

Red, Blue, and White-Out:

Censorship and Book-Banning in the Washington D.C. Public School Library System

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LIS5937: Politics of Information

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November 2023

Introduction

Washington D.C. has integrally been a martyr and battleground for many political, public, and educational movements at the nation's capital, constantly serving as the crossroad for the call for change and seeable action from the government. Whether it be actions taken by major organizations, lobbyists, politicians, or individuals, Washington D.C. has set the precedent for the rest of the country's status quo. Two intertwining topics that have been reintroduced politically and publicly have been censorship and book banning within educational institutions. Censorship and book banning have run rampant throughout society since the nation's founding, and even predates the political establishment of this country. Wherever there has been a library, there have been individuals and groups fighting for what should be allowed to be accessed and taught. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, which flooded our political and social atmospheres with an inundation of information, the call for book banning and censorship regarding heavily debated topics within our educational institutions has been widespread. Educational information that includes topics such as LGTQBIA+ rights, minorities/POC, climate change, women's rights, and more have been targeted in these movements. In this paper, I will be analyzing the effects of book banning and censorship within the Washington D.C. public school library system, and how the overtly political nature of this geographic region plays heavily into the display, education, and push-back of these issues in their public libraries.

What are Censorship and Book Banning?

Censorship is the suppression of published words, images, or ideas that are considered offensive by individuals or organized groups (ACLU, 2006). Through censorship, visual media, literature, and other depictive materials can be targeted, challenged, and subsequently removed from educational institutions based on the information or images being presented to the common

public (ACLU, 2006). Censorship has been a heavily debated topic throughout American history, as the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights protects most areas of speech and media, making true censorship a hard feat to accomplish (ALA, 2021). Many a times, groups have brought suit into the courts to challenge certain medias, such as movies, magazines, and books that presented sexual/pornographic images or violence, but rarely succeed unless they pass a very stringent test (ACLU, 2006). At most, boldfaced warnings of the “explicit nature” or requiring items to be in an age-restricted area have been the solutions to these censorship challenges, but federally, the right to freely speak and express oneself has been protected (ALA, 2021).

Modernly, the topics being censored have evolved into sexual identities and rights, minorities groups/human rights, sciences, and other topics that stray from the biased-norm society has manufactured (ALA, 2023). However, in the technologically advanced 21st century, a call for censorship of these “taboo” topics is not as easily done. It is nearly impossible to censor the Internet and visual medias, as millions of users across the globe can rightfully share their own experiences, information, photos, videos, and writings on social media. This has not stopped censorship groups from taking steps towards regulating what children and adolescents are exposed to (ALA, 2023). Instead, censor groups have begun to attack educational institutions such as public-school libraries to remove books and lesson plans that teach this kind of materials (PEN America, 2023). This is no reinvention of the wheel, as book banning has been around for centuries, with many historical societies lamenting the same public cry for removing these unseemly subjects from shelves. However, the last two to three years have trumped previous attempts, with nearly two-thousand book bans attempted between 2021 and 2022 (ALA, 2023).

Who Is Affected By These Bans and Who Are The Stakeholders?

It is difficult to strictly categorize the stakeholders in this battle for censorship and book banning, despite its directed call towards controlling what children and young adults are exposed to. However, it has primarily been parents and politicians that we see demanding the removal of books and topics from the shelves (PEN America, 2023). To pull books from a public-school library affects more than just the K-12 age range that these groups are “protecting”, but censors entire communities of adults, educators, and future generations (ALA, 2023). Demographically, despite the small geographic size of Washington D.C., its nearly 700,000-person population is more than 50% of non-white, minority ethnicity and 25% being 18 years and younger (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Public book bans have hindered children of different ethnicities, religions, economic backgrounds, and familial backgrounds from feeling recognized and understood within their schools and communities (Collins, 2023). In turn, when these students lose access to this type of literature and understanding, it translates back into their homelives, their personal relationships with themselves, and their relationships with their communities (Collins, 2023).

One of the biggest stakeholders in this book-banning push have been parents who want more control over their child(ren)’s education (PEN America, 2023). The leading group in this movement is the Moms for Liberty (Moms) group, which was started in Florida in 2021 by two former schoolboard members (Moms For Liberty, 2021). Their group has established almost 300 chapters across 44 states, with at least one chapter in most counties in the Washington D.C./Maryland/Virginia area (Factora, 2023). The main goal of this organization is to push parents and families to “fight for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government” (Moms For

Liberty, 2021). They seek to insinuate state laws that would require public schools to screen every educational title a teacher sought to use and to allow for parents to have a say in each of those titles and lessons (Moms For Liberty, 2023). Many of their banned books focus on LGBTQIA+ books that are open and honest about individuals exploring their sexuality and feeling safe within their own skin, while also attacking known classics like George Orwell's *1984*, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Factora, 2023).

Other smaller organizational groups, such as Citizens Defending Freedom (Citizens) and Parents' Rights in Education (Parents') have also gained traction over this battle, backing all book banning movements in public and political spheres, claiming they are "fighting the battles of Good and Evil" (Citizens Defending Freedom, 2021). Parents' leading message states that they "...reject any indoctrination of school children with extreme pedagogy" (Parent's Rights in Education, 2023). Within their own groups, Citizens and Parents have respectively begun their own fundraisers and petitions to support parental control within schools, as well as curating toolkits for other parents and members to begin this process of shelf-thinning within their own community public schools (Factora, 2023). These toolkits include seminars on how to speak at schoolboard meetings, how to win local elections, how to begin large scale book bans within their public-school libraries (Parents' Rights in Education, 2023).

The voices of these categorically extreme groups do not go unheard, as they have gained a lot of political attention and support from some of the big names in the Republican Party, such as Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley, and Vivek Ramaswamy, whom all spoke at the July 2023 Moms For Liberty Conference (Factora, 2023). This tractional support has allowed major censorship and book banning bills to be introduced to the House of Representative and

within individual state laws (Factora, 2023). This major support from right-wing politicians has made it significantly easier to push educationally restrictive bills through state houses that ultimately limit public school libraries in what titles and topics then can have on their shelves (Padrón et al., 2023). Additionally, it has also allowed for these groups to gain political power, as founding members from Moms For Liberty have been appointed to Florida's Board of Education and Commission on Ethics (Factora, 2023).

However, of this same token, there are a majority of parents and politicians who are also actively working to stop censorship and book banning within public school libraries in Washington D.C. and across the country. Jamie Raskin (D-MD08), Maxwell Frost (D-FL), advocate Ellen Oh, Jim McGovern (D-MA), and Jamal Bowman (D-NY) are some of the big names who have actively spoken out against this national movement for censorship and have vowed to work locally and nationally to ensure equal access of education and title to all students (Amara, 2023). There is transversal support between these political leaders and advocacy groups such as PEN America, American Civil Liberties Union, and the American Library Association, all who have worked tirelessly to stop this mass cleansing of education (PEN America, 2023). Managing director of PEN America Washington and Free Expression Programs, Nadine Farid Johnson, was quoted stating that, "The growing movement to ban books is eroding America's proud history of celebrating – and defending – free expression as the hallmark of our democracy... Restrictions on the freedom to read and learn are turning our nation's public schools into political battlegrounds, creating environments that make it impossible for our students to flourish and our educators to do their jobs" (Raskin Administration, 2023). Many of the campaigns surrounding the censorship and book bans remain general regarding keeping titles on shelves and educators in charge of what is being taught in school, but some representatives

who have already seen crushing efforts to remove these titles and edit curriculums have spoken more freely regarding their state-specific issues (Padrón, 2023). Some politicians, both Republican and Democratic, have even taken a more neutral approach to this national call for book banning. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham and Democratic Senator J.P. Booker have both openly stated that while there are books that they would personally not want their children to read at their current age, it is not for Congress or individual states to instate laws that would affect the educational decisions and wishes of other parents (Dietel, 2023). Both agree that there is not much of a congressional decision that could be made on this political issue (Dietel, 2023).

Within this mix are also parents and educators who freely speak against the few quickly growing censorship groups (Jackson et al., 2023). Despite the heavy hits brought on by the major right-wing censorship groups, majority of Americans do not support book bans or censorship within the public-school education system (Jackson et al., 2023). There is a resounding trust within educators abilities to teach kids appropriately based on their age range and comprehension-abilities that is being heavily overshadowed by a few conservative groups who are pushing their own agenda at everyone else's expense (Jackson et al. 2023). Educators and parents alike recognize the different lessons and values that come from many of these controversial books, as many of them are the same literary novels that were taught when they were in school (Dietel, 2023). There is also an overall understanding as to how personal feelings regarding certain book titles may not reflect onto other parents; one family's choice to not allow their child(ren) to read particular books should not affect another family's, an entire school, or even an entire community (Dietel, 2023).

Public Policies and Law

At the time being, no specific legislation has been enacted or books removed from the District of Columbia's public school library shelves, however that does not mean these actions are not on the horizon (Collins, 2023). Many surrounding, and influential, counties within Maryland and Virginia have not experienced the same luck, with a total of which had seven legislative attempts of censorship and book banning within their public-school libraries, and hundreds of titles having gone missing since 2021 (Cartwright, 2023). The attempted laws in Maryland and Virginia were to mimic some of the even less-fortunate states such as Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Missouri who have banned "critical race theory" in K-12 public educational settings and even in some state-funded higher education institutions and/or banned hundreds of "politically charged and inappropriate" titles (Padrón, 2023). Some of these laws go as far as to ban the discussion of religion, race theory, sexuality, political leanings, and even historical retellings that present the United States as an "oppressor" (Padrón, 2023). PEN America has termed these educational censorship policies as "educational gag orders", referencing to the "tape over the mouth" restrictive nature of these policies that prevent educators from talking about important topics and lessons in their classrooms (Padrón, 2023). This movement is quickly approaching the fine line of "what some could argue as parental choice over what their student should and should not be able to read", and erasure of information and truth from society that does not conform to a very pro-America, pro-white man story. Other states have not faced similar fates, with Illinois being one of the first states to outlaw book bans within their public institutions. He recognizes the "knowledge, culture, empathy, understanding, and diverse and differing worldviews [implications]" these widespread bans could have on society (Dietel, 2023).

The importance of looking at surrounding counties and states when addressing the District of Columbia's potential surge of book banning and censorship is the proximity these public schools have to our political hub. On one hand, the lack of unshelved titles remains a beacon of hope, showing that the libraries at the heart of our nation are not turning a blind eye to these critical topics and are showing how important access to these titles are. Conversely, despite federal inabilities to create blanket censorship due to constitutional protections, this does not prevent the libraries from becoming targets from previously discussed groups. The D.C. Public Education and Library systems recognize that many of the books being taken off shelves are predominantly about very politicized topics that face public and legislative push back daily (Collins, 2023). K.C. Boyd, a District of Columbia librarian and this year's named School Librarian of the Year, said, "It hurts Black, brown and LGBTQ kids, more than their counterparts... School librarians have to be more on the political side and conscious about what's going on in society" (Collins, 2023). She works closely with her counterparts in the library and public education system to ensure her students and their families are able to safely access these widely banned books and other educational information (Collins, 2023). Many other educational advocates and teachers are working towards implementing these same practices within their own communities, to either counteract or prevent these educational gag orders from taking root (Padrón, 2023).

Public School Library Push-Back

In lieu of any direct attacks to the District of Columbia public school libraries and education system, librarians and educational advocates are proactively working with their public libraries and local organization chapters to educate their communities on censorship and book banning. This past October, the District of Columbia Public Library (D.C.P.L.) dropped the

hashtag #UNCENSORDDC and kicked off their annual Banned Book Week (D.C. Public Libraries, 2023). The week consisted of educational and entertaining events such as an Uncensored Book Scavenger Hunt around Washington D.C., multiple art installments from advocacy organizations and local artists, and streamed Author Talks with challenged authors and journalists regarding their experience and feelings surrounding this new-age movement (Cartwright, 2023). Both community public librarians and public-school librarians participated in this Banned Book Week, taking advantage of the resources and opportunities to educate themselves, their coworkers, and their communities/students (Cartwright, 2023).

On top of a very public display of opinions regarding censorship and book banning, the D.C.P.L., public school libraries are adopting the sentiments of their communal counterparts and joining the fight vocally through advocates' press releases, adoption of mission statements, and joining forces with national organizations such as PEN America and the American Library Association (D.C. Public Libraries, 2023). Rob Hartman, the executive director for the D.C. Public Library Foundation chimes in, relaying that "DC residents should feel empowered to oppose the rising trends of book bans across the country... If we don't stand up against this, I don't know who will... So, we need to be a loud voice in making sure that intellectual freedom is celebrated," (Cartwright, 2023). PEN America's Washington D.C. chapter has been tremendously active in releasing press statements and reports surrounding supporting congressional condemnation of book bans and educational censorship (PEN America, 2023).

Tying in the previously touched-upon political support, having major political heads take an outward stance against book bans aid local communities and public-school libraries in protecting their curriculums, educational decisions, and student's access to information is an applauded stance (Raskin Administration, 2023). Representative across the nation is taking the

same stance as Maryland's 8th District Congressional Representative Jamie Raskin, in speaking out and supporting their communities locally and on the Hill (Raskin Administration, 2023). Raskin is joined by Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI) to introduce a bill that would nationally recognized Banned Book Week as well as condemn the removal of literary titles from public school libraries, community libraries, and prisons (Raskin Administration, 2023). Them, along with other advocates from the National Education Association, Interfaith Alliance, National Council of Teachers of English, EveryLibrary, and many more are supporting and enacting these kinds of actions across the nation (Raskin Administration, 2023).

Why Is This Important?

As previously stated, the District of Columbia is a part of the world that is constantly under scrutiny as the capitol of this nation; to take a stand against a national movement and prove to students, educators, parents, and other stakeholders that the centerpiece to our political make up has not fallen victim to extremist views that only accurately support a niche group is a huge accomplishment. As explained throughout this paper, the sentiments and fight being brought to our social and political forefront by groups such as Moms For Liberty, Citizens Defending Freedom, and Parents' Rights in Education are not commonly shared throughout the nation.

In my opinion, this grand censorship scheme cries like call for a whitewashed, gender confirmative story for the United States. Censorship and book banning is no new notion to this country, nor is it a fight that will every completely die down, but the rampant influx of sudden problems came into the limelight around the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic which forced us, as a nation, to face the harsh reality of what this nation had become. In the face of adversity, neighbors, friends, and families divided themselves over issues of public health, human rights,

sexuality, and climate science. To this day, we are still divided as a nation over these topics, but we have now taken the additional steps to force opposing parties to try and fit our individual narratives. Book bans are far more harmful than the parental argument of not believing certain topics is school-appropriate or wanting to control how and what your child(ren) learns about. They remove pertinent, informative information that help individuals of all different background better understand themselves, their communities, and their history. They erase history, societies, life lessons, and the ability to feel accepted and safe in a community where a person of their sexuality, ethnicity, economic background, or culture may not be fully recognized, understood, or protected.

While I have not worked in education for long, my academic career has allowed me to learn about and meet people from all walks of life, all who have come from such unique backgrounds. Not a single one of these people have been negatively affected or fundamentally changed by titles that currently sit on the Top 100 Banned Book List. That is to say, while their perceptions and understandings of the world may have grown from reading these books, who they are as a person has remained the same. It is a dangerous mindset to think that a book that talks about minority/POC rights will suddenly make you a “white man hater” or that reading a book that has a queer protagonist will make a child gay. The tried-and-true concept of “Nature versus Nurture” will overtake in the way someone evolves through life, and stripping someone of that self-growth ability by limiting what literary works and information is accessible to them I believe is a malicious and self-serving madness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Washington D.C. public school libraries have been ever so fortunate as to not have yet experienced this grand push for censorship and book banning within our nation’s

educational system (Collins, 2023). Despite resting in a “safe zone” counties, schools, and communities surrounding the D.C. area have not been so fortunate and have shown that this fight will hit close to home (Padrón, 2023). Librarians within the public school and library systems have already proactively begun to work with local advocacy chapters of national organizations like PEN America and the American Library Association, political leaders, and their communities to fight back against this movement (Cartwright, 2023). Through counteractive engagements such as Banned Book Week, press releases, and legislative bills, the D.C. community has made its voice heard that it will not be quick to censor its libraries (D.C. Public Libraries, 2023). Arguably, this increase in book bans and censorship over the past three years is only the beginning of what is to come, as political figures on both sides bring their ideas, supporters, and campaigns to Washington D.C. with the intent on making their words into applicable law (Raskin Administration, 2023). It is up to these communal actors to support the educational and informative needs of their communities and future generations and continue the good fight.

Blurbs about Creative Pieces

1. Red, Blue, & White-Out Informational Poster: This is a poster that could be used around Washington D.C., its public libraries, and other communal areas. It is an educational poster that highlights some of the key points made throughout this paper surrounding censorship and book banning. It includes local demographics, the most targeted topics, and what advocacy groups people can be involved in.
2. World Banned Book Insta Post: This is an Instagram post that can be used by the Washington D.C. public school libraries and community libraries to advertise for the 2024 Banned Books Week! Since it is very early to have specific agendas or events for that week, I thought it would be fun to come up with a make-believe project called Underway to Uncensored story wall, where individuals in the community can submit stories, poems, artwork, their favorite banned book title, and more to be displayed

throughout the week. This could be a digital story wall or a physical one that members of the community could interact with or walk through as they learn more about banned books and censorship.

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