A Review of Library Censorship Challenges

Valerie Darling

University of North Texas

Abstract

Censorship has been around for centuries. As the written word overtook oral histories, there have

been many instances of censorship throughout the ages. Censorship is an important topic in the

information science field because as librarians, we believe that everyone has access to

information. In this literature review, I look at two of the most common reasons for censorship. I

also analyze data from the past five years to see trends among groups that challenge materials,

types of libraries that get challenges, and the number of requests per year. I also look at various

themes that are deemed to be inappropriate for all readers. Finally, I explain the importance of

intellectual freedom and some best practices that may help librarians traverse censorship issues.

Keywords: library, censorship, intellectual freedom

A Review of Library Censorship Challenges

Censorship is not new. The suppression or prohibition of media has been around for centuries. As Newth (2010) explains, censorship was once used to silence unpopular opinion and to police society (para. 3). Censorship can take many forms but as the written word has been around for centuries, books have taken the brunt of censorship controversies. In public displays of opposition, book-burnings have been an overt, historical action to censor information. In fact, over 150 notable book-burnings have taken place throughout history, with the earliest recorded instance in 2240 BCE ("List of book-burning incidents," 2020). Today, censorship may not always include book-burning but it is still just as relevant. As literacy rates rise, as access to information increases, and as technology advances, the censorship debate continues to evolve.

As we progress through this advancement we look to the past to examine the most common censorship challenges. In this literature review, I will discuss the most common reasons people want information censored, which topics are requested for censorship the most, and which types of libraries receive the most censorship demands. I will also discuss best practices for navigating censorship challenges and the importance of the continued fight for intellectual freedom.

Literature Review

Censorship versus Selection

There is no library that can contain every book in existence. Choices must be made in regard to purchasing materials that appropriately serve the community. The purchasing and curation of materials for library collections is called selection. Selection is not the same as censorship and the difference between them is important to know. The American Library

Association defines censorship as the "suppression of ideas and information that certain persons — individuals, groups, or government officials — find objectionable or dangerous" (First amendment and censorship, 2008). When librarians select certain books for purchase, they are not censoring users from the books that have not been purchased. The selection of the materials is due in part to budgetary and logistical reasons, among others, and not because the information within other materials is being suppressed. An easy way to differentiate between a censor and a selector is to view their approach to content in terms of negative and positive (Asheim, 1953). Censors focus on the negative aspects of the materials they challenge. Selectors focus on the positive aspects of materials, looking for the good they can provide to the community.

Common Reasons for Censorship

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 had a lasting effect on censorship in the United States and reverberated throughout the world. After the attack, the United States Congress signed the USA PATRIOT Act to help keep the nation safe and secure. The USA PATRIOT Act gave major government authorities more access to citizen information. Government authorities were now able to watch and track what users were doing on the internet without obtaining a warrant. They also could now collect search terms individuals used on the internet, also without a warrant. In the interest of national security, the government censored information to the public. For example, they asked libraries to destroy certain public records that could be used to carry out other terroristic threats (Hamilton, 2002, p.4). The safety of others is often a cited reason for censoring information.

The other major reason people challenge programming and materials is that they believe it is in some way inappropriate for others. They feel that the inappropriate content will affect

others negatively and therefore it is out of a sense of duty to their community that they call it into

question (Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996). The censorship challenge can relate to an

audience-at-large or to a certain group of people. An example of the latter would be when a

parent challenges a school board over a text in the curriculum. The challenger is not looking for

the material to be banned outright from all audiences; instead, they are challenging the

appropriateness of the content for a certain age-range.

Though many people can understand censorship based on safety and security, it may be

more difficult to understand why challengers deem it necessary to dispute material that may not

seem questionable to most. In 1983, W. Phillips Davison coined the term the "third-person

effect" which is the phenomenon wherein people incorrectly assume that media will affect others

more than it affects themselves. This psychological heuristic is believed to be the underlying

reason for many censorship challenges (Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996).

Ways to Censor

It is important to discuss the ways in which censorship can take place. When people hear

the word censorship, they assume that a complete ban is the only way in which to censor material

or content. However, censorship comes in many forms. Censorship can be redacting text, moving

or relocating materials to places that are hard for users to find, restricting access, putting warning

labels or advisories on materials, or banning the material entirely. When a challenge is brought

forth to an institution, they have the option to problem-solve using one of the above-mentioned

choices. It is important to note that when censorship challenges are brought forth to a library or

organization, the institution does not have to take any censorship action. They have the option to

leave the content as is. When they choose to leave the content, most institutions will explain their

reason and rationale to the challenger.

Themes Most Frequently Challenged

There are multiple themes that are frequently challenged. However, it seems that in

recent years, sexually explicit content is listed as the main reason for censorship challenges. In a

study on book censorship, Akers (2012) found that sexually explicit content was the biggest

reason for censorship challenges in books between the years of 2000-2010 (p. 394). Out of the

374 contemporary books challenged, almost 29% of them were deemed to have sexually explicit

content. Sexual content is not just a topic of contentiousness in the United States but abroad as

well. Taylor and McMenemy (2013) found that even in Scotland, the most common complaint

against books was due to the sexual nature of the material (p. 33).

According to the study done by Akers (2012), one theme that was high on the list of

reasons for book censorship challenges was racism at 31% (p. 394). Though that percentage is

significant, it is important to note that the percentage was calculated based only on 15 *classic*

works. Akers (2012) points out that racism only accounted for 2% of complaints among the list

of contemporary novels, inferring that authors may now be more cognizant of diversity and

racial issues (p. 394).

Censorship challenges and what society deems as appropriate changes with time and

societal attitudes. The definition "sexually explicit" has evolved throughout the years. In the

early 1900s, sex in literature was deemed immoral and was not purchased or circulated in

libraries. However, sex education materials did not fall under the same scrutiny (Cornhog, 2016,

p. 42) which proves that themes deemed inappropriate may change based on topic, subject, and audience.

In the most recent research on banned books in America, the American Library Association (2019 censorship by the numbers, 2020) found that eight out of the top 10 challenged books were challenged because of LGBTQIA+ themes, which has been a growing reason for censorship requests. Other reasons materials were requested to be censored included, sexually explicit content, gender nonconformity, political viewpoints, and more.

Censorship Requests by the Numbers

Over the past five years, the American Library Association has reported a total of 1,813 censorship requests. In 2019, the American Library Association (2019 censorship by the numbers, 2020) stated that there were 377 reported censorship requests, an increase of 30 requests from 2018 (2018 censorship by the numbers, 2018). Within the past five years, 2017 showed the highest number of reported censorship requests with 491 in total (2017 censorship by the numbers, 2017).
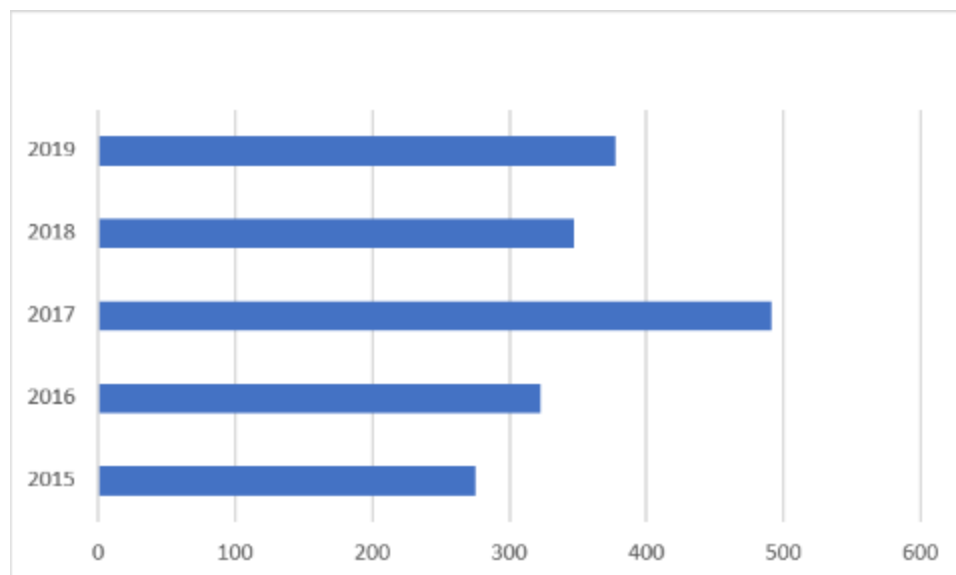
Figure 1. Total number of reported censorship requests per year. 2015 saw the lowest number of

censorship requests with a total of 275. 2016 had 323 requests. 2017 had the highest reported

requests with 491. 2018 and 2019 saw 347 and 377 requests respectively.

For the last three years, the American Library Association has also started reporting the

total number of materials challenged. Materials may include books, films, newspapers, and more.

Since the American Library Association has started reporting the number of materials

challenged, 2019 showed the highest number of challenged materials with a total of 607.
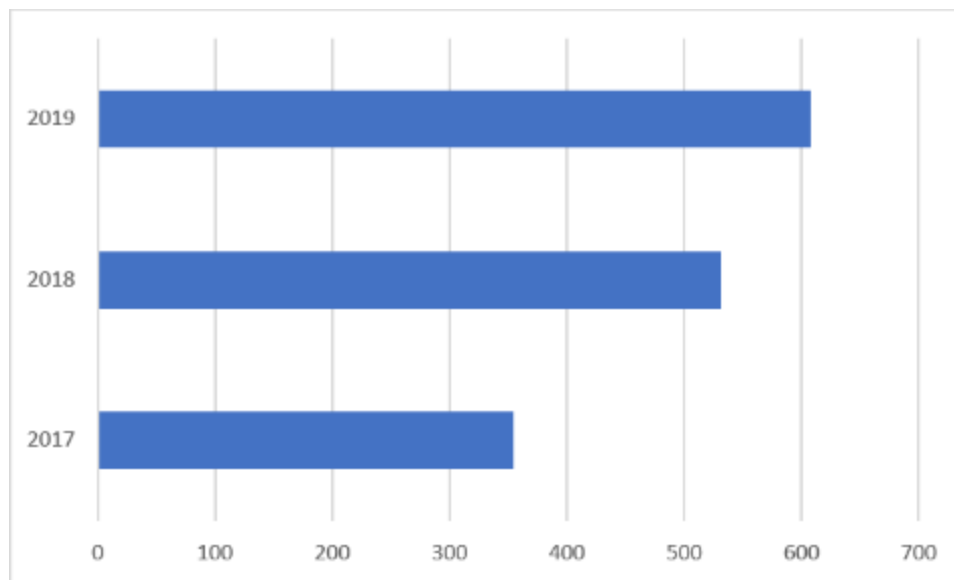

Figure 2. Total number of materials challenged per year. 2019 saw the highest number of

materials challenged with 607, followed by 2018 with 531, and finally 2017 with 354.

Who Request Challenges the Most

According to data from the American Library Association, parents and patrons challenge materials the most. In 2019, 45% of challenges were initiated by patrons, up from 33% in 2018. Patrons had the highest percentage of requests for 2019, followed by parents with 18%, then board and administration at 13%.
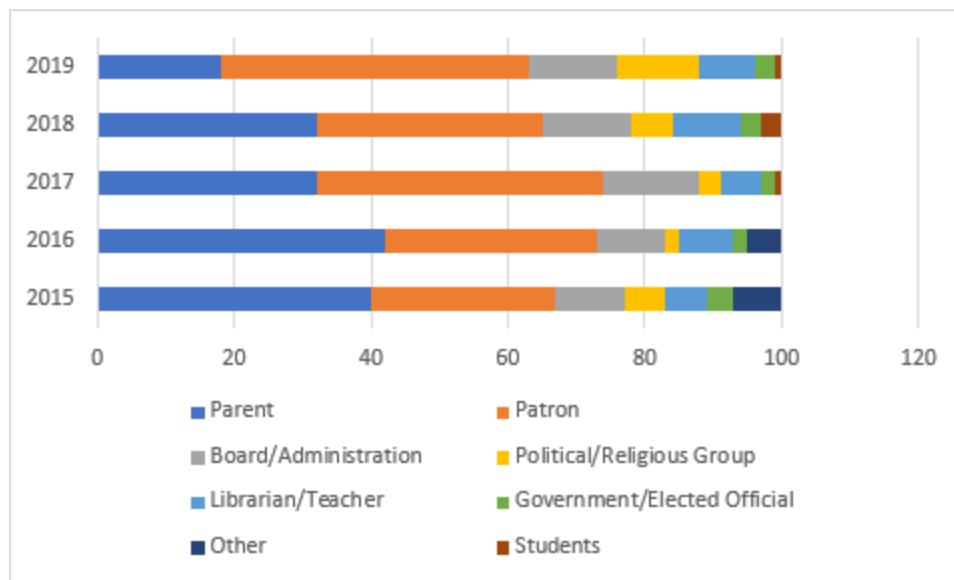

Figure 3. Who initiates censorship challenges per year. Parents and patrons are reported as being the groups of people who challenge material the most.

Types of Libraries with the most Censorship Demands

According to the American Library Association, in 2018 there were 347 reported censorship challenges (2018 censorship by the numbers, 2018). Of those 347 challenges, almost 60% occurred in public libraries and 23% in school libraries. In 2019, there were 607 materials challenged in 377 reported censorship requests (2019 censorship by the numbers, 2020) with 66% of those requests being asked at public libraries and 19% at school libraries. Though there

are almost 90,000 more school libraries than public libraries in America (Number of libraries in the united states, 2019), it makes sense that public libraries see higher requests for censorship. In public libraries, more people are allowed to access material and they usually have more content than school libraries. Public libraries are also tailored for the community at large and therefore do not need to ensure that all content is appropriate for certain ages. School libraries, on the other hand, may offer a diverse collection of material to its students but usually ensure that the content is suited for the age range.
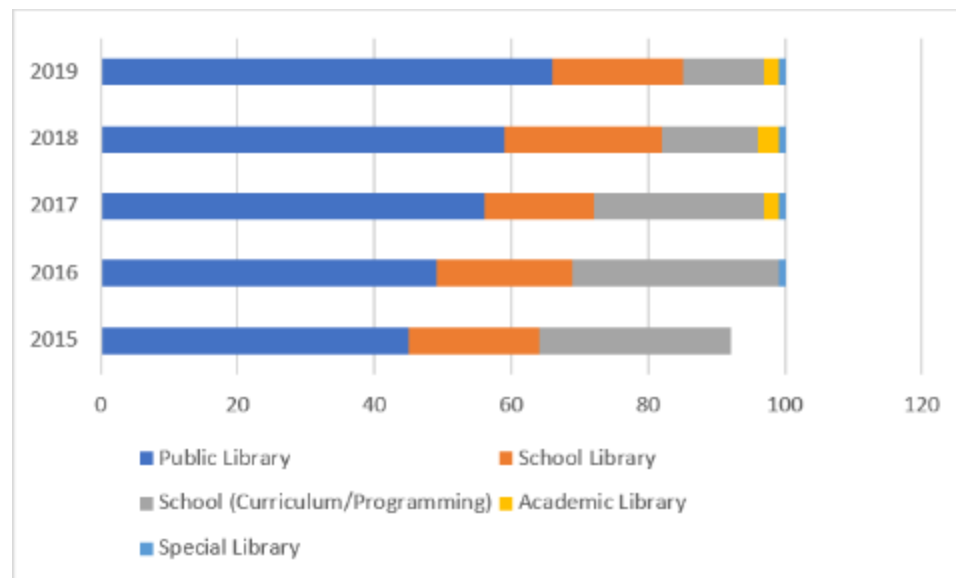
Figure 4. Types of censorship requests by library type per year. By far, public libraries get the bulk of censorship challenges.

Best Practices

When it comes to best practices, there are different methods librarians can take based on the type of library where they work and the community they serve. Best practices for book censorship may not be applicable to those who wish to censor programming. School librarians, for instance, have an important role in censorship because they provide services to students who are looking for materials that interest them, their parents who may have different ideas about what materials are appropriate, and teachers who assign homework and projects. Cooper (2010) suggests that school librarians ensure their school collection as a whole is age-appropriate but that it also provides materials containing many viewpoints and that represent many different types of people (p. 221). It is also important for school librarians to have a written policy when censorship is requested. A formal policy may assist in speaking with concerned parents who Cooper (2010) says should be treated as allies instead of enemies (p. 222).

For librarians in general, it is important to know their communities. Understanding why people wish to censor information is important, especially when in relation to community morals and standards. Knox (2017) emphasizes the importance of written policies and procedures for dealing with censorship challenges (p. 272) and ensuring that librarians have a good rapport with professional communities that deal with censorship (p. 273). Steele (2017) goes even further to say that librarians should be actively engaged in their local community's leadership so that they may educate them on censorship issues prior to challenges (p. 134).

The Importance of Intellectual Freedom

Censorship is a contentious topic because everyone has different beliefs, morals, and values. It is important to remember that most people do not wish to censor simply for the sake of

censoring. They feel they have a duty to their community to ensure its citizens stay on a morally righteous path. However, the right to access information remains an important part of the field, one that librarians, in particular, have had to fight for years. In 1939, the American Library Association adopted the Library Bill of Rights that expressed the importance of the user's rights to information. Censorship was still such an issue that in 1953, the American Library Association adopted the Freedom to Read Statement. It asserts that censorship is a direct contradiction to democracy. The right to access information should be left to the reader and should not come from a certain group of people who get to say, what is or is not, appropriate for others. Reading broadens horizons and can help those on the fringes of society feel welcome. As Americans, we believe in the right to deem what is appropriate material for ourselves.

Discussion

Censorship has been around for many years and there is nothing to suggest that it is slowing down. Censorship of the future might look different from the censorship of today. It is important to continue to track the statistics regarding censorship so that librarians can make informed decisions about programming and materials. Understanding past censorship requests and seeing trends over time may help librarians inform the public before challenges are brought forth. It is important that the American Library Association continues to fight for intellectual freedom on a national level so that librarians on a smaller scale know that they have allies. The themes and issues at the heart of censorship challenges are often difficult conversations to have; however, the conversations need to happen. In the future, it might help if librarians have a seat at the table when discussing difficult topics. Having someone who can help disseminate and explain information may produce a more information literate and tolerant society.

Conclusion

Intellectual freedom has been a core principle of library ethics for decades. However, that has not made the fight against censorship any easier. As societal values change, so too do the themes that are deemed inappropriate. With the constant flux of acceptable morals and values within a community, it can be difficult to know how to respond. Understanding the reasons people feel the need to censor information can prove valuable in discussing the actions taken with a particular request. Remembering that libraries are for all those who seek information and that everyone should feel welcome and seen, is also important when deciding on a course of action to take. Perhaps the most important is truly knowing your particular community and having a support system.

For most of history, librarians have been the gatekeepers of knowledge. They were in charge of what information was deemed relevant, correct, and appropriate for the community. Though today's libraries look and operate differently, librarians still have one of the biggest roles in the censorship debate. They have largely become vocal advocates for intellectual freedom and staunch agents of change.

References

100 most frequently challenged books: 1990–1999. (2013). Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/100-most-frequently-challenged-books-1990%E2%
80%931999

2015 book challenges. (2016). Retrieved from

https://oif.ala.org/oif/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/InfographicTopTen2015.long_.png

2017 censorship by the numbers. (2017). Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/OIF%20Infographic%2
0-%20June%20-%20Page%202_0.pdf

2018 censorship by the numbers. (2018). Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/2018-bbooks-graphic-1
_0.jpg

2019 censorship by the numbers. (2020). Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/Censorship%20by%20t
he%20Numbers%202019_0_1.pdf

Akers, C. G. (2012). Which books are challenged more - classics or contemporary? *New Library*

World, 113(7/8), 385-395. doi:10.1108/03074801211245075

Asheim, L. (1953). Not censorship but selection. Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/NotCensorshipButSelection

Cooper, J. L. (2010). Intellectual freedom and censorship in the library. *Community & Junior*

College Libraries, 16(4), 218-224. doi:10.1080/02763915.2010.521016

Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *The Public Opinion*

    Quarterly, 47(1), 1-15. doi:10.1086/268763

First amendment and censorship. (2008). Retrieved from

    http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship

The freedom to read statement. (2006). Retrieved from

    http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement

Hamilton, S. (2002). Internet accessible information and censorship. *IFLA Journal, 28*(4)

    Retrieved from https://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2147/10.1177/034003520202800406

Knox, E. (2017). Opposing censorship in difficult times. *The Library Quarterly, 87*(3) Retrieved

    from https://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2606/doi/10.1086/692304

Library bill of rights. (2006). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill

List of book-burning incidents. (2020). Retrieved from

    https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_book-burning_incidents&oldid=9361

    33412

Newth, M. (2010). The long history of censorship. Retrieved from

    http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/liste.html?tid=415&art_id=475`

Number of libraries in the United States. (2019). Retrieved from

    https://libguides.ala.org/numberoflibraries

Rojas, H., Shah, D. V., & Faber, R. J. (1996). For the good of others: Censorship and the

    third-person effect. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 8*(2), 163-186.

    doi:10.1093/ijpor/8.2.163

Steele, J. E. (2017). Censorship in public libraries: An analysis using gatekeeping theory.

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Social Science Premium Collection. Retrieved

from https://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2165/docview/2018887714?accountid=7113

Taylor, K., & McMenemy, D. (2012). Censorship challenges to books in Scottish public

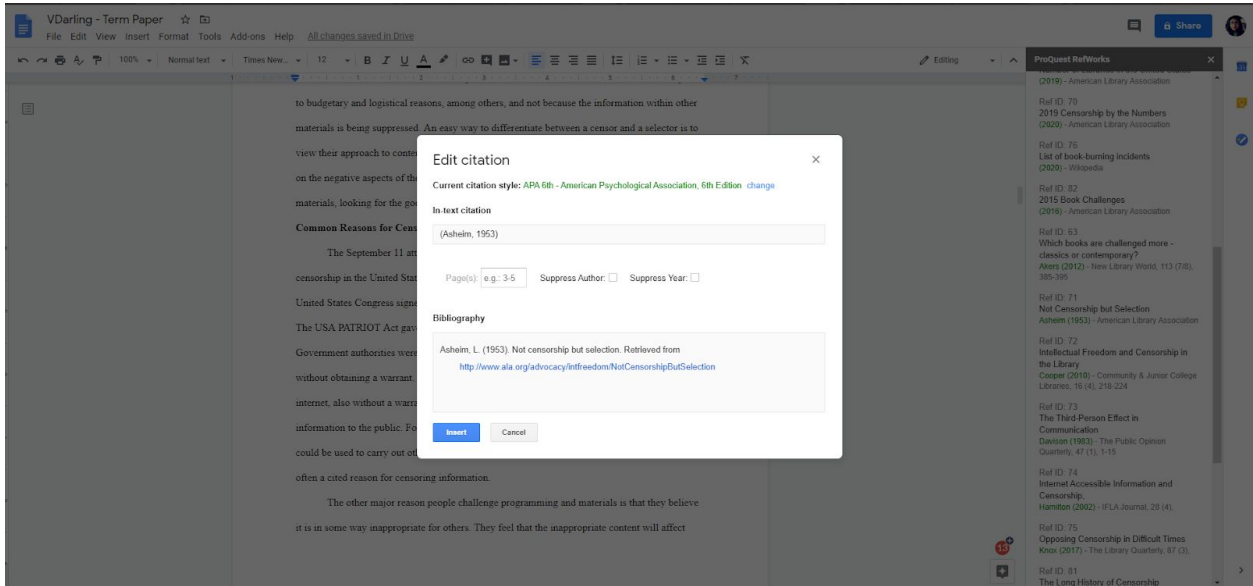libraries. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 45*(2), 153–167.

doi:10.1177/0961000611435254

Top ten most challenged books of 2016. (2017). Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/Top%20Ten%20for%2

02016.pdf

Appendix A - Write and Cite

Appendix B - Create Bibliography

Important notification. More ...

ProQuest RefWorks   5000 - Term Pap...   University of North Texas   Language (en) ▼   Valerie Darling ▼

All References   All references in 'All References' (20)   Selected References (20)

Bibliography from Selected references (20)

APA 6th - American Psychological Association, 6th Edition

Differentiate authors with the same surname by: Surname and first name

Copy to Clipboard

References

100 most frequently challenged books: 1990–1999. (2013). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/100-most-frequently-challenged-books-1990%E2%80%931999

2017 censorship by the numbers . (2017). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/OIF%20Infographic%20-%20June%20-%20Page%202_0.pdf

2018 censorship by the numbers. (2018). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/2018-bbooks-graphic-1_0.jpg

2019 censorship by the numbers. (2020). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/Censorship%20by%20the%20Numbers%202019_0_1.pdf

Akers, C. G. (2012). Which books are challenged more - classics or contemporary? *New Library World, 113*(7/8), 385-395. doi:10.1108/03074801211245075

Asheim, L. (1953). Not censorship but selection. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/NotCensorshipButSelection

Cooper, J. L. (2010). Intellectual freedom and censorship in the library. *Community & Junior College Libraries, 16*(4), 218-224. doi:10.1080/02763915.2010.521016

Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 47*(1), 1-15. doi:10.1086/268763

First amendment and censorship. (2008). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship

The freedom to read statement. (2006). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement

Hamilton, S. (2002). Internet accessible information and censorship, *IFLA Journal, 28*(4) Retrieved from https://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2147/10.1177/034003520202800406

Knox, E. (2017). Opposing censorship in difficult times . *The Library Quarterly, 87*(3) Retrieved from https://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2606/doi/10.1086/692304

Library bill of rights. (2006). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill

List of book-burning incidents. (2020). Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_book-burning_incidents&oldid=936133412

Newth, M. (2010). The long history of censorship. Retrieved from http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/liste.html?tid=415&art_id=475`

Number of libraries in the united states . (2019). Retrieved from https://libguides.ala.org/numberoflibraries

Rojas, H., Shah, D. V., & Faber, R. J. (1996). For the good of others: Censorship and the third-person effect. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 8*(2), 163-186. doi:10.1093/ijpor/8.2.163

Steele, J. E. (2017). *Censorship in public libraries: An analysis using gatekeeping theory* ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Social Science Premium Collection. Retrieved from https://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2165/docview/2018887714?accountid=7113

Taylor, K., & McMenemy, D. (2012). Censorship challenges to books in scottish public libraries: *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 45*(2), 153–167. doi:10.1177/0961000611435254

Top ten most challenged book of 2016. (2017). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org.advocacy/files/content/Top%20Ten%20for%202016.pdf