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# Manufactured Panic, Real Consequences

Why Academic Librarians Must Stand with Public and School Libraries

*Banning books gives us silence when we need speech. It closes our ears when we need to listen. It makes us blind when we need sight.*

—Stephen Chbosky<sup>1</sup>

**F**ew academic librarians have dealt with challenges to materials in their collections. According to data from the American Library Association (ALA), only 1 percent of challenges occur in college or university libraries.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of challenges—a staggering 89 percent of them—are experienced by our colleagues in public and school libraries. And since 2020, they have seen an unprecedented rise in attempted book bans. The imperative to safeguard the foundational right to exchange ideas, express identities, and embrace diverse perspectives is currently under threat; the time to act is now. Thus far, academic librarians have been privileged to be sheltered from these attacks. It is our responsibility to educate ourselves, advocate for our public and school library colleagues, and partner against book-banning practices.

Let's begin with a primer on how we got here. Public and school libraries are currently the subjects of a moral panic. Moral panics are “cultural and social situations where heightened and exaggerated attention is given to a moral issue accompanied by exaggerated demands to activate and practice steps to curb what is portrayed as the threat to morality.”<sup>3</sup> For them to work, it is necessary to create an enemy, or an “other,” that represents the perceived threat to the values and norms of society.

In this latest panic, perpetuated by a host of right-wing activists, librarians are the “other.” Some are individuals working at the level of their local school district, like those involved with Pennsylvania's WokePA, targeting the Central Bucks School District. Some are state-level groups, like Utah Parents United. Some are national organizations, like Moms for Liberty or Parents Defending Education. Though their scope and tactics may differ, they all have the same aim—to stop what they perceive as leftist indoctrination in the classroom. What does this so-called indoctrination look like? Fundamentally, this perspective views indoctrination as providing access to materials that center the experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Materials, in other words, they deem “woke.”

Conflict between parents and the state over the role and scope of public education in the United States is nothing new. Historian Jill Lepore describes how progressive educational

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reforms in the late-nineteenth century, particularly those mandating compulsory education, encountered objections on the grounds of parental rights. More recent objections to comprehensive sexual education are also born from similar historical roots.<sup>4</sup>

Parents have legal and moral right to be informed about and participate in their child's education. But those rights are not absolute; they must be balanced against the rights of other students, educators, and the public good. The current "parental rights" movement has been transformed by a conspiratorial mindset that believes individual liberties are being systematically stripped from American citizens.<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to recognize that this mindset is not tied to a specific set of ideas, such as QAnon, but rather reflects a general belief that "all power is conspiracy."<sup>6</sup> Those subscribing to this belief target various perceived "'totalitarian' authorities, including the state, Big Tech, Big Pharma, big banks, climate science, mainstream media, and political correctness."<sup>7</sup> As part of the public education system, public and school librarians become avatars of this conspiracy. From this perspective, the advocacy for "parental rights" emerges as a tool to rationalize the suppression of open discussions about race, gender, and sexuality.

This moral panic is fueled by a manipulative narrative propagated by the right-wing grievance media ecosystem. Conservative influencers, for example, seed search terms<sup>8</sup> and manipulate search engines to direct these parents to their sites where they introduce them to these radical and extreme views. Social media platforms, such as Facebook or TikTok, have also made it much easier for parental rights groups to coordinate their efforts. Dedicated sites also provide resources (e.g., toolkits, maps, spreadsheets of books, etc.) to support challenge efforts.

It is tempting to write off the agitators as cranks and conspiracy theorists. But despite experiencing a few setbacks (for example, many candidates backed by Moms for Liberty lost their bids for office in the November 2023 elections<sup>9</sup>), this bad-faith argument has gained traction. In states like Florida, Texas, and Utah, laws have been passed that limit discussion of and exposure to topics deemed "sensitive" (e.g., sex, gender, race, etc.). Allison Jennings-Roche argues, "Erasure is exactly the point for this movement. Of all the values and ideologies called up by those in the pro-censorship movement, the strongest impulse by far is the one that seeks to exclude specific groups from our public discourse and educational spheres."<sup>10</sup> We ignore them at our peril. If academic librarians are to become better advocates for our colleagues, it is necessary for us to build an awareness of the tactics these individuals and groups are using to challenge materials.

Emily J. M. Knox, one of the few scholars who investigates how these groups discuss and justify their actions, has found that these groups have three essential concerns:

First, they saw contemporary society as being in a state of decline and were concerned with preserving the innocence of children in the midst of this decay. Second, they constructed public institutions as symbols of the community that must represent their values and aid parents in their difficult role as boundary setters. Finally, challengers demonstrated a reverence for the books as a material object and employed common sense interpretive strategies.<sup>11</sup>

All these themes can be identified in the current efforts to challenge library materials.

BookLooks.org, for example, is a website that focuses on reviewing books for objectionable content, like profanity or sexual themes, that challengers see as a threat to morality. To illustrate, concerns with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* are "profanity and derogatory terms; sexual activities including sexual assault and molestation; alcohol use; inflammatory racial and religious commentary and references."<sup>12</sup> For challengers, book content has a kind of mimetic power; mere exposure to ideas may corrupt a reader and compel them to act.<sup>13</sup> Challengers employ "commonsense" methods of interpreting texts that presumes a literal and singular meaning; context is immaterial.<sup>14</sup> BookLooks reports are simply lists of decontextualized excerpts designed to lead to singular interpretations. These can serve as tools for parents to not only remove "objectional content" from public schools and libraries, but to create institutions that mirror their values. Challengers defend their approach by claiming that they do not censor; rather, they are concerned with "age-appropriate" material, and BookLooks' six-level rating system is no different.<sup>15</sup> Cherry-picking excerpts allows a haphazard "I know it when I see it" approach rather than applying consistent tests like those found in the law (e.g., the Miller Test).

## **A Call to Action**

Where do libraries stand in this discussion? Article VII of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, "All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use,"<sup>16</sup> including students and minors. This position supports the stance that parents and guardians have the right and the responsibility to determine their children's—*but only their children's*—access to library resources.<sup>17</sup> Parents do not have the right to restrict access to information for anyone outside their family.

Common pushback against ALA is often along the lines of "How dare ALA foist their policies on me," or "How can this national organization set standards at my local level?" ALA's current policies are designed for isolated incidents, not coordinated, sustained attacks. The time has come for library workers to re-engage with our principles of intellectual freedom. In the new political and information environments, our established policies and principles have become subject to withering attacks. We can no longer take it for granted that intellectual freedom is a cherished goal. As a profession we need to make the positive case for intellectual freedom. And we need to do so with language that our local communities can understand.

These are difficult times for the nation, for libraries, and especially library workers. As of right now, academic libraries have largely been insulated from these campaigns. But make no mistake, we need to be prepared. And the best way to be prepared is to support those who are already suffering under this moral panic. Book challengers use emotional appeals supported with pretzel logic. However, emotional arguments can be very effective, particularly when the media advances these scare narratives. You will need to go above and beyond explaining away the weak reasoning of this crop of organized challengers. Talk to your local public librarians and school librarians. Ask what kind of help they need and then help them get it. Go to your local government meetings, especially school boards. Join organizations like EveryLibrary and Unite Against Book Bans. Educate your communities wherever and however you can about the positive case for inclusive library collections. Educating those policy makers will be much easier when they are not engaged in a contentious environment. Early and strong communications should help build relationships and provide a foundational understanding of some of the principles of librarianship.

You might feel that it is late to be engaging in these activities. But as the old adage states, the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago; the next best time is now. We need protect our fellow library workers and the tenets of intellectual freedom. We need to plant trees now. ❧

## Notes

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