

# Book Censorship:

## The Long History and Continued Debate



In the late 1980s, a prison in New York attempted to ban a book with maps of the moon because administrators believed it could lead to a prisoner escape.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, parents in Virginia protested when their kids read LGBTQ material, calling it “sexual propaganda.”<sup>2</sup> Ironically, author Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, a novel about banning books, has itself been challenged and banned numerous times for its “questionable themes.”<sup>3</sup> The most common reason cited for banning books is “protecting readers from morally destructive and offensive literature.” But is banning books really protection - or is it censorship?

Book censorship is the regulation of content and ideas within a book or publication.

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<sup>1</sup> Zaveri, Mihir. “Prison Book Bans Called ‘Arbitrary and Irrational.’” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 27 Sept. 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, Samantha. “Angry Parents Protest LGBTQ Books in Virginia Classrooms.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 10 Nov. 2019.

Books can either be

- banned, which is the removal of a text from circulation, or
- challenged, which is the attempt for removal by an individual or a group.

Censorship has been a common practice throughout history, thought to be a benevolent form of moral protection. Authorities began by censoring speech and continued to regulate the multiple forms of media that materialized over time. Currently, banning books on a national level is rare in democratic countries, but book challenges and institutional bans happen on a regular basis, particularly in schools and libraries.

<sup>3</sup> Rindskopf, Jeff. “15 Classic Books That Were Banned for the Most Ridiculous Reasons.” *Showbiz Cheat Sheet*, 19 Feb. 2018,

# History

Censorship is a common and almost universal occurrence, with its origin tracing back to ancient societies. The term “censor” can be found as early as 443 BC with the Roman office of censor, the duties of which were to supervise the moral behavior of Roman citizens. Authorities began by censoring speech, as the written word was not yet as culturally influential.

One of the earliest advocates of censorship was Socrates, who lived in the 5th century B.C.E. He believed that most of society was impressionable, particularly the youth, and that fact alone made censorship a necessity. Ironically, Socrates’ death was the ultimate censor, as the people of Athens executed him for spreading his ideas and corrupting the youth.

The first censorship law was created in China in 300 AD, in order to suppress the spread of anti-dynastic ideas. Censorship became even more suppressive as more and more books were published, an action that made it possible to spread “subversive” ideas more widely. For example, the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450 assisted the spread of the Protestants’ ideas during the Reformation. These ideas were considered heresy by the Catholic Church, which decreed in 1543 that no books could be published without its permission. It also commissioned the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1559, editions of which were published until 1948.

## The Danger of Media

The year 1610 saw the first newspaper in Sweden, which led to a long and continuing

battle between the media and the government. Newspapers have the unique role of connecting people with ideas and current events, which makes them a potential danger to governmental support. Since its conception, “media has been the first victim in times of war.” Newspapers have often faced the dilemma of being silenced or being shut down, particularly in times of war, when public support is considered absolutely necessary.

The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) declared war on the media in Algeria, threatening that, “Those that live by the pen shall die by the sword.” Between 1993 and 1995, the GIA executed 58 media professionals because they posed a threat to national security.

## Bibliocides

Burning or destroying libraries is another tool commonly used by governments to inhibit the spread of ideas that may threaten public morality. For example, it was a common practice during the Nazi regime and that of the USSR. In 1933, around 20,000 volumes were burned in Nazi Germany as a way to purge the minds of German citizens. Books written by Jews, communists, or humanists were destroyed and anyone involved in the publication, distribution, or reading of illegal newspapers was punished by death. In 1940, the USSR began a bibliocide in occupied Lithuania that lasted until 1989. Any book or library that disagreed with the current mode of government was destroyed. As recently as the 1990’s, the Serbian government burned libraries in Kosovo that included books written in the Albanian language as a form of ethnic cleansing.

## Abolishing Censorship in Western Countries

During the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, people advocated for freedom of speech and the spread of ideas. Sweden was the first to abolish censorship when it passed laws in 1766 that ensured freedom of the press. Other countries followed, and by the 20th century, government censorship was mostly terminated in western countries.

Formal legal censorship has never occurred in the United States, and the First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press and freedom of speech. However, libel laws may serve as a loophole to censorship that can be considered an inhibition of free expression.

Despite the abolishment of censorship on the national level, teachers and librarians were then responsible for protecting the morality of citizens from potentially dangerous ideas in publications. This led to the rise of challenges as the most popular form of censorship in place of banning.

## Non-democratic Countries

Currently, larger displays of censorship happen mostly in non-democratic countries, new democracies, or declining democracies. Traditional tools of censorship are still in use, such as the burning of books, threatening harsh punishments to those who violate censorship rules, and using the postal service to prohibit the import of dangerous literature.<sup>4</sup>

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*Libel Laws: Libel is defamation expressed in print, writing, pictures, etc. A libel law prevents harm to a person's reputation and occupation, or exposure to ridicule.*

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<sup>4</sup> Newth, Mette. "The Long History of Censorship." *Beacon for Freedom of Expression*, National Library of Norway, 2010.

## Timeline

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- 399 BC: Socrates was executed
  - 300 AD: First Censorship Law in China
  - 1430's: Invention of the printing press
  - 1610: First Newspaper in Sweden
  - 1993: Massive book pyres in Nazi, Germany
  - 1940: USSR began bibliocide in occupied Lithuania
  - 1766: Sweden became the first to abolish censorship

# Most Challenged Books

The American Library Association, founded in 1876, keeps records of challenges to libraries in many states, as well as what books are challenged. However, surveys show that 82-97% of challenged books are not reported, which skews the accuracy of the lists.<sup>5</sup>

## Five of the Most Challenged Books in History

- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
  - Stereotyping, racism
- *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov
  - Contains pedophilia and incest
- *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley
  - Drugs, sexual themes, depictions of suicide, and pessimism
- *American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis
  - Discusses rape, cannibalism, murder
- *Harry Potter* (series) by J.K. Rowling
  - Contains witchcraft, violence, lying

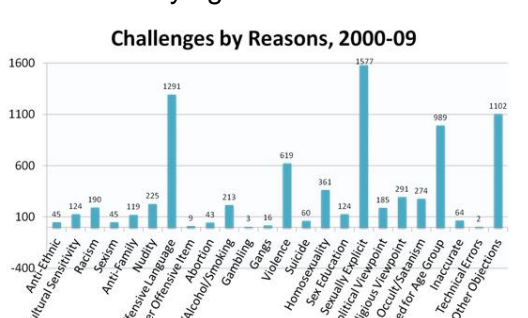


Figure 1: Source: <http://library.bu.edu/banned/intro>

## Top Ten Challenged Books in 2018

- *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher
  - Addresses suicide.
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
  - Includes profanity and sexually explicit content.
- *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier
  - Contains LGBT characters and deemed “confusing.”
- *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
  - Contains sexual violence and was considered to “lead to terrorism” and “promote Islam.”
- *George* by Alex Gino
  - Written about a transgender child.
- *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg, illustrated by Fiona Smyth
  - Discusses sex education and is thought to prompt children to “want to have sex or ask questions about sex.”
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
  - Portrayals of violence and contains the N-word.
- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
  - Descriptions of drug use, and offensive language.
- *And Tango Makes Three* written by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson,
  - Portrays a same-sex relationship.
- *I Am Jazz* written by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, illustrated by Shelagh McNicholas
  - Discusses gender identity

<sup>5</sup> Admin. “Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists.” *Banned and Challenged Books*, American Library Association.

# Arguments For and Against

In the United States, the most common form of censorship still occurring are challenges, most often initiated by parents concerned about what their child is reading in school. Figures 2 and 3 show the number of challenges received from 2000-09 by institution and by initiator.

## Pros of Censorship

A lot of the reasons cited for banning books in the United States are the same as Socrates' in the 5th century: protecting impressionable youth. This is why the majority of book challenges take place within schools and why music and film (PG-13 and R, etc.) ratings exist.

Most of the time, censorship also reduces the amount of offensive material spread throughout society. Of course, this does not account for biased agendas against groups of people, as in the case of Nazi Germany spreading hate against the Jewish people. If the censorship is more benevolent – of the kind that tries to protect everybody from offensive material – some may appreciate the concern and the avoidance of harmful thoughts.

Another benefit of censorship is societal harmony, which is often the reason governments adopt censorship tactics. It can mean less tension within different groups of society and less dissent towards authority. Supporters of censorship often provide a distinction between simply limiting potentially harmful information and suppressing information.<sup>6</sup>

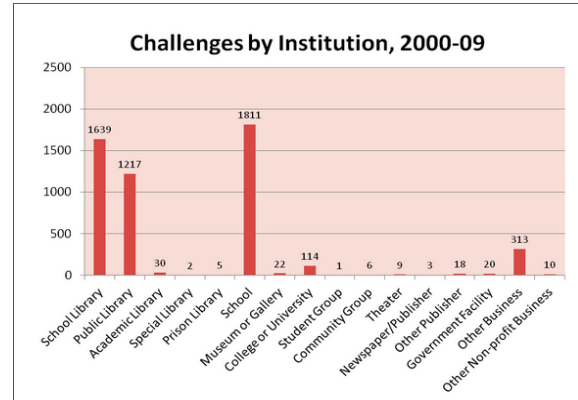


Figure 2: Source: <http://library.bu.edu/banned/intro>

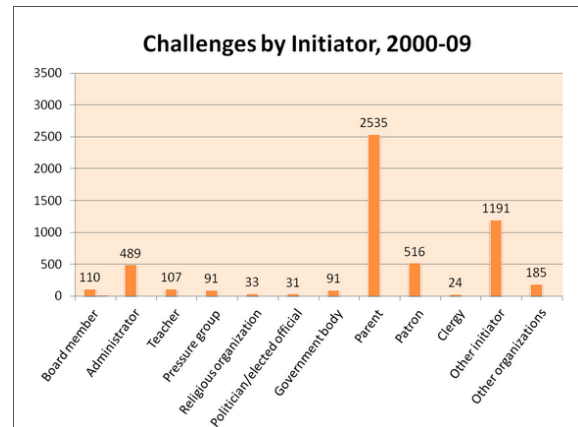


Figure 3: Source: <http://library.bu.edu/banned/intro>

<sup>6</sup> Regoli, Natalie. "19 Biggest Pros and Cons of Censorship." *Future of Working*.

## Cons of Censorship

Critics of censorship claim it promotes ignorance and can be used as a fear tactic, like in the case of the Nazi regime. In dictatorial countries, censorship could be used to frighten citizens into compliance. Censorship also tends to support the majority's mindset while suppressing minorities. Furthermore, censorship restricts the freedom to think independently and to form one's own opinions. If societies have restricted access to knowledge, it may lead to an ignorant society that prevents innovative thinking and progressive action.

On the local level, it may be considered ineffective. Although parents or prison officials may believe they are either protecting their children or the safety of those in the prison system<sup>7</sup>, information has a way of spreading despite active censorship. If the censorship is effective, however, the protected may end up too sheltered. Limited access to information, or access only to specific knowledge curated for them by authorities may lead to an unrealistic worldview that may hinder growth.

## Conclusion

Many people living in democratic countries today disagree with censorship on the national level, but find it necessary to protect children especially. A lot of people may not realize censorship is happening to them. The debate continues on whether censorship is protection or an infringement on freedom of expression.

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<sup>7</sup> Tager, James. "Literature Locked Up: How Prison Book Restriction Policies Constitute the Nation's Largest Book Ban." *PEN America*, PEN America, Sept. 2019.

## Censorship in Prisons

Although most challenges are initiated in schools and libraries, the prison system represents the largest book ban happening in the United States today. Some prison officials ban books that may prompt rebellions inside the prison or escape attempts, such as books that describe discrepancies within the criminal justice system. Others want to limit the ways drugs and other contraband material can enter the prison. Examples of banned books in prisons include

- A book about sketching,
- a book containing maps of the moon,
- a physics textbook, and
- Barack Obama's memoirs.