

The Role of Open Data in the Fight Against Book Censorship

Book challenges, especially in school libraries, have risen sharply in the last year and reached unprecedented levels in the US. Whether from well-intended ignorance or bigotry, the rise in recent challenges disproportionately affects LGBTQ+ focused works, authors, and readers (Hlywak, 2022). Fighting against this encroachment on intellectual freedom is critical to ensuring access to representative media for LGBTQ+ people and the ongoing discussion of human rights at all levels of discourse. In the Freedom to Read statement (Spaulding, 1939), the American Library Association (ALA) describes the role of libraries as essential to the development of critical thinking skills and a well-functioning democracy. Fighting against this encroachment on intellectual freedom is critical to ensuring access to representative media for LGBTQ+ people and the ongoing discussion of their human rights at all levels of discourse. Unfortunately, efforts to fully understand the scope of these attacks are undermined by a lack of objective data, and the collection of such data is being obstructed by the ALA itself.

While most recent challenges are brought by parents, there have been an increasing number challenged by pastors, community leaders, and law makers (Brownworth, 2022). Legislators have departed from their long-standing stances on inappropriate topics such as violent content or pornography, and pursued a number of restrictions on LGBTQ+ works specifically. A recent example is the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida earlier this year, which will pull all LGBTQ+ books from school shelves (Winter & Foggatt, 2022). Administrators and legislators have also targeted online journals, article databases, and other electronic resources (Natanson, 2022). The ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) has described the number of challenges as a “dramatic uptick,” targeting over 1,597 works in 2021 alone (Hlywak, 2021).

Rather than opening themselves to attack for challenging books directly, some school administrators rely on aversive tactics like forcing libraries to label books with advisory notices (Ross, 2022) or notifying parents each time a child checks out a book (Kelly, 2022). Some legislators aren’t even waiting for books to be added to libraries before moving against them, instead preventing them from reaching shelves by adding multiple levels of parental, administrative, and legal oversight before any book can be included in a library’s selection (Natanson & Rozsa, 2022). In some cases these policies are being applied retroactively, forcing teachers to prohibit students from reading books already in their class-

rooms until they pass additional vetting (Kelley, 2022). Some proposals would require a parental authorization for each and every book a student wishes to check out.

Having accurate, representative data is crucial for understanding the scope of this assault. Such data are essential for identifying trends in the frequency, nature, origins, and targets for these challenges, such that bad actors can be identified and their impacts can be tracked over time. They are critical for analyzing how different legislative contexts affect targets and outcomes of these challenges, such that laws attacking intellectual freedom and LGBTQ+ rights can be debated on the basis of facts. These data are foundational for a broader analysis of the negative effects of restricted access to LGBTQ+ works on LGBTQ+ people, such as the effects of parental notification on the safety of closeted minors. These data could ultimately protect all readers from being discouraged from thinking critically and pursuing knowledge, or having such pursuit be banned entirely.

The OIF has released some headline numbers, but without context, the true scope of the problem is unknown. Researchers, journalists, librarians and progressive lawmakers have lamented the frustrating lack of data related to these challenges (Arch, 2015). The OIF was formed in order to “educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries,” and collates statistics about requests it receives from librarians seeking advice on how to handle a challenge. No other institution in the US is in position to collect this data centrally, but despite their mission, they don’t disclose the data they collect on challenges they receive citing concerns about reporter privacy and statistical validity (Pekoll, 2015). Their policies obstruct freedom of information about how many challenges are brought, by whom, against which works, on what grounds, in what legal context, and what appeals and final outcomes occur.

The 2015 statement by Pekoll referenced a University of Missouri program that sent Freedom of Information Act requests for challenge data to every public school district in Missouri with great success (Davis, 2012). PEN America released a study on the frequency of book challenge coverage in mainstream media and referenced previously inaccessible statistics (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). The EveryLibrary Institute collects reports from school board meetings about local challenges and makes them available to the public (Magnusson, 2021). The data needed for this discussion, at least in school and government libraries, is there for the asking. When such disclosure comes from school districts or official government offices, both statistically valid sources of data, anonymization and data de-identification becomes a non-issue.

In order to defend LGBTQ+ people and the greater public from encroachments on intellectual freedom, the institutions that defend them must know that they are occurring and face those challenges on a unified front. The ALA has a pivotal role within this battleground and a mission they have thus far failed to execute. Their authority and reach uniquely positions them to provide the information necessary to frame debates and challenges to LGBTQ+ people and works in an ethical, constructive way. The freedom to read is an intellec-

tual right and depends on access to representative works, as well as the privacy needed to encounter them. It is essential that the OIF abandon its outdated and passive stance and step into the active role of data collection and aggregation on this critical topic.

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