belief in liberal indoctrination and discrimination against conservatives without support."

The conservative Claremont Institute report, *How Texas A&M Went Woke*,[4] endeavors to break down the university's transformation into what the author Scott Yenor calls "a typical, leftist American university."[5] A New York Times investigation, 'American Under Attack' Inside the Anti-D.E.I. Crusade[6] scrutinized the anti-DEI efforts of Yenor and others that have led to anti-DEI laws around the country that have scaled back or eliminated DEI on college campuses. The story showcased discussions including Yenor determining that, "Terms like 'diversity'...need to be saddled with more negative connotations," While also writing, "'We should use the term that is most likely to stigmatize the movement... While nobody wanted to seem in favor of discrimination,' he argued, 'social justice' could be 'stigmatized so that when people hear it they can act on their suspicions.'"

These attacks on DEI programs on campus are not just about rhetoric, laws are being passed that throttle or eliminate DEI positions and programs. Multiple states have dismantled DEI programs on state college campuses in 2024, closing DEI offices and eliminating DEI positions and faculty appointments as well as DEI-focused contracts with outside vendors. The politicization of educational content, coupled with movements that seek to undermine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion principles, has created a need for a robust response from the academic library community. These challenges are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper societal divisions that penetrate the core of scholarly inquiry and freedom. This puts the preservation of intellectual freedom and the commitment to providing access to a diverse range of perspectives and information under scrutiny. We find ourselves at a moment where our response will be vital to the future of academic inquiry and scholarship.

The Future of the Institution

The idea of establishing the American Academy[7] may not have been a familiar campaign talking point, but the former/future president's plan as outlined in Agenda 47 mixes a revolutionary way to consider higher education, with a description that sounds like a library.

> "This institution will gather an entire universe of the highest quality educational content, covering the full spectrum of human knowledge and skills, and make that material available to every American citizen online for free."

Rather than providing classes, the American Academy will grant degree credentials that the US Government and all "federal contractors will henceforth recognize." It's how to pay for the American Academy that might be the biggest surprise, a corporate raider's view,

not of private equity, but of private institutions and university endowments which it seems is where the money is.

> "We will take the billions and billions of dollars that we will collect by taxing, fining, and suing excessively large private university endowments, and we will then use that money to endow a new institution called the American Academy."

A "Critanic Panic" on Campus

Anti-DEI campaigns are closely intertwined with previous efforts to vilify the term Critical Race Theory (CRT), and they underpin a broader social engineering agenda that attempts to manipulate public discourse. In 2021, efforts to "freeze" the brand of "critical race theory" signaled an intentional strategy to sow discord and reshape societal perceptions. The stated goal, to turn the term "toxic" by lumping various "cultural insanities" under the CRT brand, reveals an attempt to trigger what could be called a Critanic Panic. Much like its precursor the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 90s, Critanic Panic describes an artificially inflated manufactured moral panic that is leveraged by certain political factions to rally a base, instigate division, and undermine educational efforts that aim to address and redress historical and contemporary injustices. The false panic about CRT was designed to galvanize opposition against what is, in essence, a complex legal framework pertaining to American law and structural racism, by falsely associating it with a profound and negative impact on K-12 education and curriculum, an impact it, as an academic legal theory, does not inherently possess. DEI, "Woke," and the next manufactured outrage are outgrowths of the Critanic Panic playbook, one strategy, set on repeat, a MadLibs strategy in which the messaging is set in advance and awaits the next phrase/issues/"crisis," to be set in motion.

The hijacking of terms and subsequent public perception is not a novel tactic; it has long been recognized as a fundamental instrument for reality manipulation. Philip K. Dick, a noted science fiction writer, once remarked, "The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words." The Critanic Panic around CRT, DEI, and other issues exemplifies this manipulation of words, leveraging linguistic control to influence and often mislead public opinion. The Panic Theory steers the discourse away from factual understandings of the issues at hand. Discourse, debate, and understanding are not the goals. The anger and fear, the panic, that can be generated and mobilized are the provocation.

Academic Librarians must be acutely aware of such linguistic manipulations. Librarians are not merely keepers of information but also stewards of knowledge who facilitate the critical examination of ideas and promote informed dialogue. The creation of a Critanic Panic poses a direct challenge to this mission, as it seeks to discredit the very foundations upon which collections and services are built—the diverse and equitable representation of voices and experiences.

The library professional's role in advancing intellectual freedom becomes even more crucial in an era where terms like CRT and DEI are weaponized to stifle academic inquiry. Academic librarians must engage in and promote critical literacy. It is their role to help students, faculty, and researchers recognize the distinction between disinformation campaigns and scholarly debate. By curating collections that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives, hosting forums for discussion, and providing access to resources that delve into the rich and com-

plex history of race and law, library professionals can actively counteract the effects of the next Critanic Panic. We must also educate our users about the strategic deployment of rhetorical framing in public discourse, equipping students and others with the tools to discern and analyze the intentions behind the information they consume.

Information and Disinformation

Political efforts to spread misinformation and disinformation about the integrity of federal elections became more intense on campuses following the 2020 presidential election cycle. This movement to discredit research by sociologists, political scientists, and other researchers could have had a chilling effect on research into disinformation efforts and threats to election integrity during the 2024 election cycle. Nationally, politically motivated efforts are underway to chill research on disinformation and election interference. Academic researchers studying disinformation and election integrity have been subpoenaed by the House Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government.

Members of the select House Investigative Subcommittee of the Judiciary claim researchers, government agencies, and technology companies are part of a "Censorship Industrial Complex"[8] to "silence conservative voices." State-funded institutions have received Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for their research data and communications. Researchers and institutions are being sued or FOIA-ed by conservative organizations. Technology companies have sued researchers related to big data collection. Government employees have been told not to report disinformation to tech companies and universities. In the lead up to the 2024 elections, many of the organizations and researchers that worked to highlight election interference and min- and disinformation were scuttled or went silent either through budget cuts, layoffs, or self-censorship.

The issues of disinformation extend beyond academia. Tech companies scaled back their election integrity teams, changed ownership, or changed their approaches to political content since 2020. These same companies are also grappling with artificial intelligence adoption, leaving their disinformation efforts opaque.

While self-censorship is a reality that library professionals and their colleagues will need to address, academic censorship may be something they are likely to face or can prevent. In February 2024, a college professor in Florida tweeted that her institution had rejected her request to buy banned books for adult students taking part in her "privately funded Endowed Chair project on… 'Banned Books & First Amendment Rights.'"[9] School Library Journal reports that 35 percent of school librarians in a September 2022 survey[10] self-censor often or always. However, less than half had experienced a formal book challenge, meaning that self-censorship is both preemptive and reactive. This pressure in K-12 has only grown since the survey and is moving into higher education.

Bellwether State Laws and Policies

Academic publishers of books, journals, and textbooks in the Humanities and Social Sciences are under threat in any of the more than 25 states that have passed or prioritized anti-library, anti-access legislation. The 2024 legislative cycle, which took place ahead of the Presidential election cycle saw library criminalization bills along with book banning legislation. Existing laws, even those being litigated, will impact anyone doing business with state consortia, buying groups, university systems, and state institutions.

Florida is still dealing with multiple laws passed in 2022 relating to school and classroom libraries as well as education, including the takeover of a traditionally liberal college by the Republican Governor. The chair of the Florida Democratic Party, Nikki Fried, declared "we have been the lab rats for the Heritage Foundation here in the state of Florida, so we understand the threat that is coming from Project 2025." Oklahoma made headlines when State Superintendent Ryan Walters announced his support for a PragerU curriculum to replace existing state standards. In a September 2023 press release, Superintendent Walters said that "PragerU Kids provides educational, entertaining, pro-American kids content," which he referred to as "high quality materials rich in American history and values." Thus far, school districts throughout the state have declined to add PragerU content into their curricula.[11] The same State Superintendent added a controversial social media influencer, who is not a library professional or an Oklahoma resident, to a state library advisory committee.[12] He is also requiring the Bible and the Ten Commandments be incorporated into school curricula. In Missouri, the language of a rule change proposed by the Secretary of State in 2023, would have required each of the approximately 900,000 K-12 students in the state to have an individual database account to access state library databases. This proposal lacked a plan for where and how the personal identifying information (PII) of these students would be collected, retained, and stored.

STEM, Humanities, and Academic Libraries

A resurgent tide of anti-intellectualism in the United States poses a significant threat to higher education institutions' traditional roles and values. Critics of academia often dismiss the social sciences and humanities, claiming that they lack practicality compared to the hard sciences, which are seen as more directly linked to technological and economic progress. This perspective not only undermines the comprehensive nature of higher education but also threatens to diminish the essential skills and values that these disciplines foster, including critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social awareness.

An anti-humanities stance is particularly evident in ongoing debates over educational policy and resource allocation. Several states are actively aiming to reshape academic curricula to better serve economic interests, often at the expense of the liberal arts and other disciplines that promote creativity and a deep understanding of complex social issues. The Florida Commissioner of Education claimed in a December 2023 Tweet[13] that "sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course for students." North Carolina legislators passed a FY2024 budget bill that ended funding for any new distinguished professorships, scholars, or fellows at public universities unless they were in STEM subject areas. The funding restrictions impact new roles, while existing endowment funds will allow for current non-STEM professorships to continue.

The Oklahoma Education Superintendent has called for state colleges and universities to eliminate gender studies. In December 2023 he proposed new guidelines for libraries calling the American Library Association guidelines on information literacy "woke"[14] in an interview with KOCO. The new guidelines for Oklahoma are "entirely skill-based and grade-based" according to KOCO. A Nebraska bill being considered since 2023 targeted database companies specifically with claims about pornographic content. In Mississippi, the State Auditor reviewed all courses being taught at state-funded institutions in 2023[15] and recommended the elimination of funding for Anthropology, African American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies, while calling for an outcomes-based model as a way to counter the brain

drain in the state and encourage graduates to remain in Mississippi. A 2023 law impacting libraries and content providers now regulates digital and online resources in K-12 and public schools. While specifically not including academic institutions or impacting dual-enrolled students, the law sets out terms for withholding payment from vendors for noncompliance. While language was added to allow for curing, the bill demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the size and scale of statewide contracts which often include academic institutions.

This trend goes beyond a mere shift in educational policies. It reflects a broader cultural question about the value of knowledge and the purpose of education. The diminishing role of social sciences and humanities in academic curricula undermines the role of education in fostering a democratic society ready to tackle diverse ideas and challenges. As educational institutions grapple with these pressures, they must advocate for a balanced education that recognizes the intrinsic value of all disciplines. It is essential to defend the liberal arts as they play a vital role in developing informed citizens capable of contributing to a diverse and pluralistic society. They must also resist the reduction of libraries to mere technical workshops and assert the importance of literature, history, and the arts in nurturing the intellectual and cultural growth of young minds.

Dual Enrollment as the Achilles Heel of Intellectual Freedom on Campus

Enacted and proposed state legislation impacting academic institutions have increased. Issues that had only previously impacted only K-12 or public libraries have started to surface in Higher Ed. One under-appreciated issue is that of dual-enrolled students. When laws about censorship, access, and privacy are written without the guidance of library professionals who understand the ramifications of proposed changes, dual enrollment students can create tremendous challenges for academic libraries and their parent institutions.

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students, often under age 18, to enroll in college courses for credit before graduating high school. Students can start their college education early rather than waiting until they are in college to start earning credits. Dual enrollment programs can broaden high school students' educational opportunities and provide financial benefits by reducing the time and cost of completing a college degree. Unlike other accelerated learning options, such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment programs offer college-level courses rather than courses that might lead to college credit based on exam performance.

Dual enrollment has emerged as a crucial pathway for high school students to gain access to higher education. It is also a soft target for advocates of censorship and anti-access to find a new way into college and university campuses. These accelerated programs are designed to challenge students academically, expose them to higher education culture, and save both time and money on college education. However, integrating minors into the college environment calls for careful consideration of campus policies, particularly those concerning access, privacy, and safeguarding academic inquiry and free expression.

Anecdotal reports from the 2023 North Carolina Library Association conference indicated that parents' rights issues may be extending into colleges and universities. Academic librarians in attendance reported that parents of dual-enrolled students had visited their libraries asking about their collections. A bill passed in Oklahoma in 2022 impacted dual-enrolled students forcing academic institutions to go back to their content providers to update contract language and to determine whether the providers could comply with provisions requiring content curation designed for K-12 schools to be imposed on academic institutions

with students under 17 years of age. Until the institutions could create separate pathways to e-resources for students under age 18, these restrictions impacted all students, faculty, and researchers. The law was so problematic that a 2023 bill had to be passed to rework the provisions, prevent K-12 curation controls from being forced on the entire institution, and clarify whether the law included private institutions.

To continue to serve dual-enrolled students who are under 18, colleges and universities must ensure that their policies strike a delicate balance. While they must ensure that minors' rights and protections are in place, they must also avoid imposing overly restrictive or censorious measures on the broader college community. Information literacy instruction is crucial for dual enrollment students to succeed in college courses. Academic libraries could offer tailored information literacy programs for these students to develop research skills essential for success in college courses. Library administration should work closely with high schools to understand the specific needs of dual enrollment students. Library policies should address the physical safety of minors in the library, and staff should be trained to understand the unique needs of dual enrollment students. Academic libraries can create specific programs or outreach efforts aimed at dual enrollment students to better integrate them into the campus community and library culture.

Lessons for Higher Ed from No Child Left Behind

In the United States, the Higher Education Act (HEA) plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality and performance of educational institutions. One of the ways it does this is by addressing institutional accreditation, which ensures that institutions meet specific standards of quality. During reauthorization processes, Congress can make amendments and adjustments to the provisions related to accreditation.

The U.S. Department of Education, which the incoming president wants to eliminate, recognizes various accrediting agencies, including regional and national accreditors. Regional accreditors focus on non-profit institutions with an academic focus, while national accreditors review vocational or technical programs, including for-profit institutions. Accreditation is important because it impacts an institution's eligibility for federal funding and student financial aid. The HEA sets standards that accrediting agencies must meet to be recognized as reliable authorities on institutional quality. The next president has spoken about college accrediting bodies in his campaign platform Agenda 47. "When I return to the White House, I will fire the radical Left accreditors that have allowed our colleges to become dominated by Marxist Maniacs and lunatics. We will then accept applications for new accreditors who will impose real standards on colleges once again and once and for all."

The current accreditation standards for higher education institutions have evolved to include a significant emphasis on academic libraries within their accreditation rubrics. Libraries play a pivotal role in student learning and success, and are central to the educational mission of institutions. The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) has developed a set of Standards for Libraries in Higher Education that provides a framework for libraries to demonstrate their alignment with the educational objectives of their institutions and support accreditation processes.

These accrediting bodies, which have been called out from criticism and replacement by conservative platforms have varying expectations and mentions of libraries in their standards. A change by the accrediting body, Higher Learning Commission, going into effect in 2025 removes requirements for libraries[16] altogether. The conversation about the importance

of libraries and librarians in accreditation standards should reflect the current threat and a wider dialogue about the evolving role of libraries in higher education.

Academic libraries must be engaged with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to ensure that library contributions to educational quality are communicated and recognized within these frameworks. The Act is more than ten years overdue for reauthorization. Planning should be ongoing to avoid the pitfalls that befell school librarians when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), introduced in 1965, was replaced with No Child Left Behind in 2001. No Child Left Behind ignored countless studies demonstrating the impact school librarians had on test scores and literacy, collection development quality and its support for the curriculum, and the quality of the technology libraries introduced to students and the schools themselves in the days before the proliferation of education technology.

No Child Left Behind decimated the school librarian profession by altering program certification and education requirements as well as accreditations, and even the adjustments in the 2015 reauthorization called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have not been able to resurrect the profession. In 2000, before No Child Left Behind went into effect, 86 percent of schools had librarians representing a growth from 40 percent in 1963 the year before the passage of the ESEA, according to the National Center for Education Statistics' report, America's Public School Libraries: 1953-2000. A 2019 American Library Association report indicated that only 61 percent of the schools with libraries employed full-time library professionals. The report was cited in "The Essential Leadership of School Librarians," a brief published by the International Literacy Association in 2022.

A 2018 School Library Journal article, "School Librarian Where Art Thou?," cited the National Center for Education Standards, which showed that "more than 10,000 full-time school librarian positions" were lost in the United States representing, at worst, 19 percent of the profession while changing job titles, including teacher librarian, and a lack of standardization around support staff reporting makes the numbers harder to quantify. An "Education Week Research Center analysis of federal data" (Common Core Data) verifies the nearly 20 percent loss between 2000 and 2015 (from 54,000 public school librarians in 2000 to 44,000 in 2015) while also highlighting the reductions impacted minority districts "the 20 districts that have lost the most librarians had on average 78 percent minority student populations." As of May 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there are nearly 49,500 elementary and secondary librarians employed in the United States.

Serving the Institution Benefits the Library

Library professionals have long been technology first adopters. They demand new technology from their content and technology providers, and when they don't get what they need, they are not shy about creating it themselves. Whether creating technology for their own use, making it open source to share with others, or partnering with businesses to create new services (as the original Kuali Ole libraries did when they partnered with libraries and service providers to build the FOLIO library services platform in 2019), library professionals are rarely late to the new technology party. Since they understand the need for and value of policies, and by bringing their expertise to policy making, strategy sessions, and future planning, library professionals can flex their dexterity and raise the profile of the library and the profession.

To library professionals, data analytics is nothing new. Library leaders and professionals from e-resource librarians to collection development experts have been collecting, leverag-

ing, and clamoring for more analytics for the better part of a decade. The debate is whether they are presenting the right facts to the right stakeholders to safeguard or increase their materials budget and staffing numbers and secure the library's place on campus. If libraries have the data and can indicate the ways in which they are influencing research and science, then budgets should reflect that influence.

If library leaders have not been able to make the connection or broaden the discussion to demonstrate the impact they can have on campus-wide priorities, new narratives must be sought, new scenarios created. Library professionals need to leverage the data analytics built into their library resources, created in-house, or crafted by peers to demonstrate value and scale up their offerings and their collections. Practical demonstrations of the impact of library services on core issues, including student success and retention and cost per student based on data from library resources or learning management systems (LMS), are just the start.

Academic librarians must take advantage of the opportunity to leverage their technical acumen. Instead of talking about getting a seat at the table, they need to pull up a chair, bring their analytics and know-how to that table, and start to contribute. Library professionals, who are well-versed in privacy and data protection, and fought for anonymization of user data, can confront the rapid rise in on-campus technology from the LMS to swipe cards and call for digital stewardship policies about the use of location and login information. Library professionals are well-positioned to help administrators leverage data analytics while protecting student privacy.

In addition to parleying their knowledge of analytics, library professionals need to ask themselves what they know about the larger issues impacting business and technology, research, and higher education. Academic libraries need to develop and leverage ways to share the latest news and competitive intelligence with administrators, department heads, faculty, and researchers. Being cognizant of institution-specific concerns (state bills, laws, or regulations), administrative policies and goals, or curriculum changes being driven by new technology, would allow library leaders to create opportunities to demonstrate the value of the library collection. Are librarians using library-only language when describing services — "full-text," "serials," "discovery services" — or are they letting decision makers know they can provide stakeholders with the latest articles from top journals, delivering competitive intelligence customized to each stakeholder's needs, right to their phones, emails, or online?

By identifying which departments dominate budgets, benchmarking, and administrative priorities; understanding which services or policies drive decision making; or identifying new and emerging areas of study, library professionals can begin to use the power of information to influence decision making and aid decision makers. By understanding the priorities, concerns, and pain points of institutional stakeholders, library professionals can use library services to set up alerts and send out newsletters based on institutional or departmental imperatives. Not only are these alerts and newsletters reminders of the resources available to stakeholders, they are also a reminder that library professionals are problem solvers. Each alert is an iteration and substantiation of the library itself.

Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing society. Most of the current discussion at the institutional level revolves around cheating concerns, the impact on research, and how to adjust teaching to address student access to ChatGPT and other AI resources. AI ultimately will impact the way institutions prepare students for their future careers. As guardians of technology, library professionals can also provide the testing needed to determine whether a new system allows for the provenance required to ensure students can cite sources and trace research back to the original source.

Preparing the Industry for Change

Librarians have a unique opportunity to leverage their technical expertise in any meaningful discussion of the future of academic libraries.

Library schools need to offer management training and ongoing professional development in leadership and management. Library leaders can either hold themselves apart from the institution or reinforce their role in the curriculum and as technology providers. Library schools should train future librarians to be more aware of the business of libraries, budgeting, advocacy, career paths, and the challenges facing the profession.

The industry must start discussing the more prominent issues threatening libraries, library professionals, and library businesses. For instance, state universities and libraries located in "Red States" will be affected by any legislation that impacts academic funding, tenure, DEI programs or related majors and courses, as well as by AI, threats to research freedoms, and laws affecting K-12 curriculum. Library professionals must respond by identifying allies and building coalitions and alliances that can educate legislators, counter detractors, and speak up for the profession.

Library administration can reach out to their former students, alumni, and local businesses surrounding the institution as potential supporters. A larger coalition can be built among union members on campus, faculty, and their larger associations. Publishers and content and technology providers are also facing legislation and threats to their business, and they need alliances. Library professionals need to discuss legislation with vendors and find common ground.

Library professionals must act if access to information is at risk and information itself is being vilified. Library leaders should act if research is in danger of being politicized or censored and if self-censorship or book bans start to impact scholarship. They must act with the knowledge that higher education and its institutions themselves are being targeted. So often library leaders lament not having a seat at the table at their institution, suppose publishers, library content and technology providers are singled out, and library contracts or budgets are threatened. In that case, library professionals need to pull up a chair and bang on that table.

Endnotes

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Access to Online Subscription Content in K-12 Schools through the School Library

CONNIE WILLIAMS, MARY ANN HARLAN, AND JO MELINSON

ABSTRACT

Among the many resources purchased within school libraries is subscription online content. School librarians purchase this material to support classroom curriculum and student inquiry thus providing reading materials to foster literacy, research skills, and encourage critical thinking. This content, aggregated by vendors who purchase from a wide variety of subscription-based resources such as magazines, journals, video and other media, and primary source depositories, allows students to access material that otherwise might be prohibitively expensive. Educational materials such as these have lately been targeted by politically-motivated parents' rights groups as being harmful to minors. This paper explores how limiting access to these resources affects students' ability to become critical thinkers who can identify perspectives, evaluate sources, and integrate new information into their research. It investigates how limiting access to subscription online content through legislation encourages pre-restriction by vendors and school librarians as a response to these complaints. The authors also cover strategies on how to protect school libraries against these threats.

Introduction[*]

Online subscription content provides access to news, academic research, and other published materials often not accessible without a personal or institutional subscription. Subscription content is an important avenue of information access, particularly for academic and educational purposes. Restricting access to this content inhibits teachers, librarians, and students' ability to engage with information and develop necessary life and academic skills to manage and evaluate information, misinformation, and disinformation.

Since 2021, several states have considered legislation limiting student access to information. These proposals, written under the guise of "parents' rights" have centered on a false claim that student access to online database information includes materials that are harmful to minors and places students in danger. The purpose of this white paper is to explore how limiting access to online subscription content through state level legislation is detrimental, how it can affect access more universally, and how school libraries and online subscription content vendors, by being overly restrictive in response to these complaints, could unnecessarily restrict access, as well as how to protect libraries against these threats.

In recent policy debates, concerns have been raised by special interest organizations about the content available in school library databases. These groups assert that such content

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[*]   Hyperlinks to sources in the text are contained in the endnotes

may be inappropriate, claiming it includes pornographic material, and have advocated for tighter controls. This push for restrictions can manifest in efforts to remove specific publications or indexes or by implementing stop words (defined below) and excessive filtering within database search functionalities. The intention behind these actions is often to prevent student access to information related to gender or sexuality, issues related to race and ethnicity such as the historical contribution of different ethnic groups, and the implications of laws that were based in racial identity, etc., without considering its relevance to the curriculum or whether it is suitable for the student's age and grade level.

Across the nation, various political figures seek to curtail students' access to print and digital resources. This movement poses a significant challenge to fostering critical thinking skills in students, which are essential in our rapidly evolving world. School librarians share concerns about the transparency of curricular materials, especially about online subscription content, while recognizing the value of the resources. Given the vast amount of resources provided through state-funded online content, individually assessing each piece of material (be it a news article, journal article, or comprehensive entry) is daunting.

An example was reported in *School Library Journal*. In September 2023 Fulton County (GA) Schools banned the social sciences online subscription product BrainPOP due to some content being thought objectionable by parts of the school community, including videos and blog posts about LGBTQ inclusivity, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the biology of the menstrual cycle (Bauld). This incident is part of a broader trend of censorship targeting digital resources in schools across the U.S., often led by conservative parent groups and political activists aiming to restrict access to materials related to LGBTQIA+ themes, race, racism, and sexual health.

This trend is part of a nationwide push led by certain parent groups and political activists to limit access to online subscription resources, framing it as a protection against "obscene" materials. This activism has led to lawsuits, state legislation requiring the removal of such materials, and significant debates over what constitutes appropriate educational content. School library advocates argue that such legislation and actions against educational resources hinder students' ability to research, develop critical thinking skills, and access diverse viewpoints. Established online content vendors offer tools for content control, but the overarching issue is seen as a political agenda driving censorship rather than genuine concern for student welfare.

Over-filtering, using stop words, and content censorship in school databases ultimately reduce students' access to resources aligned with educational standards and support the curriculum. Such measures limit the scope of available information and impede the development of critical thinking and informed citizenship among students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are helpful in understanding the role of online subscription content in K-12 schools and the concern related to censorship or possible removal of such content.

- **Local Community Standards:** In determining what area constitutes a "local community," the *First Amendment Encyclopedia* states that: "courts have permitted consideration of a community as ranging from statewide — including nation-state-sized states, such as California, Texas, and Illinois — to a division of the federal district court or a three-county metropolitan region" (Steiner).

- **Local Education Agency (LEA)**: Section 300.28[1] of the Individuals with Disabilities Act defines an LEA as "a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties as are recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools" ("Sec. 300.28"). The term LEA is used by states as well.

- **Open web:** For the purposes of this discussion the open web refers to public Internet sites, viewable by anyone and without a subscription or having to pay to access. The open web is searchable by search engines such as Google with a simple search.

- **Online subscription content:** Online subscription Content is a collection of media materials (that can include newspapers, magazines, academic journals, and other resources) acquired by aggregators (such as EBSCO, GALE, and ProQuest) to be sold by subscription to schools and libraries to support educational standards and classroom curriculum. This definition describes more effectively the kind of collected materials found in the K-12 environment than the more commonly used "database." While both are often used to refer to the same product, for this paper we are utilizing the term online subscription content to better describe the many variants of products offered to schools. For the purposes of this paper we use online subscription content to include databases (as defined below) and other tools and resources that provide educational materials and learning activities created particularly for that purpose. While there is other online subscription content such as Netflix we are primarily referencing educational content marketed to the K-12 educational community and considered for purchase by state organizations.

- **Databases:** Educational databases are collections of media materials (that can include newspapers, magazines, academic journals, and other resources) acquired by aggregators (such as the online database companies EBSCO, GALE, and ProQuest) to be sold by subscription to schools and libraries to support educational standards and classroom curriculum.

  Media included in these collections can range from everyday and popular material such as *The New York Times* and *Reason* magazine to peer-reviewed academic journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*. It may also include videos, images, and other media. The aggregator or online database company indexes this media to make it searchable and accessible to its users.

  Schools purchase subscriptions to this material. With such a subscription, schools and school librarians provide access for patrons to a variety of materials that would be prohibitively expensive if they were purchased separately, and students have access to materials not available on the open web that can be used for research.

- **Curation:** Curation seeks to select the best or most appropriate materials for presentation, distribution, or publication. Art galleries, for example, curate (or choose) the paintings that they want to highlight for their upcoming exhibit.

Publishers, aggregators, reviewers, and librarians all participate in the curation process for school library materials.

- Reputable publishers and licensed educational publishers use State and National Guidelines to write textbooks and produce fact-based materials designed for the K-12 market. They are often the first line of curation as they choose authors, topics, and other materials to create their offerings.
- Aggregators, such as online subscription database companies, purchase from a wide swath of materials to create separate K-12 offerings that can be purchased by grade level, subject, or other criteria. Indexing provides access to the material via keywords or other search terms.
- Professional reviewers provide information and reviews that are less biased than descriptions that the publisher might provide thus allowing schools and certified school librarians to make decisions and curate electronic resources that fit their patrons.

- **Information:** "knowledge gained through study, communication, research, instruction, etc.; factual data" ("Information").
- **Misinformation:** "false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead" ("Misinformation").
- **Disinformation:** "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda" ("Disinformation").
- **Filter:** "software that screens and blocks online content that include particular words or images" (Clark).
- **Over filtering:** Over-filtering is a common way to discuss the ways software filters may restrict access to materials not deemed pornographic, obscene, or harmful to minors and that are supportive of children's information needs including school curriculum. Filters can be controlled by district policies approved and directed by school boards; and if the mechanism for filtering the content (see definition of "stop words" below) or the filtering setting is not reflective of curricular standards, legitimate resources will not be accessible to students.
- **Least restrictive:** Least restrictive access refers to filters installed as a requirement of CIPA. Filters should be set so that students may access curricular material related to standards including Health. Under CIPA guidelines communities can determine the level of filtering, but CIPA requires a filter be installed and good faith effort on the part of schools receiving e-rate to filter for material (a) obscene; (b) child pornography; or (c) harmful to minors (Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA)).
- **Obscenity:** The Miller Test,[2] which is the legal test from which one can determine whether an expression constitutes an obscenity, defines obscenity by applying the answers to these questions:
  - "whether the average person applying contemporary community standards[3] would find the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;
  - whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law;

  - whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value" (Hudson).

- **Harmful to minors:** The term "harmful to minors" refers to any picture, image, graphic image file, or other visual depiction that

  - "taken as a whole and with respect to minors, appeals to a prurient interest in nudity, sex, or excretion;

  - depicts, describes, or represents, in a patently offensive way with respect to what is suitable for minors, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact, actual or simulated normal or perverted sexual acts, or a lewd exhibition of the genitals;

  - and taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value as to minors" ("47 USC § 254")[4].

The U.S. Dept of Justice also notes that[5]: "Federal law strictly prohibits the distribution of obscene matter to minors. Any transfer or attempt to transfer such material to a minor under the age of 16, including over the Internet, is punishable under federal law" ("Obscenity").

- **Stop words:** an industry term for words such as articles, prepositions, and pronouns, that when typed into the search bar, are not searched by the database or search engine. The search engine has been programmed to ignore this word or phrase. A comparable example can be shown in the way that Google does not search the word "the" within search phrases. Doing so, brings up far too many possible results ("hits") with that word. Ebsco Connect explains that "the primary reason for not indexing stop words is to allow for the most precise Result List" ("What Are Stop"). In K-12 educational databases "stop words" might include words and phrases that could be considered obscene under the Miller Test, or with other criteria as determined by vendors. For example: a search on <sexual harassment> may only search for <harassment>.

For the purposes of this paper there are three levels of stop words:

  - Search efficiency stop words - words such as articles, pronouns, and prepositions that impede the efficiency of a search such as "the," "a," or "however."

  - Obscenities such as slang words that would not be appropriate in a business or school setting.

  - Informationally appropriate terms that are scientifically accurate or common terms recognized by community standards such as "sexual" in the example above, or appropriate scientific terms for body parts such as "breast." **This paper concerns itself with how to recognize the problem of using the technology reserved for removing stop words to filter out informationally appropriate words that could impede a student's research.**

- **Policies**

  Collection development policies outline the scope and intent of the collection to be created. In a school library, this includes materials designed for curricular support as well as recreational and personal interest reading.

Challenge policies include the steps necessary to ask for reconsideration and/or removal of material from a school library.

- **Voluntary Inquiry:** School libraries are generally considered places of *voluntary inquiry.* Pico v. Island Trees[6] makes the distinction between "the compulsory environment of the classroom" and "the school library and the regime of voluntary inquiry that there holds sway" ("Board of Education"). Voluntary Inquiry means that the school library can and must contain broader materials that speak to their students' interests so students may pursue their own paths of inquiry into topics such as the women's rights movement and sexual harassment laws in a history course, or the impact of redlining in an economics class.

- **Request for Proposal (RFP):** *Library Technology Reports* explains that "the request for proposal (RFP) is the heart of a library system purchase and represents a coordinated effort between members of the library staff to develop a coherent statement of the library's mission, needs, and expectations" (Waller). Purchasing products using an RFP encourages competition among vendors. It also acts as a guide for the library and vendor to work together under the same agreed-upon requirements and timeframe as outlined by the RFP.

Background

School librarians purchase materials that support ongoing curriculum and content growth as well as provide reading materials to foster literacy, research skills, and encourage critical thinking. Historically, these have been encyclopedias, books, manuscripts, and other printed materials. As technology increased, libraries included media in the form of images, movies, audiotapes, and more, into their collections. Today, this content is increasingly provided through online subscription content and most often through aggregated resources that increase the amount of information crossing media boundaries and bringing content in from an increasingly smaller world.

> Three providers of online subscription material available to K-12 school libraries: EBSCO, Gale Cengage and ProQuest are examples of large aggregators who provide materials across grade levels. Their resources are available as 'leveled' in that they compile grade-identified materials targeted to specific elementary, middle, or high school audiences. Students can move between the levels to gain more specific information as well as locating a comfortable reading level for understanding. There are many more companies providing subscription collections, for instance, some targeting specific elementary audiences while others provide more academic materials for high school.

Even as schools build collections for faculty and students, the reality is that students can access a wide-ranging array of information venues both within and outside of the school environment. This ability drives the educational imperative to teach research skills that instruct in locating, accessing, critically evaluating, and ethically creating information. In the K-12 educational environment, professional school librarians are the best-placed educators to provide this instruction in collaboration with their classroom colleagues.

Throughout this paper, the term: "library" refers to K-12 school libraries and the materials they provide to their site's students, faculty, staff, and administration. School libraries include materials that meet the information needs of students whether that need is for schoolwork or personal interest. Students completing classroom assignments such as History Day or Science Fair projects, or other research topics within the curriculum where there is student choice, need to access a wide variety of topics often requiring deep dives across varying perspectives, historical investigations and new ideas. As educational standards encourage developing research skills within disciplines, school libraries provide the materials necessary to support developmentally appropriate student information needs. Personal inquiry, which includes both curricular and extracurricular information needs, requires a large body of informational resources to satisfy those student information needs. The materials available through online content referenced in this paper may be accessed through public libraries; however, the scope of this paper focuses on online content intentionally created for and provided to K-12 students and provided through school libraries.

Existing Federal Laws Apply to School Libraries

The following federal laws are relevant to school libraries and any discussion related to online subscription content.

- **CIPA[7]: "**The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) was enacted by Congress in 2000 to address concerns about children's access to obscene or harmful content over the Internet. CIPA imposes certain requirements on schools and libraries that receive discounts for Internet access or internal connections through the E-rate program – a program that makes certain communications services and products more affordable for eligible schools and libraries. In early 2001, the FCC issued rules implementing CIPA and provided updates to those rules in 2011" ("Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA)." *FCC*).

- **COPPA[8]:** While the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) is not particularly significant to online subscription content, it should be noted that in regards to the open web COPPA "imposes certain requirements on operators of websites or online services directed to children under 13 years of age, and on operators of other websites or online services that have actual knowledge that they are collecting personal information online from a child under 13 years of age" ("Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule"). Schools should be abiding by COPPA restrictions in how students engage with online materials.

- **FERPA[9]:** Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects the privacy of student education records. Parents and students have the right to view and request correction of educational records. It is unclear if browsing history, library circulation, and database search records would be an educational record as they are transitory; however, records that are collected would be considered an educational record and subject to FERPA. In regard to concerns about content of online subscription material FERPA has limited applicability but in regard to state's parents' rights bills and access to students' records it has some applicability ("Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)").

- **ESSA[10]:** Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA[11]), signed into law in 2015, replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. Some of the provisions for stu-

dent success that it includes are: high academic standards for states to ensure that students are prepared to be successful in college and careers; assessments to track that progress; an expectation for interventions for low performing schools; and English language proficiency standards. This framework allows states more flexibility in setting their goals for student performance ("Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)").

- **Parents Rights:** U.S. Code 1232H[12] allows parents to inspect instructional materials. "The term ''instructional material'' means "instructional content that is provided to a student, regardless of its format, including printed or representational materials, audiovisual materials, and materials in electronic or digital formats (such as materials accessible through the Internet)" ("20 U.S. Code § 1232h").

- **Title VI[13]:** The Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that "no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" ("Title VI"). Restricting access to information that addresses content related to race, color or national origin suggests exclusion from participation

- **Title IX[14]:** Title IX states "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" ("Title IX"). Restricting access to information related to sex or gender specific concerns may indicate exclusion.

Relevant Court Decisions

- Tinker v. Des Moines[15]
- Pico v. Island Trees

In 1969 the Supreme Court ruled that students did not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (Tinker). Students could engage in free speech activities if they did not cause a significant disruption or impinge on the rights of others. Through a number of other cases, the Court has provided further guidance related to school newspapers, assemblies, school-sponsored but off-campus events, and social media, and therefore public speech related to school activities and the school community. However, as Catherine E. Ferri points out that "while the Supreme Court has offered a number of interpretations of the public school student's right to speech, the Court has offered only one interpretation of a student's right to read."

In 1982 Pico v. Island Trees was decided with a plurality. The essential ruling was that schools could not remove books from the school library because they did not like the ideas or to "prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion" ("Board of Education"). As a plurality decision the Court left unclear what is meant by educational suitability (Ferri). Thus, an argument regarding what is suitable for youth is inherent in all attempts to control and manage student's right to information including through online subscription content.

Justice White's concurrence remanded the case without addressing the First Amendment merits, leaving the plurality opinion without binding authority. This lack of clar-

ity opened the door for further debate on the extent of students' rights to access library materials, particularly when decisions are framed as curricular or related to age appropriateness.

Subsequent cases have referenced *Pico*, but its plurality opinion has often been treated as persuasive rather than binding. For instance, in *ACLU v. Miami-Dade County School Board* (2009), the 11th Circuit rejected the use of *Pico* as precedent, arguing that school boards should have broad discretion in both selecting and removing library materials, citing Justice O'Connor's dissent in *Pico* ("Supreme Court"). Likewise, the 5th Circuit acknowledged the persuasive authority of *Pico* in *Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board* (1995), though it did not apply the plurality opinion to the book removal in question. Both cases underscore the challenges of relying on legal avenues to protect students' access to information ("Notable").

These cases highlight the complexity of book removal processes, often involving lengthy reconsideration and appeal structures. Final decisions are often made by politically driven rather than expert bodies.

To date, there has never been a case that directly applies the rulings in *Pico* or *Tinker* to the removal or restriction of access to online databases in school libraries. As digital resources have become more integral to modern education, the question of how these rulings might apply to online collections remains unresolved. The legal framework for students' First Amendment rights and access to information has yet to fully address the unique challenges posed by digital platforms, subscription-based content, and online databases used in school libraries. This evolving area of concern leaves important gaps in the legal protections for students' right to access information in the digital age.

Ultimately, while *Pico* suggests limits on the ability of schools to remove books based solely on ideology, the decision's lack of precedential weight has left room for varying interpretations across the country. The result is that students' right to read and receive information remains subject to ongoing legal and political challenges, with significant variations in outcomes based on local contexts. *Tinker*, on the other hand, established a clear precedent affirming students' rights to free speech within schools, but it primarily focuses on students' ability to express themselves rather than their right to access information. *Tinker* does not directly address the availability of content in school libraries or the digital realm, leaving a gap in how the decision is applied to the evolving ways students seek and receive information today. While *Tinker* empowers students to voice their views without undue interference, it does not fully resolve the broader issues of censorship, access, and control over educational resources, particularly in school libraries and online databases.

Federal Frameworks in Education

Standards, Frameworks, and Curriculum guidelines are the scaffolds upon which teachers design lessons, activities, and units of instruction. These guidelines assist teachers by providing the ideas, skills, and learning goals that students should meet by the end of each school year. It is important to note that the materials chosen for school libraries, be they print, e-books, databases, or other online content, are deeply woven into the texture of the classroom curriculum and the standards they cover.

All State and National Content Standards and Frameworks encourage teachers to provide a learning environment that allows students to access and evaluate information, integrate that information using critical thinking and analysis, and then display their new knowledge in a way that demonstrates understanding. Reading widely, across many genres, from many perspectives supports student growth so that upon graduation, they are college and career ready.

Library materials (including online subscription content), with library instruction, provide students with the skills necessary to complete these tasks.

Problem Statement

Despite generally held cultural beliefs that anything can be found via Google, this is not exactly the case. The open web does not allow access to a wide variety of material that supports learning and inquiry. For instance, many news agencies have restricted access to their articles behind a subscription paywall, academic articles from peer-reviewed journals have never been freely accessible to students, and historical documents may often be digitized only in a subscription digital collection.

To provide students and teachers with access to information that supports their teaching and learning, libraries provide online content through databases that have access to materials that may not be available freely online or discoverable in simple searches. This material is at the core of information access that supports personal and academic inquiry. Several states have standards or requirements in the curriculum to teach digital, media, and/or information literacy skills to address misinformation and disinformation and to provide equitable and inclusive access to materials. Restricting access or requiring that vendors participate in creating content suppression through the use of stop words, over-filtering, or other methods is a form of censorship that impacts the capacity of teachers to teach the digital, media or information literacy standards that are required through state standards and curriculum. If online subscription content vendors overly restrict their content based on legislation for one state, it could have repercussions in another state by limiting access to the information they need to teach to their standards.

Censorship is defined as "to suppress or delete as objectionable" ("Censor"). Censorship has been a part of human history for centuries. While in the past, it was possible to physically remove printed or artistic materials from view, it is less so today. The Internet is ubiquitous, flowing into all aspects of life and providing a consistent source of information across a wide span of venues. Librarians work to curate effective, inclusive collections across a wide variety of media and print materials that meet the needs of their diverse clientele.

An online subscription vendor's primary role involves compiling collections of educationally suitable sources and publications for our teachers and our students. The wide variety of materials available is beyond what a single school library collection can offer and maximizes access to information for students. In some online content subscription services vendors have decided on a collection of materials that meet a curricular or subject area focus, highlighting resources that speak directly to this focus. Materials in online subscription resources cover a wide swath of perspectives, authority, reliability and sourcing, following their educational guidelines, and goals. By capturing this wide array of materials, students have access to these differing perspectives and authority. In the process of using them, students learn how to critically analyze the material for usefulness to their task.

Moreover, the digital age, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the essential role of school librarians in teaching students to navigate a complex information environment. In order to be effective teachers, school librarians enrich the digital landscape for educational purposes. Ethical content curation involves attributing sources correctly, respecting copyright, evaluating the source of the information, and ensuring our collections offer a wide range of perspectives. By adhering to these principles, we not only uphold the integrity of our profession but also enrich the educational experience with diverse and mean-

ingful content. As experts in information management, including curation, school librarians use online subscription content to teach students how to navigate digital landscapes so that they are independent curators and users of information.

> In 2022, Oklahoma passed a significant piece of legislation that exemplifies the challenges and potential dangers facing educators and librarians in the context of curating educational content. This act, known as H3702 (2022), mandates the implementation of technology protection measures for digital or online library databases accessible to K-12th grade students. These measures are mandated to block access to obscene material. Notably, the act stipulates that if a provider of online library resources fails to comply with these requirements, the state entity is obligated to withhold payment to the provider. Furthermore, the legislation removes certain exemptions from prosecution under specific indecent exposure laws, potentially subjecting educators and librarians to legal consequences for what might be considered willful violations (Oklahoma).
>
> The bill's sponsor argued that the legislation is aimed at protecting young people from exposure to inappropriate materials. However, during testimony before the Judiciary and Education committees, the sponsor notably omitted any discussion on how the bill could lead to the criminalization of educators and librarians. Despite the significant implications of H3702, it received scant media attention. The provisions that could lead to the prosecution of educators and librarians for exposing students to what might be deemed obscene materials were largely overlooked.
>
> During the Education Committee hearing, three senators voiced their opposition to the bill, yet their concerns, especially regarding the prosecution aspect for exposure to obscene materials, didn't garner much attention. The public's inability to testify publicly at committee hearings in Oklahoma, and the fact that the Education Committee received no written testimony opposing the bill suggested a lack of public engagement and awareness about the legislation's potential impact.

Legislation passed or currently in the middle of the process across the country has highlighted the precarious situation that educators and librarians find themselves in, caught between the necessity of providing comprehensive, diverse educational resources and the increasing legislative efforts to restrict access to content under the guise of protecting minors. It underscores the broader implications of such legislative actions on educational freedom, intellectual freedom, and the essential role of school libraries as centers of free exploration and voluntary inquiry. Several of these bills also remove provisions protecting librarians and other educators from prosecution. These bills put librarians in a perilous position. If passed, they would criminalize librarians for allowing materials that certain people view as obscene, but that law and Constitutional standards would not consider obscene.

The fact is that publishers in the United States are not publishing K-12 educational content that is obscene or harmful. Subscription based online content aggregators do not seek harmful or obscene materials to supplement their offering. School librarians and educators

are not imposing harmful materials on students. Yet even with strict laws in place to prevent children from being exposed to harmful materials, lawmakers across the country are filing bills that ban books that they are labeling as obscene.

In light of these challenges, a profound concern arises regarding the broader implications of legislative actions that restrict or impede access to school library online subscription content. The potential for censorship extends far beyond the confines of educational institutions. It threatens the core of free speech principles and the exchange of ideas. By equating discomfort with obscenity, these bills risk creating a culture of fear among educators and librarians. The role of libraries as sanctuaries of free exploration and knowledge is jeopardized, casting a chilling effect on the presence of diverse voices and perspectives in our collections. It is important to recognize the slippery slope that these legislative actions represent and to consider the long-term consequences for educational freedom and intellectual diversity. The need for dialogue and understanding in addressing concerns about content is more crucial than ever to ensure that the pursuit of safeguarding minors does not inadvertently undermine the foundational principles of a democratic society.

As stated in the Library Bill of Rights[16]: "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation." A diverse collection should contain content by and about a wide array of people and cultures to authentically reflect a variety of ideas, information, stories, and experiences. This statement is consistent with educational standards and the basis of any democracy: an informed citizenry.

Furthermore, while U.S. Code 1232H provides parents the right to review instructional materials; what the code does not do is allow a parent to demand material be restricted from all students. Additionally, the school library has a different mission than the classroom as acknowledged by the Supreme Court. In Pico v. Island Trees the Court ruled that School Boards "might rightfully claim absolute discretion in matters of curriculum by reliance upon their duty to inculcate community values in schools, petitioners' reliance upon that duty is misplaced where they attempt to extend their claim of absolute discretion beyond the compulsory environment of the classroom into **the school library and the regime of voluntary inquiry** [emphasis added by authors] that there holds sway" ("Board of Education"). In other words, while parents have the right to restrict their own child from access, that right does not extend to restricting access for all children at the school.

Efforts to curtail or prevent access to subscription services that provide a collection of media resources have two specific impacts; one is practical in that school libraries would be unable to provide the sheer number of resources from local and national newspapers, to the *Economist*, to the *Journal of American Medical Association* without prohibitive cost, and one more theoretical in that student ability to engage in the democratic endeavor of learning, voluntary inquiry and critical thinking would be severely compromised.

While the above are actions designed to limit information access to all students through their access to print and/or online materials, it is important to note that more and more schools do not have credentialled librarians—professionals specifically educated to teach the critical skills of inquiry, research, online safety, and information literacy—in their schools. While this White Paper is not directed to solving staffing concerns, it is noted that curation of library collections is best completed by professionals who understand the pedagogy and developmental readiness that underscores collection development. Additionally, professional school librarians can instruct students in learning to use online resources to meet information

needs in a safe and ethical manner that meets the curricular standards of the state, which can also be more effective than technical tools such as those employed to stop words in search in preventing accidental or unwanted exposure to materials that are obscene and harmful to minors.

Literacy, Access, Information, and Privacy

As the Court ruled in Pico v. Island Trees, school libraries are places for voluntary inquiry and students have first amendment right to read, resting on the court's Tinker v. Des Moines decision that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." Removal, or censorship, of material cannot be based on a desire to "prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion" as decided in West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnett.[17]

Censorship, by restricting access, distorts students' knowledge and preparedness by directly filtering out information that rounds out an idea, provides needed data, or gives an alternative perspective or theory. This impacts a student's college and career readiness as well as their role as democratic citizens. When censorship occurs at the statewide level through restricting access to databases or materials therein it creates inequities between states and the young people who are citizens of the states, both singular and United. Additionally online subscription content supports curriculum and state educational standards. Reducing access to this content inhibits teachers' capacity to fully engage educational standards, and students' capacity for deep understanding of core content, including social science, science, arts, health, and the skills required in English Language Arts standards related to reading and writing.

Intellectual freedom should be the standard for all students. Preventing schools from having and providing access to online subscription content harms the most vulnerable students. Students served by the public school system who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, underrepresented in school materials and staffing, and whose parents have not had the higher education opportunities as others are most impacted by content suppression, which can inhibit their capacity to prepare for college and therefore their success rates.

Censorship is often a reflection of fears and/or political ideologies rather than actual student behaviors and teaching methods. Evidence does not support fears related to accessing pornography within databases as vendors have worked with school librarians and parents to close potential loopholes and remain compliant with both state laws and CIPA. Furthermore, evidence does not indicate students are accessing online subscription content to engage in material that is harmful to minors or radicalizing in political ideology (LaRue; "EBSCO Monitoring"). Suggestions that the principles of access to information have led to unrestricted access or pornography are misleading at best. The role of the federal e-rate in school funding means schools do not have unrestricted access to the open web, which would be a violation of CIPA. Schools have filtering technology installed on computers and require student and parent signatures onto an Acceptable Use Policy document that outlines the safe, acceptable and responsible online behavior by students. Schools and teachers are conscious of their responsibility to avoid the use and promotion of material deemed harmful to minors and obscenity under the Miller Test. They do not intentionally provide obscene materials. Searches that have allegedly led to sites that were considered to be obscene have not been successfully replicated by expert searchers. Furthermore, online subscription content vendors have been quick to respond technically to unintended loopholes that allowed access on

school computers to websites that bypassed filters ("EBSCO Monitoring"). In limiting further access, students are unable to reach resources that meet content standards.

A more productive route to literacy skills related to research is through professional school librarians. While School Librarians provide instruction in media literacy and information skills, they are also the experts in developing collections that support the curricular as well as independent reading needs of their school communities. Collection development in the school library is the professional practice of curating information-rich materials that are fact-based and authoritative, and includes consideration of curriculum and content standards and frameworks approved by State Boards of Education. The purpose of these materials is to provide engaging resources that support student ability to construct knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and share their new knowledge with others.

By developing relationships with vendors to ensure the best and most ethical use of funds that will support the diverse community they serve, professional librarians include purchasing decisions that are based on curricular needs and community standards, with a goal of developing a wide-ranging array of resources that serve ALL students' information needs. In doing so, collection development practices center inclusive information sources across wide ranging topics and subject areas.

School librarians recognize the balance in supporting student information needs, intellectual growth, and right to privacy while also supporting parental concerns and rights regarding their own children. They are beholden to upholding laws and policies such as CIPA, FERPA, and state laws, and are cognizant of those laws. Therefore, they work with district personnel, community members and parents to create a rich, ongoing dialog that encourages information exploration and engaging reading. The foundational value of information access emphasizes that all students and faculty have equal and ease of access to all materials in the library. These values and responsibilities guide professional practice to ensure students are well-prepared for college and careers.

The amount of available resources provided through the state purchases of online content makes singular assessment of each independent element (news article, journal article, encyclopedic entry) difficult. Databases and other online subscription content do not make political or pejorative judgments in negotiating contracts for media inclusion. They also take into account state standards and age appropriateness, which is why you can find a variety of viewpoints within any database. This is necessary when serving public school populations of diverse families. However, any required content suppression limits the capacity of professionals and families to meet the information needs of families and is not representative of a whole community. It limits students' capacity to prepare on a national level for college or to engage in the debates of an informed citizenry, a foundational democratic principle.

Conclusion

All students in the United States K-12 schools should have access to high-quality materials and instruction that are based on strong educational pedagogy and led by the school librarian in partnership with the classroom teacher in a manner that supports effective use.

Some of the values that are expected from K-12 schools include graduating students who:

- care about democracy and are able to make informed choices.
- care about factual evidence and will search for reliable sources to obtain it.

- enter the workforce informed, able to work with others, and able to collect, decode, and use information.

As a diverse culture with many perspectives, equity is an important factor in creating a school library collection. It is important to respect and value the diversity of our communities by inclusion of materials that represent a wide range of ideas, locations, characters, histories, viewpoints and stories. While some may cover topics that offend or otherwise make a reader uncomfortable, it is a part of the wider conversation that allows students to not only choose which material to read, but which material to not read.

Policy Suggestions

Response to current policy

- Recognize that these legislative proposals are based on false claims and are a threat to modern American education. Take action with librarians, to build strong policies (such as collection development and materials challenge policies) at the state level to protect against these threats.
- Create transparency in State Requests for Proposal (RFPs) from vendors. Requests for proposal should be available for review by parents, School Boards, and School Personnel. Transparency allows for stakeholders to gain awareness of potential content control measures which allows local education agencies to meet community needs and provide the widest range of curricular and standards aligned resources to a diverse community.
- Advocate that selection of material committees at the local level should be made up of a variety of community and education members and include professional school librarian(s). The RFPs and selection of statewide online subscription content should include input from certified experts in curricular and inquiry materials that are aligned to research standards. Professional school librarians have insight into all grades and subject area needs as well as search expertise that will contribute to selecting the highest quality materials. District and School administration must commit to supporting a range of resources that are educational-standards compliant and respect wide ranging diverse perspectives.
- Provide transparency in the decisions that Local Education Agencies (LEA) make regarding local content control measures by providing a public accounting of those decisions and the processes used to make them.
- Create a diverse Challenge Committee made up of librarians, teachers, parents, community members, administrators and students in order to avoid having challenges addressed only by administrators.

Establishing proactive policy

- Establish policies with state and local education agencies, along with vendor input, that guard against over-filtering at all points of filter (ie: at vendor, district, school level) and that provide the least restrictive filters necessary to provide both safety and educational information.

- Organize legislative and local commitment to a range of accessible resources across all grade levels and subject areas. Reliable and consistent funding is needed to develop and maintain diverse, equitable, and engaging library resources.
- Commit to a range of resources that are educational-standards compliant and respect wide ranging diverse perspectives.
- Hire full time school librarians and support staff to instruct students in media and information literacy, collaborate with classroom colleagues, and develop programs that encourage critical thinking and active citizenry.
- Partner with national organizations such EveryLibrary and ALA to create legislation using a cohesive voice that supports the efforts to provide online database resources to all schools using a committee approach that includes professional librarians and other experts in curriculum and inquiry materials (Blair, et al).

Endnotes

1   https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.28#:~:text=Local%20educational%20agency%20or%20LEA,school%20district%2C%20or%20other%20political
2   https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/401/miller-v-california
3   https://mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/901/community-standards
4   https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/254#h_7
5   https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/obscenity
6   https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/457/853#fn22
7   https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/childrens-internet-protection-act
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Tip O'Neill Was Right: The Power of Local Politics

SHARI HENRY

ABSTRACT

"All politics is local" is a phrase coined by Tip O'Neill, the 47th Speaker of the House, and then expanded on by President Biden who wrote, "all politics is personal." A growing number of states and local municipalities have worked locally and personally to wage a war against the freedom to read, removing books from shelves, whitewashing history, criminalizing making certain titles available, and codifying censorship. This article offers theoretical underpinnings supporting the library as the fifth branch of government, an overview of the quick and aggressive rise in book banning over the past decade, and practical ways we might use the lessons we've learned from our opponents to win back the freedom to read while elevating the critical nature of the library.

In September 2023, I stood alongside representatives from several pro free speech organizations as congressional representatives and our various CEOs addressed the crowd gathered outside the U. S. Capitol in support of Representative Raskin's and Senator Schatz's Resolution Recognizing Banned Books Week. In September of this year, Senators Murphy and Blumenthal joined Raskin and Schatz introducing the resolution again[1] and I hope they will continue to do so each year until it passes. The arc of history is long, after all.

EveryLibrary joined PEN America, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and several other national organizations endorsing this year's resolution. In EveryLibrary's statement,[2] John Chratska, the organization's Executive Director, said, "Book bans undermine the First Amendment, limit access to diverse perspectives, and threaten our democratic values. Our libraries are essential spaces for learning, reflection, and the free exchange of ideas."

A flurry of activity, much of it national in scope, arises each year during Banned Books Week. Statements are issued, Banned Books buses tour, articles are written, interviews aired. But in recent years, the subject has risen to prominence beyond this one week. The 2024 Democratic National Convention featured several speakers, including the Vice-Presidential candidate, who referenced the acceleration of book banning. The most prominent example was Tim Walz saying, as Minnesota's governor, he chose to ban hunger (through a school meals program), not books.

While I'm glad this fundamental threat to democracy is being spotlighted on the national stage, the truth is that our First Amendment rights are being stripped at the state and local levels.

According to PEN America, 565 books were removed from school shelves during the 2021-22 school year,[3] mostly by local school districts and municipal boards. Removing books doesn't sate the authoritarians' appetites for First Amendment restrictions. Florida, an oft-used worst case example prohibits teachers from discussing systemic racism,[4] denies high school students the option to take Advanced Placement African American Studies (a policy followed by South Carolina and Arkansas),[5] throwing hundreds of books away in the process.[6] Several bills threaten to criminalize making certain titles available.[7]

The codification of limiting free expression at state and local levels makes it difficult for those on the front lines to keep up, but state and national organizations have responded to help. Those organizations that understand one size does not fit all support local communities best, since they know people from outside offices based in large American cities cannot message for local change better than people who live in those communities. They grasp that we need to follow the censors' playbook and undo the havoc they have wrought city by city, county by county, state by state.

All politics is local. Tip O'Neill, the 47th Speaker of the House, was right when he coined that phrase. President Biden expanded the theme, writing "all politics is personal. . . and unless you can establish a personal relationship, it's awfully hard to build trust."

Both are correct. All politics is local and personal. The lessons learned from local groups unraveling our 1A rights haunt those of us who have been watching across America as books have been pulled from shelves and censorship is put into law by state and local governing bodies.

Thankfully, libraries are local and personal. As cornerstones of democracy, we are rising to preserve, protect, and advocate for free speech as a fundamental tenet of democracy. When we step into our roles as guardians of free expression, we are able to provide the free and open spaces, learning resources, and programming that cultivate an engaged citizenry.

If the press is the fourth branch of government, then now is the time for libraries to embrace our role as the fifth. Because we have local presence people can find us, rely on us, trust us, and feel as committed to our success as we to theirs.

As Bryan Stevenson says, there is power in proximity.

When proximate, it is harder to dehumanize and dismiss people. When we see one another at the grocery store, church, and back-to-school night, we see their humanity. When we show up at town halls among neighbors, our voices aren't competing with masses, which makes it easier to identify those with whom to build coalitions. Our representatives are accessible, and a tiny handful of votes can turn an election. We have power.

In our own communities, it's not hard to find political figures as we go about our daily business. Since my local mayor, city council members, and state legislators are often at the same community events I attend, I make it a point to speak with them each time. They are, after all, working for me.

We can make a regular practice of communicating with these officials to share our gratitude for supporting a good policy or facts that refute a bad one, propose a new idea, or request to meet. It's easy to sign up to speak at local board and council meetings. Scripting and practicing messages help, but we trust that we, after all, know our audience. Who better knows how to speak to our neighbors than we do?

Partnerships with our colleagues across librarianship and with library organizations are critical but are insufficient. We need to build deeper relationships with other free speech advocates, diversity organizations, community groups, churches, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials in our own zip codes and across our states. My state library organization

built a strong relationship with a state senator, who has since spoken at webinars for us and has been a steady voice inside our legislature. We can each scale to our sphere of influence, find our people, host gatherings, and spur one another to action.

Few are impartial to censorship, yet as librarians we must remain nonpartisan. Our messaging should never waiver from the idea that free and open access to ideas and information is nonpartisan because we are representing all equally. We should refuse to treat it as anything else.

Though each of us needs to assess whether activities can be done professionally or personally, there are several ways we can use our library positions to model democracy in action, encouraging participation, and elevating civil discourse. Urban Libraries Council's Declaration of Democracy[8] outlines five broad ways libraries may promote free expression. We can provide the widest range of resources possible, use our spaces to host programs that encourage civil dialogue and promote civic education and engagement, and use our display spaces to highlight national holidays and historical events, providing texts of documents and resources that provide context. Libraries across America are doing all these things and more. EveryLibrary's Libraries 2024[9] provides resources and pathways for individuals to participate in the political process that can be shared with patrons and be adapted for library programming.

Our positions or jurisdictions may dictate how outwardly focused we can be. Those of us who can do more bear a responsibility to do so, and none of us are without support. EveryLibrary[10] and Red, Wine & Blue[11] offer ongoing training and step-by-step guides to fight book banning, and EveryLibrary Legislation of Concern's[12] map helps track anti-free speech legislation. These two organizations model how large organizations best support local efforts because they honor proximate power and understand the risk of impeding in the relationships we have built with our neighbors or taking action that undermines our work.

Remember, 71% of people oppose book bans,[13] so numbers are on our side as we reclaim the right to read from those who have decided what books we may read and how we might otherwise freely express ourselves.

Who better to usher back in the hope and promise of America embedded in the First Amendment — an America where all people see themselves represented in books, freely access a world of information, grow in confidence and participate fully in the civic world around them, where they have power to make change — than America's greatest learning treasures, our libraries?

The stakes are high - we are keenly aware of the suicide rates among transgender teens, the achievement gap among youth of color, and the growing disregard for human rights in general. We've lost some battles, but we can't lose the war. And we can take heart in the good news that, though fighting these laws and policies in court takes time and money, many cases are being won, and the absolutist and restrictive policies do not stand.

Personal politics invites all; local politics provides the channel to create change. As we commit to focusing on the personal while working locally, we will create an America where everyone belongs, everyone is armed to contribute, and everyone enjoys the blessings of liberty as signed into a promise to us all nearly 240 years ago.

Endnotes

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3   https://pen.org/florida-book-bans-not-a-hoax/
4   https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/florida-moves-to-restrict-what-schools-can-teach-about-systemic-racism
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Shari Henry has worked in libraries at all levels, developed curriculum and presented via webinars and in-person at conferences on the essentiality of libraries to the hope and promise of America. She's trained staff and worked with executives on topics ranging from centering ourselves and our libraries in values, to crafting policies, and taking personal political action. She served as Director of Roanoke County Library System for five years and oversaw the development of Urban Libraries Council's democracy portfolio as their Director of Democracy and Community Impact. She now enjoys being on the front lines of libraries where she spends her days interacting with the public and a large staff as the manager of a large public library in Fairfax County. She is committed to food justice, climate resilience, gardening and baking, rescue dogs, and her friends and family.

Missouri Public Library Levy Campaigns: My Experiences and Advice for Directors[*]

MICHELLE R. MEARS

ABSTRACT

Tax-funded public libraries are one of the most stable and independent ways to ensure ongoing public library services for a community, but it may require a periodic vote of district residents to approve a reasonable level of support. Public library staff are often coached to remain neutral in the public eye, so conducting an advocacy campaign to turn out voters in support of (increased) tax funding is not something that is usually covered in library school curricula or continuing education seminars. This document was written as both a journal of the experience and advice for other directors embarking on a public library levy campaign.

Introduction

Most libraries do not conduct campaigns very often. It is rare for a library director to conduct a campaign more than once in their career.

Because not every director has to do a levy campaign, and because the process itself is so stressful, very little is written about it specifically to help a director through the process. It is very difficult to lead when there are no clearly written rules to follow, and many of the rules are designed to restrict what a library director can say and do during a campaign. I decided early on in the campaign process that I needed to write a guide when I was done so no other director had to go through what I did during the campaign. In the end, it turned out to be more of a memoir than a manual.

Free Public Libraries are Not Free

Public libraries in Missouri are primarily funded by property tax levies passed by voters in a geographic region. A few (and growing number) have a sales tax as all or a portion of their levy. Depending on the type of tax and the amount, a library may need at some point in its existence to go to the voters of its district to ask for a levy increase. One of the first issues to address is educating your communities about the fact that while libraries are mostly free to use, public libraries are not free to operate.

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[*] This piece was originally published in 2021, and has been re-edited for publication in *The Political Librarian* with the author's permission.

There are two kinds of property tax levies for libraries, operating and capital. This publication mostly refers to operating levies. A capital levy or bond issue is a limited property tax for a set number of years to construct or improve buildings for the most part. You see schools using it more often, for buildings but sometimes also for technology. It's like taking out a mortgage to buy a home. When you are done paying off your debt the loan payments stop so you have no need for the tax anymore. What usually happens is by the time the bond is paid off the building is worn out and needs updating and the library is stuck trying to fund those updates with operating funds or reserves. Bigger buildings cost more to operate and you may need more staff, so take this into account if you are thinking about a capital vs. operating levy.

Many members of the public are completely unaware that libraries are funded by taxes. They also don't know that we have to purchase books (some think that they are donated by publishers or just donated by the public). And, like public schools, the fact that we end up paying more for staff and for buildings than we do for collections and resources is a hard pill to swallow for many taxpayers. They think all the money should go to the collection. They don't know that the largest part of all library budgets (50-70%) goes to staff and benefits, just like they don't understand that paying teachers is usually the biggest part of all school budgets. A modern public library is not run by volunteers and does not have a collection made up of donations. Exactly how much money you need to run a library is determined by many factors.

Before embarking on a library levy campaign, you should have a really good handle on your budget. Have at least eight years of expenditures on hand as well as your current and most recent budget. Before you can work with your board to decide whether or not to request a levy increase, you need to know why you need that increase and what you plan to spend it on. Inflation is a real concern, but you do not want to ask for a levy increase to just catch up but to be comfortably funded and have a reasonable amount of reserves. If you are planning a building project, get some general figures to consider for costs per square foot for renovation and/or for new construction. But this publication does not go into detail about the differences between an operating levy and a bond issue, so you should know the difference between the two and what you are asking the voters for. You CAN do building and capital projects with an operating levy, so explore the differences thoroughly before making a decision.

You do not want to go to the voters very often to ask for a tax increase, so plan accordingly. Do not ask for so small an amount that you need to go back to the voters sooner than ten years. Be prepared to answer questions about whether the amount you are asking for is enough for the library's needs. The Missouri State Library has set a minimum operating levy amount to be eligible for state aid, but this is a threshold and not a ceiling. Many libraries with a smaller tax base will find it is not nearly enough to operate comfortably. Some will advise that you need a full-blown strategic plan before starting your campaign. We did not do this, but the board did some "visioning" work to talk about the future needs of the library and the community. You should at the very least have a good mission and vision statement and be prepared to answer how the levy increase you are asking for fulfills that mission. Most libraries do this with a (bullet) list of what you plan to do with the funding.

Although this seems to only affect two libraries in Missouri that I know of, I want to talk briefly about sunset clauses. If anyone associated with your campaign talks about adding a sunset clause to an operating levy, smote them with lightning from the sky. Sunset clauses are sometimes added to operating levies as a way to force an entity to keep going back to the taxpayers with hat in hand, couched as an "accountability" clause so action can be taken if the voters are unhappy. It is almost impossible to do complete strategic planning if some significant portion of your budget might evaporate every 20 years. But if you are stuck with a sunset

(as my library is, alas), then use it to your advantage and in your campaign to say that you are not asking for an increase but a renewal and that you appreciate the periodic input of voters, etc. If it is mentioned as an option in your community, ask for a little less if you must but do not add a sunset clause just to get something passed.

> **In review...**
> - **Libraries are not free. Staff costs are the biggest portion of all library expenditures.**
> - **Know why you are asking for more funding.**
> - **Consider both the short term and long-term funding needs of the library.**

Districts, Boundaries, and Voters

Most public libraries have clearly defined districts and boundaries. Cities and counties have lines on maps that people can see and understand. Some libraries, however, have a somewhat vague notion of the outside edges of their territory. If your district touches another district, there will likely be some boundary issues. And reciprocal agreements can blur these lines. Early in campaign planning, it is beneficial to review your district boundaries and the demographics of your voting population.

Use the usual sources for demographic data. These include Census sites, local or regional economic councils, chambers of commerce, and other websites like moving or cost of living sites. Don't reinvent the wheel. If your boundaries are the same as a city, county or school district, ask those entities for their demographics.

If you haven't looked at these recently, you could be in for an awakening. A library that for years focused on large print for elderly residents found out they were ignoring the growing population of young families with children. A change in programming and collection development brought a significant increase in foot traffic and attendance. Which could then be used in press releases and media attention long before a levy issue comes up. Good marketing is always important for laying the groundwork for media coverage that you want to remain positive towards the library. Knowing your community is very important in preparing for a levy campaign.

Knowing your boundaries will help you focus precious campaign dollars on people who are able to vote for your issue. You might promote the library to all area residents who are eligible to get a card and use your services, but you want information about your levy to go only to voters. Don't advertise in newspapers that are mostly delivered to people outside your district. Bulk mailings go by zip codes which do not always align with library boundaries. If there are any questions about your library district boundaries, be up front and very clear about where the lines are and who will be eligible to vote on your issue.

Voters are the only ones you care about during a campaign. You can blanket the media, tell all the best library stories, and promote the library and its resources until the cows come home, but it makes not one bit of difference unless you reach voters in your district and they are motivated to get out on election day. And do not confuse library users and library cardholders with registered voters. Library users may be more likely to be registered voters (according to some pollsters), but some of your biggest supporters will be people who never cross your library threshold. They like the *idea* of the "library" and recognize the importance

of a library to a community. But they never use it themselves. These are the people you need to donate to the library and support your campaign.

You can get a copy of the registered voters in your district from your county/city clerk. There may be a fee, and different counties charge different amounts. What you get in the file (usually on a CD-ROM or maybe an emailed file) can vary widely, there is no single standard for the output of a registered voter list. If you are lucky, it will not only have names and addresses but polling places and a history of voting behavior. This can help you concentrate your campaign efforts on "likely" voters and outdoor things like yard signs and door knocking in precincts where you can have the most impact. You can tailor your list and not try to blanket the district with a mailer that goes right to the recycle bin in most households.

In review…
- **Take some time to gather demographics.**
- **Know the geography of your district.**
- **Focus on library supporters and registered voters.**

The County Clerk is Your New Best Friend

All ballot issues and candidate campaigns are run through the local office of the county clerk. For simplicity, I will just refer to this position as "Clerk" for the remainder of this publication. If you are lucky, there will be only one Clerk you will have to deal with. If not, there may be multiple Clerks in multiple jurisdictions you will have to deal with. This is why you need to be fully versed in your library district boundaries to know exactly who you need to be in close contact with.

You will file the resolution from your board with the Clerk's office. This officially starts the campaign as soon as the vote is taken by your board, which is explained in more detail in the next chapter. The list of deadlines to file can be found at the Missouri Secretary of State's website, but your Clerk should also have these dates available. It is a good idea to let your Clerk know in advance of filing the resolution that a levy issue is on the near horizon.

The Clerk can give you an estimate of the cost of the election. Any and all entities with ballot issues are required to pay costs to open polling places and print ballots. You can and should pay this cost with library money (tax dollars). Many libraries choose an "off" election date to be a single-issue ballot and (so they think) increase the chances that "no" voters won't bother to get off the couch. Other libraries have challenged this opinion and successfully won levy issues during the highest turnout election date, a presidential November ballot. Be prepared to consider election costs and election dates early in the process.

You also request the list of registered voters from the Clerk and can for an additional fee get an ongoing update of new registrants and people requesting absentee ballots for your election. Newbies and absentee voters are highly likely to vote, so you could direct some campaign literature to this group but not if you don't pay for this information. You cannot tell from a voter registration list which party a person affiliates with, but conservatives and liberals are equally likely to support a library tax levy, so don't prejudge your constituency. In the next section about types of campaigns this will make more sense, but you cannot use tax dollars to buy a voter registration list and then give it for free to an advocacy (vote yes) campaign. It is better for each side to buy their own list if you plan to do any marketing or targeted mailings with this information. Better to be safe than sorry with campaign finance and ethics commission rules.

Throughout the levy campaign, you may need to stay in close contact with your Clerk. Your library should already have a relationship with your Clerk for annual paperwork filings regarding tax collections and setting levy rates. If it is not the Director, make sure the library staff person who already has this relationship continues it during the levy campaign. This is not the time to introduce a new name and face to the Clerk's office if you can help it.

In review…
- **Get to know your county clerk(s).**
- **A levy issue will cost the library money to put on the ballot.**
- **Weigh the cost/benefit of being a single issue ballot.**
- **Confirm, and then confirm again, all deadlines with your county clerk.**

Types of Campaigns and Political Rules

There are two types of levy campaigns and you must understand the differences before you begin. An **information campaign** is one that only provides text and pictures about the library and about why the library needs more funding. It never says "Vote Yes'' and only says "Please Vote." It can refer to library needs, even pie-in-the-sky dreams for the library, but it cannot say that anyone should support, carry, pass, embrace, love, or otherwise feel positively about the library or library ballot issue.

You can have a list of what will likely happen if voters vote "Yes" and what may happen if voters choose "No". This list ought to be factual and dispassionate about the impact on the library of this levy funding issue. You can and should put information campaign content on your library's web site. Tax dollars and staff time can be used on an information campaign, but everyone should be hyper-aware to not promote voting yes for the issue in the library building or anywhere on library property or on paid time.

An **advocacy campaign** is one where you tell people to VOTE YES on your ballot issue. It is sometimes also referred to as a Yes Campaign. This is where you see yard signs and TV commercials and other promotions that go beyond get out the vote (GOTV) and are strongly advocating for the levy. This is where you might ask for endorsements of your ballot issue from prominent local residents. If you do an advocacy campaign you must form a campaign committee with a treasurer who is responsible for online filings and whose name along with the committee is listed on materials produced for the campaign. Advocacy campaigns cannot use public funds and must use donated money. An advocacy campaign also needs to apply for its own Federal ID Number in order to open a bank account. Do this first because you will need the bank account information to register with the MEC. In Missouri, all donations must be reported to the Missouri Ethics Commission for public disclosure, and within a limited time period or penalties are assigned.

You can do both an information campaign and an advocacy campaign simultaneously. Some libraries choose to only do an information campaign and use library funds to do so. I think more rarely a library would do an advocacy-only campaign, because staff and others still need to be able to answer questions about the ballot issue and library administration needs to create those materials to make sure all the staff are on the same page. So even if it is only in-house, you are still researching and putting together an information campaign.

Even though it may feel like you do not have time for it, take this opportunity to look at how you market the library in general. If you do not have a modern, attractive logo, you may not have time to fix that, but otherwise any library brand awareness activities you can do during the pre/during/post campaign are valuable. We started running TV commercials in the 4 months before the election. They had nothing to do with the levy issue, but were just generic commercials promoting the library and specific things like our passport service and the bookmobile. We ran Facebook ads for the summer reading program, which was right before our August election date. We did email blasts about the library's online offerings before we did an info campaign email. You don't want your community to think you are only in their faces to get a vote. We kept up our TV commercials for 6 months after the campaign, and then let them lapse a bit due to the pandemic but have recently picked them up again. Marketing the library is important all the time, so if you decide to boost your marketing right before an election make it clear that it is not part of the campaign but you will benefit from the increased brand awareness.

A library director must straddle both worlds in a levy campaign. During work hours the director must be careful to phrase discussion about the levy as information, but afterwards can knock on doors or participate in social events put on by the advocacy campaign. Directors are usually exempt employees, meaning they are not subject to overtime rules, but that does not mean that you are a library employee 24-7. Use care, and always pause and think about your audience and setting before talking about your ballot issue with information or advocacy wording.

Your committee might decide to hire a firm to assist with the advocacy campaign. These are the same firms that help candidates for office run their campaigns. They can create graphics, register a website, help with an online donation form, discuss strategy, create and send a campaign postcard, and a myriad of other activities. But everything has a price and then your committee will have to raise the funds to purchase all those components. If you don't hire a firm, do you have volunteers with graphic design experience or who can come up with a good slogan? Sometimes it is worth every penny to have someone from the "outside" help you frame your campaign message.

It cannot be stressed enough the division between spending public tax dollars and private donations in a levy campaign. You cannot use public funds to advocate for any candidate or ballot issue by law, and that includes your own ballot issue. Do not even make a photocopy for "free" for your advocacy campaign on a library copier. There are citizens who take the law very seriously and who may be watching for any misstep in your campaign. And the advocacy campaign must account for all income and expenses, so if they mailed 500 flyers out but have no postage expenses, who do you think they will come looking for to explain how those items got in people's mailboxes? Possibly the library that has 500 impressions on their postage meter around that same time? Keep expenses and activities separate, and don't cross the streams (for those who appreciate a good Ghostbuster reference).

How much money is needed for a good advocacy campaign is hard to calculate. Your advocacy campaign may have to solicit funds from individual donors, and this takes time and effort. Donors need time to consider and can't be pressured to give. Levy campaigns can also be funded by a library's Foundation if there are unrestricted funds available. Many times these funds are in an endowment that can't have withdrawals, but the earnings on the endowed funds should be available if they have not been rolled over into the principal.

We were lucky enough to get our Friends of the Library to donate the majority of the funds, and then Board members and a few staff members donated small amounts, including

myself. Nothing says commitment like opening your wallet. BE AWARE however that you do not want your Friends or Foundation to endanger their 501c3 status by donating to an advocacy campaign. These organizations can elect to use the 501(h) measurement by filing IRS form 5768 which will allow up to 20% of an annual budget to be spent on lobbying and advocacy, or higher amounts based on income. There is also an "insubstantial part" measurement, which is less clear. Be sure to research these options fully before asking your Friends or Foundation to support an advocacy campaign.

Running a campaign in Missouri is not hard, but you must know the rules. In Missouri, the keeper of the rules is the Missouri Ethics Commission. I can't possibly replicate all of the information on their website, but you should bookmark it and read everything they have to offer. I also found it useful to search campaign finance filings for other library levy campaigns and see what was done by others, who they got donations from, etc. Be aware, however, that savvy reporters also know how to search this information and may try to trip you up with questions about your funding sources. People look for scandal, so make sure there is nothing to see there.

There are also many deadlines, one of which is the $5000/48 filing deadline. Any donation over $5000 must be reported within 48 hours to the MEC, or the penalties are steep. We got caught up in this because the biggest donor was our Friends group and our committee treasurer did not file for a week and a half and it cost us around $600 in penalties. There are no waivers or mulligans in campaign finance. Even if you think you have an experienced committee treasurer who has done a candidate or issue campaign before, as director you should watch the deadlines and follow up. Any errors will reflect poorly on the library, the public makes no distinction between the library and an advocacy campaign committee.

> **In review…**
> - **Two types of campaigns, information and advocacy.**
> - **Consider hiring a firm for an advocacy campaign.**

How Early is Too Early?

Never. It is never too early to begin levy campaign planning. The time will go so fast, even when you think you have allotted enough time it will run out before you are ready. If you have the slightest inkling that your library will need to consider a levy increase in the next 10 years, start talking to your board about it. Even if they will all term out before a levy issue comes to the ballot, talk to your board about it. Former board members can and will be one of your biggest support groups and they are not bound in the way that current board members might feel they need to be more reserved in their public life outside of the board.

There is a difference between a levy planning process and the active campaign. Most active campaigns are only 2-4 months in length. This chapter is only talking about the planning process and how much thought, effort, and discussion needs to take place long before you choose an election date and officially get on a ballot.

You also want to give your staff as much time as possible to get familiar with your campaign messaging and get comfortable with the facts and figures. Creating materials like brochures or FAQs helps the public but also helps the staff answer questions and feel like they are part of the process.

When I came on as director and I learned we had a sunset levy that was expiring in six years, I talked about it at every staff training meeting so they understood that good customer

service could mean the difference between Yes and No votes. I also did an exercise that I called "Circle of Influence" where I asked staff to think about their family and friends and how many people they could directly ask to vote yes for the library. (This was LONG before our campaign began; the restrictions on public funding don't prevent you from talking about yes and no votes for a hypothetical election.) Getting people to activate their Circles of Influence is an important part of getting out the vote in favor of the library's ballot issue.

> **In review…**
> - **Never too early to start levy planning.**
> - **Getting staff and the board to reach out to family and friends is important.**

Getting Help

Remember in the beginning when I said I felt that I was all alone and had no help? Well, that's not exactly true. I called and e-mailed as many Missouri directors as I could find who had done recent ballot issues. I talked to people at EveryLibrary.

Two books by John Chrastka and Patrick Sweeney are on your must-read list. Buy your own copies so you can highlight and mark them up everywhere, and you won't have to worry about due dates. They are listed in full at the end of this booklet. *Winning Elections and Influencing Politicians for Library Funding* was published in 2017 and *Before the Ballot: Building Political Support for Library Funding* was in 2019. I feel very lucky that these came out right before my ballot issue timeline, because I could not have had a better introduction to politics and libraries. Together these authors have also founded **EveryLibrary**, a not-for-profit group dedicated to helping libraries secure the funding they need. They do fundraising to help super small libraries do things like buy yard signs or print flyers in their levy campaign, and they are happy to just talk on the phone (for free!) if that is all you need.

Read these books all the way through, and probably in chronological order. They got better and more focused in the second book but the overview in the first book is still worth it. *Before the Ballot* starts out with a bunch of stuff about the 2008/2018 studies done by OCLC and ALA about awareness and funding for libraries, but don't let this scare you. In my opinion, you cannot determine a trend from only two data points. In 2008, it was before the housing crash and in 2018 the economy still wasn't all that whippy for most people, so a downward trend should not have been a surprise.

You do have to understand that an awareness of national issues is important, but all politics are local. I am not going to repeat the contents of these books. Just read them. Maybe more than once.

You have to know where you have been to know where you are going. Do your homework on your own library history. When was the last time you asked the voters for funding? What was the turnout and result? What can be learned and fixed from previous wins/losses? Don't overlook other local ballot issues and their impact on your election. If your community has voted down every single tax increase in the past 10 years, figure out why and then be ready to say how yours is different. If they always vote yes for education levies, figure out how to play up the educational aspects of your library.

There are no stupid questions. It's okay to preface your question with, "I've never done this before…" In fact, that phrase can also be used to get you out of a tight spot as well. I can't guarantee your clerks will be 100% right all the time, but that is a good place to start. Then

you might move to other library directors, or even contact EveryLibrary for some advice. Long term staff who might have been there during a previous levy campaign may be a good source of information. I might hold off on contacting the MEC if it is a filing or ethics question until you have asked a few other people. No need to alert the SWAT team for a cat in a tree.

You do want to have access to an attorney, and one who is experienced in your state's ballot issues. The Missouri Public Library Directors law firm has been around this block a few times, and as a member you get one free question per year so you might use that chip for your levy question. See the next chapter on "Words matter" for how the exact wording of your ballot question is of the utmost importance. Since the questions asked will likely be about the levy language or other processes related to the election, these are usually not part of the advocacy campaign and should be paid for by the library with public dollars. I can't imagine why the campaign committee would need legal advice, but if it is just about their activities or specifically donations or MEC filings, then the committee ought to pay the bill from donations.

In review…
- **Two books you must absolutely read.**
- **There are no dumb questions.**
- **Keep a lawyer on the front burner.**

Words Matter: Choose Wisely

The requirements for ballot language regarding tax issues are pretty clear in Missouri, but not every entity follows the rules. What I mean is, there are good reasons why you want to be very particular about the wording of your statement.

This is when you definitely want an attorney to review your proposed language, though the ultimate decision is made by the board when they pass their resolution. RSMo 182.650 states that the ballot wording for a consolidated library should be

> Shall there be a _____ cent tax increase over the _____ cent tax per hundred dollars assessed valuation for the _____ consolidated public library district?

It is essentially the same for all types of libraries in Missouri. As we know, ballot language is often embellished beyond this to get more details in there for voters to be more likely to support the issue.

Here are some samples of ballot language that may or may not meet the state law requirements:

> For the purpose of renovating and replacing aging Library facilities, enhancing spaces, safety and programming for children, seniors and families, expanding services, access to computers and collections to serve public demand, and for the general operation of public libraries, shall the Board of Trustees of the _____ Public Library District be authorized to levy an additional eight cent ($.08) tax over the present property tax for the free public library? (November 2018)

> Shall the _____ Public Library be authorized to continue to levy the $0.15 per $100 of assessed valuation first authorized in 1999, for a period of twenty years beginning in the 2020 calendar year, to be used to operate and maintain library facilities? (August 2017)

> For the purpose of renovations and replacing aging library facilities, enhancing spaces and programming for children and adults, expanding services and collections to serve public demand, and for the general operations of public libraries, shall there be an eight-cent tax increase over the thirty-two-cent tax per hundred dollars assessed valuation for _____, known as the _____ Library? (November 2016; note the spelled-out numbers instead of numerals.)

> For the purpose of renovating and replacing aging facilities, enhancing children's spaces and youth, adult and senior programs, constructing, improving, operating and maintaining facilities of _____ Library District, and acquiring necessary property, shall the $0.20 per hundred dollars assessed valuation tax for the Library District be increased to $0.26 per hundred dollars assessed valuation? (unknown election date)

> Shall the _____ Library be authorized to increase its operating tax levy up to $.15 per $100 of assessed valuation for the 2000 calendar year tax levy and continuing for a period of 20 years to acquire, construct, improve, operate and maintain library facilities? (1999, sunset levy language)

If you do not list both the current rate and the proposed increase, you are not in alignment with the state statutes on ballot language, but as you can see many libraries have not done so. The ballot language should be approved in your board resolution, and then gets submitted to your county clerk who then sends it to the Missouri State Auditor for review as well, but none of them appear to review for listed statutory elements. Have your ballot language reviewed by an attorney and then have MULTIPLE people review it as well. You cannot count on someone else down the line finding or correcting your typo. You have to be factual if you want to include the "purpose" of the proposed increase, but be careful because your library will be held to those words after the election by your voters. If you say "build" then, by golly, you better build something.

It is important to choose your campaign talking points consciously and deliberately. You do not want too many in a bullet list, you want to be able to succinctly tell someone why the library needs more money. It needs to be more than just, "Pay the Electric Bill" and it also needs to either evoke positive imagery about the library or conversely list what will not happen if the levy issue fails. These are factual statements that can stand on their own, or also be embellished for an advocacy campaign. These are things that all the board members should have available and be able to say without consulting a printed list. Including them in a brochure or flyer for the staff and the public also ensures that everyone is on the same page.

Here are some examples from my sunset levy renewal campaign, which will be different for a permanent levy campaign:

- This is not a tax increase, just a renewal.
- The expiring part of the levy is nearly half of the library's operating budget.
- We maintain two branches and a bookmobile.
- If the levy fails we will be forced to cut programs, hours, and services.
- We are a community library dedicated to providing learning, innovation, and creativity.

Two to five talking points are probably optimal, so people can memorize them for the most part. Supporting documents can be provided or these points can be expanded on in a web page.

There are some camps that say you should not have any negative talking points, like saying the library will cut staff and reduce hours if the levy does not pass. I think it is important to factually state the consequences of voting NO so your constituents understand what the result might be if enough people do not vote YES. You probably don't want to lead with this statement, or repeat it unnecessarily to the same group, but you don't want to later be accused of not stating the seriousness of the financial situation the library is facing.

Not every campaign needs a slogan, but if you come up with a good one it can be a game changer. You do not usually create a slogan for an information campaign, because slogans are catchy phrases that imply the direction you want them to vote. Even if you are factually on the brink of disaster, saying "Save Our Library" is telling people you want them to vote yes on your issue and is probably considered advocacy. (Also, Save Our Library seems a bit over-dramatic if it is not in danger of falling into a sinkhole, etc.) This is where the levy committee may find the services of a marketing firm very helpful. The firm hired by our committee came up with the slogan "Keep a Good Thing Rolling" and the clouds parted and the angels sang and we were off to the races (also a great play on words with our library name and the new-ish bookmobile).

Nothing will derail your campaign faster than a bunch of typos and misinformation. Proofread all your products, ask trusted people to use their eyes to check your work, and then proofread again. Proof everything that comes from the levy committee and any firm or consultant they hire. If yard signs get produced with an error after the committee has approved them, then the firm is not going to refund your money and you will pay double. You can never review printed materials too much before production, one extra look-see can save you a lot of wasted time and money.

In review…
- **Select ballot language carefully.**
- **Choose talking points that are succinct and factual.**
- **Proofread, and then proofread again.**
- **Catchy slogans may appeal to voters.**

Timeline of a Campaign

No one can give you a fully ready campaign with a timeline. Every situation is different. There are sometimes reasons to conduct a fairly short public campaign even if the planning has

gone on for many months or even years. The two books listed in the Resources section contain a lot of information about timelines, but Chapter 16 in *Before the Ballot* has the better list even if their range of times do not mesh with your experiences. If you are 6 months out and you see 10 things you should have done already, decide if they are important enough to do now or let them go. You cannot alter the space-time continuum.

Whenever you start planning, even if it is years in advance, create a document with time in the left column and activities in the right column. You can start filling it in with a targeted election date, filing deadlines, voter registration deadlines, absentee ballot deadlines, and then when it is not so bare you will feel much better about the whole process. This document will evolve over the levy planning process, and you should go back and fill in tasks after the fact to keep your activity timeline all in one place.

Be sure to include "soft" targets like board discussions and strategic planning in your timeline. If you do an advocacy campaign, include time for fundraising if needed. The public side of the campaign may only be 2-4 months. People get bored and tired of seeing yard signs, etc., if your campaign goes on too long. And yes, they may vote no just because they are annoyed. Create a way to highlight hard deadlines so you can follow up, or make the bullet points into checkboxes so you can mark off completed items. However is most comfortable for you, document your timeline and be prepared to visit it and update it often.

If you are still having difficulty getting started on a timeline, here are some suggested elements to include (not necessarily in order):

- Choose amount of levy increase to request.
- Decide on information and/or advocacy campaign.
- Form levy committee; select treasurer.
- Determine funds needed and fundraising options.
- File ballot language with county clerk(s).
- Get cost estimates for election fees.
- Create FAQ for staff and the public.
- Make web pages, flyers, brochures, if needed.
- Schedule visits with community clubs.
- List all other upcoming ballot issues or elections in the community.
- Determine library marketing outlets for info campaign.
- Decide on campaign elements, like email blasts, postcards, door hangers. yard signs, TV commercials, etc.
- Publicly launch campaign at an event.
- Prepare pass/fail statements to the public.
- Set up watchers at county clerk offices to report results more quickly.
- Plan election night watch party.
- Send press releases and thank yous.

There is so much more that can't really be listed but needs to be determined by each library's circumstances. The absolute shortest time I would guess a campaign could be pulled off is 4 months, but if you have already been thinking and strategizing for years then maybe 8-12 months would suffice.

In review…

- **You have to make your own timeline.**
- **The timeline will evolve and change over the campaign.**

Get Out and Talk to People

Once your campaign is in full swing, you have to get out and talk to people. One of the best ways is to schedule yourself to speak at all the local civic groups you can find. Make a list of all of the clubs and groups you can think of. They are usually scrambling for speakers for the current and next month, so hopefully you can get on their schedule. Be sure to bring not only your campaign materials but a cheat sheet of library budget figures and other facts about the library, including number of staff, square feet of the building(s), historical information, community demographics, collection statistics, or anything else you can think of. Sometimes you get an off-the-wall question and just do not have the answer, so get a name and number to follow up and add it to your cheat sheet. Here are just a few suggestions for places to speak:

- Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Optimist, etc.
- Chamber of Commerce
- League of Women Voters
- Democrat/Republican Clubs
- Welcome Wagon

One of the best things we did almost by accident was to have myself as library director go with a board member, who was on the levy committee, to talk to public groups. This allowed us to do the good cop-bad cop routine, where I conveyed the information campaign content and then the other person could give them the hard-sell vote yes message. It was not something I looked forward to at first, but in the end it turned out to be just the right approach for us. But for most libraries, information-only visits are fine for civic and social clubs.

If you are in a media market with television, you will be asked to be on radio and maybe TV. You have to get over any nervousness, and just do it. You should also include any local newspapers or news outlets. Breathe deeply and allow yourself a pause before answering any question. Be prepared with your campaign materials to prompt you for answers. Also have recent library statistics and demographics handy. If a question comes out of left field and you do not have an answer, then apologize and offer to follow up after the interview. Never make anything up on the fly. Media interviews may seem more nerve-wracking but it should be no different than any other type of community talk you already do on a regular basis.

Direct, in-person contact with individual voters is worth its weight in gold. But it is also challenging, time consuming, and a thankless job. Knocking on doors does not have to be a cold call on houses where you do not even know if people are registered to vote. You can use voter registration rolls to target households that are most likely to vote to help reduce the chances that your knockers will encounter hostile people. Many neighborhoods and individual houses post "No Soliciting" signs and if you see these you should not knock or disturb people. But if you print up a door hanger then you can leave it on the doorknob and hopefully someone will read it later. People in general love the library, so even if you are bone tired when you are done it will feel great when you remember all the positive comments from people you spoke with.

In review…
- **Plan visits to all the civic and service clubs.**
- **Prepare yourself for media interviews.**
- **Knocking on doors can be very rewarding.**

If You're Not with Us, You're Against Us

Don't worry about haters and trolls. Someone will always be there to write vitriolic letters to the editor and make nasty online comments against any kind of taxes. Don't rise to the bait. Carefully consider whether you need to reply at all. It is sometimes better to let negativity stand alone, and let others come to the conclusion that this person is an outlier and not the mainstream.

Board members need to ALL be on board with the levy ballot issue. Even if they do not donate extra time to the campaign they cannot be going around telling people that they do not support the ballot issue. Libraries can lean towards having fiscally conservative board members like bankers, lawyers, or retired persons from high-wage industries. While this group is usually gung-ho about libraries, they also tend to be against taxes in general. Your levy ballot issue may put some of your board members in a conflicted state. But most if not all are there because they support the library and understand that libraries need taxes. Both current and former Board members can be asked (by the advocacy campaign) to write letters to the local newspapers in support of the ballot issue.

Staff also need to be 100% on board, whether they live in your district or not. They are an often overlooked advocacy group, but are some of the best cheerleaders for the library. But, this is where things start to get tricky. No staff can advocate for the levy issue on work time or during paid hours, and it is probably a bad idea to let hourly staff volunteer with your levy campaign on their off hours. You do not want to be accused later of pressuring staff to work without pay on the campaign.

Staff CAN advocate for the levy issue to friends and family, at church, in the grocery store, and often have the power to get out the vote with these same people and turn out more "Yes" votes for your campaign with their Circle of Influence. If for some reason you feel a staff member might be against the ballot issue, it would be worth your time to talk one-on-one with that person and find out why. Sometimes it is a misunderstanding about how the library is financed which can be quickly cleared up. Otherwise, library employees need to understand how their future employment is tied directly to the availability of public tax dollars. I like to think that library employees are not anti-tax, government haters, but you might be surprised at how many are more fiscally conservative than you think.

The worst situation you might find yourself in is if there is organized and/or paid opposition to your ballot issue. If someone or some group forms a No Committee, registers it with the Missouri Ethics Commission, and then actively spends money to put out literature, direct mail, yard signs, or television commercials against your levy, then something went way off the rails. You might not know until one of your employees shows up at work with a nasty attack postcard they received at home. I don't have experience with this, but if it happens I think pushing your GOTV message and increasing "Yes" voter turnout may be your only hope. (Note: You can look up an opposition committee on the MEC site and sometimes find out something about them, or least who their donors are.) And cross your fingers it will be enough.

In review…
- **Don't fall for hater bait.**
- **Staff and board must all be on board.**
- **Pray for no organized opposition.**

Why are We Doing this Again?

Relax. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. When you are the most stressed out and you are getting close to the election, take some time for yourself and do something completely unrelated to the library. If you burn out the whole thing could collapse, because we know as library directors that the buck stops here. You not only have to keep staff spirits up but you may often have to do the same for the board and the campaign committee. Smile until your cheeks hurt. Get a manicure (men or women). Treat yourself to a nice lunch. You totally deserve it.

Remember why you are doing this, because your library really needs more funding in order to serve your community well. If you and your board have worked through the process, and you have an active and enthusiastic campaign committee then you are on your way. There is only so much you can do in the last weeks before an election. If most indicators point towards a positive outcome, then keep to your mission but allow yourself to feel confident about it.

Even with a good plan and good people and a good campaign, you will still feel anxiety. It's okay, and there is an end date to the madness. Friends and family will not completely understand your stress and can only help up to a point. Some might say, oh if you lose you can always try again in the next election. Listen, no one wants to voluntarily go through a meat grinder once, let alone multiple times. You want to do this right the first time. Use your checklists. Touch base with everyone you can think of. It will all be over soon.

In review…
- **Watch for signs of burnout and exercise self-care.**
- **Your anxiety is a function of how much you are invested in the success of the library, embrace it and power through.**

E-Day and the Aftermath

When election day comes, hopefully you will be nervous but happy, like waiting for a baby to be born. Hmm, that might not be a good analogy. Maybe more like waiting to see if your team wins the championship. However, you should be prepared for both outcomes by writing both win and loss statements to share at the watch party and with the press. It does not mean you expect to lose, just that you will not be at a loss for words whichever way the vote goes. Review the statements with trusted staff and the campaign chairperson so they know what you are going to say.

I was not sold on this idea at first, but you should plan a watch party to gather results as they come in. It is a chance to eat and drink with everyone you worked with on the campaign and relax a little as the votes are tallied. If you can have it at a public restaurant or bar, then go ahead and do that to have someone else be responsible for the food and drinks. But if you think it will not sit right in your community you can just have it in a library meeting room. If

you are not in an area where the results will be televised, then you need to make sure you have the web sites where returns are posted for your county.

We didn't do this but I wish we had: station a few trusted souls at the courthouse(s) so you can have them text you or call you with early returns. I didn't know this but the county clerks and their staff come out of their offices and report returns as the tallies are reported to them from the precincts. Of course, they are not official or certified until the ballots all get back to the courthouse, etc., but it is much faster than waiting for a web site to be updated.

When you get the final results, read your prepared statement for however it came out. Thank everyone and then go home and get a good night's sleep. Most elections are Tuesdays so you still have to work the next day. Write thank you cards to everyone you can think of. Follow up and make sure you get the precinct by precinct results from the county clerk. You will want to analyze these results and see if there are any pockets of your district where you could do more outreach and inform residents of the benefits of the library. You also want to archive them for future directors and boards to look at when the inevitable levy increase comes down the road again. If that road is a short one because you lost the election, seek out people who voted no to tell you why. Unless you can fix it, there is no sense in going to the voters again without a new message you think will be more successful.

Finally, if your advocacy campaign did yard signs or other public displays, remember they must be taken down by a certain date after an election, and you want to get them all picked up so your campaign does not become a litterbug. Keep one or two samples of each work product or brochure.

Print out a copy of the web site(s) used so you have a full record of your campaign. Someone else decades down the road will thank you for your hard work in documenting your levy campaign.

In review…
- **Prepare your win/loss statements.**
- **Have a watch party.**
- **Analyze your results and archive them.**

APPENDIX
Campaign Opposition

In 2023, my library was in the process of planning a new building project to replace an existing location. We realized that our levy that passed in 2019 with a 20-year sunset would not be able to fund the bonds needed for this project before it expired in 2039. It was suggested by our architect firm that maybe this was an opportunity to go back to the voters and eliminate the sunset, allowing extended financing terms and setting the levy at a permanent amount.

Our total levy at that time was $0.31 cents, $0.15 of which was on the sunset. I made a proposal to the board and they agreed (reluctantly) to put it on the ballot to remove the sunset levy and reset our total levy at $0.28 cents. We created a campaign on "right-sizing" our tax with the theme "Rolling Forward, Lower Tax, Brighter Future." We decided to keep it low key, as it was on the same ballot as a school bond levy and school board elections. We hired a marketing firm to design the yard signs, do two mailers, and post some social media.

Two weeks before election day, we were hit with an opposition campaign. We had no clue this was coming until a library user watching morning television emailed one of our staff and said they had just seen a commercial against our ballot issue. Essentially, it said something like say no to a forever tax and tell the library to better manage their funds. Since we did not connect the new building plans to this ballot issue, it was not against our project, just against library funding with no sunset.

As a savvy user of the MEC web site, I popped over to see if I could find out who was behind this campaign. Unfortunately, there are still loopholes where not everything is publicly disclosed. It turned out that the opposition was from an LLC that did not register as a committee. It was also not registered as a business in the state of Missouri. Their address was a mail drop at a Staples store near Kansas City. They were also running ads against the school bond issue.

There ended up being two different television commercials, direct text messaging, and an opposition postcard sent to voters against our ballot issue. I could never discover the source of their funding but they did eventually file a Non-Committee Expenditure Report with the MEC that disclosed that they spent over $56,000 against our levy vote, and an additional $50,000 against the school bond issue.

I addressed this opposition with an email blast to all cardholders, a letter to the editor of the newspaper, and a social media post. Although our levy situation was unique with two operating levy amounts and part of it on a sunset, it is important for you to stand up and address any opposition and not assume that people will see through the lies. They want to see the library stand up for itself. Here is the text of what I wrote:

> Letter to the Editor
>
> Rolling Hills Consolidated Library has a ballot issue on the April 2nd election, and we want all voters in our district to be informed voters. We currently have $.16 cents on our permanent operating levy and $.15 cents on a sunset operating levy for a total of $.31 cents. Our library would like to LOWER the total levy by removing the portion with a sunset and increasing the permanent levy by $.12 cents to $.28 cents, which is 10% LESS than the current total levy. This "right-sizing" of our levy would allow us to finance our new building project over a longer period and get better borrowing terms, and also make commitments for staff salaries and benefits that would last beyond the end of the current sunset in 2039.
>
> We are accountable to the elected County Commissioners who appoint our library board of trustees. We have managed our funds so well over the past 10 years that we were able to pay off a loan early, saving tens of thousands in interest charges, and at the same time save enough in reserve to pay for half of the new building project. Do not let postcards and television commercials from an out-of-town, anonymous group convince you that our library is doing anything outside of the best interests of the communities we serve.
>
> Our library receives high reviews and constant praise from our users about our excellent customer service, interesting programs, and

comprehensive collections. Every day, we look for ways we can help make the lives of our users better and promote literacy and learning for all ages. We cover all areas of our district with two branches and a bookmobile, and we do outreach to all of the public and private schools who want services in our region.

For more information, visit our levy page at https://rhcl.org/levy-info. PLEASE VOTE on April 2, 2024.

Michelle R. Mears
Library Director, Rolling Hills Consolidated Library

This levy passed with 62% voting "Yes" which is less than the 80% we passed with at the previous election in 2019 but still a very strong result. Remember to get your precinct by precinct results and analyze them for where your library support is strongest and weakest. If you have not done a levy issue in a while, ask to see the last school levy election results. In general, people who support education tend to support libraries though it is not always in tandem.

Have faith, keep working, and don't give up!

List of Resources

- Sweeney, Patrick "PC", and John Chrastka. *Winning Elections and Influencing Politicians for Library Funding.* Neal-Schuman, an Imprint of the American Library Association, 2017.
- John Chrastka and Patrick "PC" Sweeney. *Before the Ballot: Building Political Support for Library Funding.* ALA, Neal-Schuman, 2019.
- **EveryLibrary**, https://www.everylibrary.org/
- **American Community Survey**, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs
- **Missouri Ethics Commission**, https://mec.mo.gov/
- **Missouri Secretary of State**, https://www.sos.mo.gov/
- **Missouri State Library**, https://www.sos.mo.gov/library/
- Community demographic resources.
- Your own archives for library history and previous levy campaigns.

Author

Michelle R. Mears is the Director of the Rolling Hills Consolidated Library in northwest Missouri. Prior to this she was a public library director in Oklahoma and Kansas, and also worked in academic libraries in Illinois and Kansas. She has a BA in Psychology and a PhD in Education from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and a MSLIS from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

A Warning from East Berlin on Book Censorship

ANNE AKE

ABSTRACT

Anne Ake recounts her experience as a military wife in West Berlin between 1979 and 1983, crossing over to East Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall. She reminds us that the censorship of books is nothing new, and that unless we defend and protect our liberties, we might find ourselves nervously hiding 'forbidden knowledge' in a brown package, as she witnessed Herr Heuss do in East Berlin not so long ago.

Years ago, a friend talked me into smuggling illegal contraband across a border. Going through the checkpoint I was acutely aware of the brown paper package tucked securely under the driver's seat. I watched other vehicles being searched with large rolling mirrors and various detection devices. As a military dependent, I was exempt from these indignities, but the fact that what I was doing was not just a game began to dawn. Safely through the checkpoint, I parked on a side street, and with my brown package clutched under my coat I walked nervously down the street. I went into a small photo shop and cautiously asked, "Herr Heuss, bitte?" The clerk identified himself as Herr Heuss and I quietly told him that I had been sent by Herr Edwards. Now, noticeably nervous, he began showing me shoddily made cameras from the case. I laid the package on the counter and examined a camera. The package was quickly whisked away, and Herr Heuss disappeared through a curtained door. Moments later he reappeared, empty handed, but smiling broadly. As we continued our charade of looking at cameras, he quietly thanked me and nervously sent messages of gratitude to Herr Edwards.

I stepped back into the harsh wind blowing down the East Berlin street with relief-- and a great sadness. I was saddened by this young man's heartbreaking joy over receiving my contraband --a handful of out-of-date American photography magazines.

Censorship had suddenly become real to me. As had the value of freedom of expression and the importance of guarding that freedom with your very life, if necessary. That day in East Berlin was the seed for this article, which inspired me to turn to magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*, plus local media coverage of some close to home events. I also interviewed George Vickery, then director of the Bay County Library and left his office weighed down by reams of his personal files on the subject. Once I started following the trail, I got caught up in it and the more I read, the more appalled I became. I grew up in a household of books and was encouraged to read and to use the ideas in books to build my own thoughts and dreams. I was never told I **could not** read anything. Nor did I deny my children permission to read anything

they chose. I had taken all of that for granted until that blustery day on the wrong side of the Berlin wall.

I loved West Berlin. It was a beautiful vibrant city--but in those days we lived always in the shadow of the wall. So it was with some relief that I left behind exciting West Berlin and, in the East, Herr Heuss and his pathetic collection of forbidden reading and returned home to the land of the free.

Some time after our return to the states I was handed a list - a list of reading material deemed by our worthy school superintendent as unsuitable for the innocent minds of our children. It was a roll call of old friends with whom I had shared rainy winter afternoons and hot summer days. I saw books I had slipped into to escape the bad times of my life. Steinbeck, Hemingway, Dickens, even Shakespeare....they were all there. And of course, there was Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

Fahrenheit 451 is a novel of censorship. 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which books burn. It is the story of a society where books were systematically burned and book hoarders severely punished. I had always considered it far-fetched, now I wasn't so sure. The memory of Herr Heuss scurrying away with his little cache of illegal books was chilling. Could it happen here? Possibly, if those of us most firmly on the side of reason sit back complacently and let our freedoms gradually erode.

Censorship is not about four-letter words in print. It is about restricting the free exchange of ideas. It is an attempt to control the flow of ideas and of new and untried opinions. New knowledge, new science, new political notions, new religious beliefs, and new attitudes toward sex have all come under the close attentions of censors. Censorship is about fear. The fear of losing control because of new ideas.

Censorship is not new, but it keeps coming back to haunt us. In 399 BC, Socrates was sentenced to death by the court of Athens. The charges against him? Impiety and corrupting the morals of the young. It was felt that he popularized knowledge in such a way that it could lead to skepticism or disbelief. But the charges were really about the fear that new ideas may undermine the authority of religion or the state.

The word *censor* was the title of magistrates in the ancient Roman Republic. It was the responsibility of the censors to take the census, and while they were counting, to inspect the morals and conduct of citizens. Yes. The quieting hand of censorship was well known to the early Greeks and Romans, but they defied it. And the ideas born of that defiance still shape our thoughts today.

But the censors are still with us. With a little research, I came up with reams of information on book burnings and censorship of all kinds around the world and across the ages. But let's stay closer to home. In the mid-eighties something wonderful was happening at Mowat Junior High School. The kids were reading. They were *choosing* to read. The English teachers at Mowat were filling their classrooms with books. Not just classics, but books about modern kids who faced the same choices and problems as the Mowat students. Kids were reading and avenues of discussion were being opened between them and their teachers. In 1985, Mowat's English program was named one of the 150 "centers of excellence" by the National Council of Teachers of English. The average Mowat ninth grader read at the twelfth-grade level. Some parents were frightened. Their children were being exposed to ideas that they were not comfortable with. The kids were reading about and talking openly about things their parents preferred to pretend didn't exist.

And then the trouble started. Some of you will remember. It was a time of shame and embarrassment for my community of Panama City. All teaching materials had to be approved

by the superintendent, who admitted he had read few if any of the books he was passing judgement on. To overcome this handicap, teachers were instructed to make a list of the "dirty words" in the books they submitted for approval and to document the page numbers. The list of unacceptable books grew. It included *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Red Badge of Courage, Of Mice and Men, The Merchant of Venice, The Great Gatsby, Mister Roberts, Hamlet,* and it went on and on.

Panama City's rulings were so sweeping and the backlash of community reaction against them so biting that our little city made national and international news. Yet book banning was not exclusive to Panama City. It was then and is now happening all over the country.

George Orwell's *1984* was banned in Miami. Ironically the subject of the book is thought control. In Pontiac, Michigan 15 parents objected to "pornography" and "obscene language" in Nathanial Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Walter Edmonds" *Drums Along the Mohawk.* They were banned. In Tacoma, Washington the wife of a school board member wrote a letter of complaint about John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* The school board banned the book. And so it went across the country.

Meanwhile, back on the beach, things were getting nasty. Many supporters on the book banning side were parents trying to protect their children from "the dark side of life"--not understanding that the best way to combat the dark side of life is with the light of knowledge and understanding. People who were incapable of fighting with reason and logic were turning to threats. One TV reporter pointed out irregularities in the anti-book petitions, she was bombarded with threatening phone calls. A few days later her house was set on fire.

The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom stated, "*In Panama City, too, fundamentalists see the censorship controversy as a battle between Christian morality and humanism. Pipkin (a Mowat teacher), and her colleagues see it as a struggle between people who want to teach children* **what** *to think and those who want to teach them* **how** *to think. Either way, it is a clash between two conflicting value systems.*"

In Bay County, thanks to public outcry, national ridicule, and class action lawsuits, the school board capitulated, and the decision-making authority was returned to the individual schools. The public outcry dealt a crippling blow to efforts by the Chamber's Committee of 100 to combat the redneck riviera image and convince business and industry that Bay is indeed a better place to live.

Everyone agrees that children should be taught values. But should they be taught through suppression or through enlightenment?

No library, school, or home can have every book on its shelves, nor should they. We must make responsible choices. My home is filled with books that I value and would like to see my children and grandchildren read. I can choose what my children are exposed to at home. I relegate to their teachers the responsibility to choose what they will discuss in class. But there are no restrictions. I have said to my children, "That is pure unadulterated trash." yet I have never said, "You cannot read it."

I am secure in the belief that my values, based on logic, reason, and humanity are strong enough to withstand any attack. So, I did not feel the need to protect my children from other opinions. They are now adults, and we sometimes argue, or perhaps debate is a better word. I respect the fact that they can think for themselves, analyze information, and form sound opinions, even when they don't mirror my own. We don't always have to agree. We only have to open our minds to the fact that there can be more than one way of looking at things, and there is often no clear cut right and wrong.

Human beings in all their diversity are wonderful, interesting, and beautiful creatures. And when it comes down to the nitty-gritty we are all more alike than different. It is through

freedom of expression in speech, the written word, music, and the visual and performing arts that we can appreciate the richness and beauty of the great human experience. Protect that freedom, or we will find ourselves living in the darkness of burning books, and be like Herr Heuss scurrying to a secluded corner with tidbits of forbidden knowledge.

Author

Anne Ake has spent most of her life in Georgia and Florida, with the exception of a a four-year stint in West Berlin, during which time the Berlin Wall separated Berlin. Her family of seven lived in a quiet neighborhood in West Berlin. They were separated from East Berlin and the rest of East Germany by a 12 to 15-foot-high concrete wall topped with barbed wire and broken glass. A second wall was located about 20 feet from the first and the space between the two was guarded by dogs, mines, and armed soldiers. As a military dependent armed with a ream of paperwork I could pass freely through Check Point Charlie. It was an experience that made me appreciate the freedoms that we tend to take for granted.

Back in the states, she worked in public relations and communications, producing camera ready brochures, magazines, posters, etc. I have written non-fiction books on topics ranging from sea turtles to art. Her book, *Everglades: Exploring a Wetland Like No Other,* recently won a gold medal from Florida Writer's Association Book Awards.

She currently resides in Lynn Haven, Florida with Tamara a border collie--pit bull mix, and Morris a big orange cat. Her children and grandchildren live nearby.

A Conflict between Religious Extremism and Intellectual Freedom at Ground Zero

LACIE SUTHERLAND

ABSTRACT

Religious extremism, mostly in the form of Christian Nationalism, is the catalyst fueling the book banning engine currently steamrolling across school and public libraries in America. In March of 2023 the Autauga-Prattville Public Library (APPL) of Autauga County, Alabama became Ground Zero in a book banning conflict that eventually bled into a statewide war fought primarily in school and public library boards, city council and county commissions, the state library board, some churches, and in every branch of the government. The fight continues to this day, and librarians who were on the frontlines were soon joined by local grassroot nonprofits against the hate groups perpetrating the waves of book bans across Alabama. This article frequently sources a local journalist from the *Alabama Political Reporter* (APR), amongst other new sites and organizations, and is my personal account of what happened as I was employed there at that time. The arguments either for or against book bans are in reference to many books published either by or for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people and describe the length to which religious extremists will deem anything related to these marginalized communities as "inappropriate."

Exposing the Catalyst for Book Banning in Alabama

Religious extremism is sending its acolytes into an ideological war against public and school libraries across the United States through book banning and censorship. Religious extremists, especially Christian Nationalists, have focused their attention on books written for children and young adults by or about LGBTQIA+ people or people of color. Christian Nationalism is comparable to an army of hate groups popping up every year with anti-diversity agendas and far-right extremists using school and library boards as their personal battlegrounds and brandishing the time-honored phrase "For the Children!" as though they are the ones with children's best interests in mind. In areas like the uber-conservative South, this agenda is all too easy to implement. Alabama groups like Clean Up Alabama (CUA), The Heritage Foundation, 1819 News, Moms for Liberty, and Eagle Forum communicate easily with the state's majority Republican leaders to advance their agendas into law.

How is it that a group of people who use a historical, religious text that purports the love for all humankind, could be some of the worst offenders of that declaration? According to Sam Harris' book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*:

> "Thousands of people have written to tell me that I am wrong not to believe in God. The most hostile of these communications have come from Christians. This is ironic, as Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism. While we may want to ascribe this to human nature, it is clear that such hatred draws considerable support from the Bible. How do I know this? The most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse" (Harris, 2006).

Harris' paradox is difficult to accept; however, there is historical precedent of people using the God of the Bible to justify both great deeds and base atrocities. This is truer today because the rate of freedom distributed to many countries has never been higher across the globe in all of human history. We Christians, or those of other faiths who question this use the Bible as a weapon may recall what history has taught us about the actions and behaviors of these so-called Christians. We must remember that those who espouse Christianity, but do not actually follow its key teachings, may belong to fringe groups resembling Christian Nationalists. One of their current vendettas is the books on our library shelves, which are being portrayed by these extremists as paper nuclear bombs instead of the troves of intellectual pursuit that they are.

On the other hand, those locals who adhere to religious and intellectual freedom are rising up and combating this phenomenon through grassroot activist organizations like Read Freely Alabama (RFA) and Prattville Pride. They are then supported by nonprofits and news sites like EveryLibrary, moveon.org, Book Riot, the American Library Association (ALA), the American Booksellers Association (ABA), the Freedom to Read Foundation, Democracy Forward, We Need Diverse Books, Penguin Random House, and PEN America, just to name a few. Some of these activist groups receive support from their respective state library associations, which in RFA's instance is the Alabama Library Association (ALLA). ALLA's mission is to uphold the intellectual freedom upon which school and public libraries stand. It, therefore, advocates for those rights and protections already defined by our national and state constitutions. These rights include First Amendment rights for all people, the rights of parents to parent their own children, and the rights of individuals to make their own decisions except in cases of crime. ALLA also takes into consideration that public and school libraries are bastions of diverse concepts, and that they institutionally fall under the umbrella of the separation of church and state. Most strikingly, groups like RFA strive to protect the librarians and educators themselves, who are currently being vilified, the likes of which have not been seen since War World II.

Example of Religious Extremism in Action, Explained Through Personal Experience

In March of 2023 a homeschool mom checked out a board book about pronouns for her son's English lesson. She paid attention to the title of the book, *The Pronoun Book* by Chris Ayala-Kronos, but not its cover, which illustrated the book's theme. To be fair to the mom, the cataloger at the time had mistakenly processed the book with the incorrect Dewey Decimal call number, classifying its subject matter as grammar, instead of correctly classifying it under gender studies. Her ire at the discovery led her to her favorite Facebook page for local homeschool moms, and through that channel she instigated a hate group. Their eventual name signifies their overall plan: to "Clean Up Alabama." Their mission: to punish the library for having such books on the shelves, or have it defunded. They started petitions on change.org to have the book and anything similar removed (it was eventually taken down because it had attracted the notice of the author himself, Chris Ayala-Kronos, who accused change.org of copyright infringement). They began to attend the library board, city council, and county commission meetings over the next few weeks to read excerpts from books that were either taken entirely out of context or from books that were not even in the library. They quoted the Bible throughout their speeches, equating their cause to righteousness. They espoused hateful words about the LGBTQIA+ community, falsely comparing books about this community to "sex books" or "porn in the children's room." The most striking example of this was the use of the graphic memoir *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, which is not owned by the Autauga-Prattville Public Library.

When their attempts to defund the library failed during a city council meeting in September of that year (Holmes, 4 September 2023), the group met with the chairman of the Alabama GOP, who was poised to become one of the next board members for the Alabama Public Library Service (APLS) under Governor Ivey's directives to cleanse the state's libraries of books about diversity (Holmes, 17 October 2023). The next plan of attack was to use the library as a scapegoat by passing highly discriminatory policies so that the APLS could reciprocate for their own push to pass policy changes tying censorship to funding (Holmes, 4 April 2024). To accomplish this, the city council and county commission needed to replace the current board with as many acolytes as possible to the cause of religious extremism. This was accomplished throughout the winter of 2023-2024 when the country commission ignored the advice of a retiring board member, and selected a city councilperson's family member. When the rest of the board resigned in protest, a wave of CUA members were subsequently voted in by the county commission. An atmosphere of anxiety descended upon the librarians working at my library.

It all exploded soon after, when this newly Clean Up Alabama-stacked library board passed policies banning books about "sexual identity and gender studies" for patrons under the age of eighteen in February 2024 (Chapoco, 2024). One month later, the board met at city hall to fire the library director, who had taken the post just eight months prior, after the previous director resigned due to attacks by patrons over this issue. These attacks led to serious health complications and a desire to spend more time with her family. After firing the new director, the new board banned him from entering the library again and told library employees that they were going to pursue ethics complaints against him. In protest, my fellow coworkers and I closed the library early and stood in a united front against the library board members, who besieged us from the other side of the circulation desk like a Wild West standoff. Consequently, we were fired too (Holmes, 15 March 2024).

Many of the remaining staff resigned over the next couple of days in protest. The library was swiftly taken over by Clean Up Alabama volunteers. The police were called because the staff members were accused of allegedly "stealing library property and causing damage to the building." Locksmiths changed the library locks in the middle of the night. One employee who stayed was swiftly appointed interim director and, in her complicity, did not hesitate to allow the new board members to fully implement all their desired policy changes (Jensen, 2024). Over the next several weeks this resulted in a reduction of the library's hours, the termination and change of long-standing programs, the disappearance of LGBTQIA+ youth and sexual health books, the end of purchasing new books and the Interlibrary Loan program.

From the beginning, public focus had been directed toward young adult and children's books, but that focus widened to include attacks on all books containing sexual content, sexual orientation, and gender identity in general, regardless of target age.

One former board member of the Autauga County library system, who is an avid supporter of libraries and a local author, resigned her position after only one month of service. Concerned by the discriminatory policies that were voted on without her knowledge or participation, she requested that books authored by her be pulled from the library. The policies were purposefully vague when it came to gender identity references and to the appropriate age for readership. The policy was put into place with the intent of removing all books containing references to gender identity, even ones placed in the adult section. This was done because extremists feared that children might wander into the adult section where some books and graphic novels depict sexual scenes within the context of the story (Holmes, 9 February 2024).

The author's books are characterized as steamy, supernatural romances meant for adults. Therefore, her books were correctly cataloged in the adult fiction section of the library. Many people online vilified her as a pornographer because she wrote books of a sexual nature for an adult audience. Those who vilified her work acted as if we still live in a prude police state where sex is taboo and practically outlawed, and as though the Supreme Court had not already resolved the definition of obscenity in 1973 with the passing of the *Miller* test.

When scrutinized, many locals in the area brought up the critique that if the purpose of censoring or banning books is simply to "protect children," why would removing adult books be relevant. Claiming that a child would be irreparably damaged by being exposed to a book that is beyond their reading level is fallacious and opinion based only. The policies of most libraries in the country specifically direct parents to supervise their own children in library spaces, which is a clear indication that parents should be responsible for what their children read.

In this regard, do we treat young children the same developmentally as teenagers just because they both are under the heading of "minors," and, therefore, authors should write books for teenagers the same way they would for small children? All such questions are at the foundation of the fight against book bans and censorship in our public and school libraries, which should never have begun in the first place, thanks to the pursuit of intellectual freedom and the importance of diversity and secularism in public spaces.

Regarding book challenges, school and public libraries across the U. S. have already instituted policies for patrons to submit material reconsideration requests. Librarians are the best proponents of protecting this policy, since they understand a patron has that right. There are times when a patron may notice a mistake about the processing of a book that went unnoticed by a librarian. This happened to me while I was the cataloger during the book challenges. A patron emailed me to tell me that I had erroneously put a science fiction book in the young adult fiction section when publishers were classifying it as the author's debut,

adult, science fiction book. She was right, and I swiftly made the change and thanked her for her fastidiousness. It was all down to my human error and is just one of the many reasons why librarians protect patrons' rights to submit material reconsideration requests in their local library within reason.

In an act to maintain modern librarianship as well as a suitable compromise to the few legitimate concerns about inappropriate books in the young adult section, my former coworkers and I created a New Adult Section in the library; a relatively new category for publishers and nationally recognized as a legitimate category for fiction by Goodreads, Reedsy, and Kirkus Reviews. This new category captures stories about young adults between the age of 18 and 25 who are beginning their transition into adulthood. This includes stories about starting college, a career, military service, etc. Many books from the adult and young adult sections were then transferred to the new adult section at our library.

Material Reconsideration forms and policies exist for patrons who want to express their rights in regard to books they wish to have investigated. However, in reference to Mary Jo Godwin's quote in the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, "a really good library should have something in it to offend everyone." Whether that be books, movies, programs, displays, or whatever, libraries have diverse collections that represent the general population in order to remain a sanctuary of public space. When a library begins removing books according to the whims of the religiously, socially, and politically intolerant, it no longer is a sanctuary, but a cult.

In the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy* (2019), James LaRue, former director of the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and author of *On Censorship: A Public Librarian Examines Cancel Culture in the US*, wrote in contrast to the famous quote by Ms. Godwin that

> "a really good library has something in it to *support* everyone (assuming that the intent is not to commit a crime). You're a Christian homeschooler? Let us show you how we can provide an alternative to a $1,000 a year paid curriculum. You're a lesbian mom looking for books to show families like yours to your kids? Here's our small but growing collection. Can you recommend other titles? In my formal responses to challenges, I did my best to find that balance. The subtext: Libraries demonstrate their value not through the suppression of resources, but through their provision. Our mission was to add useful information, not hide what some people found disagreeable or uncomfortable."

The Adoption of State Administration Code Changes

In February of 2024, the board of the Alabama Public Library Service announced their intention to accept public comments, per the law, for the proposed administrative code changes as requested by Governor Ivey shortly after she removed board member Virginia Doyle, when Ms. Doyle "questioned threats to rip funding away from the state agency over matters she said the board has no authority to address" (Holmes, 22 November 2023). In response, the *Alabama Reflector* reported "the governor wrote that state funding for local libraries should be based on the existence of policies related to the location and relocation of materials inappropriate for children, as well as advance approval for displaying, recommending or otherwise actively promoting books by staff" (Stephenson, 2023). Hundreds of letters were sent from concerned Alabama citizens and in April, over a hundred people signed up to

speak in front of the APLS board either to express their support for or opposition to Governor Ivey's administrative code changes. As can be imagined, those who spoke in support for the changes were in the minority and did so using aggressive language and several out-of-context references to the Bible while those in opposition used research and personal experiences (Holmes, 1 May 2024).

With the support of at least three of the board members, who allegedly adhered to religious extremist views towards diversity and inclusion within libraries (Holmes, 24 June 2024), the changes were adopted by the board in May with few amendments. All of this was supposedly done in the name of continued funding, according to one board member, ALGOP Chairman John Wahl. According to the *APR*, "When [Dr. Nancy] Pack asked [Chairman John] Wahl whether that meant [House Education Budget Chair Danny] Garrett (R-Trussville) is looking to cut funding, Wahl said nothing was final right now and that conversations are still being had among lawmakers" (Holmes, 22 March 2024). This is in reference to the Alabama legislature discussing possible bills that would tie funding for the APLS and in proxy the public libraries within the state to policies that would essentially ban books deemed "sexually inappropriate," a term that no book banner in power will specifically define.

Obviously, the refusal to be clear is due to the wish to avoid federal lawsuits; if one does not say the word "anti-LGBTQ" then facetiously, one's actions against that community are not anti-LGBTQ. If one looks only at sexual content no matter its context, then clearly one would be distracted by the real target. On 15 July 2024, the APLS officially certified the admin code changes, which meant that every public library in the state had until the end of the fiscal year (October 2024) to draft policies that aligned with the code changes or would not receive state aid (Holmes, 17 July 2024). In October of 2023, APLS voted to remove its affiliation with the ALA in order to avoid having funding removed by the legislature (Holmes, 13 November 2023).

The Legislature Exacerbates the Issue

The worst of these offenses that have arisen out of the political and religious fervor of these extremist conservative actors is the passing of bills by state legislatures to criminalize the profession of librarianship. For example, during the 2023-2024 legislative session in Alabama, HB 385 made it all the way to the last day of session before finally being killed. Proposed by Rep. Arnold Mooney (R-Indian Springs), the bill would have removed the criminal exemption for librarians under Alabama's Anti-Obscenity Enforcement Act, and according to J. Holmes of *APR*, included "a substitute brought by Rep. David Faulkner (R-Homewood) [that] creates a seven-day notice requirement before librarians could be arrested" (Holmes, 26 April 2024). Known as the "Jail Librarians" bill, it has since been brought back on the docket for the 2024-2025 legislative session.

Bills of a similar nature that either passed or were punted into the next session in either local or state legislatures includes two bills. The first bill, HB 425, extends library restrictions into university libraries, prevents libraries from joining the ALA, prohibits libraries from purchasing books with "sexual content" or gender ideology, and authorizes the attorney general and parents to take legal action if a violation occurs. Its nature is self-explanatory as to why religious extremists wanted that one in action. The second bill, SB 10, allows library board members to be removed by local governing authorities, which would make it legal for local leaders to remove any board member who does not agree with their censorship agenda. According to Summer Lopez of *Time Magazine* in an exposé article about how the book ban-

ning crusade has even extended into America's book publishing industry, "Of course, book publishers and distributors aren't putting pornography in schools. And it is already a federal crime to distribute obscene materials to minors, rendering these new bills unnecessary, if that were their goal. But these bills aren't actually about obscene materials. They're about giving book ban activists another way to advance their broad censorship crusade" (Lopez, 2023). These bills illustrate the extreme level of attack that this country's books and their purveyors are currently experiencing.

The concept of instituting oppressive laws to police books is a result of galvanized efforts by conservative politicians for their potential voting blocs. According to Drs. Goncalves, Langrock, et al. of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States, who published an academic article in *PNAS Nexus* in July 2024, there is a deepening polarization of politics in regard to the recent book banning push:

> "…we find that (i) banned books are disproportionately written by people of color and feature characters of color, both fictional and historical, in children's books; (ii) right-leaning counties that have become less conservative over time are more likely to ban books than neighboring counties; and (iii) national and state levels of interest in books are largely unaffected after they are banned. *Together, these results suggest that rather than serving primarily as a censorship tactic, book banning in this recent US context, targeted at low-interest children's books featuring diverse characters, is more similar to symbolic political action to galvanize shrinking voting blocs* [emphasis mine]" (Goncalves, et. al., 2024).

To the trained eye, religious extremism through the form of book bans is currently being used by conservative politicians in order to build this political galvanization wave in the US. When ignorance reigns, tools for learning and entertainment morph into tools for oppression. Alabama is one of the many examples of this.

In addition, these bills and other forms of political action are not unique to Alabama. Many libraries throughout the country experiencing the same political attacks are taking extreme measures in order to keep their doors open. This is especially true for small libraries that do not have the space to provide restrictions between children's and adult books. For example, after Idaho's state legislature passed the so-called "Children's School and Library Protection Act" in early 2024, Donnelly Public Library in Donnelly, Idaho (a building of only 1,034 square feet) was forced to become "adults only" in order to comply, since it is too small to be able to separate the adult and children's sections (The Authors Guild, 2024). How can bills such as these "protect" children when many libraries are forced to ban *children* in order to remain open?

Another example is the policy that some libraries are adopting that prevents children's library cards from checking out any books from the adult section at all, whether the child has the parent's permission to check out that book or not, and whether that book contains any sexual content or not (Jensen, 2023). For example, this would apply to those libraries whose classics books are only available in their original format and not the juvenile illustrated classics version. How would that work out in actuality? Could a child not just check out a book under an adult's card, as happens so often already? The ability to ignore such simple caveats of religious extremism is ample proof that the extremists in power are not interested in actu-

ally protecting children, but in stirring the conservative fervor that affects the voting actions of many of their supporters, many of whom vote from a place of fear rather than a place of reason.

Hopeful Responses to Militant Advocacy Groups

Clean Up Alabama is a hate group acting as a spinoff of Moms for Liberty, a nationally recognized hate group that infiltrates school and public library boards across the country in order to push a Christian Nationalist agenda under the slogan "For the Children". This relatively recent extremism has blinded many of its followers from seeing the necessity of freedom of expression, religious tolerance, and intellectual pursuit.

Amanda Jones, famed author of *That Librarian: The Fight Against Book Banning In America*, says it best when she interviewed for *Publisher's Weekly* in June 2024 to discuss her book and specifically to answer the question about who needs to read it:

> "I hate to make it political, but I think moderate Republicans like my parents need to read this book, because book banning has been so politicized by the far right. Censorship should be a nonpartisan issue. All of us should be in favor of the freedom to read, but there are so many lies being spread about libraries by extremists and then amplified by well-meaning people who just believe things they see online" (Albanese, 2024).

In the same article, she further elaborates on the importance of libraries having diverse collections and why this current wave of book bans is so pernicious:

> "They [the book challengers today] are targeting books by the hundreds written by, or about, the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, posting out-of-context passages from books on social media and calling it pornographic, and often misleading the public about where books are placed in the library, all to generate political outrage. And then those who stand up for the freedom to read, like me, are called groomers, and targeted and harassed" (Albanese, 2024).

Because of one group's blindsided fervor for religious intolerance, a faction of society is being "othered" through the books written by and about them, a concept that is not new worldwide. According to Sam Olson, a cofounder of RFA, "books are proxies for people" (Hayden, 2024). When books about people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community are banned from libraries, it is the same as saying that those people should be banned from public spaces too. On September 19, 2024, Alabama GOP chairman also became the chairman of the APLS board, proving that Alabama is now aligning its traditionally non-partisan public libraries with Republican politics (Holmes, 20 September 2024).

However, there is hope. According to their mission page, RFA is a local nonprofit group that is "dedicated to upholding the values of American democracy by fighting any censorship of our public libraries, and by advocating for inclusive library collections that accurately reflect the diversity of the communities they serve" (Read Freely Alabama, 2023). Founded in opposition to Clean Up Alabama, RFA actively supports Alabama's libraries, its librarians, LGBTQIA+ rights, intellectual freedom, First Amendment rights, the separation

of church and state, DEI initiatives, and governmental transparency. Since May 2024, Read Freely Alabama has filed a federal lawsuit against the APPL board, in conjunction with ALLA and various Autauga County families (Roney, 2024).

A patron, who is a RFA member, started a GoFundMe page to raise money in response to our loss of income mere hours after the news broke that my coworkers and I were fired. EveryLibrary then began their own fundraiser and the two were eventually combined before dissemination to the affected librarians. Similarly, the ALLA presented awards of recognition to the fired librarians and since then has released its own Alabama Bill of Rights, in defiance to the APLS's self-removal of its subscription from the ALA and passing of the discriminatory code policies for statewide funding. Other Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints have also been filed against the board in reference to wrongful terminations and the lack of accessibility for patrons with disabilities on the website.

Conclusion

The push to make religious extremism the law of the land is not a new concept. Politics has always been rife with candidates who care more for their own ideological preferences than they do for the people they represent. Religious extremists use library books as proxies for banning the rights of certain disenfranchised people. Alabama is part of a much bigger picture that is impacting public libraries across the nation. Equality for all does not mean that there is inferiority for some, and no more is that reality a fact than in a library. One public library in Alabama and its support groups know this fight for equality for all well enough, even if those who are bent towards religious extremism do not.

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