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EDITORIAL

FEATURE

Silencing LGBTQIA+ Voices

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The United States has been in a book-banning crisis for the past three years. According to the American Library Association, in 2021 there were 1,858 titles targeted; in 2022, 2,571 titles; and in 2023, 4,240 unique titles were challenged (American Library Association 2024). This is the highest number of titles targeted since the ALA began collecting this information 20 years ago. In 2010, former Office for Intellectual Freedom Director Barbara Jones estimated that only 75–80 percent of challenges are reported. It is almost impossible to know, for example, if books aren't purchased for collections because they might provoke controversy ("Campaign Urges Book Challenge Reporting" 2011). Following the pattern of the past two years, almost all of the top ten challenged titles in 2023 were diverse books. Seven of the books focus on LGBTQIA+ content or have LGBTQIA+ characters.

The three research articles in this issue all focus on barriers to accessing these materials. This was not intended to be a special issue on this topic, but given how many of LGBTQIA+ titles are targeted, it is not surprising that the journal received several articles tacking this topic. The first article provides a history of censorship of LGBTQIA+ materials for children. The second demonstrates that, at the moment, LGBTQIA+ content is not blocked by CIPA-compliant filers. However, given the current political climate, this could change any time. Finally, the last article analyzes the Moms for Liberty–endorsed BookLooks.org reviews of Stonewall Book Award–winning titles.

The current crisis has also led to a backlog in the journal's news coverage. It is imperative to have a written record of this challenging time for libraries, library workers, schools, teachers, and their allies. News will return to the journal in the next volume.

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Access to LGBTQ-Themed Children's Materials

A Recent History of Their Censorship

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Whether in school or public libraries, children and young adults are often denied access to materials that contain gay or transgender themes. However, it is the librarian and information professional's job to make sure that the public has equal access to information for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. With the current rise in censorship attempts targeting the community, librarians and information professionals can learn from how prior censorship attempts were handled. The following essay contains a recent history and discussion of the censorship of LGBTQ books and materials for children.

Censorship is an issue that has been plaguing libraries for decades (Steele 2020a; Steele 2020b). Not only does censorship come in the form of book banning and book burning, censorship can also be weaponized by parents, community leaders, and even librarians themselves. Self-censorship has become more rampant in recent years, with many librarians choosing to self-censor in order to avoid conflict (Downey 2013; Moody 2005; Whelan 2009). However, according to Article III of the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*, "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (ALA 2021, p. 19, Article III). The *Library Bill of Rights* is the American Library Association's statement expressing the rights of library users to intellectual freedom and the expectations the association places on libraries to support those rights. The American Library Association promotes the freedom to choose as well as the freedom to express one's opinions, even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular, and stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those viewpoints to all who wish to read and access them.

Currently, a population that is often the target of censorship is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. Forty-one percent of all books banned by school districts from July 2021 to June 2022 were about LGBTQ characters. That includes 671 titles that explicitly address LGBTQ themes or feature protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are part of the LGBTQ community. About nine percent of these bans—or 145 titles—targeted transgender characters and their stories (Pendharkar 2022). While it may not be the top cited reason (ALA 2023d), homosexuality was still cited as a reason for censorship in many analyses of censorship trends over the last several decades (Doyle 2000; Foerstel 2002; Harer and Harris 1994; Karolides, Bald, and Sova 2005; Sova 1998; Woods 1979). In addition, there are even examples of state legislatures that limit state funding for libraries that do not agree to restrictions on certain controversial LGBTQ materials (Barack 2005; Oder 2006).

In addition to state funding, some public libraries have had city funding threatened if they provide access to LGBTQ materials, with one example taking place in Ridgeland, Mississippi. According to Tonja Johnson, Executive Director of the Madison County Library System in Madison County, Mississippi, in January 2022 the Mayor of Ridgeland, Mississippi, Gene McGee said he would withhold $110,000 from one of the system's branches, Ridgeland Library, because he received citizen complaints about books that depicted members of the LGBTQ community (AP 2022). According to Johnson, "Funding for this year was being withheld until we removed what he called 'homosexual material' from the library. . . . His reasoning that he gave was that, as a Christian, he could not support that, and that he would not release funding until we remove the material" (AP 2022, para. 7). The library did end up receiving payment, and in August of that year the Madison County Library System signed a standalone contract with the City of Ridgeland, avoiding a library shutdown (Judin 2022).

For people who wish to censor the LGBTQ community, their desire to exercise power over them through censorship can often be linked to homophobia. Naidoo (2012) writes that homophobia "is the societal belief that individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning are demented, evil, harmful to society, disgraceful, perverse, and otherwise unfit to live in society" (p. 10). Homophobia can stem from a variety of different causes. It can often stem from some irrational fear, whether it is fear of something different or unknown, or even from an individual's fear of being identified as gay themselves. Religious beliefs are yet another common root of homophobia. This homophobic societal belief is often what leads to censorship.

Censorship of LGBTQ-Themed Children's Literature

Much of the controversy surrounding LGBTQ-themed materials deals with their dissemination to children (Naidoo 2012; Steele 2022). Kidd (2009) writes how the "censorship of children's books has accelerated in the twentieth century, as the censorship of adult materials became less acceptable and as childhood was imagined more and more as a time of great innocence and vulnerability" (p. 199). In regards to LGBTQ-themed materials, DePalma and Atkinson (2006) write how oftentimes children are considered to be innocent asexual beings, and therefore must be "protected from the dangerous knowledge of homosexuality" (DePalma and Atkinson 2006, p. 339). Parents frequently challenge books with LGBTQ themes, claiming they are not suitable for the child's age group. This makes it difficult for families with LGBTQ members to access these materials. Materials with LGBTQ themes being difficult to find at the library is certainly not a new problem, with Wolf stating in 1989:

> Homophobia . . . still keeps most gay families hidden and accounts for the absence of information about them. It also keeps what information there is out of the library, especially the children's room, and makes it difficult to locate through conventional research strategies. (Wolf 1989, p. 52)

In the history of children's literature and its connection to the LGBTQ community, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, children's book authors were not able to include any outward form of a same-sex marriage or relationship. These would often be hidden, such as in *Frog and Toad*, a series of four picture books by Arnold Lobel that were originally published between 1970 and 1979 and tell the story of a frog and toad, both male, who are best friends. Not until the late 1980s and early 1990s did LGBTQ children's literature as it is known today, with outward examples of same-sex couples, start to become public (Green 2019).

One of the first pieces of LGBTQ children's literature to garner broad attention was *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman (1989). The story is about a child, Heather, raised by lesbian women: her biological mother, Jane, who gave birth to her after artificial insemination, and her biological mother's same-sex partner, Kate. The book was listed at number nine on the American Library Association's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 1990 to 1999 decade (ALA 2023a). It dropped off the list for the 2000 to 2009 decade (ALA 2023b), but returned at number 87 for the 2010 to 2019 list (ALA 2023c).

Another early children's book to address the subject of homosexuality was *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990). The story follows a young boy whose divorced father now lives with his life partner, and the book was awarded a Lambda Literary Award in 1991. The American Library Association listed *Daddy's Roommate* at number two on their list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 1990 to 1999 decade (ALA 2023a).

One example of censorship involving both *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies* is the federal court case *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Texas* (2000). In this case, city residents of Wichita Falls, Texas, who were members of a church sought removal of the two books because they disapproved of the books' depiction of homosexuality. The City of Wichita Falls City Council then passed a resolution to restrict access to the books if a petition was able to get 300 signatures of people asking for the restriction. A different group of citizens then filed suit after copies of the two books were removed from the children's section of the library and placed on a locked shelf in the adult area. The District Court ruled that the city's resolution permitting the removal of the two books improperly delegated governmental authority regarding selection decisions of books carried in the library and prohibited the city from enforcing it (Steele 2017; Steele 2018; Steele 2019).

The children's book that has been one of the most frequently challenged books in recent years is *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell 2005). The book tells the true story of two male Central Park Zoo penguins, Roy and Silo, who form a couple and after a failed attempt at hatching a rock, end up hatching a true penguin egg and raising a female baby penguin named Tango. According to the American Library Association, *And Tango Makes Three* was the most challenged book of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010 and the second most challenged book of 2009. The book continued to be in the Top 10 Most Challenged Books in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019 (ALA 2023d). *And Tango Makes Three* was also listed at number four on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2000 to 2009 decade (ALA 2023b), and at number six for the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2023c).

One example of librarians having to fight censorship challenges of *And Tango Makes Three* took place in Loudoun County, Virginia. In 2008, the Loudoun County Public Schools Superintendent removed the book from general circulation at public elementary school libraries on the basis of a parent's complaint. After the parent formally challenged the book, an advisory committee of principals, librarians, teachers and parents was put together to review the book. The group deemed it acceptable, and the anonymous parent made an appeal. Another committee of administrators,

librarians and parents reviewed the book, and that committee also recommended that it remain in the collection. After originally deciding to override the decision of the committees and make the book available only to teachers and parents, the Superintendent ended up returning the book to circulation (Chandler 2008).

The authors of *And Tango Makes Three* have taken the challenges in stride, although do believe them to be unfounded. Speaking to the *New York Times* in 2005, one of the authors, Justin Richardson, stated, "We wrote the book to help parents teach children about same-sex parent families. It's no more an argument in favor of human gay relationships than it is a call for children to swallow their fish whole or sleep on rocks" (Miller 2005, para. 23).

Another LGBTQ children's book that has been frequently challenged in recent years is *Prince and Knight* by Daniel Haack (2018). The book tells the story of a young prince who falls in love with a knight after the two work together to battle a dragon threatening the kingdom. At the conclusion of the book, the two wed. *Prince and Knight* made the American Library Association's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number five in 2019 (ALA 2022d). The book was also listed at number 91 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2022c).

One challenge to *Prince and Knight* occurred in 2019 in Loudoun County, Virginia. The local school district faced several challenges to pieces of literature that were instated as a component of a "diverse classroom libraries" initiative for elementary and high school classrooms. Most challenges centered on the LGBTQ pieces of literature, despite constituting only five percent of designated texts for the program (Schmidt 2019). Specifically, *Heather has Two Mommies*, *My Princess Boy*, and *Prince and Knight* received the most requests for reconsideration by parents and citizens, according to internal district documents, with *Prince and Knight* having been moved to the school counseling office while under reconsideration (Van Slooten 2019).

Censorship of Transgender-Themed Children's Literature

One subcategory of LGBTQ-themed literature that is important to note is transgender-themed literature. Like other LGBTQ-themed literature, a major issue deals with its availability to children. Flanagan (2007) discusses books such as *Princess Max* (Stiller 2001), in which children are introduced to the idea that cross-dressing is wrong, and then reinterpret that message as an expression of individuality and normalcy. This is also clearly evident in the picture book *Jesse's Dream Skirt* (Mack 1979) in which a preschool boy

wants to wear a skirt to school, is ridiculed by his classmates, and then eventually embraced for his individuality. Books with similar stories include *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis 2009) and *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman and Hoffman 2014). Another example is *What a Year!* (dePaola 2002), in which author and illustrator Tomie dePaola writes of his own childhood exploits, including dressing up as Snow White for Halloween and being a bride at his brother's birthday party. In the book, young Tomie is never ridiculed for his cross-dressing, and his behavior is treated as a non-issue.

While male cross-dressing is commonly viewed as taboo, female cross-dressing is typically not regarded with the same level of concern (Naidoo 2012, p. 39). In books such as *Rough Tough Charley* (Kay 2007), the female character spends her entire adult life as a man and is a successful entrepreneur. When her cross-dressing is discovered, condemnation is not as forthcoming as it would have been if she had been a man dressed as a woman. Similarly, Tunks and McGee (2006) point out that children and educators embrace the female character in *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman 1991) for taking on the role of Peter Pan in a school play; however, these same educators and children, because of social conditioning would balk at the idea of a male character dressing up as Tinkerbell or Wendy in the same school play.

Different from cross-dressing, some transgender individuals fully identify with the gender other than the one assigned to them at birth and truly believe they were born in the wrong body. An example of this is Jazz Jennings, a transgender female who was assigned male at birth. She began to identify as a female at a young age and has since become a well-known advocate for the transgender community. In 2014 she co-authored *I am Jazz* (Herthel and Jennings 2014), a children's picture book about her experience as a transgender child. Since then, Jazz has grown a popular YouTube channel, starred in a reality TV series, and published a memoir, *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen* (Jennings 2016). *I am Jazz* made the American Library Association's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number three in 2015, number four in 2016, number ten in 2017, and number six in 2019 (ALA 2023d). The book was also listed at number 13 on ALA's list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books for the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2023c).

One significant occurrence of censorship regarding *I Am Jazz* took place in Wisconsin. On November 23, 2015, a reading of *I Am Jazz* was scheduled at the Mount Horeb Primary Center, a public elementary school in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, where a student had recently transitioned from boy to girl like the main character in *I Am Jazz* (Gomez 2015). School staff had scheduled the reading to "support gender-variant students and their families" (Gomez 2015, para.

2). After learning about the event, the Liberty Counsel, a conservative Christian nonprofit headquartered in Florida, threatened to sue Mount Horeb Area School District. The Liberty Counsel claimed that the school district's decision to read *I Am Jazz* "substitutes the beliefs of the principal and school psychologist for those of parents" (Liberty Counsel 2015, para. 4). Upon threat of a lawsuit, the school district canceled the scheduled reading (Gomez 2015).

The children's book *George* by Alex Gino (2015) is another example of a children's book centering on a transgender child as the main character. In the book, the main character George was assigned male at birth but identifies as a girl. She wants to play Charlotte in the class play *Charlotte's Web*, but the teacher says she cannot play the part because she is a boy (Gino 2015). Beginning in April 2022, the book began to be published under the title *Melissa*. According to the American Library Association, *George* was number three on its Top 10 Most Challenged Books List in 2016, number five in 2017, and number one in both 2018, 2019, and 2020 (ALA 2023d). The book was also listed at number five on ALA's list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books for the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2023c).

One particular controversy surrounding *George* involved the Wichita, Kansas, public school system and its decision to ban the book from its district libraries in 2017 (Gomez 2017). The justification used for this banning was that the book included "sexual references and language considered to be inappropriate for children" (Gomez 2017, para. 2). The district's supervisor of library media at the time, Gail Becker, obstructed district librarians' efforts to include the book in their collections by withholding funds intended to purchase the book. In response to this challenge, author Alex Gino organized a Twitter campaign intended to raise money to purchase enough copies of their book so that each of the district's 57 elementary and K-8 school libraries could have one (Gomez 2017). Another incident occurred a year later in King City, Oregon, this time involving the Tigard-Tualatin School District and its decision to consider requiring a signed permission slip from parents before letting its elementary school students read Gino's *George* (Marshall Libraries 2021).

According to Beemyn and Rankin (2011), learning about and meeting other transgender individuals is an important milestone in transgender development. Children in particular often desire to read books with characters they can relate to and they feel are like them. This makes it highly important for transgender children to have access to books and materials that feature positive portrayals of transgender characters in order to support a positive identity development. However, picture books and chapter books for children that

present transgender children in this positive light are few, and they rarely make their way into classrooms and onto library shelves (Naidoo 2012, p. 39).

Conclusion

For centuries, censorship has been a tactic used for one group of people to exploit power over another. Censors are attempting to use their power to control society and the information that is accessible to them. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) defines power as "not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93). Foucault (1978) goes on to discuss how in the seventeenth century, sexuality had become something forbidden and unmentionable and was not talked about in society. Furthermore, sex was seen as a private and practical matter that should only take place between husband and wife. Sex outside of these boundaries was not only prohibited, but it had also been repressed. A gay or lesbian couple in a sexual relationship would have been kept secret and unheard of. This era of silence can be translated to today, when censorship attempts of books and materials containing such themes as gay or lesbian relationships are still all too common.

By denying individuals access to these LGBTQ-themed books and materials, society as a whole is trying to show dominance over a particular group, in this case the LGBTQ community. As McKerrow (1989) states, "power functions to keep people 'in their place' as that status is defined and . . . may deflect attention from the existence of multiple classes, groups, or even individuals with varying degrees of power over others" (p. 96). Not carrying these materials on library shelves is society's way of exercising power and keeping LGBTQ individuals "in their place" and out of the library. When LGBTQ materials are kept out of the library, parents and other censors are able to "deflect attention" from the fact that this community exists.

Alvin M. Schrader's (2009) article, *Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship, Building Resilience: LGBTQ Services and Collections in Public, School and Post-Secondary Libraries*, discusses the importance of including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) materials in libraries so that young people can turn to these materials for support. Schrader (2009) explains that librarians are avoiding building these collections and are claiming that their libraries do not serve people who need, or want, LGBTQ materials or that the library cannot afford to purchase those materials (p. 107). Schrader (2009) challenges librarian to "foster diversity and resilience. They can create safe places. They can turn pain into opportunity, tolerance into celebration, despair into hope," (p. 109). This message should encourage librarians to uphold professional standards and resist the pressure to censor LGBTQ-themed materials in their libraries.

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Accessing LGBTQ+ Content in One US State

The Role of CIPA and Internet Filters

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Passed in 2000, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) required public schools and public libraries to use a technology protection measure to limit minors' access to various types of content, though the specific implementation of this law is left up to individual institutions. In the subsequent 20+ years, internet filters have been used to block access to a wide range of content, including some that was not intended to be covered by CIPA. In this research project, we tested internet filters in public libraries across one Southern US state by examining whether we could access LGBTQ+ content; this data was then supplemented with interviews of library staff. We discovered that LGBTQ+ content was not inappropriately blocked but was in fact overwhelmingly accessible. Though previous research indicated LGBTQ+ content was blocked in some public libraries, this study did not corroborate these findings. It appears that implementation of internet filters to comply with CIPA has become less controversial and more routine than has been depicted.

Courts have recognized a government interest in protecting children from inappropriate or indecent speech, that would otherwise be protected by the First Amendment (e.g., *Ginsberg v. New York* 1968). However, doing so in an online environment has proven difficult. One way that some nations, including the US, have dealt with the explosion of online pornography and explicit content is with laws mandating internet filtering. In this context, internet filtering refers to software that blocks particular content. It typically functions by classifying websites into various categories, then blocking whichever categories are selected (see below).

Congress attempted various approaches to restricting minors' access to explicit online content, some of which were overturned by the Supreme Court. However, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) was upheld by the court system and went into effect in 2003. This focused on public libraries and public schools, often the primary sources of internet access for youth at the time. There have been numerous reports of overzealous use of internet filtering in these institutions since 2003, but most data pertaining to internet filtering is outdated and incomplete. The project

described here offers new data, focusing on access to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) information, as well as a fresh perspective on the implementation of internet filtering in public libraries.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section describes the policy background of internet filtering, CIPA itself, and the overall efficacy of internet filtering. It also includes a brief overview of access to information for the LGBTQ+ community. The subsequent section outlines the methods used to collect data. The following section details the findings of the project, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

Literature Review
Policy Background
In 1996, Congress enacted the Communications Decency Act (CDA)[1] as part of the Telecommunications Act; this was Congress' first attempt to regulate pornography and obscenity on the internet. The CDA prohibited the transmission of obscene or indecent messages or images and the sending or displaying of "patently offensive" sexual messages to minors. However, the Supreme Court overturned the CDA, in part because "many terms within the CDA created uncertainty among internet users" (Wardak 2004, p. 683; *Reno v. ACLU*, 2000). Furthermore, the application of "contemporary community standards" is difficult at best in a global medium such as the internet. In summary, "the Court found that the terms of the CDA were overbroad and not narrowly tailored, thereby rendering the statute an unconstitutional limitation on free speech" (Wardak 2004, p. 684). As Peltz-Steele (2002) explained, "The Court observed that 'the "community standards" criterion as applied to the Internet means that any communication available to a nation-wide audience will be judged by the standards of the community most likely to be offended by the message,' an impermissible 'least common denominator' approach" (p. 421).

After this judicial defeat, Congress tried again to regulate minors' access to content on the internet, with the Child Online Protection Act (COPA). Wardak (2004) wrote, "For COPA to apply, the materials must (1) depict or represent in a 'patently offensive' manner as pertains to minors or sexual acts or body parts of minors, (2) have been intended to appeal to a prurient interest of minors, and (3) 'lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors.'" (pp. 685–86). One of the primary differences with COPA was that it focused on material "harmful to minors," a more narrowly defined category of information. In addition, it

defined minors as those under the age of 17 (not 18, as CDA had done). Nonetheless, in *Ashcroft v. ACLU* (2002), plaintiffs challenged the constitutionality of the law. After being overturned by an appeals court, the case worked its way to the Supreme Court, who remanded it back to the appeals court, where it was overturned for overbreadth. Because COPA was content-based restriction of speech, it was subject to strict scrutiny by the courts (Peltz-Steele 2002). The Third Circuit, in addition, determined that "contemporary community standards" has no functional meaning online because web publishers cannot limit access to their content based on geographical location (Peltz-Steele 2002). In 2004, the Supreme Court affirmed this ruling.

Children's Internet Protection Act
Peltz-Steele (2002) noted, "Faced with courts troubled by efforts to silence speakers on the internet, and by restrictions that treated adults and children alike, Congress needed a bill that could (1) target recipients of communication rather than speakers; (2) treat adults differently from minors; and (3) offer a minimally restrictive means to identify unprotected content as to adults and minors respectively" (pp. 425–26). With these needs in mind, CIPA was developed and passed in 2000. According to this law, all public schools and public libraries that receive certain federal funds must install a "technology protection measure" to prevent minors from accessing images that are child pornography, obscenity, or "harmful to minors." While child pornography and obscenity have a long (though sometimes contested) history of falling outside First Amendment protection, the category of "harmful to minors" referred to a visual depiction that:

> (A) taken as a whole and with respect to minors, appeals to a prurient interest in nudity, sex, or excretion; (B) depicts, describes, or represents, in a patently offensive way with respect to what is suitable for minors, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact, actual or simulated normal or perverted sexual acts, or a lewd exhibition of the genitals; and (C) taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value as to minors.

This definition evolved from case law based around *Ginsburg v. New York* (1968).

CIPA defines a technology protection measure as an internet filter; to comply with the law, all computing devices in an affected institution must be filtered (not only those used by minors). This requirement is tied to federal E-rate funding, which helps public schools and public libraries afford internet access and other telecommunication products and services (USAC 2023). In addition to CIPA, 26

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1. The CDA has been back in the mainstream media recently due to Section 230, but this section is not relevant to the analysis of this project.

states have enacted further laws requiring internet filtering in public schools and/or public libraries (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016). CIPA does not offer guidance regarding evaluating if a visual depiction is obscene or harmful to minors. The law "delegates these decisions to local authorities (e.g., school administrators and library directors) who were (and are) free to select, configure, and implement a filter to meet their needs" (Peterson, Oltmann, and Knox 2017, p. 4587; see also Minow 2004).

The American Library Association (ALA) brought a lawsuit to challenge CIPA in the early 2000s.[2] They argued that internet filtering went against core values of librarianship, such as access and intellectual freedom (https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues). The ALA further argued that internet filtering was akin to censorship, as information protected by the First Amendment would inevitably be blocked. In the District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, the judges ruled that CIPA was unconstitutional because it restricted speech in a public forum; they issued an injunction to block the statute (*ALA v. United States* 2002).

Due to a provision in CIPA, the federal government appealed directly to the Supreme Court, which in 2003 upheld the constitutionality of CIPA by a plurality. The three dissenters all noted the likely unconstitutionality of permanent filters. In separate concurring opinions, both Kennedy and Breyer "reasoned that the statute should be upheld primarily because of the disabling function" (Desai 2023, para. 8). Similarly, Klinefelter (2010) explained, "eight of the Justices found the ability of adult patrons to gain access to protected internet speech to be important to the constitutionality of the library's use of internet filters" (p. 362). One convincing argument in support of CIPA relied on Congressional authority to regulate how funds are spent. Under this view, Congress was applying limitations to federal funding (the E-rate program), and libraries and schools could choose whether or not to concede to those limitations.

The Efficacy of Internet Filters

Most internet filtering software is produced by for-profit companies, such as CYBER-sitter and Net Nanny. As a result, the exact methods used to filter access are proprietary and not public knowledge. There are a variety of ways that internet filtering can be implemented, but perhaps the most common approach is to install filtering software at the

system level (i.e., across all machines at a public library). Filters can work by preventing users from accessing sites that have been blacklisted while allowing access to other sites. Users will receive an error message when trying to access blocked sites.

Generally, filters group blocked sites into categories such as adult themes, alcohol, gambling, and so on (see Peterson, Oltmann, and Knox 2017 for examples of actual categories from filtering companies). This sampling of categories, clearly, does not neatly align with the categories prohibited by CIPA. In fact, all of the categories listed above are protected by the First Amendment as legal speech. Furthermore, because these categories do not map neatly onto the law, filtering becomes "inherently subject to the normative and technological choices made during the software design process" (Deibert et al. 2008, p. 372; see also Brown and McMenemy 2013). Internet filters are well-known to have two shortcomings: they both under-block and over-block content (e.g., Cooke, Spacey, Creaser et al. 2014; Cooke, Spacey, Muir et al. 2014; Deibert et al. 2008). Some content that should not be allowed gets through, while content that should be allowed is blocked; past research suggested that filters over- or under-block 15–20 percent of the time (Batch 2014).

Research testing the efficacy of internet filters is both somewhat limited and dated (see, e.g., Heins et al. 2006). For example, Chou et al. (2010) tested the efficacy of three top-ranked internet filters and found that all were out-performed by using text mining[3] approaches. Some researchers have examined whether internet filtering is effective in protecting minors, but the data "fails to provide support for governmental and industry advice regarding the assumed benefits of filtering for protecting minors online" (Przybylski and Nash 2017). The American Library Association (2006) states "Content filters are unreliable because computer code and algorithms are still unable to adequately interpret, assess, and categorize the complexities of human communication whether expressed in text or image" (para. 3).

It is unclear exactly how widespread internet filtering is in US public libraries (though the picture may be clearer in

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2. The ALA was the primary named plaintiff in the suit, though "Plaintiffs in the suit include libraries, library users, state library associations and the Freedom to Read Foundation" (ALA 2001, para. 11).

3. The approach used by Chou et al. focused on the contents of webpages, rather than creating URL lists, but they focused on "work-related" and "non-work-related" webpages within the context of a business.

public schools).[4] Estimates vary widely and tend to be dated. In 2009, Jaeger and Yan (2009) estimated that at least 51.3 percent of public libraries used internet filters and that 100 percent of schools used internet filters. In contrast, Kolderup (2013) reported that 65 percent of public libraries were filtering by 2005. However, by 2014, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) estimated that 73 percent of public libraries received E-rate discounts in 2014 and over 90 percent of libraries had used E-rate at least once in the past eleven years (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2014); according to CIPA, all of those libraries would have to certify they were using filters. It is troubling that CIPA mandates internet filtering yet there seems to be no hard data on compliance in libraries or schools. It is important to note that millions of Americans lack (reliable) personal computing devices and/or reliable, ongoing access to the internet. Because of this, "the constraints and consequences of Internet filtering (a) affect many people and (b) especially impact the poor, elderly, and less-educated individuals who are less likely to have home broadband" (Peterson, Oltmann, and Knox 2017: 4588).

In February 2011, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) launched its "Don't Filter Me" campaign, designed to uncover, and then rectify, cases where school libraries were filtering LGBTQ+ content (ACLU 2011). The ACLU's final report explained that the campaign was launched "after hearing reports from students across the country that their schools' web filtering software was programmed to block these LGBT-supportive resources while at the same time allowing free access to websites [that] condemned homosexuality or opposed legal protections for LGBT people" (3). Most schools, when contacted about this discrepancy, changed their filtering settings, but the ACLU and supportive organizations had to go to court to get a preliminary injunction (*PFLAG v. Camdenton School District Case No.*

2, 2012) against a school in Missouri. This set a precedent, at least in public schools, that sites should not be filtered merely because they were supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals.

One study (Peterson, Oltmann, and Knox 2017) drilled down and studied filtering implementation in detail in one particular state, Alabama. In their research, "no two implementations of the same system had the same selection of common categories, and no two filtering systems had the same category set" (p. 4596). Each library and school had a different filtering configuration. However, several libraries chose to block access to content about the LGBTQ+ community; some libraries chose to block access to a category titled "alternative lifestyle," a phrase commonly used to denote LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some libraries have, or continue to, block access to LGBTQ+ content online, though these reports usually focus on K-12 school libraries. Quillen (2011) reported that school districts in Georgia and Missouri blocked access to educational LGBTQ+ sites and faced potential lawsuits over their filtering (see the ACLU's "Don't Filter Me" campaign). In 2021, Utah students requested access to blocked LGBTQ+ sites, which was quickly granted by the local school administrative authorities (Deininger 2021). Similarly, in 2022, the Katy Independent School District (ISD), in Texas, faced a complaint from the ACLU because its internet filters blocked access to LGBTQ+ content such as the Trevor Project (which supports LGBTQ+ teens and adults facing bullying and ostracism). Katy ISD changed the settings on filters in high schools and some middle schools following the complaint (Williams 2022).

Despite losing the court case in 2003, the ALA still opposes internet filtering in public libraries. Their position statement explains that:

> CIPA-mandated content filtering has had three significant impacts in our schools and libraries. First, it has widened the divide between those who can afford to pay for personal access and those who must depend on publicly funded (and filtered) access. Second, when content filtering is deployed to limit access to what some may consider objectionable or offensive, often minority viewpoints, religions, or controversial topics are included in the categories of what is considered objectionable or offensive. Filters thus become the tool of bias and discrimination and marginalize users by denying or abridging their access to these materials. Finally, when over-blocking occurs in public libraries and schools, library users, educators, and students who lack other means of access to the Internet are limited to the content allowed by unpredictable and unreliable filters (para. 8).

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4. The lack of available national data is in sharp contrast to other nations, particularly the UK and Scotland. Though there is no equivalent to CIPA there, researchers have investigated the rate of internet filtering in public libraries. In 2013, Brown and McMenemy (2013) reported that all of their respondents had implemented filtering. Blocked content included actually illegal content/activity, potentially illegal content/activity, and value judgment grounded (such as the category "tasteless") (p. 192). Across the UK, Cooke, Spacey, Creaser et al. (2014) studied the implementation of internet filtering and, again, 100 percent of their respondents reported using filtering. They note that "currently, there appears to be little standardisation, guidance or transparency about measures being taken to prevent misuse" (p. 6). In the US, state library agencies may have comprehensive data for their particular states, but to the best of the author's knowledge, this information is not aggregated anywhere, nor made publicly available.

The LGBTQ+ Community's Access to Information

For decades, before the advent of the internet, information about and for the LGBTQ+ community was difficult to come by, especially outside of major metropolitan areas. Individuals in the LGBTQ+ community often relied on personal conversations and references. During the post-WWII period, early affinity groups began forming, such as the gay male-focused group The Mattachine Society and the lesbian-focused group Daughters of Bilitis; many of these affinity groups published newsletters and magazines, available via subscription to local or national audiences and often passed from individual to individual (see, for example, Johnson 2019). The Mattachine Society's ONE magazine was initially seized as obscene material but was eventually protected by the Supreme Court (following *Roth v. United States*, 1957; *ONE Inc v. Olesen, 1958*). In 1962, another Supreme Court case (*MANual Enterprises v. Day*) further protected the legality of LGBTQ+ publications, which cemented the practice of "newsletters and publications circulated from reader to reader" (Brooks 2019, para. 1; see also Meeker 2006). *The Advocate*, the oldest continually-publishing LGBTQ+ publication, began in 1967 (Angelo 2015). In 1969, *The Washington Blade* (originally called *The Gay Blade)* began publishing; it has been called the "gay publication of record" because of its comprehensive coverage (Angelo 2015).

LGBTQ+ bookstores began opening and flourishing in the 1960s and often functioned as de facto community centers; the first ones were located in Philadelphia, New York City, Washington DC, and San Francisco (Brooks 2019; Hogan 2016). Most content came from small gay and lesbian publishers (such as Alyson Books) (Hogan 2016). By the early 1970s, most concern about obscenity was focused on hardcore unsimulated sex portrayals (especially gay male sex); LGBTQ+ publications were legal, but there was often much gatekeeping.

As societal changes occurred (such as the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the American Psychiatric Association's changing stance on homosexuality [removing it from a list of mental disorders in 1973], and the election of the first openly gay politician, Harvey Milk, in 1977), information about the LGBTQ+ community continued to be difficult to obtain; these same changes also sparked some backlash across the US (Rosen 2014). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, LGBTQ+ publications persisted, as did the community, though information about LGBTQ+ individuals or groups continued to be difficult for many to learn about. This necessarily abbreviated discussion in part demonstrates the paucity of information available for many during this time period, pre-internet.

In many ways, the internet has enabled broader distribution of more information to more people. As Last (2019) wrote, the internet

> allows LGBT+ [individuals] to connect beyond geographic and physical boundaries, and to reduce the feeling of isolation that can so commonly be part of the LGBT+ experience. . . . Social media has also helped to amplify the voices of those who have previously been marginalised and sidelined – and this new prominence has undoubtedly contributed to increasing acceptance (paras. 5-6).

Information about sexual and gender identities, coming out, getting married and starting a family, and other issues is now present online and presumably accessible to many. Nonetheless, there has been pushback about the availability of LGBTQ+ related information, and it is unclear just how accessible it is, particularly to minors in the US.

As this literature review demonstrates, there are significant gaps in our knowledge about internet filtering in public libraries. We do not know the full extent of filtering in public libraries, how it is implemented, or the effects of its implementation (for example, what sort of information is restricted). Furthermore, most research into internet filtering is several years old; we lack current information on these questions in particular.

Methods

To address the gaps in research, a multi-prong methodology was developed: internet filtering was tested in nearly 30 different library systems, and 11 library staff were interviewed about their perspectives on internet filtering. This took place in three phases: first, libraries that agreed to participate were visited; second, some library staff (who consented to participate) were interviewed; third, libraries that had not volunteered to participate were visited. These steps are further explained below.

Testing the implementation of internet filters required several steps. The researcher obtained a list of all public library systems utilizing internet filtering, in one southeastern, politically conservative state.[5] Then we contacted the director of each system (which are primarily organized by county in this state) to ask if we could visit their library, use their computers as a guest, and subsequently interview staff

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5. This list came from the state's department of libraries. More details cannot be given without revealing the state studied, which may implicate libraries or library workers. Also, because this is a politically conservative state, revealing its identity may prompt state legislators to mandate more strict filtering than currently exists.

members who volunteered and consented; each library director then had to send a letter agreeing to participate in the study (these steps were mandated by the researcher's Institutional Review Board [IRB]). The researcher drove to 13 randomly selected[6] libraries which had agreed to participate, to utilize their computers, with their own particular implementation of internet filtering. Since Peterson, Oltmann, and Knox (2017) found that each library implemented filtering in a different way, it was seen as necessary to test each library's configuration. Of the 13 randomly selected libraries, they were located in both rural and urban areas, of varying socioeconomic status, and all in politically conservative counties (in this particular state, nearly every county is considered politically conservative, as most went for Trump in 2020).

To test the local implementation of internet filtering, a list of websites with LGBTQ+ content was developed, in partnership with the researcher's university office of LGBTQ+ resources. The researcher wanted to investigate whether the state's public libraries blocked or provided access to LGBTQ+ content. The list was based in part on Nowak and Mitchell (2016), who devised a cataloging system for a physical LGBTQ+ library. Their library subject headings were used as a guide to develop subject headings for the list for this project. This list had ten categories:

- Famous person
- Cultural studies
- Psychology
- Issues
- Relationships
- Religion
- Sex
- Anti-bullying
- Intersectionality
- Pro-family

To compile the list, a volunteer from the university LGBTQ+ office searched each heading with "LGBTQ". For example, the first search was "LGBTQ famous person" (without the quotation marks). The volunteer then examined the search results and copied the first ten URLs that were not duplicates (for example, if there were two search results from cnn.com, only the first one would be included). This

Table 1. Length of interviews.

Interviewee Pseudonym	Interview Length
Athena	16.03
Beatrix	17.40
Brennan	19.21
Dorothy	12.42
Katherine	23.23
Kristen	14.54
Mary	11.59
Peg	9.56
Samuel	5.58
Tasha	19.44
Winona	11.31

was repeated for every category except "pro-family", which was searched without the LGBTQ prefix; this phrase is often used as a euphemism for conservative, anti-LGBTQ+ information. This category was included to see if libraries blocked pro-LGBTQ sites but allowed sites opposed to LGBTQ communities. Overall, this process resulted in 100 unique URLs, 90 of which specifically had LGBTQ+ content (and ten of which were "pro-family," a phrase often used in opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and visibility).

Once the list was complete, and the participating libraries were identified and approved by the IRB, the researcher drove to each library. At each library, the researcher asked to use the library's computers as a guest, received a guest pass, logged in, and began trying to access the 100 URLs on the list using the Google Chrome browser. Success or failure in reaching each URL was tallied.

After this process was complete, the researcher cleared the computer cache and logged off, then asked to speak to the director. In a conversation with the director, the researcher identified herself, reminded the director about the research project, and asked the director to circulate an email inviting interested library staff to an interview (again, as directed by the IRB). (This research focused on library implementation and perspectives regarding internet filtering, not patron knowledge or perspectives.) Staff who agreed to be interviewed emailed the researcher to set up a mutually agreeable time for a telephone interview. Eleven total staff, from nine different libraries, were interviewed. These interviews lasted between 5:58 to 23:23 minutes (see table 1). The brevity of some interviews reflects that some respondents found it difficult to talk about an everyday, taken-for-granted software and its implications.

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6. Counties were listed alphabetically, then a random number (7) was chosen using a random number generator online. Each seventh library was then selected until one-fourth of all filtering libraries were selected. From this pool, thirteen agreed to participate and completed the documentation required by the IRB.

Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and analyzed iteratively using Dedoose software. All interviewees were given randomly generated pseudonyms, and to protect their identities, job titles and library names/locations are not provided in this article. Staff roles varied from front desk worker, to technologist, to director; many libraries were small enough to not have an identified technologist/technology specialist. Further, we wanted to hear perspectives from a wide variety of workers, not just technologists (and some technologists may not have wanted to be interviewed). From these interviews, 20 codes were developed, as reflected in table 2; note that some excerpts were coded multiple times.

Toward the end of the research process, a third step was added. Because the libraries being investigated were knowingly and willingly engaging in the research, perhaps they were not representative of *all* public libraries in this state with internet filters. It was possible that only those libraries who had particularly light, unrestrictive filtering had agreed to participate, while those libraries who maintained a stricter, more restrictive filter had declined to participate. Thus, in this phase of the project, the researcher selected 13 libraries to visit, without prior communication about the visit. The researcher found the political leanings (as measured by Trump votes in the 2020 election) of the 13 previously visited communities and identified 13 additional communities with matching political leanings. For example, if 63 percent of a first-round county voted for Trump, a second-round county that had a similar voting record was found and matched. (Libraries in this stage similarly varied in terms of rural/suburban and were of similar socioeconomic status.) Because these visits only involved computer use, and interviews were not sought with the staff, IRB approval was not needed for this step.

In summary, 13 public libraries that agreed to participate in the research were randomly selected and visited; 13 public libraries that had *not* agreed to participate in the research were purposively selected and visited; and 11 library staff members were interviewed. The following section describes the results of this process.

Findings
Website Access
Did these public libraries block or enable access to LGBTQ+ content, as represented on the list? Overall, these libraries provided remarkably strong access to this information. Figure 1 shows the rate of successful access to the listed sites at the first set of libraries visited, while figure 2 shows the rate of successful access at the second set of libraries visited. Across all libraries, on average, 95 percent of the sites were able to be accessed despite the internet filter.

Table 2. Coding of Interviews

Code	No. of excerpts
Advantages of internet filtering	18
Asking patrons to leave/banning patrons	6
Disadvantages of filtering	14
Don't know filtering categories	14
E-rate or CIPA	8
Getting the filter removed	17
How the filter works	13
Inappropriateness	3
LGBTQ content is fine	13
Librarians like the filter	5
Miscellaneous	34
Patrons try to access blocked content	12
No tension between filtering and IF	4
Not surprised at results of study	9
Patrons don't know about filters	15
Patrons like the filters	9
Pornography	6
Surprised at results of study	4
Telling a patron to stop	13
Tension with IF	10
Unspecified other stuff filtered out	4

The list of LGBTQ+ websites included news organizations, like CNN and BBC, commonly known LGBTQ+ organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, GLAAD, and the Trevor Project, academic websites, Wikipedia, journal articles, and lesser-known LGBTQ+ and human rights organizations. None of these were more or less likely to be blocked by the internet filter. Toward the end of the study, one pro-family site was consistently inaccessible, but this is because it was hosted in Singapore and that country blocked access.

Libraries in rural, urban, and suburban areas were visited. Some were in liberal areas, while many were in conservative areas (as demonstrated by the percentage of votes Trump garnered in the 2020 election). There were no differences in rates of access based on the size of the community or the political leaning of the library's community. Libraries in figure 1 (in the first round) consented to be visited and studied, while libraries in figure 2 (in the second round) did not consent to be studied. There were no significant differences in rates of access between these two categories of libraries. In

other words, the LGBTQ+ content tested here was widely accessible across a wide range of public libraries in this state.
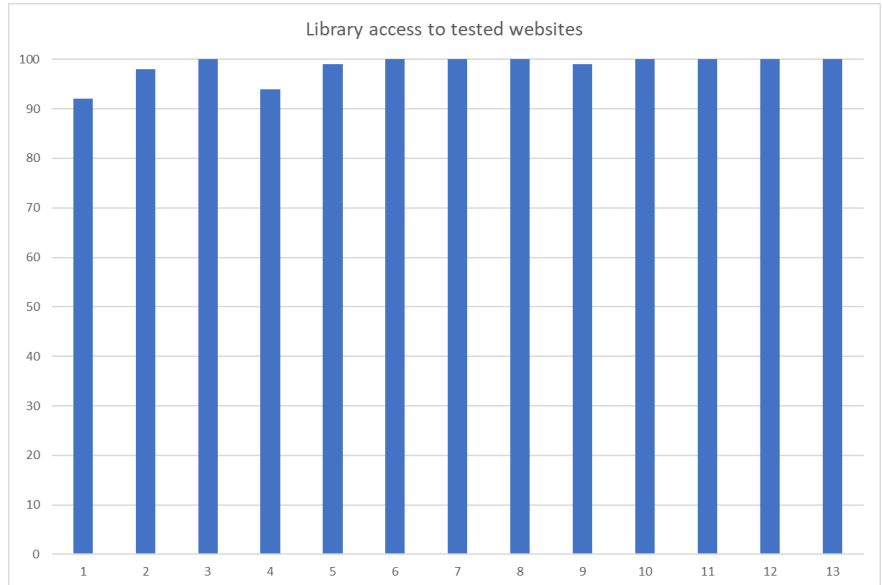
Library Staff Responses

All library staff interviewed for this project were aware of the internet filter in their library, though few had any thorough understanding of how it worked. For example, Winona said, "I know very little. I do know that we have a system that filters based on, I believe it's based on, the information that is put in, what is pulled from it from the website." Athena explained, "We have a filter that has certain categories that we have selected, and that it will track, then it will filter them." and Peg said, "The basics of filtering software [is] we keep the bad stuff out. And occasionally the good stuff gets blocked, and we have to go in and get it changed." Dorothy tried to explain:
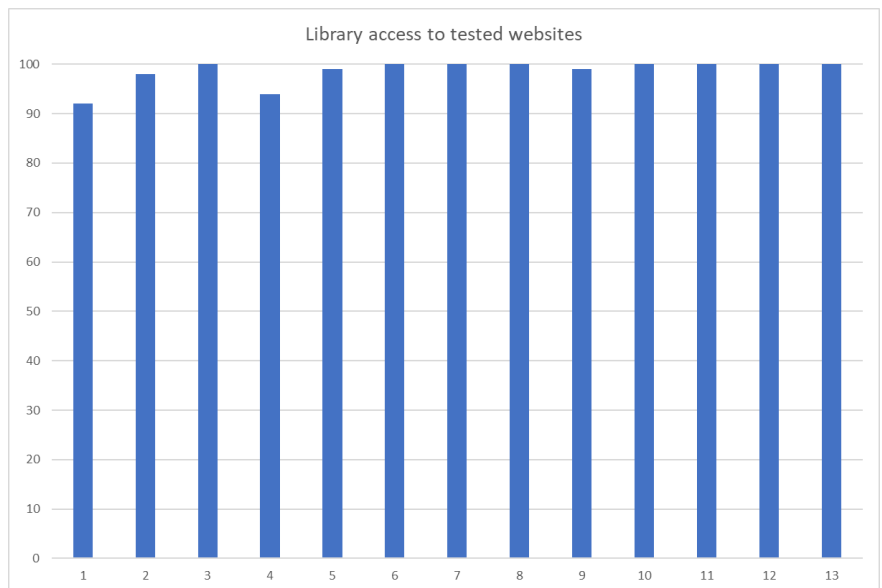
> No. I mean, it's because it's not on, like, it's not on content—that doesn't make sense. It's not on subject, knowing. I'm not sure how I'm trying to explain this, but it's the way it's presented. So, if you're looking at something like breast cancer, and you go through and you're not looking for specific pictures, if you go through breast cancer, and you go to find WebMD and then WebMD will have some pictures and those aren't blocked. But if you type in, I want images of breasts, then it's going to block that. So as long as the websites that you were looking at were just informational. And they weren't, you know, "hey, look at all this."

Similarly, library workers knew that internet filters try "to make sure that patrons aren't getting on websites that have, like, I guess harmful material, especially for like minors, anything with, like, pornography and stuff like that" (Mary). When pressed, though, library staff could not elaborate on what was really blocked by filters. Dorothy, for example, said, "I'm sure it's like pornography or anything like that," while Katherine said, "I don't know a list. I mean, you know, I could make assumptions about a lot of

Figure 1. Rate of successful access to tested sites at first set of public libraries.

Figure 2. Rate of successful access to tested sites at second set of public libraries.

things. I definitely do not know what the categories are." Peg suggested that "the biggie is pornography, and anything that's going to, like, have malware or you know, prone to viruses and that sort of thing." Respondents indicated that most people trying to access blocked content were adult males; juveniles "just want to play games and stuff" (Beatrix). Samuel,

Beatrix, and Kirsten acknowledged they did not know what was blocked by their internet filter. On the other hand, Winona, Athena, and Brennan said only their tech support person would really know about what the internet filter blocked.

Since this study specifically examined access to LGBTQ+ websites, the respondents were asked about their views on this. Athena said, "I don't see any reason why that specifically needs to be filtered. I don't think that would make any sense . . . I would not like to see a library filtering that content as a category." Katherine, likewise, explained, "I don't think it should be blocked. It's certainly important information for people in our community, for folks who use our library. If people are searching for sexual, legitimate information, they should be able to get it." Winona added, "Being the parent of two LGBTQ children, I'm glad that that information is available out there if someone needs it. They shouldn't have to get permission to go through a filtering service." Some respondents were surprised that so many LGBTQ+ sites were accessible at their library through the internet filter. For example, Mary said, "I know my director is all about diversity, but this community is not, necessarily . . . I am just really surprised that it wasn't blocked because a lot of internet filtering just picks and chooses things." Kirsten elaborated:

> I hate to say it, but yeah [I am surprised.] I do know that has been a problem in different internet things I use personally. I know there have been issues where certain tags like the LGBT community in the [school] district have been blocked because apparently, even having material about that topic is just inherently, you know, not safe for work.

Even though these libraries all had internet filters, some material that should have been blocked still managed to be found by patrons. In those cases, library workers generally first told the patrons to stop viewing "inappropriate" material, and, if needed, escalated to temporary bans from the public library. Tasha explained that she would say, "'I'm sorry, but the content that you're viewing isn't appropriate. You know, I'm going to have to ask you to stop viewing the content.' You know, if they don't, we kick them off." Likewise, Kirsten said, "We go speak to the patron and ask them to, you know, we let them know that that's not appropriate for being in the library and shut them down." However, most respondents said that accessing inappropriate material happened relatively rarely in their libraries.

Mary indicated that sometimes the internet filter worked in problematic ways:

> Well, the systems aren't really set up to, I guess, work with the way human language and different things are set up. So

sometimes it blocks more information or sometimes less information than it's supposed to. And so, you know, the patrons that are trying to access some material that it's blocking—if we don't have an easy way to override it, then they're not able to get access to information that they should easily have access to.

Tasha, also, said, "I think it can unintentionally block sites sometimes that are being accessed for a legitimate reason. And that person isn't always going to ask staff for help." Samuel said that there are problems when the filter "will probably not allow for very wide access to information that will be used in a practical everyday situation. For example, one of filters can be very sensitive to bananas and interpreted it as something very pornographic." Beatrix added, "If you're doing research on something, and you know, it's not necessarily considered pornography, but it may have nudity, that's probably a part of the filter. So, you know, from a research standpoint, it could be a disadvantage." Kirsten said:

> I think sometimes people make the filters too restrictive, so that perfectly legitimate material that—because one person or one group of people has deemed something inappropriate, that they can decide that it's not appropriate for the rest of the community, like LGBT materials. There's nothing inherently wrong with LGBT materials. Now, there are certain LGBT materials that should not be viewed in public spaces, like pornographic materials. But, you know, there's nothing inherently wrong with somebody looking up information about the queer community. But it's the people who are sitting at the filters who decide, 'oh, that's inappropriate.' Because it's about LGBT materials . . . that goes from being, like, suffering for the public good to censoring really quick.

However, library workers were still overall positive about internet filtering in their libraries—in part because filters allowed these libraries to qualify for E-rate funding. Tasha explained, "We have it in place because we're required to in order to get the E-rate funding. We have to be CIPA compliant, which means we have to have the filtering to block pornography and stuff like that." Athena, similarly, said, "We take funding from the federal government and part of the agreement means that we have to comply with laws regarding filtering . . . I think it's reasonably substantial funding as well, that we receive, to help out with technology [and] connectivity."

In addition, having reliable, consistent internet filtering protects the library staff. As Katherine said, "From the staff side, one of the arguments [in favor of filtering] was that having to deal with, you know, really vulgar and obscene pornography was a form of harassment or staff harassment."

She added that installing the internet filtering "was a gift with a sense of relief" for the staff. Brennan added that filters are "making sure that [patrons] are complying with the rules, but not making an awkward situation for anybody."

Finally, library workers discussed whether they saw tension between intellectual freedom (one of the core values of librarianship) and internet filtering. Mary said, "If we don't have an easy way to override [the filter], then patrons are not able to get access to information that they should easily have access to. And then that borders the line of censorship." Katherine noted, "In the most broadest [*sic*] sense, yes. . . . Intellectual freedom means everything that's available, and people are free to use, read, access whatever they wish. And filtering by definition reduces that." However, Brennan thought that, on a day-to-day basis, internet filters had little effect on intellectual freedom. He said:

> I know when I took classes in library school, I've been to conferences, and yeah, filtering has come up . . . they always use something like, you know, maybe breast cancer or some research. That's an example of something, you know, that could potentially, you know, be filtered out. But it's, you know, obviously, not something that you want the filter to catch. But I can't really recall a real-world scenario where we've ever had somebody that, you know, came up and said, you know, hey, I'm trying to do legitimate research about this topic or look something up and can't access information.

Discussion and Conclusion

From one perspective, these findings may not be surprising or worthy of much discussion. In 2022 (when the study was conducted), LGBTQ+ online content was widely available in this state's public libraries. It may seem self-evident that LGBTQ+ content should be, and is, accessible to communities across the state; American perspectives on LGBTQ+ individuals have generally grown more tolerant in the past 20 years (though there is a sizable minority of Americans who are vitriolic about the LGBTQ+ community) (e.g., Borelli 2022).

Yet, access to LGBTQ+ information has a complicated history. For decades, it was notoriously difficult to locate and peruse. The internet did significantly change that, but there are many people who believe that access to LGBT+ information should still be restricted in some way. As of January 2023, the ACLU noted that politicians had introduced over 120 bills to restrict the rights of LGBTQ+ people (ACLU 2023). These bills target "their freedom of expression" among other issues (para. 1).

People find numerous ways to limit access to LGBTQ+ content. For example, in Michigan, a town voted to defund the public library rather than accept certain LGBTQ+ books in the library (Cantor 2022). In Louisiana, threats from citizens angry about LGBTQ+ content resulted in public librarians afraid to go to work (Chavez 2023). Public library patrons repeatedly challenge the inclusion of LGBTQ+ books in their libraries (see, e.g., Lavietes 2023). Access to LGBTQ+ information, particularly in libraries, is under siege. From this vantage point, accessing LGBTQ+ content online is particularly valuable—and perhaps unexpected. In the 2020s, access to LGBTQ+ content in any format cannot be taken for granted.

This study did not explicitly address the efficacy or success of CIPA with respect to keeping content that is "harmful to minors" out of the hands of minors. However, we found that content that is *not* harmful (that is, non-pornographic LGBTQ+ content) is in fact accessible. This may be a partial indication that CIPA is functioning as intended (or as written).

Nonetheless, several questions remain. The overall efficacy of internet filters remains elusive: do they function as the law intends, as libraries intend, as parents/guardians intend, and/or as the companies that market the filters intend? Data addressing this question is outdated (e.g., Chou 2010) and incomplete. As filters have steadily improved and become more nuanced, the vast quantity of information online has also grown exponentially, so it is unclear if internet filters have managed to keep pace with the explosion of information quantity.

Filter efficacy must also be considered from another perspective: how difficult are the filters to confuse, trick, or overcome? In this project, many of the interviewees had stories about persistent patrons being able to get past the filter to gain access to content that should be blocked. It is unclear how often this happens or the skill level needed to outsmart the filter. Furthermore, as both visual content and social media have proliferated, it is unclear if internet filters can evaluate and restrict these types of content. It is also unclear if internet filters can successfully block virtual private networks (VPNs) which would easily allow routing around the filter. Recent research (Thurman and Obster 2021) indicates that teens in the UK frequently view pornography via social media and pornographic websites, and nearly half have used VPNs to do so; these UK researchers also note that every legislative approach to regulating pornography access has flaws. CIPA was written prior to the advancement of visual content and social media, as well as so-called deepfake or AI-based pornography, so it is unclear how effective internet filters can be as online content continues to evolve and expand. In addition, large language model programming could potentially be used to censor "controversial" content in public libraries, expanding upon the book censorship that is currently escalating across the US.

Of course, the concept of content that is "harmful to minors" is—or ought to be—contested and debated. Some individuals might argue that sites that condone or support firearms, tobacco or drugs, gambling, violence, or hate speech are harmful to minors and ought to be regulated, while other individuals might well be tolerant of some or all of those categories. It is unsurprising that, in America, "harmful to minors" has been defined exclusively as sexual content, with no consideration for violence. In addition, we ought to consider whether (trying to) block minors' access to harmful content is the best approach; would frank, thoughtful discussion of difficult topics be more beneficial to minors? For example, rather than attempting to ban minors' access to pornography, perhaps conversations and policies about safer sex practices, erotica, masturbation, sexuality, and sexual/gender stereotypes would be more useful in both the short and longer term. This may be analogous to findings that comprehensive sex education (as opposed to abstinence-only sex education) for minors results in reduced rates of teen pregnancy (e.g., Mark and Wu 2022).

The policy implications from this study are murky, meaning that the implications for CIPA and internet filtering are somewhat unclear. Because the research did not seek to evaluate the efficacy of internet filters or CIPA more generally, we cannot make specific recommendations on whether to revise the law as it currently stands. Perhaps more particular guidance about how to interpret CIPA—specifically how to implement filtering certain categories of content—would be useful and beneficial for public libraries and schools. Although the ALA still maintains opposition to internet filtering, it could craft guidance for these institutions, which would be useful for them; for example, ALA could recommend categories like "malware" be blocked, but categories like "alternative lifestyles" be allowed (these examples of categories come from Peterson, Oltmann, and Knox 2016). In addition, we still lack information about how widely internet filtering is deployed in public libraries and schools.

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From Book Rating to Book Bans

A Critical Content Analysis of BookLooks.org's Report Cards on LGBTQIA+ Titles

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When attempting to enact book bans, challengers often rely on book reviews and rating sources that are designed and authored by people working outside the field of librarianship and who may have little to no professional qualifications in the field. These sources, while presenting themselves as impartial, can be biased and steeped in partisan positions. BookLooks.org is one of the resources used to support efforts to remove books from K-12 public schools. However, an empirical examination of these rating sources has not been undertaken. In this manuscript, we use critical content analysis to examine the "report cards" created for Stonewall award-winning (and honored) LGBTQIA+ titles included on the BookLooks.org site. While the site's mission statement claims to uncover "objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content," our analysis of annotations pulled from the report cards of LGBTQIA+ titles reveals a more widespread effort to warn parents/caregivers of any content related to gender and sexuality that would be considered non-normative. Findings from our study suggest that these report cards promote skepticism about factual data and objective definitions of terms, undermine allyship and support for LGBTQIA+ students, and systematically target gender presentation that lies outside of a masculine-feminine binary or sexualities other than heterosexuality. By discussing and naming the rhetorical implications of resources like BookLooks.org, we offer support for practitioners looking to defend their school and public library LGBTQIA+ collections.

To support the book-banning attempts sweeping across districts and communities in the US, book challengers have cited BookLooks.org in support of their positions. This has occurred, for example, during public comments sections of school board meetings, and as justification on material reconsideration forms. During the public comment section of one school board meeting for Beaufort County Schools (South Carolina), a local Moms for Liberty representative cited the BookLooks.org website as her source when she, along with others, created a list of 97 titles that the superintendent promptly removed from every school in the Beaufort County Schools district pending review (Kukulich 2022).

This mass removal of texts sparked a debate as removing the titles was a violation of the school district's policies and procedures for challenged materials. Similarly, in another district in Iowa (Mason City Community Schools), a parent and other Moms for Liberty-affiliated residents cited the BookLooks.org website as a source for the list of books they demanded the school district evaluate (Schmidt 2023). In this case, the superintendent in Mason City did not immediately remove the books and instead adhered to the process for reconsideration of specific titles.

Challenges to diverse material in libraries and classrooms are not a new phenomenon. However, while students and their rights to access ideas have always been a contested issue, organizations like the American Library Association (ALA) and PEN American Report (2022) have documented a record number of challenges over the past two years within this current movement of book challenge attempts. ALA documented 1,269 (reported) instances of book challenges in 2022, which nearly doubled the 729 reported in 2021 (ALA 2022). Additionally, preliminary data for 2023 demonstrates that challenges are up 20 percent from 2022 (ALA 2023). Moreover, most of the challenged titles were books by and/ or about Black, indigenous, and other people of color, as well as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is noteworthy because, as GLSEN notes, the presence of LGBTQIA+ books in a library can have a positive impact on young readers (2021). Because of the use of the BookLooks.org website in multiple justifications for the removal of these texts, this trend is worth examining, as the book-rating website has clear ties to partisan and politically motivated organizations (such as Moms for Liberty) and has given way to other book rating sites like No Left Turn in Education's RatedBooks. org and other sites that use BookLooks.org's report cards to encourage parents to challenge specific titles (e.g., the PavementEducationProject.org and BetweentheBookCovers.com).

In Library and Information Science graduate programs, librarians are taught to rely on professional review sources and avoid book review and rating sources like BookLooks.org, because they are created by consumers and untrained advocates. The ALA has addressed this issue within its professional position statement on rating systems stating that rating systems pose "distinct challenges to intellectual freedom principles" (ALA 2015). Our research builds on this conversation by empirically examining the ideological and rhetorical implications of the BookLooks.org website that has been used to challenge materials in youth collections. Through a critical content analysis (CCA) of the book reports compiled for selected LGBTQIA+ titles included on the BookLooks website, we ask the following questions:

1. What content in young adult literature related to gender and sexuality do the report card creators on BookLooks.org find objectionable?
2. What do the BookLooks.org report cards reveal about what the website's creators value and what they deem as acceptable or unacceptable in regard to gender and sexuality in young adult literature?

Using a critical content analysis of selected BookLooks.org book reports, we identified three themes to elaborate on. These themes suggest that the mission of the BookLooks.org site is more than identifying and banning "profanity, nudity, and sexual content," and in fact, works to subtly but surely maintain gender and sexuality norms.

In the sections that follow, we identify and elaborate on our data analysis process and present three themes that were gleaned from that analysis: 1) factual data and resources about gender and sexuality are noted as controversial; 2) allyship and support of LGBTQIA+ youth is considered objectionable; and 3) normative expectations about gender and sexuality are considered acceptable.

Background

Historically, the use of reviewing and rating sources for book selection in public school libraries is not new. School librarians learn in their preparation programs to use professional review sources (e.g., *School Library Journal, Booklist*) that determine the book's audience and potential fit for collections. Online sites like Common Sense Media have been around for decades and have prompted questions among librarians about how useful ratings are within collection development processes (Kenney 2010). In library material selection processes, the workings of Common Sense Media, the review process, and the team of people who contribute to and manage the site are provided in a transparent way. However, the speed at which BookLooks.org (and other similar websites) grew and then has been utilized in support of book bans, coupled with a lack of transparency within the BookLooks.org processes, make it an important site to examine regarding bias. A visitor to the BookLooks.org site would find it challenging to locate credentials for the creators or any systematic process for determining which books are selected for review, who reviews them, and who determines the categories they deem as "aberrant" or "minor restricted" (Jensen 2022).

For example, there is a lack of transparency on the BookLooks.org site about who is creating the report cards. The "About" page includes a section "Who We Are," stating:

We are concerned parents who have been frustrated by the lack of resource material for content-based information regarding books accessible to children and young adults.

We make no money and seek no recognition in our efforts. We believe sunlight is the best disinfectant and parents should have the information at their disposal to make informed decisions about the content their children consume.

We are not affiliated with any other groups, but we do support several groups by letting them use our materials and by taking suggestions for what we should review. If you would like to use or distribute our materials, or have books you'd like for us to take a look at, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Names are not provided on the site, and no report cards are attributed to any reviewer who assigned the book's rating. The site's founders have been identified as Emily and Jonathan Maikisch, who have been affiliated with Mom's for Liberty in Florida (Mechling 2022) and have spoken on conservative podcasts about their project (McBreairty 2023). Further, upon scrolling to the site's mission statement, the goals of BookLooks.org seem fairly innocuous; BookLooks.org purports to "write and collect detailed and easy to understand book content reviews centered around objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content" and promote the ability of parents to "make informed decisions" ("About—Book Looks" n.d.).

We suggest, however, that this website—presented as an objective rating source—can be problematic given the lack of a specific method used to both identify titles for the website and in their creation of "book reports"—the format used to organize what has been deemed objectionable content for viewers.

The site consists of "book reports," wherein each book is given a content-based rating from 0-5 that loosely corresponds to the film industry's rating (G to NC 17+). Books rated a 0 have "mild inexplicit violence, no hate, no nudity, no profanity, no references to sexuality, gender ideologies, or sexual activities, and no drug and alcohol use," whereas books rated a five have "explicit references to aberrant sexual activities (sexual assault/battery, bestiality, or sadomasochistic abuse)." All books are rated, with most of the books falling in the middle of this spectrum. A very small number of books are rated 0, suggesting that the books included on the website contain some level of material which BookLooks.org finds objectionable. On the other end of the spectrum, creators state that books that receive a 4 or 5 would likely be "considered obscene by most standards," although they are careful to point out that they do not have the legal expertise and are therefore not making a legal determination about whether the books should be considered obscene. In fact, the site relies on a definition of "obscene" that, as Jensen (2022) points out, cherry-picks language from the Miller Test, which the United States Supreme Court has established as a test for obscenity.

Previous Research on the Motivations of Book Challengers

Several scholars have examined the motivations of book challengers as they target diverse materials, particularly when it comes to young people and materials in schools (Dawkins 2017; Knox 2015; 2019; Magnusson 2011; Oltmann, Peterson, and Knox 2017; Price 2021). In her examination of the motivations of book challengers, Knox (2015) finds that several rhetorical arguments are used to justify book or material censorship, including a belief in the innocence of children and a moral imperative on the part of adults to defend children from ideas that some adults disagree with. Knox notes that some adults hold the belief that some parents are inherently good at parenting and equipped to guide the moral development of young people, while other parents are ignorant or neglectful. Thus, those who promote book challenges believe that public institutions like schools and librarians have a responsibility to be pillars of a community's morals because they are funded by public taxpayer dollars. Price (2021) builds on Knox's work, discussing two communities' objections to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and its inclusion within the high school curriculum.

Fun Home: a Family Tragicomic (Bechdel 2007) is a graphic novel that made it into many high school curricula and libraries after winning an Eisner award, Lambda Literary Award, and becoming a finalist for the National Book Award (to name a few). Bechdel's graphic memoir explores her relationship with her late father (after he committed suicide) and, in exploring the (often dysfunctional) family dynamics, also tackles the role gender and sexuality played in Bechdel's life. Price (2021) discusses these book challengers' belief that they sought to "preserve a moral citizenry." Specifically, while challengers rely on "parental rights" narratives and a belief that public institutions must represent the "dominant morals of the community," those that challenge books don't seem to provide any evidence of actually having the dominant morals of a community. Instead, they view their own morals and perspectives as so unquestionable and righteous that they see their desire to remove materials as the only legitimate response to that material.

In her research exploring a variety of book challenges to the popular children's picturebook *And Tango Makes Three* (a picture book about two male penguins living at the Central Park Zoo who raise a baby penguin together), Magnuson

(2011) examines the motives and arguments used by challengers of this title. One of those arguments uses a theory from the media and communications field, the "third-party effect," or the tendency of book challengers to overestimate the power of the messaging in books to influence young people's behavior. In other words, they suggest that children simply reading about an identity or action could influence a young person to take on that identity or repeat that action.

Challenges to diverse materials, specifically, remain particularly high, and Knox (2019) examines how challengers construct arguments against these materials. For example, this includes the argument that certain materials are not suitable for particular age groups, mostly younger children. In particular, Knox finds that LGBTQIA+ materials are often directly linked to sexual activity by these challengers, even when the text or the story doesn't mention or allude to sexual activity at all. Additionally, as Knox argues, when discussing diverse titles, challengers often make the argument that another text could be used instead to teach the same concept or theme, or fulfill a specific need in a collection, which ignores the variety in these stories and relies on "single story" narratives; single story narratives has been challenged by intersectional authors and scholars. Books with LGBTQIA+ topics and themes continue to be some of the most heavily challenged books (ALA 2022), and as Price (2023) points out, challengers often rely on arguments that not only name LGBTQIA+ content as obscene but twist the legal definition of obscenity to suit their means.

The current political climate for book banning has only reinforced and furthered the agenda of those who wish to restrict young people's access to complex ideas about gender and sexuality, and more research is needed that looks specifically at the tactics used to challenge LGBTQIA+ materials. Research suggests that there are a variety of other arguments and tactics used when stakeholders and challengers voice their objections to the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ materials, including a belief that gender and sexuality are topics that should be taught by parents in accordance with their own religious beliefs and values (Thein 2013) as well as efforts to silence and erase the lived of experiences of LGBTQIA+ people (Krutka 2024).

Analyses of the rationale behind the challenged materials have emerged in recent academic literature, including the particular avenues challengers use to object to materials. Researchers (Oltmann, Peterson, and Knox 2017) have discussed the "mechanisms of censorship" that are used to censor materials, including relying on and creating laws and regulations, self-censorship within the profession, such as librarians deciding not to purchase or make available certain materials based on their own biases and fears (see also

Dawkins 2017). Also, and perhaps most visibly in the current climate, they look at the objections from the public in the form of requests for reconsideration and passionate defense at school board meetings (e.g., Krutka 2024). Our article discusses an additional mechanism used by the public–a reliance on "objective" rating sources. While professional literature (e.g., Hill 2013; Martin 2015) and position statements (e.g., AASL 2021; NCTE 2018; ALA 2015) have warned against the use of rating sources to make determinations about whether a book's content is appropriate, our study engages in an empirical investigation of how ratings systems are created and what that reveals about the motivations of the creators.

To date, research has not been undertaken that carefully analyzes the motivations of the book rating websites that have been highly influential in the recent wave of book-banning that started in 2021. In their schooling and practice, librarians are often warned about book review sources and rating systems that are not informed by professional expertise. Though some have advocated for book rating labels much like the film industry uses as an indication of a book's appropriateness, professionals contest this, (Rittenberg 2022) suggesting that these systems are often reductive and do not take into account the very particular nature and impact of prose, as well as the tendency to take phrases and lines out of context. Our study adds to a body of scholarship that explores challengers' motivations for attempting to restrict access to LGBTQIA+ books by explicitly examining the use of book rating systems that are currently being relied upon in school board meetings to challenge these materials.

Queer Theory and Youth

Much of what we draw on as we analyze the BookLooks.org site regarding their stance on gender and sexuality comes from our understanding of queer theory (Butler 2006; Marcus 2005). Queer theory challenges the idea that there are inherent, natural, or non-overlapping binary categories of male and female (or man and woman). Therefore, we do not assume that these categories are something that would need to be protected or preserved as children grow and come of age. Queer theory instead suggests that gender identity is not stable or permanent. Because the categories of male and female are not inherent or "natural," queer theory offers an alternative to young people. The genders and sexualities of students and young readers are influenced by their lived experiences and realities, and the books they read inform the options they can draw from in terms of their own identity development (Moje and MuQaribu 2003). From this perspective, books presenting alternative gender or sexuality depictions would not be a danger to students or children

because alternative genders and sexualities would be considered just as valid as what we know as traditional categories: (cis)male, (cis)female (for gender), and heterosexual (for sexuality).

Queer theory also offers a way to think about the origin of contemporary conceptions of gender and sexuality that have led to our society believing that there is a natural link between gender and sexuality, and that a (cis)man and (cis) woman in a heterosexual relationship is considered normal and therefore, an image that must be protected. Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) is the belief that heterosexuality is not "natural" or "normal" but an idea that gets reinforced and reproduced throughout one's life and through practices and policies. An understanding of young adult literature based on queer theory undermines the binary categories of (cis)male and (cis)female, and heterosexual and homosexual. It also suggests that other identities of gender and sexual identity are just as valid and "normal" and natural as ones we think of as traditional today. Because of this, books that present these non-traditional identities of gender and sexuality are seen as subversive and dangerous instead of simply offering representations of other types of gender and sexuality out of a plethora of possibilities.

Critical Theories of Queer Youth

Queer theory intersects with constructions and conceptualizations of adolescence, particularly as it relates to queer teens and books. Those who work with youth in schools know that adolescence has functioned as a category and a developmental paradigm that is relied upon to make determinations about what youth in schools should have access to and what they need to learn, including what is appropriate, what is normal, and when these milestones should occur (Robinson 2012). Critical Youth Studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship (Lesko 2012) that questions the predominant belief system about teens that sees adolescence as simply a biological and developmental inevitability with attendant activities and milestones (e.g., queer teens "come out," or sexually active teens "lose their virginity"). However, certain conceptualizations and beliefs about adolescence can also lead to the (mis)use of development models to further political ideologies. For example, if one assumes that it is a biological fact that adolescents are hormonally impulsive and susceptible to peer pressure, then it might also follow that restricting access to information about non-normative gender and sexuality in adolescence might have some consequences for the non-normative gender and sexualities practiced in adulthood. However, we know that a variety of sociocultural factors (i.e., race, class, ethnicity) play a role in adolescent behavior, and there is no evidence that

adolescents are motivated by material in books to engage in certain behaviors and activities. These same conceptualizations are at work in the current wave of book banning in the US; they cannot be unlinked from the way queer topics and identities are discussed in books, and thus why they are flagged and marked with warnings. Gender, sexuality, relationships, and age appropriateness are all constructed categories, not inherent ones.

In their work, Owen (2020) examines the development narratives about youth that have come to constitute a "logic" about young people used across a variety of interdisciplinary settings in everything from education to library science:

> The developmental narrative is one we impose on experience, locating moments of transition, change, and rebellion in adolescence and locating moments of arrival, stability, and conformity in adulthood. Queer sexualities and transgender phenomena suggest a much more varied and complex range of possibilities for bodily experience and gendered subjectivity, drawing our attention to the contingency of any subjective arrival, whether it be normative, queer, or trans-identified. (17)

This logic is often employed in discussions about what literature is appropriate or inappropriate and for what age. Owen further points out that "the idea of impressionable youth has survived to this day alongside notions of youth as unreasonable and uncontrollable" (74). In attempts to ban and challenge reading materials, young people are positioned as being both empty vessels that adults have the responsibility to fill with moral information, and on the other hand, rebellious and unable to appropriately handle any information that is given to them. This contradiction is essential for understanding the interminable nature of any kind of debate about what is appropriate content in youth literature. As Owen suggests, ideas about gender and sexuality (and how to influence the formation of gender and sexuality in these young people's lives) are always inextricably linked to ideas about adolescence.

Our core tenets, drawn from queer theory and critical youth studies, guided our critical content analysis in this paper:

- Gender identity is not stable or concrete (Butler 1999), and the presence of gender identities or sexual identities outside the traditional categories of male, female, and heterosexual can be liberating for readers, especially those who don't fit neatly into these categories, to see how gender norms shape us in both positive and negative ways.

- Books presenting gender or sexual identity representations outside traditional categories are not a danger to students or children because all gender and sexuality identity categories are just as valid as what we know as the traditional categories (male, female, heterosexual) (Kedley and Spiering 2017; Thein and Kedley 2015).
- Queer theory intersects with constructions and conceptualizations of adolescence because adolescence is seen as a time when gender and sexual identities are formed and, thus, a space to contest conceptualizations and exposure to nonnormative genders and sexualities (Thein and Kedley 2015).

Methods

To gain a clearer picture of the strategic and rhetorical tactics of the website's creators, we engaged in a critical content analysis (CCA) (Johnson, Mathis, and Short 2017) of the site's book reports with a specific focus on the way the values of the reviewers are revealed through these specific aspects of queer theory and CYS. This was done through the process of compiling and including report cards on the BookLooks.org website for award-winning LGBTQIA+ titles. Content analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify themes and patterns within a text through a coding process, and this method has been used to examine book challenges in other studies. CCA, a method traditionally used within literary critique, has been taken up in recent years by scholars in the social sciences (and particularly within education) to understand how these texts function among those who *use* them in schools, classrooms, and libraries (Short 2017).

Critical content analysis is distinct from content analysis in that the scope of the research and the research questions are crafted within a particular theoretical lens and this lens is used to interpret themes and patterns "locating power in social practices in order to challenge questions of inequity" (1). In other words, in CCA our theoretical perspective is used as a tool to design our study and make sense of the data by setting the data within social structures giving special attention to the issue of power. We use these core tenets from queer theories of youth to make sense of frequently occurring codes that we marked in our analysis of the report cards.

Our CCA focused on uncovering the nuances in reviewer values through their identification and subsequent inclusion of "objectionable" material in the book reports we examined. It is important to note that we were not interested primarily in the frequency of the codes, and that is not how we determined themes. For example, intimate acts between queer characters were coded across 8 report cards—one of the higher instances across our data. However, the BookLook.

org site's mission statement clearly states it would identify and flag intimate acts, and thus this was not part of our analysis. In sum we are not interested in the *authors'* (of the reviewed book titles) intentions when writing the passages, nor were we solely interested in the quantity of times themes came up; we were instead interested in how and why the BookLooks.org contributor decided to identify the particular passage as objectionable. We asked: What makes the content objectionable to the BookLooks.org contributor? And what kind of ideological beliefs would one have in order to deem that content objectionable?

Data Sources

Data for this study include *book reports* for LGBTQIA+ titles that are included in the BookLooks.org database. We first made a list of all titles that were selected as Stonewall winners and honor books from 2012-2022. The charge of the Stonewall award-winning committee is to honor books with "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transgender experience" (ALA). We chose the Stonewall Award as a source for selected titles to ensure that the books being evaluated were deemed of high literary and aesthetic value by a professional body of experts and, therefore, likely titles to include in library collections. Then we cross-checked those titles with the BookLooks.org database and pulled report cards for any titles on both the winner lists and the site. It is important to note that the website continues to add book reports, and our search for titles ended in February 2023. It is possible that more Stonewall-recognized titles have been added since our analysis concluded. The charge of the Stonewall award-winning committee is to honor books with "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transgender experience" (ALA). We chose the Stonewall Award as a source for selected titles to ensure that the books being evaluated were deemed of high literary and aesthetic value by a professional body of experts and, therefore, likely titles to include in library collections. We located 16 BookLooks.org report cards that fit the criteria detailed above (appendix A).

Contributors to the website created book reports for each of the included titles. Each BookLooks.org book report contains a summary of the book, a rating from 0-5 suggested by BookLooks.org, a list of objectionable passages and page numbers, and a profanity counter (a tally of every time profane words are used). The reports vary in length but include a table with direct quotes and page numbers for the passages in the book that are flagged as objectionable and, presumably, are used to determine the book's rating. For our purposes and analysis, we are focused on the objectionable passages included in these reports.

Data Analysis

We used values coding (Saldaña 2012) in our first pass through the data to identify discourses related to "participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (110). We created a codebook (appendix B) that included codes representing what aspect of the passage we believed the reviewer thought was objectionable. To illustrate how we applied values coding to the BookLooks.org book reports, we offer an example from the children's book *Julian is a Mermaid*. The BookLook.org book report for *Julian is a Mermaid* flagged the illustration on page 7 of the children's book and includes the commentary from the report card creator:

> The illustration on this page depicts Julian and his Abuela sitting on a subway. Julian is looking at three women dressed as mermaids. The text at the bottom of the page read: Julian LOVES mermaids.

At first read, it is challenging to determine why the content would be flagged as objectionable. The text simply notes that Julian and his grandmother sit on the subway together and that Julian loves mermaids. However, its inclusion on the BookLooks.org report card indicates the BookLooks.org contributor wants to give a warning about this specific content. Given what we, the researchers, know about the aims of the group creating this site, we coded the passage within a "gender norm subversion" category because the mostly likely reason this passage was flagged was that the contributor wanted to highlight that a young boy, Julian, likes mermaids – and mermaids in our contemporary understandings of children and gender, is a character that is typically reserved for girls. To minimize personal bias (for transparency, one author is cisgender and heterosexual while the other is a member of the LGBTQ community and identifies as queer), we collaboratively coded each passage on each of the 16 report cards. We discussed together to determine which codes were most appropriate to assign to each passage. As needed, we added codes to the codebook to capture the reviewers' intent fully.

After coding each passage, we conducted a second round of analysis. We then applied the tenets of queer theory and CYS to make sense of and organize the codes into themes. For example, recall that one of our core tenets is that "books presenting gender or sexual identity representations outside traditional categories are not a danger to students or children because all gender and sexuality identity categories are just as valid as what we know as the traditional categories (male, female, heterosexual)." Thus, the codes that highlighted passages as objectionable simply because they describe gender or sexualities outside of what we understand as traditional categories are notable because they reveal the underlying motivations of the website's creators. We discuss this further in the results and discussion section that follows.

Results and Discussion

Here, we elaborate on three themes that emerged through our critical content analysis of the report cards on the BookLooks.org website. We identified these themes because they were salient across multiple report cards and were worthy of further discussion in order to fully understand the workings of the BookLooks.org site, specifically as it pertains to their evaluation of LGBTQIA+ materials.

Inclusion of Factual Data and Resources About Gender and Sexuality

The first finding from our data set addresses the presence of factual data in the young adult literature. Many of the young adult texts we looked at, both nonfiction and fiction, include factual data or information and statistics about diversity and equity issues. For example, in *Beyond Magenta*, which is a non-fiction book, there is a plethora of information about gender and sexual identities, including medical and mental health resources and interviews with relevant professionals. The inclusion of this type of data is not limited to non-fiction texts; there are also facts and information about LGBTQIA+ communities in novels. For example, in the young adult fictional novel, *If I Was Your Girl*, a statistic is included in the narrative that notes (accurately among the millennial generation, according to Gallup data (Jones 2022)) that about ten percent of the population can be assumed to be queer or LGBTQIA+ identified. Though in this paper we specifically present data related to gender and sexuality, there were other instances of factual data flagged for the BookLooks.org report cards. For instance, in the non-fiction young adult text *The 57 Bus*, this sentence was flagged:

> In 2013, the year Sasha was burned, Oakland ranked seventh among American cities in income and inequality—just below New York. (7)

This demonstrates that data about diverse topics beyond gender and sexuality (such as income inequality or socioeconomic status) are deemed flaggable by the report card creators in order to meet the goal of empowering parents.

Because the mission statement of the BookLooks.org site suggests they provide information for parents in order to protect children to "make informed decisions," it is notable that our data included codes from the reports that were

related to information that is meant to share information with young readers. These topics included information on themes such as diversity, activism, and statistics, and presumably, the book's author included this information for the benefit of young readers. In other words, even efforts to support young people in the LGBTQIA+ community by sharing basic, factual information are highlighted as something that parents may deem objectionable and want to protect their children from. The website's creators and contributors presumably believe that access to this information must be flagged and explained to parents in order to protect children from legitimizing these gender and sexual identities.

In another instance in *The 57 Bus*, the following passage is flagged by the BookLooks.org book reports:

> Legal documents in the United States only recognize 'male' and 'female' as genders, leaving anyone who does not identify as one of these two genders with no option. Australia and New Zealand both allow an X in place of an M or an F on passports for this purpose, and the UK recognizes 'Mx' (pronounced 'Mix') as a gender-neutral title.

Here, the book *The 57 Bus* offers information that is factual: it is a fact that there are countries in the world that offer alternatives to M(ale) and F(emale) on legal documentation. However, BookLooks.org contributors flag this fact as something that parents should be notified of and that children and young readers must be protected from.

Another example again occurs in *Beyond Magenta*. The author includes an interview conducted with a medical doctor who provides gender-affirming care for trans teens. The interview with Dr. Manel Silva (a board-certified internal medicine doctor who specializes in adolescent care) was flagged almost in its entirety. The interview with Dr. Silva included specific passages that contained factual information, as well as an elaboration on the doctor's expertise regarding trans- and gender-affirming medical care. For example, when answering questions about the risk of hormone therapy, Dr. Silva responded:

> There are rare contraindications. There's no medical interaction between most common drugs and hormones. . . . If a person's suicidal, we worry that hormones could increase that. But half the time, the reason trans folks are suicidal is because they can't access hormone therapy. . . . To learn more about the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, visit their website at. (Owens 2020)

In this example, the text *Beyond Magenta* not only includes an interview with a medical expert but also a direct link to a community health center where teens who would like to actively seek information beyond the book can do so.

These examples illustrate a contradiction in the BookLooks.org report cards. Though the BookLooks.org creators and contributors suggest that their mission is to protect children and youth by restricting access to "objectionable content," in some cases people would argue they do just the opposite. For example, the information and resources flagged here actually increase the chance of harm done to children and youth, especially gender non-conforming youth. While young people are constructed as being irrational and unable to act using reason, they are simultaneously denied access to information that can help them make informed decisions about their own lives. Trans and gender-nonconforming teens already have some of the highest risks of suicide among their peers (Price-Feeney, Green, and Dorison 2020); access to information such as the data and resources flagged in our coding is one way to support and protect these youth. Suggesting children need protection from and then restricting access to that information in actuality has the potential to cause harm rather than prevent it.

By including passages on the BookLooks.org report cards that present data, factual information, expert medical opinions, and resources, the website's contributors suggest this information should be exposed to concerned parents, who in turn might restrict access of the material to young readers in order to protect them. The inclusion of this information—specifically related to gender and sexuality on various titles' report cards—signals to parents, children, readers, and those who use BookLooks.org's report cards that the mere mention of a fact about gender or sexuality is so potentially offensive that it must be noted and considered as something to protect youth from. By flagging representation, data, and resources relative to non-traditional (but, according to queer theory, entirely normal and natural) identity categories, BookLooks.org also conveys specific ideas about what are "normal" or "acceptable" gender categories: LGBTQIA+ identified communities are not, and neither are anyone who is not cisgender or heterosexual

Presence of Allyship and Support

The second finding that emerged from our research and analysis demonstrates that support and allyship of LGBTQIA+ people and communities are flagged as notable within the report cards. Several flagged passages included instances of characters either supporting their friends, peers, and family members who had marginalized gender or sexual identities and thus were demonstrating allyship. Given this scenario, the report card creators believe that young people should be protected from reading about portrayals of allyship or

instances of support given to or from within LGBTQIA+ people or communities.

To illustrate, the nonfiction text *Beyond Magenta* includes stories and quotes from trans teens. In one narrative, a trans teen advocates for coalition building between oppressed communities. We marked the following selection as a code related to allyship:

> What's interesting is that the straight, non-trans population seems to think that trans people automatically have allies in gay people. And that gay people automatically have allies in the trans community. And they do Not, capital N. We need to stand together to fight the system. If trans people stand alone, we have no chance. No chance at all! I think all people who are oppressed in one way or another should stand together—women, queer people, people of color, disabled people, whatever. All the special-interest groups, minority groups, have a much better chance of effecting change if we stick together. . . . Life goal: be part of the revolution! It's on my bucket list—I don't have a bucket list, but if I did, revolution would be on it. . . . I want to be a doctor, I will find a queer organization and work with queer kids and prescribe hormones to trans kids. It's going to be so cool We have so much potential. Together we have the potential for dynamic change. A revolution. I hope a revolution happens. And I want to be in it.

It is hard to pin down exactly what part of this selection caused it to be flagged by the BookLooks.org contributors. The mention of gay and trans people and the inclusion of other "oppressed groups" are all possibilities. There is language he included about hormone therapy and also affirmation for the identities of trans kids. However, those topics only cover part of the passage, yet the first half of the passage is flagged as well. This instance shows that a selection that signals support and allyship for young LGBTQIA+ identified people is marked for parents to review and decide the level of access children should have in order to protect them, as indicated by this example.

In another report card for the nonfiction text *The 57 Bus,* the following passage is flagged on BookLooks.org:

> We hope that there are programs in juvenile detention that can at least help Richard with this and that he can become an ally who will stand up against the bullying and hatred of gay and trans people.

The event described here from *The 57 Bus* tells about a person named Richard who was convicted of a hate crime after setting Sasha's (a nonbinary teen who uses they/them pronouns) skirt on fire. This happened on a public bus in Oakland, California (hence the title *The 57 Bus*). The flagging of this passage by BookLooks.org contributors is particularly revealing. The example with Richard involves extreme and almost deadly violence directed toward a person who is gender non-conforming, and then a rehabilitation program Richard had access to while in detention. This example seems to support all youth in that it suggests restorative justice for offenders and protection for the LGBTQIA+ community. But even this initiative to stop physical violence against LGBTQIA+ identified people is something flagged for parents so they can protect young readers. This begs the question: what type of youth are they purporting to protect? It isn't LGBTQIA+ youth, for example, and it doesn't even seem to be Richard and the efforts at his rehabilitation. The mention of this kind of support and allyship, in this case, is potentially just as problematic as the actual physical violence done to SashaViolence, for example, is not a criterion that BookLooks.org website creators use to determine a book's rating of a topic that is flagged.

Finally, an example from Kyle Lukoff's middle-grade novel *Too Bright to See* mentions allyship and LGBTQIA+ affiliated student groups. One passage reads:

> I read about the different student organizations I could join, and check out the instructions for how to start a new one—there's no LGBTQ group yet, but there could be.

The BookLook.org site lists this selection as noteworthy. Its inclusion here among a list of controversial passages suggests that mentioning this kind of school support group may be considered controversial, and children would need to be protected from it. The presence of this group and its inclusion in a young adult novel legitimizes the gender and sexual identities of characters attending a school. The inclusion of this selection in BookLooks.org, however, suggests that youth many need to be protected from the knowledge that allyship and support groups exist, or at least warned of its potentially offensive presence in a young adult book.

When considered collectively, the passages that BookLooks.org flags on report cards that mention LGBTQIA+ community building, activism, allyship, and resource sharing suggest that the contributors believe parents need to be warned about these themes and children should be protected from them. However, it is a hallmark of professional practice for librarians and educators to support all students, regardless of sexuality or gender identity, encourage them to find groups/clubs to align with their interests and passions, and connect them to resources that they can use to address challenges they are facing in their lives (AASL 2019). It is common for adults in school spaces to encourage

students to support other student groups, such as allyship. However, allyship and support for LGBTQIA+ communities and people are flagged in the BookLooks.org website, suggesting that contributors deem this topic controversial enough that it should be brought to the attention of parents in order to protect their children. Furthermore, the inclusion of these passages proposes that young people need to be shielded from information that may support or help them to elucidate aspects of their identity, suggesting that they are not ready to do so, or they are not ready to support friends, peers, or family members who have diverse gender or sexual identities.

Normative Expectations about Gender and Sexuality

The BookLooks.org book reports intend to contribute to conversations about what books are appropriate or not for different ages about the topics of gender and sexuality. This, according to their own website, allows parents to protect their children from objectionable content. In this manner, these report cards present some genders and sexualities as "normal" and unremarkable and others – non-normative genders and sexualities – as identities readers must be warned about or even protected from. The simple act of flagging a phrase or selection from a book draws negative attention to what has been framed as potentially offensive content. Because the phrases and passages are without context (from the book) and are based on opinions (from the BookLooks.org report card contributors), mentions of gender or sexual identity outside the norm are painted as objectionable with the same broad stroke.

Many of the codes we assigned and the passages included on the report cards were included because they depicted conversations about gender and sexuality. These passages had different aims ranging from more graphic descriptions of sexual acts to the more mundane commentary and acknowledgment that LGBTQIA+ people exist in the world. Upon closer look, we became more interested in what the inclusion of these passages, taken as a whole, convey through the process of creating report cards on BookLooks.org. Many of the passages flagged by BookLooks.org described a character's gender identity depicted through narrative or dialogue (their personal thoughts and feelings about their own gender), descriptions of gender as non-static (evidence a character's thoughts about their gender changes or evolves), gender language (how characters describe their gender, including pronoun usage and name changes), and gender norm challenges (characters who present their gender in ways that are outside traditional gender norms).

In the titles that we looked at that were written explicitly for children and middle-grade audiences, the gender norm

subversion code was particularly noteworthy. As we noted earlier in this article, in a book report for *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, the following description of an illustration was included:

> The illustration on this page depicts Julian and his Abuela sitting on a subway. Julian is looking at three women dressed as mermaids. The text at the bottom of the page reads: Julian LOVES mermaids.

BookLooks.org includes this first passage suggesting that it is noteworthy and that it would not be OK for a boy to love mermaids as there is nothing else included on that page other than three women dressed as mermaids. Later, in another annotation that is included on the same report card, the following is described:

> The illustrations on this page depict Julian with a fern and flower headdress and make-up on his face, in different stages of dress as he takes a curtain from the window and wraps it around his waist. He has tied the end of the curtain, thereby creating the appearance of a mermaid's tail. In the final illustration on the page, he has his arm in the air and his head looking up.

At this point in the story, Julian has taken a curtain from the window and is dressing up as a mermaid at home. The inclusion of this passage suggests that this kind of dress-up is controversial and potentially that boys should only have access to gender-normative dress-up.

In a passage pulled from Kyle Lukoff's *Too Bright to See,* the main character simply states,

> But people being LGBTQ was something I always knew about," and then later, "She knows that Uncle Roderick was gay, of course."

These excerpts acknowledge the existence of gay people and, in no sense, convey a sexual act. Yet, these passages from Lukoff's book are included in a listing of controversial passages on the report card, suggesting a much more far-reaching effort to warn about any content related to sexuality that is included in books published for youth (even if no sexual act of any kind is present). Another passage comes from Kyle Lukoff's *Too Bright to See:*

> Boys can wear nail polish. And makeup. Maybe I'll want to be that kind of boy. . . . But I'm sorry for trying to turn you into someone you're not.

In this book, the main character is transgender and is transitioning before starting middle school. In this conversation with his friend Moira, he reminds her that even boys can present their gender in various ways, including by wearing nail polish. By suggesting that these ideas could be controversial, the website contributors offer their perspective on what and who is normal, acceptable, and worthy of receiving social goods (like access to healthcare) and inclusion in the school curriculum. They reinforce the idea that gender should be presented in specific ways. They suggest that the lives of those who do not follow that way are controversial and, in the larger context of book banning here, are not worthy of having their stories included in classrooms and libraries. To reiterate what Price suggests (2021), it is not within the contributors' frame of reference that there are others who see these presentations of gender as normal or appropriate because they position their ideas as morally superior.

Gender norm expectations can be limiting for students and can reinforce dynamics that are dangerous for youth. What about students who come from other cultures that do not value certain gender expressions in the same way? What about boys who like to dance (or like mermaids), or girls who want to be mechanics? What if a boy wants to date another boy? BookLooks.org has an interest in warning parents and adults about cultural and social instances in books that undermine those normative expectations about gender and sexuality. The mission statement for the website claims to warn parents of "objectionable content including profanity, nudity, and sexual content." The excerpts we analyzed contain none of these, rather it is the mere mention of non-normative genders and sexualities that causes these selections to be flagged. Their inclusion in the book reports suggests a broader goal for BookLooks.org and those that challenge different variations of gender and sexuality—that traditional and normative understanding of gender and sexuality are the "natural" and appropriate ones.

Conclusion and Implications

Through the use of CCA, we can see how the book reports created by BookLooks.org reveal a more widespread effort to control the kind of information our students can access through books. While the mission statement claims that the site seeks to share information with concerned parents about "profanity, nudity, and sexual content," an analysis of the report cards reveals that the website's contributors go further by flagging any mention of gender and sexuality, even when it is related to objective data and the simple presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Carefully considering how the report cards are crafted is informative in understanding, beyond the site's stated mission, how the creators render

certain books, lives, and identities significant while others are deemed reprehensible.

Content analysis and other qualitative methods have been used as a tool to analyze the rhetoric of book challengers, including the justifications teachers and librarians themselves make for why specific titles are not appropriate (e.g., Kimmel and Hartsfield 2019; Thein 2013)). Others have found that challengers rely on reductive views of children and a belief in their own righteousness, saying that they are not trying to "ban" books, only making the titles less accessible to those who are not ready for them (Knox 2019). This study uses CCA to contribute to this body of work by looking specifically at resources used to challenge LGBTQ materials and the kind of "objective" rating and review systems challengers call on to support their complaints. Through a better understanding of how these rating and review systems are constructed, a more complete picture of the motivations of book challengers comes to light. While BookLooks.org's mission statement claims to support the goal of uncovering "objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content," the analysis of annotations pulled from the report cards of included titles demonstrates the variety of other topics that the website deems objectionable. Information about data and statistics related to the lived realities of LGBTQIA+ people, resources and efforts to engage in allyship, and gender presentation outside of the normative binary have no connection to profanity, nudity, and sexual content. Yet, these passages are repeatedly marked and included in report cards for use during public comment sections of school board meetings and in justifications within book challenges. This indicates that the motivations of the website's creators (and their followers) are not simply to restrict sexual content but to deny the existence and realities of certain identities they deem inappropriate.

By trying to restrict the ability of young people to access these titles, the website creators are essentially advocating for the erasure of LGBTQIA+ identities rather than "every" parent's ability to make decisions for their own children. By uncovering and discussing some of the rhetorical and ideological implications of resources like BookLooks.org, we intend to lend empirical support to practitioners defending their school and public library LGBTQIA+ collections. Rating systems developed by parent groups and political lobbyists are not helpful in professional decision-making in determining the kinds of stories and experiences the diverse students and teens have access to. When one group renders its moral code more righteous than another, we enter dangerous terrain that ultimately seeks to deny social goods from some groups and positions children and young adults in ways that deny them access to information about their lives.

This work also joins continuing conversations within scholarship about the arguments being made by those who seek to ban books and restrict access to specific ideas. While this phenomenon is not new and has been the focus of research for decades, the present moment is essential to consider as we encounter new rhetorical tactics and strategies being used to argue against queer books. More research in this area could be useful that examines how discourses and rhetoric about gender, sexuality, and adolescence are circulating in various other venues, including school board meetings, talking points, and conversation guides circulation among political groups and organizations, communications between administrators and teachers and parents, within all aspects of the curriculum in schools, and amongst young people themselves.

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Appendix A: List of Report Cards Located

1. *Beetle and the Hollow Bones* by Aliza Layne
2. *Beyond Magenta* by Susan Kuklin
3. *Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta
4. *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier
5. *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callendar
6. *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater
7. *George* by Alex Gino
8. *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo
9. *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson
10. *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love
11. *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Melinda Lo
12. *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi
13. *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg
14. *Too Bright to See* by Kyle Lukoff
15. *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan
16. *When Aiden Became a Brother* by Kyle Lukoff

Appendix B: Codebook

Codes	No. of Book Reports Where This Code Appeared
abortion	1
allyship	4
anti-gun	1
access to resources	1
body parts	3
bullying /teasing	4
coming out	8
communism	1
data	3
definitions of terms related to gender/sexuality	5
description of intimate activity	7
drug use / Alcohol	6
gender identity language	9
gender norm subversion	8
hate crime	2
intimate act between queer characters	8
masturbation	3
nudity	3
physical transition	3
profanity	5
queer attraction	5
queer nonhuman representation	1
race language	3
sex act between queer characters	6
sex in Conversation	7
sexual assault, sexual violence	2
sexuality language	10
suicide / suicidal intent	4
trans identity	3
politics	1
divorce	2