

# Beyond the Library Walls: This Censorship is Not About the Books

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## Introduction

Recent years have seen a persistent and highly organized effort to censor LGBTQ materials<sup>1</sup> in libraries (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Natanson, 2023). These efforts have been most pronounced in the United States, but are certainly not limited to that country; many of the same techniques for book banning have bled across the border into Canada (Manitoba Library Association, 2023). Attempts to ban books are nothing new, but the frequency and vitriol of these latest attempts are noteworthy and have startled librarians and the general public with their fervor. Current book-banning attempts target multiple libraries and many books at once. Queer materials are framed as explicitly pornographic and therefore inappropriate (especially for children), regardless of the actual content of the works. Librarians themselves have been targeted in these book banning efforts as well, framed and harassed as being pedophilic

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ materials are not the only materials that have been targeted; notably materials about racial minorities have also been targeted

groomers (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Smith, 2023). In some cases, librarians have had the police called on them for sharing “pornography” (actually young adult novels) with children (Legum, 2023). In others, librarians have faced death threats for their role in opposing book bans, with attackers framing them as “pedos.” (Smith, 2023).

Some libraries have capitulated to these censorship demands, either by choice or through coercion from their governing bodies (Bloom, 2023; Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Kienlen, 2023). Other libraries have responded to censorship attempts with the traditional library standbys of freedom of expression and neutrality. Libraries frequently use claims of neutrality to assert a sense of apolitical detachment from the world at large. But it is critical that librarians understand these recent book-banning attempts in their full context and recognize them for what they are; an explicitly political attempt to silence certain groups of people, and moreover, a small part of a much larger plan to invoke large-scale political change.

Additionally, the targeting of queer works must be understood in the broader context of queer history in the Western world. While in recent years there has been a flourishing of queer literature, coinciding with increased acceptance of queer individuals, it is essential for librarians to recognize that this is a relatively new development. Rather than the exception, widespread censorship of queer materials has been the norm for much of recent history (Brownworth, 1994; Cossman, 2013; Jaeger et al., 2023). Likewise, suppression or even outright criminalization of queer identities has also been the norm. Indeed, such suppression still occurs, with social media algorithms that flag any LGBTQ content as mature, hiding it from view or discoverability (Monea, 2022). Criminalization of queer lives occurs still as well; in many countries, homosexuality is

illegal even today (Human Dignity Trust, 2023; Kelleher, 2022). But even in countries that have been more tolerant to queer individuals, we see attempted or enacted laws designed to hamper queer existence. In particular, transgender individuals are targeted with laws affecting everything from their access to medical care, to their ability to participate in sports, to their ability to use public washrooms (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023).<sup>2</sup> As librarians seek to respond to requests to censor materials, this state of affairs should be kept in mind, for these targeted requests cannot be removed from the context of this history, nor can they be divorced from current efforts to legislate against queer individuals. Nor can this be viewed as an aberration; vitriolic organized censorship attempts in response to the increased acceptance and visibility of queer lives have occurred before, and must be fervently countered.

## The History of Queer Censorship

With regard to materials with LGBTQ content, censorship has been the norm more than not. The history of queer media is one of censorship; queer publications were seized by police under obscenity laws, prevented from crossing borders into other countries, and generally prevented from being accessed (Cossman, 2013). While censorship in the strictest sense refers to censorship by a government organization, censorship as discussed in this chapter will refer to a wider form of censorship that includes censorship from other organizations, including libraries themselves, as well as any other organizations that have a role in information dissemination, censorship by classification, and self-censorship. All of these forms of censorship have played, and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://translegislation.com/>

indeed continue to play a role in how queer content exists in the world. Famous examples include the Hays Code, ironically created to prevent the introduction of formal government censorship in the United States during the McCarthy era, which kept queer content out of movies by disallowing the inclusion of “sexual perversion” in movies (Mennel, 2012). The Comics Code Authority did the same for comics, and similar structures existed for television shows and publishing (Grunzke, 2021). Many of these codes were in place until the 1980s and have lasting legacies in the presentation of queer content even today.

Libraries too played their role in censorship. The modern idea of libraries as beacons of neutrality, that house content that will appeal to all, is an idea that did not develop until World War II, in direct response to the harsh censorship of the Nazi regime (Popowich, 2019). Historically, libraries were seen as a means by which to better society and to provide access to a certain quality of reading material that promoted a hegemonic worldview that aligned with the dominant white, straight, male, and wealthy perspective.

In more recent times, libraries have contributed to censorship by classification, often while denying their own culpability by making claims to neutrality. Until the 1970s and the work of the *Task Force on Gay Liberation of the American Library Association*, queer content in libraries catalogued using the Library of Congress classification were listed under the subject heading “sexual perversion.” Despite a change in subject headings, the legacy of this can still be seen today, as queer books are still catalogued next to sex crimes in the Library of Congress classification. This is because while the subject headings had changed, the physical placement within the collection still reflects

the original positioning of queer content as a form of sexual deviancy or criminality (Adler, 2013, 2015; Berman & Gross, 2017). The concept of “perversion” being used interchangeably with queer content is something we still see echoes of today, both in inflammatory right-wing rhetoric, and in more subtle ways, such as corporate algorithms in search engines and discoverability functions, marking all queer content as adult in nature and/or making such content more difficult to find on their websites or platforms. YouTube is a prime example of this, and is known to have discriminatory practices and algorithms that suppress queer content that is not deemed sufficiently palatable (Rodriguez, 2023). Likewise, the linking of queer content and activities with sex crimes has been a standby of anti-queer rhetoric; the accusation of “pedophile” and “corruption of the innocent” was used frequently against gay men in the past, and those arguing against gay marriage frequently argued that it would open the doors for pedophilic relationships (Adler, 2015). Today, similar accusations are leveled at transgender individuals, and increasingly at individuals providing access to queer resources, such as librarians (Bombaro, 2023).

It should not be lost in this discussion that the censorship of queer materials is not, and never has been, exclusively about the materials. Rather, it is about queer people: queer materials are censored as a side effect of attitudes towards, and attacks on, queer people. This is perhaps most clearly epitomized in the now-defunct American military policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which barred LGBTQ people from serving, and thus functionally placed limitations on speech by preventing members of the military from acknowledging their LGBTQ status. The existence of such individuals in the military was accepted only if their queerness was kept out of sight. It is also worth noting

that when this policy was implemented, it was considered a step forwards, as prior to it, suspected LGBTQ status could be used to dismiss members, and this limited such possible dismissals to those with explicit LGBTQ status (Goldbach & Castro, 2016). In the previous example, one could focus on the censorship of speech if one desired, but of course, the larger problem is what the censorship represents: control over the lives and livelihoods of LGBTQ individuals. So, too, is this the case with the censorship of queer materials.

Censorship of queer materials is tied up with a desire to control the lives of LGBTQ individuals. This may manifest as a desire to keep queer individuals out of sight, to keep them from “corrupting” others, to prevent knowledge of queer lives from becoming widespread and normalized, to wanting queer individuals to feel as though their existence is shameful and wrong, to, at the most extreme edges, wanting queer individuals to cease to exist. Today, queer rights have reached extents that have not been seen before; since 2001, many countries have legalized same-sex marriage, and protections exist to prevent discrimination based on gender or sexuality in many places. Queer representation is increasingly common in mainstream media, and its depiction no longer comes with archaic rules that require queer lives to only be shown in a negative light. The recent attempts at censorship of queer material represent a pushback against this increasing acceptance of queer people, a desire to return to a previous (or perceived previous) status quo from conservative quarters. We are seeing a desire to effectively push queer people *back* into the closet.

Such pushbacks against increasing acceptance of queer lives have been seen before. The Weimar Republic in Germany saw a greater acceptance of queer

individuals than had previously been the case, and was noteworthy within Europe at the time for it (Marhoefer, 2015). Though queer individuals were generally expected to keep their queerness out of public view, they could be accepted as long as their queerness was kept private. Queer spaces were generally tolerated in an underground context, societies of gay and lesbian people were formed, serious attempts were made to decriminalize homosexuality, and Magnus Hirschfeld's *Institute for the Science of Sexuality (Institut für Sexualwissenschaft)* was opened. But with the Nazi rise to power in 1933, that progress was destroyed (Anonymous, 2013b; Marhoefer, 2015). Homosexuality had long been a target (one of many) of the far right in Germany, and was explicitly singled out as undesirable by Nazi doctrine. The famous book burning conducted by the Nazis on May 10th, 1933 included the works and research housed at Hirschfeld's *Institute*, after a violent and most likely deadly raid on the building on the 6th, alongside books from other locations, such as public libraries and universities (Marhoefer, 2015). Under Nazi rule, gay men were persecuted, with many ultimately killed or imprisoned in concentration camps (Anonymous, 2013a; Heger, 1980; Plant, 1986). Here we see an extreme example of how censorship of queer materials is not about the books, but rather, about a desire to see an end to queer existence.

While the comparison between modern censorship attempts and Nazi censorship in the form of book burnings may at first seem hyperbolic, it must be noted that anti-trans hostility in the United States was identified as being genocidal in nature in a statement made by the *Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention*<sup>3</sup> in late 2022 (Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 2022). Transgender individuals in particular have

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/>

been the target of the American far right; hundreds of anti-trans bills have been proposed in the United States since 2021; as of the writing of this chapter, 83 of those bills have passed (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023).<sup>4</sup> The bills target transgender individuals' ability to use public washrooms or changerooms, to access gender-affirming care, to perform in public in drag<sup>5</sup> or to refer to transgender individuals by their correct pronouns, among other things (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023). The ultimate goal of such bills is to remove transgender people from existing in public spaces.

Other bills have targeted the wider queer community, notably the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida, which prevents educators from teaching on sexual orientation (Associated Press, 2022). Similar bills have started finding their ways into other Western countries such as Canada (Hunter, 2023). These bills present queer individuals as being explicitly obscene or unsuitable for public spaces or unsafe around children. This framing is reflected in the calls for the banning of queer books, which frequently describe even the mildest queer content as pornographic and unsuitable for children.

## The Bigger Picture

As with previous attempts to censor queer content, recent attempts to ban queer materials should be acknowledged as part of a larger movement. In the current case, the attempt at censorship is part of an organized, rather than an organic, pushback

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<sup>4</sup> <https://translegislation.com/>

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting here that so-called drag bans are themselves a way to target transgender individuals, as they could be perceived as “dressing in drag” at all times by bad faith actors.

against a society increasingly accepting of those not historically in power, including, but certainly not limited to, queer people.

The organized nature of recent censorship attempts cannot be denied; the *American Library Association* (ALA) has reported alarming increases in its tracked book banning attempts, with 1,269<sup>6</sup> attempts in 2022 alone (American Library Association, 2023a). This number is likely to significantly underestimate the true number of proposed book bans, as only those reported to the ALA are tracked. The *Washington Post* has reported that the majority of attempted bans originated from only 11 zealous individuals, who filed similar or identical multi-item complaints at libraries across the United States (Natanson, 2023). Likewise, many attempts at censorship have been facilitated by organizations such as *Moms for Liberty*, a Florida-based group (Harris & Alter, 2022). Without attention to a broader context, recent censorship attempts could be viewed as the actions of a handful of malcontents, able to make noise, but with little power. However, when viewed in context, it is clear that these censorship attempts represent a single wing of a much greater attack force targeting many fronts. The anti-trans bills discussed earlier represent another front, and there are yet others targeting other marginalized groups not discussed here as they are out of the scope of this chapter.

It is also worth noting that these organized efforts from small-but-vocal groups do inspire more local individuals to confront their libraries with censorship requests as well. Framing these requests as a way to protect children allows for a much more palatable excuse to ban books than simply finding them distasteful. Additionally, these organized groups provide guidance to those wishing to send their own book removal requests to

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<sup>6</sup> Not all of these attempted bans target queer content specifically, but a significant number do. As noted earlier, though queer censorship is the focus of this chapter, it is not the only content being targeted.

libraries; a prime example of this is the *Moms for Liberty* affiliated *BookLook* “Book Reports” for parents, which note “concerns” about specific books, and highlight individual passages and pages that can be pointed to in boilerplate book removal requests (BookLook, 2023). Similar sites with an array of different books can likewise be found, several of which use the rating system and techniques used by *BookLook*; another example is *Rated Books* which provides information on many more books (RatedBooks, 2023). In short, it is simple to find the details necessary to file a book removal request, meaning that not only will attacks on books come from a small number of people external to most library jurisdictions, but the systems have been put in place by the organized right to make it simple for discontented locals within a jurisdiction to file takedown requests as well. This organization and simplicity of process no doubt contributes to the volume of book banning requests in recent years.

*Moms for Liberty* is a member of the Advisory Board of *Project 2025*, an initiative of the Heritage Foundation, an \$86 million conservative think tank (Heritage Foundation, 2023). In July 2023, *Project 2025* released its *Mandate for Leadership*, a 920-page framework – functionally, a wish list – for a Republican leader to follow, should they win the 2024 American election (Project 2025, 2023). The *Mandate* is clear in its desire to push back against queer rights. For instance, it notes that the hypothetical 2024 Republican president should “rescind regulations prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, transgender status, and sex characteristics.” The *Mandate* also refers to the normalization of transgender individuals as “toxic” and equates queer content with pornography (which it claims should be outlawed) and the “sexualization of children,” in a move that reflects the manner in which queer content

has been censored previously. It also outlines plans to expand censorship attempts to target research funders such as the National Institutes of Health, and regulate what research can be produced, specifically calling attention to transgender individuals in the process:

The incestuous relationship between the NIH, CDC, and vaccine makers—with all of the conflict of interest it entails—cannot be allowed to continue, and the revolving door between them must be locked. As Severino writes, “Funding for scientific research should not be controlled by a small group of highly paid and unaccountable insiders at the NIH, many of whom stay in power for decades. The NIH monopoly on directing research should be broken.” What’s more, NIH has long “been at the forefront in pushing junk gender science.” The next HHS secretary should immediately put an end to the department’s foray into woke transgender activism. (Project 2025, 2023)

Anti-transgender activists denigrate the research that supports gender-affirming care, despite a medical establishment that overwhelmingly supports it; the above quote indicates a desire to censor and shape research so that it might not interfere with bills targeting access to gender-affirming healthcare. With *Moms for Liberty* as a member organization of *Project 2025*, we can see clearly that the censorship attempts are only a step in a much larger plan, one that targets queer rights and lives, though even this does not encompass the extent of the larger plan.

## Necessity of Context

This context, both historical and political, is essential for librarians to keep in mind as they confront attempts at censorship in their libraries. This rash of targeted, organized attempted book banning that frequently frames librarians and other educators as indoctrinators, pedophiles, and groomers cannot be treated like run-of-the-mill attempts to remove books from library collections, for the simple reason that these efforts represent a much broader scope than one-off book removal requests. These censorship attempts are not raised in good faith, but as part of a grand plan to remove queerness from the public eye and queer people from public society.

Addressing book banning requests is a time-consuming process. When libraries are inundated with book banning requests by organized groups, that time commitment is multiplied. Policies for addressing these book challenges may require reading or assessing each individual book, removing the book from circulation until the book has been assessed, or otherwise demanding significant parcels of staff time be devoted to the request. For challenges targeting multiple books, the time required to assess them all, and the fact that libraries may remove the books from their shelves while the assessment is ongoing, means that those challenges may effectively remove queer books from circulation, even if it is only for a short time (Sterbenz, 2023). In the current situation, library workers often also face harassment for refusing to bow to censorship demands. This harassment ranges from the leveling of terms like “pedophile” and “groomer” at librarians, to explicit death threats, to hate groups appearing at library board meetings to intimidate librarians and others (Smith, 2023; Sterbenz, 2023). The stress of the situation has caused some library workers to quit, and it is unfortunately likely more will follow (Smith, 2023).

Viewing these censorship attempts in the broader context allows for better assessment with how they should be dealt with. Situating these attempted book bans as part of a targeting of queer, particularly transgender, individuals should indicate to librarians that these challenges run counter not only to intellectual freedom, but also to the professional commitment to social justice. The ALA code of ethics states both:

We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources

and

We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces. (American Library Association, 2021)

These censorship attempts should be confronted not only on the grounds of protecting intellectual freedom and resisting censorship, but also, perhaps especially, on the grounds that they represent a serious affront to social justice.

Social justice has not always fit comfortably into librarianship. Indeed, it is a concept that is often framed as running counter to neutrality. Neutrality itself is often framed as being essential to librarianship and intellectual freedom in particular, but as a recent ALA working group pointed out, it is not something that is well-defined in librarianship, and is not positioned centrally in ALA documentation (American Library

Association, 2022). The place of neutrality has long been debated in the profession, with many highlighting that true neutrality is impossible, and that attempting to follow a framework of neutrality privileges those already in power (American Library Association, 2022; Lewis, 2008). Neutrality, however, is not essential to intellectual freedom, and the ALA Working Group on Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice has recently proposed alternative frameworks to neutrality, including radical empathy, trauma-informed response, and cultural humility (American Library Association, 2022). This is to say that social justice can be centered in the profession, and doing so is not an affront to the values of the profession, as neutrality, a historically fraught paradigm that is ultimately mythical in its ability to be applied practically, is not the only lens through which one can approach librarianship and intellectual freedom.

Recent situations in libraries have seen neutrality pitted directly against social justice, most especially in controversies involving the booking of library spaces to anti-transgender speakers, sometimes even in the face of library policies that allow for the discretionary cancellation of events (Popowich, 2021). In these situations, neutrality historically wins out in nearly all cases, often resulting in an unsafe environment for queer individuals. The argument goes that if queer people are to be protected, then we must allow those who wish to deny or erase their existence to voice that in library spaces. However, as others have pointed out, neutrality benefits the status quo, and does not benefit minority groups, such as queer, and particularly transgender people. Accepting neutrality as a framework for enforcing intellectual freedom implies a starting point of equality within society that does not exist, and therefore neutrality unfairly benefits those already in power.

These power dynamics are of particular interest in the current situation, where well-funded, organized groups are directly attacking queer (particularly transgender) rights in the political and social spheres. Attacks on books and libraries are a single wing of a much larger front, epitomized by offenses such as *Project 2025*. The current response in libraries to these attacks prioritizes neutrality, which misses the broader picture. Social justice should be of equal or increased importance in librarian responses to the current book challenges, because what is at stake is more than merely whether or not queer books exist in libraries, but whether queer people are permitted to exist in public spaces. Neutrality as a framework has librarians confront these book challenges on a symptom level, when what librarians should confront is the reason that the challenges are being issued to begin with; i.e., a desire to roll back queer rights and queer visibility. Addressing this only at the book challenge level will be akin to playing a game of whack-a-mole, and will be largely futile. As such, bad faith attempts to censor books, particularly those that come with a larger goal of silencing queer voices, should be dismissed without needing to waste hours of librarians' time responding. Spending time on these challenges takes away from the true work of librarianship; ensuring access to information for all. Ignoring the broader context of the book challenges ignores their targeted nature; not only are queer individuals being targeted, but so too is the role of libraries, librarians, and any who would seek the free flow of information of all sorts within a society. By contrast, viewing the book challenges in their proper context, as the wing of a broader attack against both queer individuals and those in a society that allow information about queer lives to be accessible, demonstrates the need to approach from a social justice perspective.

The organized nature of these recent censorship attempts merits organized response, and libraries and librarians should be a part of that response, both to protect queer lives and to protect the profession. The ALA has already created a *Fight Censorship*<sup>7</sup> page with resources, including legal resources, for those facing censorship challenges (American Library Association, 2023b). As these censorship attempts increasingly reach beyond the borders of the United States, library organizations in other countries should consider developing similar toolkits, with resources suited to their particular country's laws, and potentially building legal defense funds to help library workers who face harassment. Ultimately the goal of library organizations should be to see that no librarian faces these censorship challenges on their own. Suggested responses to these calls for censorship and to the harassment of librarians have included responding to threats with legal action, and changing or streamlining book challenge policies (Sterbenz, 2023). These attempts are to be lauded and should be continued, but efforts should also be made at a grander and more political scale.

While politics have long been considered anathema to libraries working from a neutrality framework, the current context highlights how libraries are themselves political. Library boards are often controlled politically, and in some cases, boards have been deliberately stacked with individuals hostile to libraries as places of freely available information. In response, librarians should foster attempts to populate boards with those friendly to the information-accessibility mission of libraries. Political awareness of the issue should be raised as well; while endorsing specific candidates in elections would likely be unacceptable, ensuring that the voting public considers these issues when

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/fight-censorship>

casting their ballots is something that librarians could do as well, through advertising or leafleting campaigns, organized within the larger community. These campaigns should be organized through library organizations, as a direct response to a current crisis in the profession; organizing it in this fashion allows the response to be greater than any single librarian or library, and solidifies the effort as worthy of professional attention and organized response.

The professional credentials of librarians should also be more clearly vocalized to the public, who often do not recognize the degree of specialized education required of librarians; highlighting this educational background and vocalizing our expertise in this area may help articulate why just anyone should not be making content decisions for libraries.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the recent attempts at censorship of queer materials have implications far beyond the library walls. Current censorship attempts are part of an attack against transgender individuals that has been identified as genocidal in nature. Despite the severity of this, even the attacks on transgender and other queer individuals represents only a small part of a larger plan. The organized nature of this pushback against queer acceptance is unusual, but not unprecedented. Nor is censorship unusual in the history of queer material.

This context *must* be kept in mind when responding to these censorship attempts. Examining the history of the censorship of queer materials shows both the long-lasting effects of successful censorship and the way that such censorship is often tied to broader political agendas that can have dire consequences for queer individuals.

If librarians ignore the context – by imagining these censorship attempts as the vendettas of a few organized malcontents, for example – they miss that this is part of a broader agenda that seeks censorship not just of library materials, but of education and research on a much larger scale. If librarians view this censorship as something that can be dealt with effectively by responding to it on the microscale of individual book bans at individual libraries, they will be unable to counter it as the organized attempt that it is. Librarians should forge alliances within and across libraries, and with those in other professions, to counter these censorship attempts and to pre-empt additional and more hidden censorship attempts, such as those that could occur if organized anti-queer activists targeted research funders.

The librarian's commitment to social justice is an essential tool in combating the recent wave of attempted censorship, as the goals of the bodies organizing the censorship attempts run directly counter to social justice. Because this censorship is a means to an end (one of many being employed) that seeks to remove queer, particularly transgender, individuals from public existence, the social justice lens allows librarians to view this censorship in its proper context, rather than as a hodgepodge of individual book banning attempts. As removal of queer lives from the public eye is the goal, librarians should be particularly cautious when responding to censorship attempts that they do not acquiesce to the demands of censors by quietly removing contested books from public view, even if they remain in the collection, for example. In this moment, it is not merely queer books at risk, but queer rights and queer lives. Moreover, these organized efforts threaten libraries as freely available sources of information more generally – a direct attack on the purpose of our profession. The goal of the current

ensorship movement is to roll back the progress that queer people have experienced in recent years, and to curtail the free flow of information about queer lives: librarians must resist this completely.

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Note: This archived copy of the chapter corrects an error in the published version which referred to the “Comics Code Authority” as the “Comics Code of America”