

# BEYOND BANNED BOOKS

Defending Intellectual Freedom  
throughout Your Library

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ALA Office for  
Intellectual Freedom

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## FOREWORD

**Martin Garnar**

Dean of the Kraemer Family Library  
University of Colorado Colorado Springs



**WHEN WE** talk about censorship with people who don't work in libraries, it's pretty clear that Banned Books Week has turned into one of our profession's most successful marketing campaigns. People will stop me and talk about their favorite banned books, and how it made them feel like a rebel to read something that bothered someone else. At my academic library, students are incensed each year by our display of challenged books, since they cannot fathom why anyone would want to take a book off the shelf just because they don't agree with it.

"Just don't read it if you don't like it!"

"How can people be so ignorant?"

"No one should ever ban a book."

Banned Books Week itself can become the target of complaints. At my previous institution, a faculty member complained about our library's Banned Books Week display, contending that we were misleading our users by suggesting that all of the books in the display had been banned, when some had "merely" been challenged. In response, a staff member changed the sign from "Banned Books" to "Controversial Titles" without consulting the display's creators. Since no books were removed from the display and the

display was not taken down, maybe you think it's a stretch to call this censorship, but I would argue that altering content because it makes someone uncomfortable or angry is leading you down that road.

When the conversation moves beyond books, the same people who will defend Harry Potter or their favorite graphic novel to their dying day don't seem to have a problem when a school district removes students' access to an entire suite of databases because of spurious complaints about pornography by one set of parents.

"There are some limits to what we should allow in schools."

"It's a shame, but they can just get the information from somewhere else."

These are quotes from a conversation I had about the wholesale removal of one vendor's databases from over 100 schools in my home state of Colorado. Who was I talking with? Someone who works with libraries.

Censorship is no longer just for books, nor has it been for quite a while. In these contentious times, free and unfettered access to information is more important than ever, and this book is coming out when we are at a professional crossroads: how to support intellectual freedom and equity, diversity, and inclusion all at the same time. The difficult process of updating the American Library Association's policy guidelines for library meeting rooms has highlighted the divide between those who feel there must be appropriate limits on who can use them (i.e., no Nazis) and those who see any limits as a slippery slope (i.e., "everyone" means everyone, even if they ultimately mean us harm). While this book can't bridge a decades-old divide, it does give us plenty to consider as Kristin Pekoll examines the many ways that access to information—especially of underrepresented perspectives—is being restricted beyond the banning of books.

## PREFACE

“You’re Going to Hell!”



**NOT YOU;** they were talking to me. That was the message left for me on a voicemail ten years ago. Librarians rarely choose their career path with a desire to occupy the spotlight or be in the center of a controversy. I know I didn’t. I knew at the age of fourteen that I wanted to be a librarian and that I believed in this profession and its values. I wanted to work with smart people, kind people, open-minded people. I wanted to work with young people and steer them towards a bigger, brighter, bolder future. I’m not a shy person or a conservative person, but I never imagined that I would become known (falsely) as a porn purveyor with a gay agenda, or that I would be told I was going to hell and I shouldn’t be around children. As distressing as these opinions were while I was in the midst of the situation, my values of intellectual freedom never wavered, which only reinforced the certainty that I had chosen my profession correctly.

In February 2009, I was the young adult librarian at the West Bend Community Memorial Library in Wisconsin. I had started working there while finishing my MLIS degree at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee in 2003. I loved working with teen volunteers and ordering young adult (YA) materials and growing as a young librarian. Posting booklists on library websites was a newer thing at the time, and I had just taken over the management of the website. I had no idea that one booklist would lead to a book challenge case

targeting over eighty LGBTQ books; those five months defined my career, and they are the reason why I work for the Office for Intellectual Freedom and the reason I wrote this book.

I close my eyes today and I can instantly remember sitting in my car in the library parking lot sobbing. The pounding thought in my head was "I just want this to be over" again and again and again. I remember the fear every time I saw I had a new voicemail message. I remember sitting across from the parents who were so upset about these LGBTQ books, while I was armed with as many sources as I could get to defend these books and the teens who read them. I started shaking during that meeting as they read out loud a scene from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. All my defenses were torn to shreds, when a parent glared at me and demanded to know if I was a mother. She said that I couldn't be a mother because no mother would promote this pornography. It took everything I had not to protectively cover the baby inside me.

I would call my mom. I would talk to my colleagues. I would vent to my husband. But it wasn't until I spoke with Angela Maycock at the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) that I felt someone understood the stress of the situation and completely validated my struggles. She made me laugh when things were anything but funny, and she reminded me how important these books were, especially in a community that claimed that "we don't have any gay kids here." I'm lucky and thankful to still be friends with Angela.

During the days of the challenge, while working at the library, I would put on my bravest face, even though I often felt I had no idea what I was doing. Now that I'm working in the same office that Angela Maycock once worked in, I realize that my experience is an incredibly common one for librarians who are going through a book challenge. Even the most seasoned librarians say they feel like they are being hit by a Mack truck or are staggering blind down a deserted street. Because you can read every book on intellectual freedom and book censorship; you can attend every webinar and conference session; you can memorize the website—but when a challenge happens to you, you still feel attacked, alone, and uncertain. Because every single intellectual freedom case is unique. You never know when it's going to happen. You never know who is going to be offended or why. And nowadays, you don't even know if it's going to be about a book. The challenge could be about a display or an artwork in the library, or about a library's social media post, or even about a database to which students have access in a school district.

With this book, I wanted to provide a resource that would help librarians when challenges arise that don't fit the traditional mold of *books*. Instead, they involve other media and formats. These challenges can involve art-works, displays and exhibits, programs, readers' advisory services and book-lists, social media, and even databases. I wanted to showcase these types of challenges because they are often misunderstood and underreported and it helps librarians appreciate the broad spectrum of resources they provide and the value they hold to the institution. We have to know about these challenges in order to uncover the resources that are needed to support the librarians confronted by those challenges. We can't fix a problem we don't know about.

I am in a unique position to see every challenge that is reported to the American Library Association. Not only do I see the reports, but I talk to the librarians involved in responding to the challenges, and I chronicle the details. When we, my colleagues and I at the Office for Intellectual Freedom, take a step back every year and look at the larger trends and issues that are surfacing, we see an increase in the challenges to library displays, to programs, and to reading lists. We see that social media posts are deleted because of their alleged racial bias, and pages are removed from books because of alleged political bias. We see a country where a president issues a cease-and-desist letter to a publisher of an upcoming book because the president doesn't like how he is portrayed in it. We see challenges of every type, in every kind of library, for every reason and by every kind of initiator.

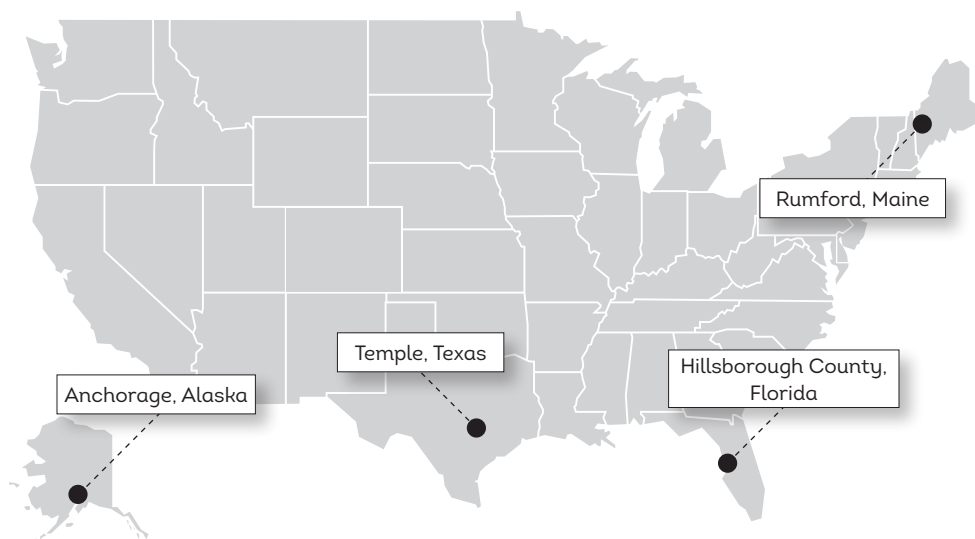
I am awed and inspired by the librarians, educators, and activists who are refusing to sit quietly while their rights are challenged and denied and they themselves are personally threatened and abused. It's important to me that I do what I can in supporting the push for equitable access, inclusive learning environments, and diverse voices in publishing and in education. I recognize my privilege of being a straight white woman in a field that is dominated by straight white women. I'm privileged to be able to publish this book, and if it can push the needle towards what is right and just and kind in this world, and if it can support and encourage librarians in their careers, I will consider the book successful.

In my work and in my writing, I often think gratefully of Michael Tyree and the West Bend community who walked alongside me during the challenge and remain my friends wherever life takes us. I thank Barbara Jones and the Office for Intellectual Freedom for taking a chance on this Wiscon-

sinite and giving me a home within the American Library Association. I am beholden to my family: my parents, Scott and Lynn, who have supported and loved me every day of my life; my kids, Joey and Annie, who give me hope for the future; and my husband, James, who holds us all together. And I am especially beholden to my mentor, Jamie LaRue; I am inspired by your peace and strength in the face of criticism, which has shown me that what people say does not make you who you are. Thank you for believing in me.

And finally, to internet trolls and book censors around the world and in my backyard, you know who you are—and thank you, for without you, none of this would have ever been possible. Through your challenges and criticisms I have learned the strength of my own convictions and my character.





# 1

## Displays and Exhibits

**“DESIGN CREATES CULTURE. CULTURE SHAPES VALUES. VALUES determine the future.”** This quote from the world-renowned designer and educator Robert L. Peters connects visual design with active verbs about how the world is perceived. Libraries, too, use visual design in displays and exhibits in order to connect users with information possibilities.

### Free-Range Browsing

The term *display* is often used casually by library staff to describe the placement of materials with the covers facing out to attract attention. The most common type of display in libraries is a book display. In *Creative Management of Small Public Libraries in the 21st Century*, author Cynthia Harbeson writes about the need for small libraries to establish their space as a community center through the intentional use of inviting displays and physical spaces that are welcoming and engaging.<sup>1</sup> She establishes a working definition for library displays by adapting the dictionary definition to the library environment: a display is “any creative arrangement of objects on view for a specific purpose.” A cousin of the display is the library exhibit. Exhibits are usually broader in their sources and materials than displays are. Exhibits often include more than a library’s internal collections, and in fact, sometimes

no library items are used in them at all. Exhibits may encompass artworks, artifacts, objects, and other materials. Exhibits can be online or physical and of any scale or duration. Most commonly, the materials in a library exhibit are curated from an outside source for a temporary loan. The sources can be large agencies, like museums or art galleries, or small groups, like Cub Scouts, photographers, or local historians. Harbeson distinguishes library displays from exhibits by the size of the project and the amount of planning, time, and resources that are invested in it.

It's common knowledge that most libraries are arranged with books placed upright on horizontal shelving with their spines facing outward and a directional label adhered to the spine. Usually the spine labels include the general collection area with a call number. These materials are organized systematically for retrieval and for the efficient use of space.

Alternatively, when librarians create displays from the materials in their collections, the intention is to showcase attractive book covers and highlight relevant topics or new materials. Displays differ from traditional organization by disregarding call numbers, collections, formats, and uniformity. Displays allow librarians to embrace their inner creative artist.

Displays have a multitude of purposes. They are attractive and eye-catching, and they often welcome and entice users into the space. Displays showcase materials that might otherwise get overlooked. Displays increase foot traffic to different areas within the building. Displays offer opportunities to cross-promote additional services and events in the library.

The market for display furniture, shelving, easels, signage, and accessories has grown exponentially in the last few decades. The funding available for creating displays has also increased. Terms like *visual merchandising* have spread beyond the retail industry to the information profession. Searching Pinterest, blogs, and social media for ideas for new displays can often stimulate a librarian's creativity. The range of complexity, skill, quality, and size of material displays can vary greatly. These variables may depend on the staff that libraries have available to devote to the projects, or they may simply depend on what space is available. Many newer libraries have prioritized display space with their designers and architects. By contrast, some rural or small neighborhood libraries are lucky if they can find display space along the top of a high bookshelf against a wall.

The libraries with the most successful displays mirror the practices and strategies of bookstores and other retailers. When priority is given to attracting customers and is shifted away from simply stocking inventory, the circu-

lation of library materials skyrockets. In a culture of selling and advertising, visual appeal and catching the attention of the audience are as important for the Boise Public Library as they are for Barnes & Noble.

Some libraries don't understand the value of high-quality displays. After all, it can be difficult to measure the success of a display. Library managers need to balance the time spent to create and maintain displays with the fuzzy output of their value. Often, the needs of performing other tasks are more pressing than that of creating a display. Similarly, if a library doesn't value the resource, there is less intentional thought about how displays are created, who is responsible for them, and what the parameters are for displaying the materials in them. Librarians consider displays a valuable commodity, yet rarely is this professional function considered in job descriptions, budgets, training, or education.

What is lacking in most of our profession's literature, either formal or casual, are guidelines about the subject content of library displays. Obvious display ideas include readers' advisory requests that often get asked, such as "If you like James Patterson, try one of these books," or "Binge-worthy reads for fans of *Stranger Things*." There are also upcoming program cross-promotions such as "Impress our visiting magician with card tricks and laugh-out-loud jokes," or "Familiarize yourself with canning and food preservation in anticipation of our master gardener program." Displays often showcase specific formats like audiobooks, large-print materials, or graphic novels. These all seem like innocent display ideas, right?

Concerns and complaints can arise from even the best and most innocent of intentions, however. A display about *Stranger Things* might include Stephen King's horror novel *It*, which has historically been frequently challenged. It could include *Paper Girls*, by Brian K. Vaughan, whose artistic work on the graphic novel, *Saga* was included in ALA's Top Ten Most Challenged Books of 2014. Additionally, critics of graphic novels have often stated that the books are lowbrow and pornographic.

Libraries will often use displays to recognize significant or historical events. There are weeks and months that pay homage to underrepresented populations, such as Black History Month or GLBT Book Month. Librarians are connecting recent events with calendar celebrations to create displays that draw attention to stories and viewpoints that are neglected, or to highlight their library's mission of inclusivity. They are spotlighting Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday in January with materials about the Black Lives Matter movement.

No act in the library is too small to foster tolerance and acceptance. Many librarians are embracing their roles as display designers in order to highlight resources and themes in their collections on relevant issues in the news and on people who are change-makers.<sup>2</sup>

Meg, from a public library in Connecticut, created a display in the children's room around a quote from Mr. Rogers that says, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" The books in the display highlighted kindness, tolerance, and refugee and immigrant stories.

Brytani, from the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, made a display for families to learn about Islam together. In addition to books, the librarian compiled a "fact file." This folder had articles from library databases that explain Islamic culture and customs, as well as a child-friendly explanation of the controversy over the word jihad. All the resources in the folder have their references listed, and there's a note indicating that families can take home copies of the articles and ask a librarian for more information.

Andria, from the Charleston County Public Library in South Carolina, created a display titled "Y'all Means All" for June for Pride month, but after the massacre at the gay nightclub in Orlando and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, she decided to make it a permanent display. In addition to the books, she has buttons and "wait a minute" flyers distributed throughout the library's Teen Lounge.

## Front-Facing Fiascos

The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom began specifically tracking the censorship of library displays in December 2016. In some instances, a patron complained about the subject of a display, or about a specific book being included in display materials. Other complaints have been initiated internally from administrators, board members, or colleagues. When there are no policies to guide the librarians who have to respond to concerns about displays, often the display has been dismantled.

### Temple, Texas

In June 2017, librarians at the Temple Public Library created a display to recognize June as GLBT Book Month. The library received few comments

about the displays, but the issue gained steam after an Aug. 5 Facebook post by a local group, Concerned Christian Citizens, criticizing the display.

Fast-forward to the next library board meeting, where twenty-one residents spoke about the displays, beginning with former state representative Molly White. “Never, in my wildest dreams, did I ever imagine that my grandchildren would be exposed to materials that are not only contrary to personal growth, but leads people down a path of dysfunction and self-destruction,” White declared. “Family units with a mother and father are the backbone of all society. Without strong, intact family units, societies will collapse.”<sup>3</sup>

The month of June had been chosen to recognize LGBTQ pride to commemorate the Stonewall riots, which occurred at the end of June 1969. The Stonewall riots were multiple, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community in retaliation against a police raid that took place at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village of New York City. Libraries and bookstores have been celebrating June as National Lesbian and Gay Book Month since the early 1990s. In 2015, the ALA’s Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) continued the nationwide celebration with GLBT Book Month.

The controversy in Temple, Texas, was not the first time GLBT book displays have been targeted, and many times the displays have been taken down. The challengers’ concern is less about the inclusion of diverse materials in the library collection than it is about the fact that librarians are choosing to display these materials, or promote them.

### **Anchorage, Alaska**

In 2001, the Alaska Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against the city of Anchorage after the mayor ordered the Z.J. Loussac Public Library’s gay pride display removed for “advocating” a specific issue. Later, a court order required the reinstallation of the gay pride display for thirty days.<sup>4</sup>

The First Amendment emphatically does not give mayors—or city council members, or legislators, or governors, or even presidents—the authority to restrain the presentation of exhibits at the library or any other public space. The First Amendment, and a huge body of law and tradition all over the United States, is intended to do the opposite—to

give all Americans the freedom to express themselves without fear that a misguided mayor may stop them.<sup>5</sup>

### **Hillsborough County, Florida**

In 2006, another lawsuit<sup>6</sup> was filed after the Hillsborough County Commission voted to ban the county government from acknowledging gay pride. The members of the commission added this vote to their agenda after a Gay and Lesbian Pride Month display at the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library generated controversy. In 2013, the commissioners voted unanimously to repeal the ban of gay pride recognition in the county, including the public libraries.<sup>7</sup>

### **Rumford, Maine**

Katrina Ray-Saulis, a resident of Rumford, shared an emotional discovery on Facebook when she learned that a Banned Books Week display at the Rumford Public Library was challenged by three local pastors.<sup>8</sup> In their letter to the library, the pastors were concerned about displaying “sexual themes that were not appropriate for children.”<sup>9</sup> They asked the library administration “to have a high standard of providing and displaying books and resources that are high quality and promote high moral standards, especially where children are concerned.” Others who supported the pastors were more open with their objections to the LGBTQ themes in the books that were displayed.

About a week after the library received the letter, the library board met to address the issue and provided opportunities for the public to present their opinions and concerns. With over seventy people in attendance, the trustees voted unanimously to keep the display intact.

This case received a great deal of national media and blog coverage because of the irony of wanting to ban a display that is specifically about banning books. In a post on the award-winning, nationally recognized LGBTQ parenting blog *Mombian*, Dana Rudolph concluded by saying: “Books matter. Representation matters. Community support matters. And librarians rock.”<sup>10</sup>

## **The Right to Showcase**

Displays are hard to classify because they are so broad in their definition and creators. Are displays considered art, and are they therefore expressive speech that merits First Amendment protection? If so, interior design, real



**FIGURE 1.1** Rumford banned book display

estate staging, merchandising, and architecture might be considered art. The American Bar Association states that “visual art is as wide ranging in its depiction of ideas, concepts and emotions as any book, treatise, pamphlet or other writing, and is similarly entitled to full First Amendment protection.”

Displays can also be considered as marketing or advertising. But since there’s no profit involved, displays would not be considered commercial speech. Commercial speech is generally defined as speech designed to convince a target audience to purchase a good or service so that a business or individual can make a profit. The Supreme Court first explicitly ruled that truthful commercial speech was protected by the First Amendment in *Virginia Pharmacy v. Virginia Consumer Council*.<sup>11</sup>

## Defending Displays

It is not uncommon for public library boards and academic institutions to adopt policies regarding the exhibits in their facilities. These policies have become more common since ALA crafted an interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* titled “Exhibit Spaces and Bulletin Boards.”<sup>12</sup> (See “Exhibit Spaces and Bulletin Boards” and other interpretations of the *Library Bill of Rights* in the Appendix.)

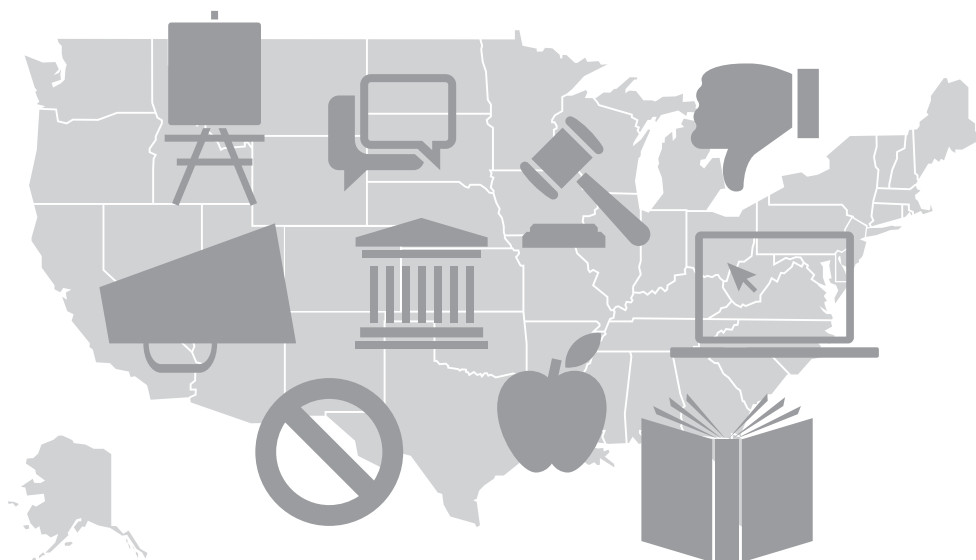


Exhibit areas often are made available for use by community groups. Libraries should formulate a written policy for the use of these exhibit areas to assure that space is provided on an equitable basis to all groups that request it. Written policies for exhibit space use should be stated in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. For example, a policy that the library's exhibit space is open "to organizations engaged in educational, cultural, intellectual, or charitable activities" is an inclusive statement of the limited uses of the exhibit space. This defined limitation would permit religious groups to use the exhibit space because they engage in intellectual activities, but would exclude most commercial uses of the exhibit space.

Often these policies focus on the use of the exhibit space by external organizations. For example, the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts, has a policy that says: "The Forbes Library welcomes the opportunity to allow community groups and individuals to use the various display and exhibit areas in the building, as part of its mission to provide a wide range of information and materials, and to encourage and support the civic, intellectual, and cultural pursuits of the community."<sup>13</sup> Saint Louis University's exhibit policy says: "Although beliefs and viewpoints expressed in the displays belong to the exhibitors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Library Exhibits Committee or Saint Louis University Libraries, exhibits will be consistent with the University's educational philosophy and ideals and be fair and equitable concerning issues of potential controversy."<sup>14</sup> Neither of these policies outlines a procedure if there is a complaint about an item in the exhibit or about the topic of the display.

The Norfolk Public Library in Virginia has adopted a policy that not only references the ALA's "Freedom to Read" statement and the *Library Bill of Rights*, but also clearly states: "The library encourages free expression and free access to ideas, both essential elements in a democratic society, and does not knowingly discriminate regarding age, race, beliefs, or affiliations." The policy further states: "Exhibits will not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation, nor removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval."<sup>15</sup> But the policy also includes a procedure in case an individual has a complaint about the exhibit: "The Norfolk Public Library's policy concerning challenged materials will be followed should complaints about an exhibit or display be received by the library.





## 7

# Report and Support

**JAMES LARUE, FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE ALA'S OFFICE FOR INTEL-**lectual Freedom (OIF), frequently writes and speaks on the need to discuss issues and occurrences of censorship. He is quoted as saying: "Censorship thrives in silence; silence is its aim."

Reporting challenges to the OIF raises our awareness of the harms of censorship. The OIF tracks attempts to remove or restrict materials and services in libraries and schools across the country. The more information that is brought to light about challenges and bans, the more education and resources the OIF can provide to librarians.

## Censors and Selectors

A *challenge* is a direct request to a library, school, or university to remove or restrict materials or services due to their content or appropriateness. Often these requests are submitted via a formal, written complaint or a reconsideration form; and sometimes they are not. But any time a request or action impacts the rights of others in the community or institution to access a material or service, that request falls within the definition of a challenge. Sometimes challenges do not follow official procedure. With the rise of social media, more and more complaints are published online that express outrage

at an institution, its policies, or its materials or services. When public support for a challenge has attracted enough attention—in the form of a petition, a Twitter storm, or a public protest—to warrant action by the library or governing body, the American Library Association asks for a report so the library can be supported and the incident can be documented. These situations qualify as a challenge.

A ban is the removal of materials or the canceling of services because of complaints or challenges, or due to the misuse of institutional authority. While situations occur where a reconsideration committee or governing board may vote to ban material, it is more common that materials are banned, services canceled, or resources denied because a library did not follow its policy and acted unethically and illegally.

A decision to ban is not the same as a professional selection decision not to carry material or offer a program because it doesn't align with local selection policies, which consider a variety of criteria when offering resources. Once a resource has been determined to meet selection criteria and is a part of the collection or the resources offered, to remove it violates the First Amendment rights of library users or students. It is important that librarians rely upon adopted policies and their own professional judgment and skills to determine what programs, resources, services, and displays best meet the mission of the library and the needs of its users. Any decision to restrict or deny access is most appropriately made by individual users or their families, who are best equipped to know and understand their own intellectual and emotional development. But it is not the obligation or right of others to restrict an individual's ability to read or learn from a resource.

In 1953 Lester Asheim published the article “Not Censorship but Selection,” where he describes the fundamental differences between the “selector” and the “censor” in the clearest terms:<sup>1</sup>

For to the selector, the important thing is to find reasons to keep the book. Given such a guiding principle, the selector looks for values, for strengths, for virtues which will overshadow minor objections. For the censor, on the other hand, the important thing is to find reasons to reject the book; his guiding principle leads him to seek out the objectionable features, the weaknesses, the possibilities for misinterpretation. The positive selector asks what the reaction of a rational intelligent adult would be to the content of the work; the censor fears for the

results on the weak, the warped, and the irrational. The selector says, if there is anything good in this book, let us try to keep it; the censor says, if there is anything bad in this book, let us reject it. And since there is seldom a flawless work in any form, the censor's approach can destroy much that is worth saving.

These fundamental distinctions have not changed with the much broader array of resources and services that libraries offer now. Whether it's a book or a program, a display, an artwork, an online database, or a tweet, a selector's motivation is to provide value for a user: information, enjoyment, or identity. When the motivation is to remove content out of fear of offending someone, it becomes the action of a censor.

### **If You See Something, Say Something**

By reporting censorship incidents, librarians and educators help to identify trends in censorship cases and document their institutions' responses and solutions to censorship. Since 1990, the OIF has maintained a database on censorship challenges in libraries, schools, and universities. This data is collected from two sources: volunteer reports submitted by individuals, media reports, and public documents.



**FIGURE 7.1**  
**Office for Intellectual Freedom**  
**report graphic**

### **Scope**

The scope of the reports is broad, but there are limitations. The First Amendment specifically addresses public institutions that are representatives of our government. The Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency, defines a public library as an institution that is “established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and provides at least the following: an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof; paid staff; an

established schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public; the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule, and is supported in whole or in part with public funds.” There is nothing in this definition about profit, popular demand, retail, best-sellers, publishing, merchandise, sales, owners, or advertisements. Libraries are nonprofit institutions that serve everyone and provide access to all ideas—for free.

Public libraries, like public schools, public universities, public agencies, public parks, and city departments, are enacted and structured through local governments authorized by the people and are organized by municipal, state, and federal laws. Those people who work in a public library are considered civil servants and employees of the local government.

When decisions are made by a school board, library board, board of regents, provost, mayor, city council, or the teachers, librarians, faculty, and staff they employ, those decisions are made by the government. And the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prevents the government from “respecting an establishment of religion,” prohibiting the free exercise of religion, or abridging the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble, or to petition for a governmental redress of grievances. Because of this, the OIF limits its scope to public institutions in the United States.

Traditionally, censorship reports have centered on banned books: fiction, nonfiction, children’s books, books for young adults, books for adults, and books for educational or recreational reading. But as the scope of libraries’ services has grown, and as our awareness of censorship has intensified, there are more reports about programs, displays, databases, artwork, magazines, DVDs, music, and social media being censored. Librarians are encouraged to report anything they are concerned about, even if they are unsure if it falls within the scope of what the OIF tracks. In tracking media accounts of incidents outside its scope, the OIF may note issues that are related to independent booksellers, campus speakers, international incidents, publishing, and free speech conflicts, but rarely is there ALA involvement or an outreach of support in these cases. The OIF’s main focus is on libraries and on supporting librarians when resources are challenged.

## Data

The ALA tracks a lot of information in order to connect as many dots as possible and thus form a larger national picture of censorship:

- Who is censoring materials?
- Are challenge requests coming from parents, religious institutions, politicians, or organized groups?
- What are their concerns? What reasons did they express in their communication?
- Are items being pulled because of racist language, profanity, or nudity?
- What issues are relevant in the materials and services that indicate there is a larger concern, over and above the reason listed for the challenge?
- How many displays are dismantled because of complaints?
- Are the majority of challenges happening in public libraries or in academic institutions?
- Are institutions following board-approved policies when they respond to a challenge?
- What types of materials are challenged?
- How was the situation resolved?
- What is the racial makeup, religion, or sexual identity of the authors or creators of the content involved?
- Who is the intended audience for the resource?
- Is the challenge confidential or public?

This information helps the ALA prioritize its resources and strategically focus its energy in ways that will help the profession. The data is often compiled and presented in infographics and reports in order to support educational efforts about censorship.

While priority is given to protecting confidentiality and the trust of those who report censorship to the OIF, reports that are not confidential are included in internal reports for OIF members and are often published in the annual field report, or in banned book resource guides like *Banned Books: Defending Our Freedom to Read* by Robert P. Doyle. This information is helpful because students, teachers, and reporters often inquire about specific resources that have been challenged and why. As long as librarians are not requesting that the situation be kept confidential, the OIF will use the data to further the enlightenment of the library profession and the public.