

Navigating the Minefield: A Review of Literature on Management Control and Book Bans

Library management must deal with a wide variety of issues from mundane to catastrophic. One of the most potentially explosive issues today is the growing minefield of censorship, which comes in many forms, from book bans to more extreme book burnings, and can arise “from ethical, political, religious, or security reasons” and can come from “a variety of different sources, including parents, government officials, community leaders, and even librarians themselves” (Steele, 2021, p. 109). The subject of censorship and “appropriateness” is far from merely academic, and libraries must juggle warring priorities and ethical questions. Conservative communities tend to resist efforts to advance social justice in just about any form, including libraries. The struggles seen across the United States often boil down to libraries’ stance on freedom of information based on the First Amendment and the responsibility to provide resources to all library patrons on one side, and conservatives’ reasoning, which may include “a paramount scriptural obligation” that requires children be protected “from library holdings perceived to be inappropriate” (Crowley, 2023, p. 4). This results in “a massive conflict where jobs can be lost...and the lives of library personnel threatened,” not to mention the fact that libraries routinely have their funding threatened and library directors are forced out (p. 6).

The Issue at Hand

Where censorship attempts have historically come from individuals seeking to ban an individual book or two, there seems to be a more concerted effort today. About 72% of the censorship pushes at public and school libraries in 2024 came from activist groups and various governmental officials (American Library Association, 2025). The American Library Association (ALA) saw a record number of titles targeted in 2023 with 4,240 unique titles in 1,247 challenges. The number dropped for the first time in several years with 821 attempts to ban 2,452 titles, but the numerical story is likely an incomplete one. The ALA suggests the number, which only tracks official cases, is artificially low due to underreporting, censorship by exclusion, and legislative restrictions (American Library Association, 2025). Although there are some challenges to adult-oriented materials, most book bans target “children and young adult books that are written by authors who are a part of minority groups and subject areas pertaining to sexuality and gender identity, the presence of violence, witchcraft or paganism, religious reasoning, and racial issues” (Teel, 2023, p. 5). According to the freedom of expression

organization PEN America (2025), about 67% of those banned titles were for young adult or younger readers, while 32% were for adults. A little more than a third of books censored in the 2023-2024 school year (36%) featured people of color and a quarter (25%) included LGBTQ+ characters. Surprisingly, despite a great deal of “inflammatory rhetoric about ‘explicit books,’ only 13% of banned titles had ‘on the page’ descriptions of sexual experiences” while another 31% had “off the page” sexual encounters (PEN America, 2025).

The censorship movement touches on all aspects of management, which Moran and Morner (2018) divide into five basic functions: planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and controlling (p. 9). Planning requires anticipation of tasks that need to be accomplished so an organization can achieve its goals. Organizing involves establishing the formal structure of the organization. Staffing incorporates the human resources functions, such as hiring, training, retention, and pay. Leading means to create a common organizational culture and associated goals to help motivate employees (p. 11). Controlling relates to each of these other functions, but is also its own, discernable aspect of management:

Controlling means monitoring an organization’s activities to be sure it is on the right path to meet its goals. Controlling requires analyzing the organization’s operations and then using that information to inform the planning process. In this way, the organization can continually examine and correct its goals in light of current information. Controlling is the mirror image of planning. In planning, managers establish where the organization is headed, whereas in controlling, they assess whether they are on target to reach these goals. Planning allows managers to decide where their organization is going; controlling allows them to find out if it has gotten there. (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 12).

Control involves making use of the organization’s goals and plans “and directing the organization’s activities toward those goals” (p. 445). It is the “practical” side of things, where rubber and road meet. Censorship provides an especially thorny challenge for all library professionals, including managers, and well-researched literature providing best practices would be most helpful.

Weakness in the Research: A Bit Too Passionate

Unfortunately, literature relating specifically to library management and book bans is sparse. The most useful articles tend to be commentary pieces published in academic journals. These articles usually have much the same academic rigor and research as the articles, but they

also editorialize on the matter, which makes unbiased views difficult to ascertain. For example, Hazelton-Boyle and Hazelton-Boyle (2025) refer to conservative Christians challenging books as “extremists” (p. 115). Teel (2023) is more nakedly biased with their explicit connection of “conservative right, the Christian right, to the idea of bigotry” (p. 6). The passion behind the commentary, while understandable, seems to preclude sufficient evidence to support the claims made and favors *pathos* over *logos*, such as proclaiming there is a “war” on “book topics, and authors, that belong as a member to a minority group” (p.6) or using the word “pandemic” to describe “the current widespread surge (and attack) on children and young adult literature” (p. 5). Graff (2022) calls book ban attempts “an illegal right-wing takeover of a public good” and states that censorship activities “are an active danger to the local and the larger community” (p. 11). The article stretches a bit when equating book bans with a desire “to ban everything else with which they disagree,” including free speech, abortion, gun safety, voting rights, and LGBTQ+ rights (p. 12). In discussing the furor over *Gender Queer* (2019) by Maia Kobabe, Buehler (2024) says that claims about the book being pornographic are “unfair and untrue” and “yet in conservative circles, the false claim sticks” (p. 76) but offers little evidence to support the position. Even pieces not designated commentary can face issues with bias. One example can be seen in how Bintrim (2023) uses quotation marks when describing how book banners “want to ‘protect’ children from inappropriate content, reinforce the ‘moral standards’ of the community, and ensure that public funds are being used ‘appropriately’” (p. 38). Putting “protect,” “moral standards” and “appropriately” in quotes suggests doubt as to the protestors’ sincerity in these beliefs and the standards used as a basis for proposing censorship.

Strength of the Literature: Real-World Application

Even when biased, the literature is at its strongest when it offers solid, concrete suggestions in dealing with what Hazelton-Boyle and Hazelton-Boyle (2025) call the “thorny ethical dilemmas public librarians are faced with across the United States” (p. 113). Unsurprisingly, one of the most important steps to take is to make sure the library has a solid, thorough policy covering collection development (Steele, 2021, p. 121) while also making sure staff is “fully educated about the best ways to serve their communities to the best of their ability” while also maintaining an ability to work with community leaders and governmental officials to “be able to educate them regarding issues of censorship. The librarian should not be passive, but rather an informed and knowledgeable professional who brings the principles of the profession to

the table” (p. 122). Similarly, Moore and Tudor (2024) note that collection development policies should help guide decisions about what resources are made to library patrons, as where and how access is provided. These policies should be regularly reviewed and updated while also being made accessible to the public. As importantly, policy needs to provide guidance for how materials are reconsidered and potentially removed as well as the responsibility library staff have in resisting censorship efforts from any source (p. 5). Clear policies and procedures that outline both selection and reconsideration procedures not only reduce stress, but also help protect librarians when a challenge arises. On the flip side, “the absence of a formal policy can increase behaviors of self-censorship” (p. 25). There is, however, more to control than merely setting a policy or three.

Steele (2021) also warns against self-censorship. Book bans and similar cases often involve power and authority “in regards to who [has] the power and authority to enact policy and make other library decisions, whether this be the library board, library director, or public officials” (p. 120). Ideally, library management exercises power and authority in selection decisions. However, a city council, board of trustees, or other governing body can subvert the established power structure by using rules or regulations to strip decision-making authority from the administrator. In such situations, library management and other employees sometimes react with “reactive censorship” by responding “to instructions given to them from their governing body that was exercising power over them” (p. 121). As a result, self-censoring librarians often take more subtle steps than the usual loud clamouring for removal of books, such as “avoiding building these [controversial] collections and...claiming that their libraries do not serve people who need, or want, LGBTQ [or other controversial] materials or that the library cannot afford to purchase those materials” (p. 110-111). At the same time, managers should be aware that broad, blanket policies may not always be the ideal approach. Various departments may each need their own spin on policy. For example, Teel (2023) notes the importance “that children, and their rights, are prominently considered when discussing the implications of book bans” because when “children’s literature is pulled from shelves it restricts their growth” as well as violates their First Amendment rights (p. 7). Given the strong focus on children’s and young adult literature for book bans, policy tweaks that specifically focus on this area may be warranted.

As these complaints arise, Houde (2023) suggests controls that implement a five-step process to deal with complainants. The first step is to apologize for the patron’s negative

experience – but not “for the book’s (or display’s) presence in the collection” (p. 46). The second step is to listen rather than being defensive; let the person speak rather than trying to silence them. Third is to restate the problem to make sure it is understood. The next step is to offer service such as helping to find some other, more suitable material from the collection. And finally, offer follow-up, such as how to speak with someone higher up or the board of trustees or how to file a formal complaint, and assure them that someone will follow up on the complaint (p. 46). The angry groups and individuals demanding censorship of library materials may not be responsive to this approach, however. Strong, clear, collection policies “won’t stop the complaints, but they will provide a foundational protection for the library. Also, just knowing your policies will give library staff confidence and assurance” (p. 46). Policies are not enough alone, of course. Managers need to keep themselves up-to-date on current trends and happenings in the censorship movement, as well as applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and make sure that library staff is kept up with the related information and training regularly. Also, staff can benefit just as much from the knowledge that “facing an angry customer complaining (usually loudly) about the library’s collection is scary for anyone, even you! And it’s even more important for them to know that you have their backs and will support them in this kind of situation” (p. 47). Supportive, relatable leadership can go a long way to reassuring employees.

Bintrim (2023) likewise notes the importance of staff needing to be prepared ahead of time to respond to challenges. In addition to strong policies, managers do well to maintain consistent and clear communication with both “internal and external partners early on – including library leadership and staff, board members, security personnel, and community partners – [so that] you can establish much-needed support while putting a damper on misinformation campaigns” (p. 39). When challenges do arise, management should focus on “de-escalation, documentation, and communication. Although most library staff members probably already know that you can’t outshout an angry customer, we all can get agitated in the moment” (p. 39). Because of this, staff should be trained in methods to not only de-escalate tense situations with angry patrons, but also themselves. The debates and discussions that arise from censorship efforts can be aggravating for the librarians, as well, but angry outbursts “undermine the effective communication needed to make or retain socially just progress in library services in conservative environments. Name calling, terming someone a racist, is more likely to generate anger and kill any possibility of productive progress” (Crowley, 2023, p. 15). Calm

communication goes a long way toward building bridges while angry rhetoric tends to burn them.

In addition, Crowley (2023) also stresses the importance of communication, and not just when controversy boils over. Instead, libraries, particularly those in conservative communities, should commit to continuous communication because an “approach where mutual respect is provided, and suggestions are truly considered by the library and its staff, may be more favorable for advancing social justice in collections and services in the short, medium, and long terms” (p. 19). Of course, communication sometimes breaks down or proves insufficient, and issues grow into angry debates. When this happens, library professionals may sometimes lose sight of the fact that they are part of a community and may need to compromise on some topics rather than choosing a hill to die upon. To that end, Cowley (2023) offers a pragmatic view on the importance of “collaboratively negotiating to develop library solutions to an agreed upon problem” (p. 3). Other than more progressive communities where efforts at inclusivity are welcome, libraries often lack political and official support to maintain their progressive programs and “the only methods to effectively respond to such growing attacks bring with them an unwanted political conundrum” (p. 13). In such cases, there are only two choices: “the library can have the director and staff either go down fighting for social justice or begin talks with opponents over its current collections and services” (p. 13). Sitting down to talk has its own potential pitfalls, of course. Libraries rarely find themselves negotiating from a position of strength, and any proposed changes or limitations to the library’s activities “might well undermine socially just services as defined by the American Library Association” (p. 14). Mediation can help when two sides cannot negotiate a compromise themselves. An outside, neutral facilitator can help lead the negotiation process and encourage participation among the various parties (p. 14). This is also where the idea of collaborative negotiation comes to the forefront. Highlighting successful past negotiations, however minor, can help current talks as “a means of both showing appreciation for past advances while laying the groundwork for additional progress” (p. 16). Negotiated outcomes rarely satisfy everyone, but partial victory is usually preferable to total defeat.

Continuing the theme of communication, Buehler (2024) notes that advocacy for diverse materials even in the face of opposition should be passionate, authentic, authoritative, timely, and

compelling (p. 80). Rather than a process, they out a series of talking points based on a number of topics and issues that frequently arise when books are challenged:

- **Sexual content:** “Pornography is entirely different from literature that includes sex. Honest and nuanced depictions of sex provide teens with information that they want and need. Reading and discussing such content will foster healthier attitudes and lead to safer sexual behavior” (p. 82).
- **Race and racism:** “Our society is racially diverse. Reading literature that centers people of color opens up important conversations about the complexity of identity and the ways race matters in daily life” (p. 81).
- **Difficult historical narratives:** “All young people need to grapple with the complexity of our shared history. An honest reckoning with the past produces informed citizens who can work toward a more equitable society” (p. 81).
- **Changing curriculum:** “The publishing world has changed. More people of color are writing books, and publishers are helping those books find readers. Students have a right to encounter the same diversity in classroom texts that they encounter in their daily lives” (p. 83).
- **College readiness:** “Reading diverse literature provides a foundation for the college experience” (p. 84).

Amid the heightened passions and ethical dilemmas surrounding book bans, it can be easy to focus on the need for strong policy and lose sight of the human factor. Hazelton-Boyle and Hazelton-Boyle (2025) stress the need for management to be aware of the effects that these controversies can have on the library professionals. The varying – and sometimes competing – professional and personal ethical conundrums surrounding censorship can lead to moral injury, which is when “a person experiences a strong negative cognitive and emotional response after enduring exposure to a traumatic situation that violates their ethical values” (p. 114). Librarians’ authority and expertise as highly trained professionals gets “undermined by politicians who threaten funding and legal action, and members of the public who have accused librarians defending intellectual freedom as pedophiles, groomers, indoctrinators, and pornographers” (p. 117). Balancing various responsibilities to the taxpayers, to the community, and to intellectual freedom weighs heavily on those in such a service-oriented profession. Without the clear,

consistent guidance and support of solid policies and the people in leadership positions, this weight can prove morally injurious (p. 116).

Some works offer more general, but still useful, advice. For example, Graff (2022) does not offer direct suggestions for management, but does imply a need for awareness of the censorship movement's basis in "ignorance," particularly when it comes to knowledge "of the First Amendment and the Doctrine of the Separation of Powers of state and religion, and a lack of respect for law and tradition; and disregard for due process, democracy, and fellow humans" (p. 12). Similarly, Forester (2024) emphasizes the need for community and mutual support, particularly from other organizations, to "help each other survive the harsh winters of attacks on intellectual freedom so that we can thrive to support education and educators in our state and beyond" (p. 11). Such partnerships go past mere survival, of course; "they can also help our organizations thrive" (12). Leaders should make a priority to learn about organizations at the local and state level that have similar missions or goals. It is also important to "ask" – library managers should reach out and ask other organizations for help or to form partnerships, noting that the "more we asked, the more we were asked in return. Learning about organizations and proactive communication were instrumental in forging successful collaborations" (p. 12). For the less experienced manager, such work can help build confidence and build "the skills necessary to foster community-building initiatives" (p. 12). Developing personal skills and confidence are crucial to growth as a manager.

Conclusion

A library with a diverse, inclusive collection benefits the entire community it serves, and while the debates seem to grow louder and more prolific, there is evidence that "the country as a whole is becoming less conservative and is more open to finding these materials in their libraries" (Steele, 2021, p. 109). Still, book bans have always been a challenge for information professionals, and as Teel (2023) rightfully notes, there "will always be someone who wishes for a book to be banned," and librarians need to consistently respond in a professional manner (p. 7). Proper controls can make or break a library's efforts to navigate this minefield. The key to successful control is successful communication because without that, managers "will not be successful in carrying out the other managerial functions of planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and controlling" (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 408). Communication helps to build support from the community, and "a supportive community and administration is of utmost

importance when building a quality, inclusive library collection” (Steele, 2021, p. 109).

However, the fact also remains that libraries cannot always take proactive measures to ensure progressive policies, collections, or programs, whether because of “an inability to affect change, whether because of legislation, political and social norms, or simple financial shortcomings” (p. 121). Which is why controls must also be in place in the form of solid, clear policies and procedures that outline how selection, challenges, and deselection are handled. The process tends to be much smoother when everyone involved – staff and patrons alike – know how such things will be handled and when leadership makes sure to control the process so that the guidelines are followed.

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