



CHOOSING NOT TO CHOOSE: THE ETHICS OF SOFT- CENSORSHIP IN U.S. LIBRARIES

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WHO I AM



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A blurred image of a person with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, looking down at an open book. The image is partially obscured by a large yellow diagonal shape and a dark blue background.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America recorded 10,046 instances of book bans.

That's 6,684 more than the 2022-2023 school year.

Subject matter of banned content

Of the 1,091 most commonly banned titles, July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024



57%



**Sex or sex-related topics
and content**

44%



**Characters or people of
color**

39%



**LGBTQ+ characters or
people**

Data from PEN America Index of School Book Bans.
Note: many titles contain more than one type of content.



WHAT IS SOFT-CENSORSHIP?

“Soft censorship is when fears of real censorship may cause educators and librarians, school administrators, and school boards to self-censor or suppress speech well beyond what may have been banned or prohibited.” – PEN America

- Librarians pulling books off shelves
- Purposely not buying “controversial” titles
- Restrictions on what can be checked out
- Only “non-controversial” titles on display
- Requiring parent permission for book checkout
- Specific warnings placed on certain titles
- Question student’s book selection at checkout

Why is it happening?

- Fear of backlash
- Protection of jobs & funding
- Increasing politicization of library materials
- Increase of laws against librarians



GEOGRAPHIC & LEGAL CONTEXT

► Most Affected States

As of February 2025, “15 states have introduced bills that would impose harsh penalties on libraries or librarians for distributing books that some think are inappropriate. Penalties in some of those proposed bills range from stiff fines to imprisonment for librarians.” - New Jersey State Bar Foundation

- Arkansas, Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, Texas, Iowa, Utah, to name a few.

► Recent Laws/Regulations

Arkansas - Act 372

- Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Tennessee followed.

Florida - House Bill 1467

Utah - House Bill 374

Georgia - Teacher fired for reading *My Shadow is Purple* to students.

Texas- Felony charges against librarians for allowing access to “obscene” literature.

► Impact

Librarians are caught between professional/moral obligation and personal safety.

Publishers are seeing chilling effects on what gets printed and marketed.





CONSEQUENCES OF SOFT-CENSORSHIP

- ▶ **Loss of Intellectual Freedom Without Public Debate**
 - ▶ “At the end of the day, we really do sort of a disservice to our students if we don’t allow them to have access to materials that can be challenging in some circumstances, perhaps, but allow them to grow and learn.” - Marina Lowe
- ▶ **Erasure of Marginalized Voices**
 - ▶ “The fact is that gay, queer and transgender people, African Americans, Latin people, Indigenous people have finally found a voice and a place in libraries. Now we’re seeing an effort to erase those voices, to stigmatize those individuals, and send a message of exclusion.” - Deborah Caldwell-Stone
- ▶ **Undermining Trust in Libraries as Neutral, Inclusive Spaces**
 - ▶ “Upholding this ideal [that children should be sheltered from differences] makes the library a doer of harm by making it difficult for marginalized groups to see themselves in literary work.” - Nicole Cooke & Cearra Harris
- ▶ **Consequences for Publishers**
 - ▶ “So what we’re seeing is this censorship happening before the book is banned because of the draconian ecosystem that we’re living in.” - Dr. Seema Yasmin

WHAT CAN WE DO?



As Publishers

- Stand firm against preemptive edits for political reasons
- Support distribution of challenged titles
- Collaborate with libraries for programming & access



As Librarians

- Transparency: make collection decisions public
- Build community support & advocacy groups
- Evaluate your collection



As People

- Support local libraries
- Attend board meetings & speak up
- Read & share challenged books

CONCLUSION

Soft-Censorship is hard to see, but equally as damaging.

“This targeted censorship amounts to a harmful assault on historically marginalized and underrepresented populations—a dangerous effort to erase their stories, achievements, and history from schools.” - Sabrina Baêta

Call to Action

Speak out against soft-censorship in school libraries. When books are quietly removed or restricted without transparency, students lose access to vital ideas and diverse voices. Stand up for the freedom to read and demand open, inclusive access to information for all, **especially** our young readers.



THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE!



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