



## The Softer Side of Censorship

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*This essay aims to take an introspective look into soft censorship's complexities and demonstrate how conforming to the ideals of soft censorship makes libraries perpetrators of implicit bias. It begins by defining the concept of book banning before delving into its long and complicated history, which dates back to 212 BCE. By initially looking back at the chronology of book banning, the authors aimed to make a case for how the practice of book banning has continuously been a concerted effort to whitewash and sugarcoat history and to continue dismantling our public educational institutions. The essay dives into disseminating implicit bias through soft censorship in libraries and information sciences. The authors justify how soft censorship directly undermines the intellectual freedoms of library users and readers and demonstrate how, by engaging in soft censorship, libraries are not only perpetrators of implicit bias but are also catalysts of inequity within their institutions. The essay then gives readers a step-by-step guide on resisting censorship in their respective roles. After that, it urges readers to take action and concludes with an important message emphasizing the need for a cultural approach to combat censorship. By doing so, we can begin dismantling the inequities plaguing the library and information science field.*

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*Just as during the McCarthy era there was a desire to suppress social change, we see that happening again, especially as people of color and LGBTQIA individuals seek more social inclusion and political power*  
—Tracie D. Hall in Cotto 2022.

**T**he challenging, banning, restricting, censoring, and even burning of books and printed materials is an age-old dilemma, one that has roots in classism, religious elitism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other “isms.” Banning, challenging, and restricting information is a form of censorship, which stands against the library profession’s core values (ALA 2020), the American Library Association’s (ALA) Freedom to Read Statement (ALA and AAP 2020), and ALA’s Library Bill of Rights (ALA, 2019), all of which suggest that individuals in our democracy have intellectual freedom and the right to read and believe what they choose; individuals should not be hindered in their access to information by the beliefs or wishes of others, particularly those that may disagree with them.



Book banning occurs when private individuals, government officials, or organizations remove books from libraries, school reading lists, or bookstore shelves because they object to their content, ideas, or themes. Those advocating a ban complain typically that the book in question contains graphic violence, expresses disrespect for parents and family, is sexually explicit, exalts evil, lacks literary merit, is unsuitable for a particular age group, or includes offensive language. (Webb 2009)

Brown (2022) further contextualizes this definition:

Banning books is always bigger than just the ban or just the book. It's a concerted effort to whitewash and sugarcoat history, to deny the truth of what happened and who we are as a nation, and to continue the dismantling of our public educational institutions. This current surge is not a grassroots movement of individual parents wanting to protect their children. No, for the most part these are extremely well-funded, politically connected, and highly coordinated conservative groups determined to dominate and oppress.

### This History of Book Banning

The first instance of book banning can be traced back to 212 BCE, when the Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti burned all his kingdom's books to destroy any historical records, so that history could begin with him (Tucker 2009; ALA 2021). In 1933 in Nazi Germany, numerous strategic book burnings of literary texts considered corrosive and anti-German took place to "cleanse" the libraries and schools (Lewy, 2016). And in 2007, one of the most widely known book challenges occurred when a grandmother was concerned with the content of the sexual education book *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie H. Harris. She received civil summons, a fine, and made national headlines after checking out the title from the library and refusing to return it over morality concerns (Knox 2015). While these are seemingly extreme instances of book banning, similar occurrences are not uncommon today.

We are seeing a period in our history where the number of book bans is eclipsing even that of the McCarthy era. And, just to remind everyone, I'm speaking about a period of time where there was a concerted effort to remove books from libraries and from the public sphere that were considered to be unAmerican. Today we are seeing the return of that era, but we're also seeing a period where books are being removed and banned at a pace that far eclipses that. One of the things that underlies both, as a throughline that we can draw between both eras, is that in both eras the books that were targeted for banning often were books that spoke about integration, or desegregation, or self-reliance, and autonomy. Today we are seeing that the majority of books that are

being banned, also, speak about Black Lives Matter, how to be anti-racist, as well as uplift the voices of people who are LBGTQIA. I think that there is a connection to this movement to ban books in this era that harkens back to an earlier age, unfortunately. (Tracie D. Hall in Juarez 2022)

Book bans have become increasingly political, weaponized, and exclusionary.

According to Pen America's *2022 Index of School Book Bans*, 1586 books were banned in United States school libraries and classrooms from July 1, 2021, through March 31, 2022 (Friedman and Johnson 2022). A snapshot of the recent uptick in challenges to books, and by no means a comprehensive list, Pen America's research documents the trend of attempted censorship of books that feature and/or are written by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPoC), and other marginalized authors, and the detrimental impact of this purposeful erasure. Books of all kinds have been targeted, including nonfiction, fiction, poetry, graphic novels, history books, essays, memoirs, reference books, informational works, and of course children and young adult books. And librarians, media specialists, and teachers are in a literal, figurative, professional, and moral battle to preserve their students' and patrons' intellectual freedom and access to information. The politicization of the current movement has expanded to include educational gag orders, the monitoring and censoring of educators who teach topics of diversity, equity, inclusion, and unabridged depictions of history, and the removal of classroom textbooks.

### Soft Censorship and Implicit Biases in LIS

Book banning is an obvious and purposeful act; it's a hard act, one that is done with a great deal of force or strength. But hard censorship is not the only problem we face. Soft censorship, which is rooted in implicit bias, is equally detrimental and even more insidious.

Implicit bias is a form of unintentional prejudice that affects our decisions, judgments, and behaviors toward others (NIH 2022). Unlike explicit bias, which is overt, implicit bias is often harder to identify. Medical research has proven that one can find implicit bias throughout the brain, specifically in the amygdala, which is also associated with a human's "fight or flight" notion (Dalton and Villagran 2018). Furthermore, often humans are unaware that implicit biases even occur, and they may not align with one's declared beliefs. One example of implicit bias is seen in organizational hiring practices. An organization may state they adhere to inclusive practices, yet deny interviews or job offers to applicants because of their name, appearance, or assumptions about cultural background.



Implicit bias is commonly seen as a hidden force that one can only find within (De Houwer 2019).

And while a library may have established practices and policies that claim they intend to dismantle the inequities within their spaces, these practices are ultimately performative and meaningless when other unintentionally discriminatory policies exist that allow implicit bias to flourish. Understanding how implicit biases can permeate the library and information science field will require educators, researchers, and professionals to take a deeper look within and reassess their systemic practices on every level.

Implicit biases in library collection development and banning procedures hinder libraries from providing equitable access to all. An example of implicit bias in collection development and book banning procedures is a library refusing to purchase books or prematurely removing titles from their shelves that do not adhere to the personal beliefs of the selectors. By taking a deeper look into the ways that implicit bias affects library and information science, educators, researchers, and professionals can move beyond performative DEI collection and practice development and begin working towards creating spaces where the library, its customers, and its workers can collectively thrive.

Chopra (2006, p. 255) said, “Unless there’s a personal transformation, there can be no social transformation.” Implicit and explicit bias, and their progeniture, soft censorship, burgeon when there is a lack of self-reflection, cultural competence, and intellectual and cultural humility. Banning, challenging, and censoring materials is a response to a lack of understanding and/or feelings of discomfort and fear. These personal feelings should be dealt with individually, instead of foisting them upon the larger community. If something is distasteful or offensive, feel free to reject it, but to assume that it is not of value to others is entitled, privileged, and harmful. It would be more productive and helpful if people would expend their energies on engaging in critical reflection and intellectual humility—assessing what they currently know and do not know. It would be more beneficial if people would spend the time to reckon with what they do and do not know about other cultures, determine what makes them uncomfortable (and why it makes them uncomfortable), and become purposeful in their learning about other communities (cultural humility). And hopefully, they will reach the point of prioritizing the voices of others and celebrating the richness of the communities of which they are not members (cultural competence). This is the type of personal transformation that is required for any form of social transformation; this is the type of personal transformation needed to combat banning, challenging, and censorship. The infrastructures supporting banning and censorship are intertwined with the concept

of library neutrality. This idea has been the subject of much debate in Library and Information Science (LIS). As Horton and Friere (1990) argue, neutrality in libraries can often be reduced to simply conforming to the system’s expectations (p. 102). It upholds white supremacy, it maintains the status quo, it prevents the decentering of whiteness and Western norms, and it prevents diverse voices, stories, and perspectives from being included in literature and the cultural record. Neutrality allows decisions to be made without nuance (i.e., removing a book because of a complaint, or not buying a book because it has been deemed offensive), and it allows hard conversations to be shut down and vilified over differences of opinion. Neutrality gives censorship fertile ground in which to grow and thrive, outside *and* inside the LIS profession.

Proponents of book banning and challenging have weaponized the concept of neutrality and turned it into a political catch-all for removing “offensive” materials. But who is the arbiter of “offensive”? And what if what is “offensive” to one group is celebrated and profound for others? This weaponization has been successful because neutrality has been conflated with “good materials” (as opposed to “bad materials”); it has been conflated with objectivity, and not with inclusivity and representation; it has been conflated with being a “real American,” and not being an “other;” it has been conflated with materials that make the reader feel good, and not guilty about unearned privileges that come with the adherence to Western norms; and it has been conflated with maintaining the status quo and not rocking the boat. It has been conflated with whiteness and not with those who are non-white and/or otherwise marginalized.

The authors recently heard librarians conflating neutrality with being inclusive; neutrality is the *opposite* of inclusion. Library professionals are steeped in the core value of providing access to information for all (this can work towards inclusion), whereas book banning and challenging removes information from the community. What the librarians really meant is that they don’t want to take sides and exert their opinions on others. We think they mean that they want to be objective and not biased and/or partisan, which of course is what we want to see in library collections and services. But we are not neutral! The profession is not neutral! Censorship cannot be permitted in an attempt to maintain the fallacy of neutrality. Even if neutrality looks good on paper, it can never be operationalized in the way people believe it should be. Every decision made, every book purchased (or not purchased), every program planned (or not planned), etc., is done so by people with particular backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. As humans, it is inevitable that our decisions reflect our own values, and we must recognize and accept that our values don’t always match or reflect the values of others.



We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe (Wiesel 1986).

To fight censorship, we must first fight the false notion, dare we say the propaganda, of neutrality in libraries.

Words and their meanings matter, and because there is such confusion and manufactured consternation about certain words, the root problems will remain and flourish, and the marginalized will continue to be disenfranchised and under-represented in the information the library does provide.

At the time of this essay writing, in 2022, we are witnessing heightened trends of book bans and challenges surrounding titles that are bringing awareness to the identities, histories, and experiences of marginalized groups. ALA reported that more than 470 challenges occurred between September to December 2021 (Kim 2022), and there were 8,000 documented challenges between 1990 and 2009 (Moellendick, 2022). The current trends mirror the historical instances that have negatively penetrated literary history and include books that critics unjustly accuse of having Critical Race Theory content and titles that bring awareness and normalize the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community. Reviewing the current trends of book challenges and bans currently occurring nationwide within public libraries and academic institutions brings into question the intention of the challenger and the institution's responsibility to uphold the intellectual freedoms of their users when responding to the challenges.

When institutions respond to book challenges and bans by removing titles from their shelves, they become perpetrators of implicit and explicit bias by allowing the discriminatory ideals of book challengers to create barriers to intellectual freedom for others. More introspectively, institutions like libraries and schools, which potential users revere as safe learning spaces for the community, also become perpetrators of implicit bias when they align with an outdated stance of neutrality in their collection development. By taking a stance of neutrality, institutions allow implicit bias to flourish, by inadvertently building collections that minimize the voices of marginalized communities. Selectors may avoid collecting titles that they (unjustly) feel could cause controversy. This soft but intentional form of censorship upholds the outdated but common nineteenth-century ideal that learning centers should shelter children from differences of opinion. Upholding this ideal makes the library a doer of harm by making it

difficult for marginalized groups to see themselves in literary work (Ringel 2016).

Soft censorship, which is often interchangeably referred to as self-censorship, is the practice of a library, or library worker, not selecting book titles based on a litany of reasons. These reasons can include but are not limited to the fear of retaliation, potential pressure from publishers, and concerns in determining which titles are age-appropriate (Whelan 2009). Libraries engage in soft censorship by not including or quietly removing books from their shelves because they believe the books have racist, sexual, or homosexual themes (Whelan, 2009). Seemingly, libraries that participate in soft censorship believe that they are protecting their institutions from the threat of pushbacks while also protecting their users from content the libraries deem unsuitable. One organization advocating for libraries to engage in soft censorship is the Family Friendly Libraries, whose ultimate goal is to create action against “libraries that filter Internet access and to ensure that they do not put questionable books on their shelves” (Moellendick 2022). In addition, this organization wants libraries to give parents more rights regarding collection monitoring and selection. When their requests are not responded to favorably, Family Friendly Libraries encourages their users to take political action (Moellendick 2022).

The most prominent issue surrounding soft censorship is that it is not regulated. Without necessary open discussions about why a library censors a title, a library can give too much power to the selector and embolden them to be the judge and jury of which books a library should include in its collection (Whelan 2009). Soft censorship can be highly problematic if the selector's implicit bias is the driving force behind their selections. And as censorship issues continue to build momentum, LIS researchers are beginning to question whether libraries violate our user's First Amendment rights when a library removes a title for objectionable reasons (Kim 2022). This argument is gaining validity because books are often removed from shelves because of the personal viewpoints of some community members and officials and not for merit-based or universally justifiable reasons (Kim 2022).

According to the ALA, in 2021, the most banned and challenged book was *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe (OIF 2022). In this raw and reflective memoir, Kobabe documents eir (Kobabe uses Spivak pronouns ey/eir) journey to find eir identity as a queer person. *Gender Queer* is a critically acclaimed title that easily lends itself as a place of refuge to youth actively striving to successfully navigate life's many obstacles. Unfortunately, as of 2021, *Gender Queer* has been banned in eleven states because it allegedly contains homosexual, offensive, and pornographic content (Lavietes 2021). But Kobabe, an advocate for eir title along with similar



books remaining in schools, argues that removing books that include the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth “is like cutting a lifeline for queer youth, who might not yet even know what terms to ask Google to find out more about their own identities, bodies, and health” (Kobabe 2021). In the article “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Bishop (1990) eloquently stated that “when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society which they are a part; furthermore, children are affected by what they see around them, and it helps them grow.” When they remove books that showcase the experiences of marginalized people, learning institutions like libraries are perpetuating the harmful idea that there is something wrong with marginalized people being true to themselves.

Readers have a right to have true intellectual freedom, and libraries, librarians, and stakeholders are responsible for upholding this freedom. Unfortunately, implicit bias will continue to flourish within the field of library and information science until institutions take a deeper look within and reassess their current barriers to intellectual freedom and equitable access. Book banning is just one way the field is a perpetrator of bias. But taking a deeper look into inequities that hinder libraries from developing inclusive collections, reflective of the communities they aspire to serve, is a first step in the right direction of dismantling the biases that prevent libraries from becoming free and safe learning environments for all. It’s time that the field rid itself of performative diversity, equity, and inclusion practices to become the authentic, safe learning spaces they claim to be.

### Pushing Back Against Censorship

In addition to educating ourselves about the fallacy of neutrality and the harms caused by implicit bias (both of which require cultural competence and cultural humility), there are many practical things we can do to fight against censorship. Brown (2022) suggests defining, donating, advocating, communicating, appreciating, and activating.

Defining, or establishing shared terminologies and meanings, is part of what this essay sought to do. We can’t have conversations about the harms of censorship if we’re not actually talking about the same concepts, events, and phenomena. Furthermore, we cannot truly understand the harms of censorship and begin dismantling the inequities that it causes without seeking to understand how uncovered implicit biases allow libraries and other education organizations to become perpetrators of injustice.

Donate money to organizations engaged in this fight at a collective level, and even better, donate time and knowledge to assist these organizations in their work. This

action-oriented work is also a form of advocating. There are several organizations that potential advocates can support. The list of organizations includes but is not limited to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), the Freedom to Read Foundation, the National Coalition Against Censorship, PEN American, and PFLAG. Action-oriented advocacy is vital because it ensures that the various initiatives created by organizations dedicated to protecting intellectual freedom can continue to be facilitated.

Communicate with individuals and organizations dealing with bans and challenges and appreciate the work that they do. They are undoubtedly frustrated and overwhelmed with the censorship fight that occurs in addition to their everyday duties and services. Then, communicate with others about how they can help and support. Additionally, advocates are encouraged to use their platforms to communicate with the media about the importance of diverse book collections and fight against book bans. For example, We Need Diverse Books, a grassroots organization, supports efforts to encourage the purchasing and promotion of inclusive children’s literature. By supporting organizations like We Need Diverse Books and using every opportunity to stand against book bans, we can step beyond performative advocacy into the realm of true activism.

Activate and run for a seat on the local school or library board and help create policy that will fight against censorship, oppression, and erasure.

Experts in the field recommend adopting a critical cultural approach to combat censorship. This involves gaining knowledge of the historical censorship trends and banning, recognizing the influence of politics, racism, and media in these processes, and acknowledging the harmful effects censorship can have on individuals seeking information, particularly those who rely on literature to see themselves and their experiences represented.

We have to understand that anytime there’s a concerted effort to censor books, it’s also about repressing speech, autonomy, and agency for individuals. I would say let’s not take this lightly. We do need to stand up against this encumbrance of freedom of speech, because what we know is that once we begin to see one area of our Bill of Rights taken away, that impacts other areas (Tracie D. Hall in Juarez 2022).

These active strategies will enable us to “Fight wisely, fight efficiently, and fight bravely” (Brown 2022). We need to proactively fight because “book bans and book censorship will last as long as we allow it. . . . We do need to stand up against censorship. We cannot take this sitting down” (Tracie D. Hall in Juarez 2022).





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