INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM FOR TEENS
ALA Editions purchases fund advocacy, awareness, and accreditation programs for library professionals worldwide.
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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Freedom and Young Adult Librarianship: An Overview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before a Challenge Occurs: How to Prepare Yourself and Your Staff</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristin Fletcher-Spear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to Do When a Challenge Happens to You</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly Tyler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Freedom: Programming and Marketing</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Jensen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access in the Digital World</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Braun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIXES</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Most Challenged YA Books, 2006–2011</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: The Value of Young Adult Literature</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: YALSA's Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth: Young Adults Deserve the Best</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Current Research Related to Young Adult Services, 2006–2009: A Supplement Compiled by the YALSA Research Committee</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Interpretations of ALA's Library Bill of Rights</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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I DEDICATE THIS TO my mom, Kay Fletcher, who gave me the foundation that fostered my passion of intellectual freedom. I thank Howard Rosenbaum at Indiana University. Without his intellectual freedom course at Indiana University, I would have floundered in the IF issues I’ve had in my career. Jason, thank you for all the love and support. You and our kids are my life.

—Kristin

Ken, you are my partner in life and work. Thank you for giving me time, your keen librarian’s eye for detail, and boundless moral support while I was working on this book and my many other projects that don’t offer an opportunity for me to show you public gratitude. Without you and Julian, life would be dull indeed.

—Kelly

We also thank the authors who contributed chapters to this guide. Their expertise in their areas are what made them perfect candidates for their chapters: Stevie, Linda, and Karen, thank you for your dedication to this title and to teen library services.

—Kristin and Kelly
I am pleased to see not only a new, updated edition of what should probably be considered a YA-professional classic, but also that the authors have taken an issue-oriented, contextual approach, recognizing both the similarities and differences between school and public libraries. It could have been easy to list all the titles of interest to young adults that have been challenged over the years, along with their reviews. This would have only perpetuated the myth that reviews can somehow “save” librarians under challenge or attack by censors. Often the title being challenged has never been reviewed with the YA audience in mind, or the age ranges for the title suggested by the reviewer do not support the age of the user on whose behalf the challenge is being made. In fact, the variation and possible inaccuracy in suggested age ranges across library review media could almost be viewed as an indirect contributor to challenges. Reviews may support the fact that the decision to purchase something for the collection that upsets the challenger was not arbitrary, but they are good for little else.

Chapter 2 looks particularly valuable, not only because it covers the open “dirty little secret” of self-censorship—that is, not buying something you know the young adults would love because you do not want to get yourself in trouble. One can always sense an urge to self-censor when YA librarians start talking about appropriateness for the YA collection. This happens frequently with graphic novels, for example. Separate YA collections attract attention, which is what
they are supposed to do for YAs, but disapproving adults and colleagues also notice what is in them; hence the concern over “appropriateness,” or in the school context, “age-appropriateness.” These discussions frequently attempt to sound like literary criticism, when they are really about political fear. I ran into this once with a seventh grade teacher who participated in a discussion of *Sold* by Patricia McCormick that I was leading for a local library system. Everyone in the group, including the squirming teacher (the only nonlibrarian in the group) who kept bringing up appropriateness, agreed that the book had an important theme (sexual trafficking), that kids would be interested in and like it, and that kids could read it, so I pointed out that this was a political problem, not an appropriateness problem. The urge to self-censor is probably as strong as the urge to run for the hills when challenged, but because it is often hard to predict what item, specifically, will set someone off, doing it for one title may just be self-defeating in some other way and may inevitably lead to a delusional complacency over challenges.

The necessity of having a materials selection policy should go without saying, but there are still librarians who feel that, if they do not let anyone know what they are doing, they can get away with it in perpetuity. Hammering out a policy that should include, among other provisions, how one purchases possibly controversial material for teens, and how the community can challenge items in the collection, is a clarifying professional exercise and usually quite helpful in explaining librarian decision making to the public (if it is not filed in a drawer immediately upon completion, which is often the case, or lost in a huge procedural manual). A selection policy should be immediately handy and available when staff members need to refer to it or use it in discussions with users.

Another use for the policy is in staff training, which the authors discuss in a section called “Preparing Staff for Questions and Potential Challenges.” If a library’s commitment to intellectual freedom is to succeed, the entire staff needs to be on board, from the janitor to the library/school board chair. It can be scary to be on the receiving end of an angry or upset challenger, especially if the staff member agrees with the objections presented, so there has to be lots of behind-the-scenes discussion and practice for responding interpersonally, as well as understanding when to refer a challenger to a higher
level staff member, when to use a request for reconsideration form, or how to get the right tone into a written response. Intellectual freedom needs to be managed in such a way that it is part of the fabric of everyday library practice, not an occasional exercise in crisis management.

I have often said that, if it means the difference between having something available and being forced to censor it because of objections to the cover, take the cover off and keep the book. While I consider myself to be an intellectual freedom purist, meaning that people, regardless of age, should be able to pursue their interests in libraries without interference, the real world often does not allow it. One looks for the best pragmatic compromises, so I look forward to the potential solutions section in chapter 3 which will, no doubt, cover the “tap on the shoulder” of users viewing graphic sex on unfiltered computers, the ethics of temporary reserve shelves and parenting collections, and the joys of managing DVD collections for young adults rated by the Motion Picture Association of America. The American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) has vast information available on promulgating intellectual freedom in libraries as well as on what to do when something happens in the trenches of real life. OIF is prominent in the list of important resources provided in this book.

It does no good to resist challenges if nobody knows either that something has been challenged or that you have resisted it, so I am glad to see that marketing and programming are included in chapter 4. Because intellectual freedom seems an abstraction until censorship happens to you personally, many teens who have never experienced it this way need practice thinking about it as new abstract thinking abilities develop. One of the most famous of these YA think-about-it programs was the human chain symbolizing chained books that Cathie Dunn Macrae’s (former editor of Voice of Youth Advocates) Young Adult Advisory Committee did at the Boulder (Colorado) Public Library some years back. They also went to the trouble of writing a play about censorship, only to be banned from performing it after being booked in several local schools. I suspect few of them consider intellectual freedom to be an abstraction anymore.

Because the Internet and cell phones are ubiquitous in YA life now, I am glad to see that social networking success stories are in-
cluded, especially since Facebook has become so contentious in terms of privacy issues, both among teens themselves and between teens and adults. Intellectual freedom now covers much more than just challenges to collection items.

If the existence of this book does nothing more than help YA librarians think better about troubling intellectual freedom issues with more clarity buoyed by increased intestinal fortitude, it will have done its job. I do think, however, that it should also stand as a reminder that the most important issue in YA services is still remembering who the primary client is, namely, the young adult. To serve young adults well, YA librarians need to be street smart and politically savvy about intellectual freedom issues. This book goes a long way in helping them do that. Otherwise, they stand the risk of being paralyzed because they are looking over their shoulders constantly for real and imaginary censors.
IN 1999 TOM REYNOLDS asked readers of Alki, the Washington Library Association’s journal, to consider what age group is most affected by intellectual freedom issues:

The answer . . . is teenagers. Take a look at ALA’s list of the most frequently challenged or banned books . . . . What do these eighty titles have in common? Most are either written for or are popular with teen readers, or are of such literary value that they regularly appear on high school reading lists.¹

He also questions the wisdom of withholding digital content from minors, explaining that libraries have a responsibility to teach young adults how to use the Internet rather than blocking material that may be questionable.

Reynolds’s article, with updates to some of the names and dates, could have been written now, more than a decade later. In 2011 seven of the top ten most challenged books, based on instances reported to the ALA’s OIF, were written for teens (and strong argument could be made to consider an eighth, To Kill a Mockingbird, in that category).² The Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA): passed in 2001, “imposes certain types of requirements on any school or library that receives funding for Internet access or internal connections from the E-rate program.”³ Those requirements often mean filtering, but also mandate that schools create Internet safety
policies and educate students on how to safely and smartly navigate content online. Privacy, whether learning how to maintain it on social networking sites or ensuring that a teen’s borrowing history remains known to that teen only, is another aspect of intellectual freedom for YA library staff to consider.

“Society and libraries vacillate between allowing YAs to behave responsibly while at the same time wanting to protect them,” Patrick Jones, Michele Gorman, and Tricia Stuelentrop noted in 2004, hitting at the very heart of what makes defining intellectual freedom for young adults so tricky for parents and educators as well as library staff. In the Library Bill of Rights, ALA argues that libraries should offer materials on all viewpoints, challenge censorship, and ensure that each person’s right to accessing all library materials is open and not prevented by race, religion, or age, among other factors. But the profession’s ideals do not always match up with those espoused by governments and school boards, political groups, or individuals. This is where a school librarian, YA librarian, or library worker’s expertise in protecting teens’ freedom to read and ability to access material online is most important.

DEFINING INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Intellectual freedom, broadly speaking, is an individual’s right to seek out information of any kind and enjoy the free expression of ideas and information. It is the foundation of democracy and a cornerstone of librarianship.

In the context of librarianship, intellectual freedom is sometimes seen simply as fighting against banning books or challenging libraries’ ability to keep certain items in their collections. While challenges and book bans are the more highly charged or visible aspects of intellectual freedom, to limit the definition to challenges and book banning is highly reductive.

Carrying controversial materials and defending a young adult’s right to access them do likely rank highly in a teen librarian’s intellectual freedom priorities. But library staff who work with teens may find themselves defending the rights of their patrons beyond materials: they may need to argue in favor of teens’ ability to hang out in the library’s public computer lab after school or the right to privacy,
explaining to parents that they cannot see a list of materials recently borrowed by their children; school librarians may need to explain to administrators why the school should consider unblocking YouTube for educational use during the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Teen Tech Week. Intellectual freedom within libraries has grown to include the rights of library patrons to access digital content on library computers, to have their checkout records maintained privately, to enjoy the same access to public spaces within a library, all no matter a patron’s age, personal political viewpoints, race, or religion, among other factors. It can also mean examining whether a library self-censors by deciding not to collect materials that could engender controversy or undue attention. This book intends to offer guidance and consideration to the ever-expanding universe of intellectual freedom for teen library staff and school librarians.

**ALA AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM**

The Library Bill of Rights was first published by ALA in 1939 and has been amended six times. ALA’s commitment to intellectual freedom issues is stated clearly and plainly within:

> The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

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.

Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

Libraries that make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.


Given the profession’s commitment to supporting intellectual freedom, ALA created OIF in 1967, charging it with “implementing ALA policies concerning the concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the Library Bill of Rights, the Association’s basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials.”6 OIF’s mission remains educating libraries and the general public about intellectual freedom and the important role that it plays in libraries. Led by Judith Krug until her death in 2009 and currently led by Barbara Jones, OIF collects statistics about intellectual freedom, particularly challenges, and offers support and resources for library staff handling intellectual freedom issues. In addition, OIF publishes *The Intellectual Freedom Manual*, soon to be in its ninth edition; creates toolkits to aid library staff in understanding intellectual freedom issues; and sponsors Banned Books Week, a celebration founded in 1982 by Krug to honor authors and books that faced censorship and to draw attention to the First Amendment.

In 1969 ALA established the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) as a First Amendment legal defense fund, although the foundation does more than support librarians and libraries embroiled in free speech–related litigation. FTRF is directly involved in legal cases, both as plaintiff and amicus, and defends library customers by arguing against access to confidential records at the library. In addition, FTRF offers legal and financial help, including grants, to libraries, librarians, and other literary
professionals (including publishers, authors, booksellers, journalists, and others) facing attempts to restrict materials and services. FTRF is an affiliate of ALA but works closely with the organization.

**INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM FOR YOUNG ADULTS**

In the same year that ALA founded OIF, its members debated whether intellectual freedom applied to children and teen library users during a preconference event in San Francisco. More than 400 librarians attended the session, “Intellectual Freedom and the Teenager.” Panelist Edgar Z. Friedenberg was emphatic that those under 18 deserved the same rights as any other library visitor: “The library is just one more place where kids are taught they are second-class citizens. They learn this . . . from the very atmosphere of the place.”

Preconference attendees agreed strongly with Friedenberg, enough that age was added as an area of concern to the next revision of the Library Bill of Rights. American courts have also found that minors should be allowed First Amendment protections, although not quite as many as those over the age of 18. The U.S. Supreme Court has argued over the years that minors must have access to “a broad range of information for intellectual growth,” arguing that “students ‘do not shed their constitutional rights . . . at the schoolhouse gate’” and “‘[p]eople are unlikely to become well-functioning, independent-minded adults and responsible citizens if they are raised in an intellectual bubble.’”

Even with these legal protections and the generally supportive view of library staff, minors still face roadblocks to content at the library, school or public, including the removal or restriction of print materials and the filtering of online content.

**CHALLENGES AND THE YA LIBRARIAN**

Intellectual freedom plays an important role in the professional lives of YA librarians and school librarians because the vast majority of challenges to materials and access is aimed at those under 18. OIF maintains a database of challenges, tracking the number of challenges per
year, the reasons for challenges, the initiators of challenges, and the types of institutions in which a challenge takes place. Since 1990 OIF has logged nearly 11,000 challenges; more than 60 percent of them were originated by a parent, with more than two-thirds of challenges taking place in schools or school libraries.9

A book challenge is a form of censorship and can lead to a ban, but it is important not to use these terms interchangeably. Challenges and book banning are facets of censorship, which cuts a far broader swath against intellectual freedom than the facets alone. Censorship is a systematic approach to preventing speech that may be considered objectionable. A challenge is a “formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness,” and OIF only tracks those challenges that are reported to them or seen in the news; they assume that as many as four or five incidents occur for every one that is reported or covered by media.10 For a book to be considered banned, it must be removed from a library. Each year, OIF compiles a list of the most frequently challenged books, drawn from challenges reported to them. Approximately 300 to 500 challenges are reported to OIF each year, and it is fair to assume that many of them begin in either the children’s or teens’ department.

Challenges are launched for a variety of reasons and are not limited to any side of the political spectrum. *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been challenged for offensive language by left-leaning individuals and organizations over their use of the word *nigger,* the picture book *And Tango Makes Three* is one of the most challenged books in the United States over its depiction of two penguins as being gay, even though it contains no sexually suggestive or explicit content. Challenges are aimed at books that are currently breathtakingly popular (*The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* series) or are older or more obscure (*The Summer of My German Soldier*, originally published in 1973, appeared on the 2001 most-challenged list).11 The most oft-cited reason for challenging materials is sexually explicit content, followed by offensive language, and “unsuited to age group,” according to OIF. It is worth noting, however, that the fourth most popular reason for challenging materials is “other.”

Challenges take place in all kinds of libraries and come from a variety of sources. The stereotypical challenge begins with an agi-
tated, organized group or an irate parent, but it can originate from any source. YA specialists can talk about books that individual patrons have suggested be added to a restricted area rather than the YA section, or when a colleague from another department expressed shock that the YA section offered a display of books about extreme sports, as they suggested risky behavior to teen patrons. Ask any school librarian, and she is sure to discuss the limitations that her principal or a colleague has tried to place on materials in her library. In fact, schools often face challenges that go beyond something a parent, student, administrator, or staff member does not want to see on the library shelves. Many classes have required reading lists, and secondary schools often send students home for the summer accompanied by a reading list. Objections are often made against titles on those reading lists, be they classics or more modern releases.

Challenges cannot be avoided. No matter how careful a library believes it can be, someone somewhere is going to take offense to the materials that a library collects (or chooses not to collect). Even librarians who engage in self-censorship—an ongoing, little-discussed approach in which libraries, particularly those that serve large young adult populations, opt not to collect materials of great popularity or literary merit that are likely to garner complaints—cannot ward off potential challenges. A 2009 School Library Journal study found that as many as 70 percent of the school librarians they surveyed engaged in self-censorship because of concerns that parents may object, yet nearly half (49 percent) admitted to facing a challenge situation in the library.

How is a librarian to cope with these odds? Well, as the old saying goes, the best offense is a good defense, and librarians will find many stellar defenses in chapter 2, which details how a library and its staff can prepare themselves by creating a materials selection policy and delineating a formal policy for addressing library patron complaints and challenges. And chapter 3 provides guidance for handling a challenge from both internal and external audiences and defending the library publicly.
Chapter One

OTHER INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM ISSUES FOR TEEN LIBRARY PATRONS

Challenges and removals of physical materials are the most visible threat to intellectual freedom for teens, but content filtering and ignoring minors’ right to privacy are significant issues for teen librarians to consider as well. CIPA requires libraries to implement an Internet safety policy. Those libraries who receive E-rate discounts, Library Services and Technology Act grant funds, or funding under title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act must filter or block “illegal visual depictions accessible on the Internet.”13 Although CIPA ostensibly applies only to obscene content, pornography, and speech that is not protected constitutionally, many filters block content so broadly that they restrict minors’ ability to access constitutionally protected speech online. In addition, many libraries and school districts use CIPA as a reason to block social networking and gaming sites, despite the law not requiring them to do so and research that shows that youth benefit from exposure and instruction in using these sites responsibly.14

Librarians need to be advocates for teens when it comes to the Internet, championing the positive outcomes of social networking and gaming and offering instruction on how to be smart, ethical users of technology. As social networking has grown in the past few years, library privacy concerns have grown to include teaching teens about what content is appropriate to share online and what should be kept private. And, in the age of torrenting and remixing content online, teens need to learn the importance of properly using—or not using—others’ copyrighted materials. How can society expect teens to learn that downloading music without paying for it is often illegal, if they are not given the opportunity to do so?

One important tool working in libraries’ favor is the U.S. Broadband Data Improvement Act of 2008. As part of that legislation, schools and libraries that receive E-rate funding are required to teach students how to behave online, including how to safely use social networking sites and chat rooms, as well as how to be aware of and handle cyberbullying. In addition, libraries can take advantage of events like YALSA’s Teen Tech Week, an annual celebration of

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technology and teens at the library, which offers an excellent opportunity for schools and libraries to safely explore the importance of open access to teens with parents, guardians, educators, and administrators. Chapter 5 further explores intellectual freedom online and how librarians and educators can further stand up for teens’ rights online.

Privacy and ethical use of online information is a major intellectual freedom issue for library patrons, and teens are no exception. Privacy at the library includes a teen’s right to check out materials that he wants to, with input from a parent or guardian; it also includes a teen’s right to have her library records kept confidential. A parent who needs to pay late fees may innocently ask to see a teen’s checkout history to make sure the charges are correct. While this is often done benevolently, there may be materials that a teen has checked out that she does not want a parent to see and, in some cases, it may be important that a parent not know about, such as in suspicion of abuse. This is an ethical issue that comes up repeatedly, and likely will, as long as teens see the library as a place where they can find answers to sometimes difficult questions. Librarians need to be prepared to deal with difficult conversations, and it helps to integrate a privacy policy into a library’s guiding documents.

**CONCLUSION**

There is a fine line between teaching responsibility and protecting youths from those materials that may not be appropriate for them. That line, many librarians believe, should be set by the young adult, with input from the young person’s family, not a government entity or a concerned citizen. Unfortunately, many government entities and concerned citizens feel otherwise, and those efforts are often focused on teens.

As librarians, it is important to remember that our responsibility is ultimately to teen patrons, to ensure that the library remains a safe space for them to meet their informational needs, whether it is finding statistics online to support a high school research paper, a magazine to entertain them, or the answers to difficult questions about the turbulent world in which they live. By ensuring that they can
trust the library to help them find whatever they need, in whatever materials are appropriate, without judgment, we can ensure that they continue to find the library a necessary resource.

NOTES


14. Ibid.
A

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (Alexie), 86
access, digital. See digital access
access to information, 112
access to resources and services in the school library media program, interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights and, 119–120
administration competencies for librarians serving youth (YALSA), 111
advocating for digital access, 71–75
age ranges for books, 22–23
ALA (American Library Association).
See also Library Bill of Rights; OIF
Banned Books Week resources, 51
FTRF (Freedom to Read Foundation), 4–5
ALA Washington Office, 79
Alexie, Sherman, 86
Alice series (Naylor), 86–88
Allende, Isabel, 105
Alvarez, Julia, 105
Amazing, Sarah, 50
American Association of School Librarians, 33
American Booksellers Foundation, 51
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 34
American Indians in Children’s Literature (website), 54
And Tango Makes Three (Parnell and Richardson), 6
Anderson, Laurie Halse, 63

Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories
(Crutcher), 98–99
a

audience
defining your, 48
going to your, 48–49
involving your, 49–50
for YALSA competencies for librarians serving youth, 109

B

background on young adult literature, 104–105
Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read (Doyle), 50
Banned Books Week
craft ideas and resources for, 57–58
marketing and programming resources for, 51
overview, 4, 49–50
social media and, 59–60
Barshegian, Tina, 70
Belief.net, 70
Bell, M. A., 114
Bible, 46–47
blocking digital access, 70–71
Blume, Judy, 54, 99
book banning. See also Banned Books Week
challenges compared, 6
described, 6
book challenges. See challenges
Book Quote Celebration, 55
Booklist, 20
Boyle, T. C., 105
Bradbury, Ray, 54
Broadband Data Improvement Act, 8

INDEX
INDEX

C
Capwiz, 79–80
cataloging department, censoring by, 24
*The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger), 94
censorship, 29
“Censorship: What do school library specialists really know? A consideration of students’ rights, the law and implications for a new education paradigm” (Luckenbill and Luckenbill), 116
Chabon, Michael, 105
challenges. See also most challenged YA books (2006–2011); receiving a challenge
book banning compared, 6
conducting a challenge hearing, 38–41
defined, 6
OIF database of challenges to materials and access, 5–6
overview, 5–7
questions and potential challenges, preparing staff for, 16–19
reasons for, 6
sources for, 6–7
training staff on resolving, 18–19
types of challenges, 28–29
Chicago Public Library, 69
Chobsky, Stephen, 92
*The Chocolate War* (Cormier), 95
CIPA (Children’s Internet Protection Act), 1, 8, 70, 115
collection development
censoring, 24
policies, 19–21
collection development statement. See materials selection policy
collection management policies, 21–23
Collins, Suzanne, 52, 85
communication, marketing and outreach, 110–111
competencies for librarians serving youth (YALSA)
access to information, 112
administration, 111
        audiences for, 109
communication, marketing and outreach, 110–111
knowledge of client group, 110
knowledge of materials, 111–112
leadership and professionalism, 109–110
overview, 108–109
services, 112–113
using, 108
complaint procedure, creating a library user, 14–16
computer use policies, 75–76
Condi, Ally, 54
conducting a challenge hearing after the hearing, 40–41
before the hearing, 38–40
during the hearing, 40
overview, 38
supporters, rallying, 39
content filtering, 8
Cormier, Robert, 95
cosplay, 55
*Crank* (Hopkins), 90
Crutcher, Chris, 54, 98, 99
current research related to young adult services (2006–2009 by YALSA Research Committee), 114–116
D
*The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* (Hentoff), 53–54
Defending Access with Confidence (staff training module), 19
Delirium book series (Oliver), 54
Detour for Emmy (Reynolds), 100
device policies, 76–77
digital access
advocating for, 71–75
blocking, 70–71
interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights on, 117–118
legal issues, 78–80
myths about, 70–71
overview, 67–68
policies affecting
computer use policies, 75–76
www.alastore.ala.org
device policies, 76–77
social media policies, 77–78
resources on, 80–81
“A Dirty Little Secret” (Whelan), 25
“Dispelling Myths About Blocked Websites in Schools” (Barshegian), 70
DOPA (Deleting Online Predators Act), 67
Douglas, Sara, 30, 31, 32–33, 34
Doyle, Robert P., 50

E
E-rate funding, 8
The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things (Mackler), 94–95
electronic mailing lists, 33–34
emotional response to receiving a challenge, avoiding an, 31
ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board), 118
ethical dilemmas, training staff on, 18
ethical use of online information, 9
“Everybody else is doing it! Multimedia & Internet at Schools” (Bell), 114
“Evidence of student voices: Finding meaning in intellectual freedom” (Steadman), 116
expression of concern, 15, 28

F
Facebook, 72
Fahrenheit 451 (Bradbury), 54, 55
fanart, 55
fanfiction, 55
“Female sexuality in young adult literature” (Jones), 115
filtering content. See content filtering
First Amendment, 17, 28, 34
First Amendment in Schools Toolkit, 34
Flashcards of My Life: A Novel (Harper), 97
Forever. . . (Blume), 99
formal complaints, 15
forms for written complaints, 15–16, 44
40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute), 48

Franklin, R. E., 114
“Free Access to Libraries for Minors,” 27
Friedenberg, Edgar Z., 5
Friend, Natasha, 90
Frilot, Holly Thompson, 52
Frontline series on the teenage brain (on PBS), 48
FTRF (Freedom to Read Foundation), 4–5, 34

G
gaming, blocking sites for, 8
Glendale Public Library, 12
Go Ask Alice, 70
Google Docs, 72–73
Gorman, Michele, 2
The Gospel According to Harry Potter (Neal), 49
Gossip Girl series (Ziegesar), 89–90
graphic novels, 62
Greco, Albert, 105
Green, John, 59

H
Halls, Kelly Miner, 54
Harper, Charise Mericle, 97
Harris, Robie H., 98
Harry Potter series (Rowling), 22, 49, 55, 100–103
Henkes, Kevin, 97
Hentoff, Nat, 54
Hirsh, Kimberly, 30, 31
His Dark Materials trilogy (Pullman), 95–96
Hopkins, Ellen, 22, 90
Huckleberry Finn (Sawyer), 6
The Hunger Games (Collins), 52, 85

I
intellectual freedom. See also programming and marketing intellectual freedom
ALA and, 3–5
content filtering and, 8
defined, 2
in libraries, 2–3
Library Bill of Rights interpretation of, 119–120
INDEX

minors’ right to privacy and, 8, 9
overview, 2–3
policy, 44
separating books for younger teens
and older teens, 23
and young adult librarianship
challenges, 5–7
overview, 1–2
for young adults, 5
“Intellectual Freedom and the Teen-
ager” (conference session), 5
Intellectual Freedom Committee
(IFC), 28, 34
The Intellectual Freedom Manual, 4
International Reading Association
(Ira), 106
The Internet Girls (Myracle), 83–84
interpretation of the Library Bill of
Rights
on access for children and young
adults to nonprint materials,
117–118
on access to resources and services
in the school library media pro-
gram, 119–120
on labeling and rating systems,
122–123
on minors and Internet interactiv-
ity, 120–122
It’s Perfectly Normal: A Book about
Changing Bodies, Growing Up,
Sex, and Sexual Health (Harris),
98

L
labeling and rating systems, 23,
122–123
leadership and professionalism as
YALSA competencies for librari-
ans serving youth, 109–110
learning labs, 69
Lee, Harper, 93
legal issues
alerts, legislative, 79–80
digital access, 78–80
New York State education law on
Internet safety and appropriate
use, 78–79
Library Bill of Rights (ALA), 2, 3–4,
23. See also interpretation of the
Library Bill of Rights
Library Journal, 20
Library Media Connections, 20
list of most frequently challenged
books, OIF compilation of, 6
literature, expanded definition of, 105
Lord, Catherine, 19
Luckenbill, J. F., 116
Luckenbill, W. B., 116
Lush (Friend), 90–91
Luther, Martin, 47

M
Mackler, Carolyn, 94
mailing lists, electronic, 33–34
marketing, communication, and
outreach, 110–111
Matched book series (Condi), 54
materials selection policy, 11–14, 44
McDaniel, Lurlene, 22
media center and materials selection
policy, 13–14
Meyer, Stephenie, 91
Michael L. Printz Award, 105
Milliern, Jacqui, 63
minors and Internet interactivity,
interpretation of the Library Bill
of Rights on, 120–122
minors’ right to privacy, 8, 9
mission statement, basing your mate-
rials selection policy on your
library’s, 12
Mitchell Community Library, 63

J
Jaeger, P., 115
Jones, C. E., 115
Jones, Patrick, 2

K
Kim, Dong Hwa, 84
Kirkus Review, 20
knowledge of client group as YALSA
competency for librarians serv-
ing youth, 110
knowledge of materials as YALSA
competency for librarians serv-
ing youth, 111–112
Krug, Judith, 4
most challenged YA books (2006–2011)

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (Alexie), 86
Alice series (Naylor), 86–88
Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories (Crutcher), 98–99
The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger), 94
The Chocolate War (Cormier), 95
Crank (Hopkins), 90
Detour for Emmy (Reynolds), 100
The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things (Mackler), 94–95
Flashcards of My Life: A Novel (Harper), 97
Forever . . . (Blume), 99
Gossip Girl series (Ziegesar), 89–90
Harry Potter series (Rowling), 100–103
His Dark Materials trilogy (Pullman), 95–96
The Hunger Games (Collins), 85
The Internet Girls (Myracle), 83–84
It’s Perfectly Normal: A Book about Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health (Harris), 98
To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee), 93
Lush (Friend), 90–91
Olive’s Ocean (Henkes), 97
The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chobsky), 92–93
Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology (Sonnie), 91
The Story of Life on the Golden Fields (Kim), 84
Twilight series (Meyer), 91–92
Whale Talk (Crutcher), 99
What My Mother Doesn’t Know (Sones), 88–89
Mountain Dew, 49
MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) movie ratings, 118
Myracle, Lauren, 83
myths about digital access, 70–71

N

National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), 34
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 35, 106
Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds, 87
Neal, Connie, 49
New Directions for Library Service to Young Adults, 106
New York State education law on Internet safety and appropriate use, 78–79
Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist (Cohn and Levithan), 31, 32, 34
Nike, 46
1984 (Orwell), 54
nonprint materials, access to. See digital access
Nooks, 77

O

Oates, Joyce Carol, 105
offensive language as reason for challenge, 6
OIF (Office for Intellectual Freedom) challenges to materials and access, database of, 5–6
list of most frequently challenged books, compilation of, 6
overview, 4
questions and answers to prepare for a challenge hearing, 40
statistics on challenged books, 29
support offered by, 33
Workbook for Selection Policy Writing, 30–31
older teen collection, separating out an, 22–23
Oliver, Lauren, 54
Olive’s Ocean (Henkes), 97
“One law with two outcomes: Comparing the implementation of CIPA in public libraries and schools” (Jaeger and Yan), 115
OpenCongress, 79
oral complaints, 15, 28
Orwell, George, 54
“other” as reason for challenge, 6
outreach, marketing, and communication, 110–111

P

Peck, Dale, 105
Pekoll, Kristin, 29, 31
INDEX

The Perks of Being a Wallflower
(Chbosky), 92–93
Pike, Christopher, 22
Pinterest, 73–74
Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers
(Blume), 54
Plainview School (DeKalb County, Alabama), 13–14
policies
collection development policies, 19–21
collection management policies, 21–23
on digital access
computer use policies, 75–76
device policies, 76–77
social media policies, 77–78
knowledge of your library’s, 30–31
materials selection policy, 11–14
Portland Public Library, 77
preparation for yourself and staff before a challenge occurs
collection development policies, 19–21
collection management policies, 21–23
complaint procedure, creating a library user, 14–16
materials selection policy, developing a, 11–14
overview, 11
questions and potential challenges, preparing staff for, 16–19
self-censorship, 23–25
privacy, minors’ right to, 8, 9
“A private (school) matter: The state of materials challenges in private college preparatory school libraries in the southeast United States” (Franklin), 114–115
procedures, knowledge of your library’s, 30–31
professional detachment, 18
professional reviews used to build collections, 20–21
professionalism and leadership as YALSA competencies for librarians serving youth, 109–110
programming and marketing
intellectual freedom
audience
defining your, 48
getting message to your, 48–49
involving your, 49–50
Banned Books Week
craft ideas and resources for, 57–58
marketing and programming resources for, 51
social media and, 59–60
defining your message, 47
foundation for intellectual freedom, building a, 44–45
list of suggestions for, 52–56
multiple formats used for, 46
overview, 44, 45–47, 50
reader’s rights, 64–65
respect for teens’ choices, 62–63
with social media, 59–60
staff and, 61–62
steps for, 47
teen literature, 63–64
year-round promotion of intellectual freedom, 60–61
programming staff, censoring by, 24–25
Prose, Francine, 105
public attack, 28
Publisher’s Weekly, 20
Pullman, Philip, 95
Q
questions and answers to prepare for a challenge hearing, 40
questions and potential challenges, preparing staff for, 16–19
R
rating and labeling systems, 23, 122–123
rationales
contents of, 37
examples of, 38
overview, 36
reasons for writing, 36–37
reconsideration process, using a rationale during, 38
writing, 36–38

www.alastore.ala.org
INDEX

reader’s rights, 64–65
receiving a challenge
conducting a challenge hearing, 38–41
emotional response to, avoiding an, 31
hearing and respecting the concern, 32–33
overview, 27–28, 29–30
policies and procedures, knowledge of your library’s, 30–31
rationales, writing, 36–38
support and assistance when, 33–35
written complaints, reviewing, 35–36
reconsideration process, using a rationale during, 38
Reese, Debbie, 54
regional legislative alerts, 79–80
research related to young adult services, current (2006–2009 by YALSA Research Committee), 114–116
resources
Banned Books Week
craft ideas and resources for, 57–58
marketing and programming resources for, 51
on digital access, 80–81
respect for teens’ choices, 62–63
reviews used to build collections, professional, 20–21
Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology (Sonnie), 91
Reynolds, Marilyn, 100
Reynolds, Tom, 1
Rowling, J. K., 22, 100
S
Salinger, J. D., 94
School Library Journal, 20
self-censorship, 7, 23–25
separate space for teen collection in library, 21
sexually explicit content as reason for challenge, 6
SLATE (Support for Learning and Teaching of English), 35
social media. See also specific social media policies, 77–78
programming and marketing intellectual freedom with, 59–60
social networking, blocking sites for, 8
Sones, Sonya, 88
Sonnie, Amy, 91
staff. See also preparation for yourself and staff before a challenge occurs
programming and marketing intellectual freedom and, 61–62
programming staff, censoring by, 24–25
training for, 16–19, 45
state legislative alerts, 79–80
Statement of Concern (Reconsideration Form), 15–16
statistics on challenged books, 29
Steadman, W., 116
Stine, R.L., 22
The Story of Life on the Golden Fields (Kim), 84
Suellentrop, Tricia, 2
The Summer of My German Soldier (Greene), 6
support and assistance when receiving a challenge, 33–35
supporters, rallying, 39
T
Teen Librarian Toolbox (TLT), 52
teen literature. See young adult literature
Teen Tech Week (YALSA), 3, 8–9
To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee), 6, 93
training for staff members, 16–19, 45
Twilight series (Meyer), 91–92
Twitter, 74
U
“unsuited to age group” as reason for challenge, 6
V
values of young adult literature, 106–107
Voices of Youth Advocates, 20
Voigt, Cynthia, 23

www.alastore.ala.org
W
Warkentin, Elizabeth, 52
Warren-Trumbull County Public Library, 50
Washington-Centerville Public Library, 52
West Bend Community Memorial Library, 29
Westbrook, Josh, 48
Whale Talk (Crutcher), 99
What My Mother Doesn’t Know (Sones), 88–89
When She Hollers (Voigt), 23
white paper discussing value of young adult literature, 104–107
Wintergirls (Anderson), 63
Workbook for Selection Policy Writing (OIF), 30–31
written complaints, 28, 35–36

X
Xtranormal, 74–75

Y
YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association). See also competencies for librarians serving youth (YALSA)
Intellectual Freedom Interest Group, 33
position on young adult literature, 105–107
Teen Tech Week, 3, 8–9
YALSA-bk electronic mailing list, 61
YALSAblog, 80
Yan, Z., 115
year-round promotion of intellectual freedom, 60–61
You Wouldn’t Want to Be book series, 25
YouMedia, 69
young adult literature. See also most challenged YA books (2006–2011)
background on, 104–105
defined, 104–105
intellectual freedom and, 63–64
teachers preventing older teens from reading, 22
values of, 106–107
White Paper discussing value of, 104–107
YALSA’s position on, 105–107
younger teen collection, separating out a, 22–23
YouTube, 69, 72, 79
Ypulse, 48

Z
Ziegesar, Cecily von, 89