

Criminalization of Ideas

Historical and Digital-Era Book Banning as Sociopolitical Control

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This article examines book banning as a mechanism for criminalizing dissent and enforcing sociopolitical control, highlighting its historical and contemporary manifestations. Building on Darnton's account of how authorities police print culture to shape political order, the analysis shows how censorship operates through legal and institutional frameworks to regulate public discourse, suppress opposition, and reinforce power. By integrating social control theory, labeling theory, and conflict theory, the article compares state-sponsored censorship in the Soviet Union, apartheid South Africa, and Nazi Germany with digitally mediated information control in China and contemporary book restriction controversies in the United States. Resistance movements—from samizdat networks to digital advocacy—underscore the enduring struggle for intellectual freedom. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for coordinated advocacy, governance safeguards, and technology-aware policy to protect free expression amid expanding surveillance and control capacities.

Throughout history, book banning has functioned as a practical means for authorities to suppress dissenting ideas, regulate public discourse, and consolidate sociopolitical control (Darnton 1995). Seen through Darnton's lens, struggles over access to texts are also struggles over who may define legitimate knowledge and political belonging. By criminalizing certain ideas and restricting access to particular forms of knowledge, those in power can shape societal norms, maintain ideological dominance, and limit challenges to their authority (Prunckun 2024). This suppression of intellectual freedom is intertwined with legal and institutional mechanisms that enforce control, illustrating how censorship regulates public knowledge and reinforces social hierarchies (Ewick and Silbey 1998).

In contemporary society, the rise of digital media and communication technologies has added complexity to the dispute over intellectual freedom (Zuboff 2019). Traditional forms of book banning have evolved into methods of digital censorship, targeting websites, online publications, and social media platforms. Governments now employ surveillance applications, algorithmic filtering, and legal frameworks to suppress dissenting voices. Yet these technological advancements have empowered activists, organizations, and resistance movements to challenge state control, creating a

dynamic and ongoing global confrontation between suppression and resistance (Howard and Hussain 2011).

Although scholarship has examined censorship and its sociopolitical implications, much of this work focuses on either historical or contemporary contexts in isolation. Additionally, the interdisciplinary application of theoretical frameworks, such as social control theory, labeling theory, and conflict theory, has often been underexplored regarding both historical and modern censorship mechanisms. This article addresses these gaps by bridging historical and contemporary perspectives and integrating a theoretical foundation to analyze the evolving dynamics of censorship and resistance. In doing so, it highlights the implications for intellectual freedom in both traditional and digital contexts, offering insights into the persistent and adaptive nature of these struggles.

Specifically, this article examines how state actors and state-adjacent institutions use legal, administrative, and technological frameworks to restrict access to ideas and enforce sociopolitical control. Integrating social control theory, labeling theory, and conflict theory, it analyzes censorship as a legal and social phenomenon, showing how suppression is institutionalized through criminal law in some settings and through governance processes (e.g., education



and library policy) in others. The article illuminates the enduring and adaptive struggle for intellectual freedom and considers the implications of censorship for democracy, innovation, and social progress.

To achieve this, the article outlines the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis and then explores key historical case studies—the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa—before turning to contemporary examples of censorship in China and the United States. The article concludes by examining the forms of resistance that emerge in response to censorship and considers the implications for intellectual freedom, democracy, and social progress in an era of advancing surveillance.

Theoretical Framework

Social control theory, developed by Hirschi (1969), holds that individuals conform to societal norms because of their bonds with society, comprising attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. These bonds serve as internal controls, deterring individuals from engaging in deviant behavior. In the context of book banning, authorities manipulate these bonds, particularly the “belief” component, to promote conformity. Criminalizing specific ideas and banning books ensures that only state-approved ideologies are accepted, thereby discouraging dissent and reinforcing societal obedience (Ewick and Silbey 1998).

For example, authoritarian regimes often exploit this theory by fostering loyalty to the state through strict media control. The government tightly regulates literature in North Korea, ensuring that citizens’ beliefs align with state ideology (Lankov 2013). The threat of surveillance and punishment for engaging with banned material creates a climate of fear, strengthening social bonds oriented toward conformity. Individuals often prioritize their societal standing and relationships over exploring prohibited ideas, further entrenching state control.

Labeling theory, articulated by Becker (1963), emphasizes that deviance arises not from the act but from societal reactions. When an act or an individual is labeled as deviant, this label influences self-perception and societal treatment, often resulting in stigmatization and marginalization. Applied to book banning, the labeling of certain books as “dangerous,” “subversive,” or “illegal” criminalizes their content while stigmatizing authors, publishers, and readers (Becker 1963). This deters others from engaging with such material for fear of being similarly labeled and subjected to social or legal consequences.

Historical examples underscore the power of labeling. During the McCarthy era in the United States, artists and

writers accused of communist sympathies faced blacklisting, loss of employment, and social isolation (Schrecker 1998). The label “communist” deterred individuals from exploring or expressing dissenting ideas because the fear of scrutiny and marginalization outweighed the desire for intellectual freedom (Navasky 1980).

Conflict theory, rooted in the works of Karl Marx (1867) and further developed by C. Wright Mills (1956), examines society as a battleground of competing groups vying for power and resources. Dominant groups use laws and institutions to suppress subordinate groups and maintain control (Calavita 2010). Book banning exemplifies this dynamic because those in power suppress literature that challenges the status quo or promotes alternative ideologies, effectively preventing the dissemination of knowledge that could empower marginalized groups and threaten existing hierarchies (Quinney 1970).

A striking example is Nazi Germany, when book burnings targeted works by Jewish authors and political dissidents. These acts were not only symbolic but strategic, aiming to erase cultural and intellectual foundations that could oppose Nazi ideology. By eliminating dissenting voices, the regime strengthened its ideological control and facilitated its genocidal agenda with minimal internal resistance (Evans 2005; Taylor 1995).

By integrating these theories, this article adopts a framework to analyze the phenomenon of book banning. Social control theory explains the mechanisms of conformity and the reinforcement of societal norms. Labeling theory highlights the stigmatization processes and societal reactions to deviance. Conflict theory situates these dynamics within larger power struggles and structural inequalities. These perspectives reveal that book banning is not merely an effort to maintain social order but a calculated strategy to preserve power by suppressing intellectual freedom. This approach underscores the societal implications of censorship, particularly its role in shaping collective memory, stifling innovation, and marginalizing dissenting voices (Silbey 2005).

In sum, social control theory is used to explain how censorship promotes conformity by narrowing the boundaries of permissible belief and discourse; labeling theory is used to analyze how texts, authors, and readers are stigmatized as deviant or threatening; and conflict theory is used to interpret censorship as a strategy through which dominant groups defend power by restricting oppositional knowledge. This integrated approach supports comparison across regimes and periods while keeping attention on the concrete legal and institutional mechanisms that operationalize the criminalization of ideas.



Methodology

This study uses critical comparative analysis to examine both historical and contemporary censorship environments. Cases were selected because they (1) exemplify distinct mechanisms for restricting ideas (criminal law, administrative censorship, propaganda institutions, and digitally mediated controls), (2) have documented historical and social impact on intellectual freedom, and (3) provide observable resistance practices that clarify how suppression is contested. The purpose of this design is analytic generalization—identifying recurring mechanisms of control and their adaptation over time—rather than statistical representativeness.

The analysis first examines three historical cases of state-centered censorship (the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa) and then turns to two contemporary cases (China and the United States) to show how censorship persists while adapting to digital communication, surveillance, and decentralized governance.

These cases were chosen for their historical significance and diverse sociopolitical contexts, offering a comparative lens to understand censorship's universal and context-specific dynamics. The analysis focuses on the legal, social, and cultural dimensions of censorship, exploring the strategies employed by state actors to suppress dissent and the forms of resistance that emerged in response.

This methodological approach is guided by an interdisciplinary framework integrating social control theory, labeling theory, and conflict theory. The study contextualizes historical examples within these theoretical perspectives and explains how censorship operates across different regimes and periods.

Additionally, the focus on documented resistance movements enables exploration of strategies to counter contemporary censorship, highlighting the enduring struggle for intellectual freedom and its implications for modern society.

Limitations

This study examined specific historical cases—the Soviet Union, apartheid South Africa, and Nazi Germany—thus providing insights while limiting generalizability. It did not cover global censorship practices or contemporary dynamics in emerging democracies and authoritarian regimes. Although it touched on artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain in the context of digital censorship and resistance, the analysis was not exhaustive. Future research could explore AI's role in state control, algorithmic bias, and surveillance, as well as the potential of decentralized and encrypted methods to counter censorship, thus offering a broader view of censorship's evolving landscape.

Censorship as a Mechanism of Control

The enforcement of censorship through book banning relies on the criminal justice system as a state control device. Legal frameworks, including laws, regulations, and punitive measures, formalize the criminalization of ideas, making dissent a legal offense. These mechanisms ensure that opposition to state ideologies is met with institutionalized punishment, reinforcing state authority (Calavita 2010).

In the Soviet Union, conformity was enforced through strict censorship laws, illustrating social control theory's role in aligning societal norms with state ideologies. Dissidents, labeled as “enemies of the state,” faced stigmatization (labeling theory), and the country faced struggles between the ruling class and suppressed groups (conflict theory). Censorship, institutionalized through the Glavlit agency, regulated all published material, ensuring alignment with state ideology (Fitzpatrick 1999). Criminalized dissent, such as Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, was punished under Article 70 of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Penal Code, leading to imprisonment or exile for authors (Alexeyeva 1985). Similarly, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose works exposed the Soviet labor camps, faced expulsion, arrest, and exile (Solzhenitsyn 1975). Trials of dissidents lacked due process, with punishments including forced labor or psychiatric hospitalization (*psikhushka*) (Bloch and Reddaway 1977).

Censorship also altered collective memory through the rewriting of textbooks to align with ideology and the erasure of purged figures from historical records (Fitzpatrick 1999). Despite this, underground networks circulated banned literature within the USSR (*samizdat*), and some works were smuggled abroad (*tamizdat*). These clandestine efforts preserved intellectual freedom and sowed dissent, contributing to the regime's eventual collapse (Boobbyer 2005).

In apartheid South Africa, censorship upheld racial segregation, silencing dissent against white minority rule (Dugard 1978). The Publications Act granted sweeping powers to ban “undesirable” material, criminalizing possession of banned literature (Merrett 1994). Writers like Nadine Gordimer, whose works critiqued apartheid, faced bans and scrutiny despite global acclaim (Clingman 1992). Laws restricted media and punished reporting on resistance movements, reinforcing systemic racism and isolating South Africa intellectually (Hachten and Giffard 1984; Switzer and Adhikari 2000). Textbooks promoted apartheid narratives, and dissenting educators faced detention or exile (Heffernan and Nieftagodien 2016). Despite this suppression, banned texts continued to circulate through informal reading networks, while exile allowed South African writers to publish abroad and address international audiences (McDonald 2009; Raditlhalo 2012).



In Nazi Germany, censorship was integral to totalitarian control. The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda regulated cultural production, and the Reich Chamber of Literature enforced ideological conformity among authors and publishers (Evans 2005). Laws like the 1933 Law on Editors criminalized dissent, and book burnings symbolized the eradication of “un-German” ideas. Works by Jewish authors and political dissidents, such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), were banned, and their authors were forced into exile (Manguel 1996). Textbooks were rewritten to reflect Nazi racial theories, and universities purged dissenters and Jewish professors (Giles 1985). The intellectual stagnation that followed highlighted the detrimental cultural effects of censorship (Evans 2005).

Censorship suppressed intellectual freedom and fostered conformity across these regimes. Yet resistance persisted—from underground literature networks to global solidarity efforts—illustrating the enduring struggle for intellectual freedom and its vital role in challenging oppressive systems.

Contemporary Contexts

The historical cases previously examined illustrate censorship as an overt, centralized project: States criminalized “dangerous” ideas, controlled publishing pipelines, and imposed severe penalties for producing or possessing prohibited texts. Contemporary censorship retains these objectives but often shifts the means. In China, state authority is extended through networked surveillance and platform regulation at scale. In the United States, contemporary restriction efforts typically operate through institutional governance—school boards, administrative policy, funding, and collection management—often triggered by organized pressure campaigns rather than direct state criminal law. These differences matter for comparison: The targets may be similar, but the channels of enforcement and legal/ administrative logics vary.

China’s approach to internet censorship is among the most sophisticated and comprehensive globally. The government employs a multifaceted strategy that encompasses legal regulations, technical controls, and human oversight to monitor and restrict online content (Roberts 2018). Central to this system is the Cybersecurity Law, which was adopted in 2016 and went into effect in 2017; it consolidates prior regulations and requires network operators to register users using their real names, store data locally, and assist authorities in investigations (Creemers 2017; National People’s Congress 2016). This law reflects social control theory by promoting conformity through surveillance (Hirschi

1969). It also aligns with labeling theory because individuals expressing dissenting opinions can be labeled threats to national security, leading to stigmatization and legal penalties (Creemers 2017).

Technical measures, collectively known as the “Great Firewall,” include keyword filtering, website blocking, and internet speed throttling to deter access to foreign information sources (King et al. 2013). International platforms such as Google, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) are blocked, whereas domestic alternatives operate under close government supervision (Roberts 2018). Thousands of human censors and AI programs are employed to detect and remove undesirable content (Qin et al. 2017). Conflict theory is evident in the Communist Party’s maintenance of dominance through censorship of content that could undermine its authority (Gorwa et al. 2020), such as discussions of the Tiananmen Square protests or criticism of government officials (Calavita 2010). These measures are justified as necessary for social stability and effectively suppress dissent and collective action (Han 2018).

Despite these controls, Chinese citizens employ various methods to circumvent censorship, including virtual private networks (VPNs), proxy servers, and coded language. However, the government has intensified its crackdown on such methods, penalizing individuals and companies that use or provide VPN services (Xu 2020).

Unlike the historical cases and unlike China’s centralized digital censorship, most contemporary US book restriction campaigns are not implemented through a national censorship office or direct criminalization of reading. Instead, they are typically initiated by private individuals or organized groups seeking to mobilize public authority through institutional processes: school board decisions, administrative policy, collection development rules, procurement and budgeting controls, and occasionally state-level education directives. The result is a form of state-adjacent censorship in which public institutions restrict access to ideas, even when the pressure to do so is “private.” Analytically, this still functions as a form of sociopolitical control because the restrictions are enforced through legitimate institutional power (access rules, removal decisions, professional risk, and policy compliance), producing chilling effects even without criminal penalties (Laats and Meehan 2024).

In recent years, the United States has experienced a resurgence of book-banning debates, particularly in schools and public libraries. Book challenges often focus on content related to race, gender, sexuality, religion, or history (American Library Association [ALA] 2021). Although the First Amendment protects free speech and expression, local



authorities and school boards have sought to remove or restrict access to certain books, prompting legal and ethical debates (Doyle 2020).

High-profile challenged titles include *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, which addresses police violence and racial injustice, and *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, a memoir about gender and sexual identity. Opponents have described these books as unsuitable for young readers, while defenders argue that access to diverse literature allows students to see their own identities represented and to encounter perspectives beyond their experience (American Library Association 2022; Bishop 1990). Labeling theory applies here because books and authors are stigmatized as controversial or inappropriate, deterring engagement (Becker 1963). Conflict theory further highlights the power struggles between traditional cultural groups seeking to maintain dominance and marginalized communities advocating for inclusion and representation (Calavita 2010).

Legal challenges have shaped the discourse on censorship in the United States. For instance, *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* (1998) addressed objections to racial slurs in classics like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The court upheld the school district's decision to keep these books in the curriculum, emphasizing the educational value of confronting historical realities (*Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* 1998). Organizations such as the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom and the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) continue to advocate for intellectual freedom, emphasizing that book banning undermines students' rights to information and hampers educational development (ALA 2021; NCAC 2020).

Resistance to Censorship and the Future of Intellectual Freedom

Resistance to censorship often arises through underground movements that innovate to circumvent state control. These efforts are critical in preserving banned literature and fostering dissenting ideas. They operate in secrecy and rely on trust among participants despite significant personal risks (Alexeyeva 1985).

In the Soviet Union, samizdat networks clandestinely reproduced and circulated banned literature, such as Andrei Sakharov's essay "Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom," which criticized the government's human rights record (Sakharov 1968). Similarly, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* was distributed via samizdat and later smuggled abroad for publication (Pasternak 1957). Participants manually reproduced texts using typewriters or handwritten copies, risking imprisonment, exile, or forced

labor (Alexeyeva 1985). This decentralized model preserved literature and cultivated dissenting communities that weakened state control (Boobbyer 2005).

In Nazi Germany, the White Rose movement, led by the University of Munich students Hans and Sophie Scholl and their professor Kurt Huber, distributed leaflets condemning Nazi atrocities (Scholl 1983). Despite strict censorship, the group used the postal system and personal networks to disseminate thousands of leaflets across cities (Fest 1996). After being discovered by the Gestapo, the members were tried in show trials and executed, but their legacy remains a symbol of moral resistance (Hoffmann 1979).

Legal challenges have also been a cornerstone of resistance. In the United States, the Supreme Court case *Island Trees School District v. Pico* established that school boards could not remove books solely because they disagreed with the ideas within them (Levy 1985). Justice William J. Brennan Jr. highlighted the "right to receive ideas" as fundamental to intellectual freedom and participatory democracy (*Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* 1982). Such rulings reinforce the role of judicial systems in protecting free expression.

In the digital age, activists leverage technology to bypass censorship. During the Arab Spring, social media platforms enabled real-time updates and coordination of protests despite government crackdowns (Anderson 2011), including internet shutdowns and content censorship (Howard and Hussain 2011). Activists employed VPNs, proxy servers, and anonymizing programs to evade restrictions (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). Similarly, in China, citizens use VPNs to circumvent the Great Firewall and access censored content despite increasing government crackdowns on VPN services (King et al. 2013; Roberts 2018).

Although technology provides new avenues for resistance, it also intensifies state surveillance. Governments use AI for content moderation, facial recognition, and predictive policing, raising human rights concerns (Mozur 2019). Resistance technologies like Tor and Signal offer secure communication channels, whereas blockchain platforms like LBRY and Steemit explore decentralized and censorship-resistant content distribution (Penney 2016; Wright and de Filippi 2015). However, these technologies face challenges related to scalability, accessibility, and potential misuse (Zuboff 2019).

Censorship profoundly affects intellectual and cultural development by stifling creativity, critical thinking, and minority voices (Freire 1970). The suppression of innovation hindered scientific progress and cultural expression, as seen in the Catholic Church's condemnation of Galileo, which delayed advancements in astronomy and physics (Finocchiaro 1989). Censorship also undermines democratic values



by restricting open debate and freedom of expression, eroding the foundations of participatory governance (Calavita 2010; Dworkin 1996).

Although often justified as necessary for security or social harmony, censorship frequently conceals efforts to suppress dissent and consolidate power. These measures can backfire, fostering resistance and international condemnation. In the digital age, this “arms race” between censorship mechanisms and resistance technologies raises critical questions about the future of intellectual freedom (Zuboff 2019). Governments enhance digital surveillance while activists innovate to safeguard privacy and access to information (Roberts 2018).

International cooperation is vital to protect freedom of expression online. The United Nations (UN) recognizes internet access as a human right, and initiatives like the Freedom Online Coalition aim to promote internet freedom globally (DeNardis 2014; UN Human Rights Council 2016). However, competing national interests and technological disparities complicate efforts to establish universal standards, leaving intellectual freedom under persistent threat (Zuboff 2019).

Conclusion

Book banning remains a potent method for authorities to criminalize dissenting ideas and enforce sociopolitical control in the digital age (Darnton 1995). By employing social control theory, labeling theory, and conflict theory, this article has provided a broad framework for understanding how censorship operates across different regimes based on historical contexts (Calavita 2010; Silbey 2005).

Social control theory demonstrates how authorities manipulate societal bonds and norms to promote conformity and suppress dissent. Labeling theory highlights the role of stigmatization in marginalizing dissenting voices and deterring others from engaging with prohibited content.

Conflict theory underscores the broader power dynamics and structural inequalities that enable dominant groups to suppress challenges to their authority by controlling the flow of information. These theories illuminate the strategic and multifaceted nature of censorship as a control mechanism.

The criminalization of ideas carries far-reaching consequences, including the suppression of innovation, the marginalization of minority voices, and the stifling of critical thought (Freire 1970; Medvedev 1969). Yet resistance to censorship is both persistent and adaptive. From underground movements to legal challenges and technological innovations, the enduring struggle for intellectual freedom reflects a universal drive to preserve and protect the exchange of ideas (Alexeyeva 1985; Howard and Hussain 2011). This struggle has become increasingly complex in the digital age, necessitating greater advocacy and collaboration to safeguard free expression amid evolving challenges (Zuboff 2019).

The need for vigilance in protecting intellectual freedom cannot be overstated. As governments develop more sophisticated methods to monitor and control information, the risks to individual rights and democratic values grow. To counter these threats, the global community must prioritize transparency, privacy protection, and the defense of free expression (Dworkin 1996; UN Human Rights Council 2016). Achieving this requires a multifaceted approach involving legal and political reforms, technological advancements, and enhanced international cooperation.

By fostering environments where ideas can be freely exchanged, societies can promote progress and inclusivity and strengthen democratic principles. Continued advocacy, the development of innovative technological solutions, and concerted international efforts are essential to safeguarding and advancing intellectual freedom as a cornerstone of human rights and social progress (DeNardis 2014).

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