

The Censorship of Literature:

The Scales of Freedom and Security

The censorship of literature is a powerful and impactful part of American media and its overarching influence. Censorship has existed since before even the times of Roman literature, and has been a prevalent, but often misunderstood, issue within both open and closed societies (Aliprandini and Wagner 2). As literature becomes more and more integrated into the mainstream media that average Americans absorb and react to, the effects of censoring said works grow in significance. The number of books that comprise the *Banned Books Guide* circa 2007 included over 1,700 banned and challenged works, and has only increased in size since (Kidd 198). Censorship is brought on by concerned groups, like parent-teacher councils, school administrators, advisory boards, and book publishers, that question the content of a book based on its merits in the relevant setting it can be read: schools, prisons, business places, local booksellers, or in different countries. The control of censorship exists as a balance between the self-policing policies of booksellers and the industry literature is published in, and the American government's legal and moral influence on rules and guidelines therein. Although the potential security afforded to American citizens through increased government control of written media exists, it is far outweighed by the ability of choice and the benefits of allowing the industry that publishes and markets literature to make the policies regarding censorship.

Government controlled censorship has been an increasingly relevant issue in regards to American media, what with the changing demands and shifting natures of the American public and the media it creates. As adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute Rhoda Rabkin

states in her scholarly article *Do Kids Need Government Censors?*, “Most American parents want to restrict children’s access to entertainment glamorizing violence, sex, drug use, or vulgar language” (27). This desire to keep minors from graphic content meets the possible vagaries and roadblocks such as voluntary suggested age ratings and the difference of opinion in the eyes of publishers and authors on how adult the content in their books really is. Measures taken in the past, like Joseph Lieberman’s Media Marketing Accountability Act (Rabkin 28), the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Seditious Act of 1918 which targeted politically sensitive literature (Micah and Cushman 2), as well as legislation like the Patriot Act that allows government agencies to determine if books or articles can be considered dangerous (Aliprandini and Wagner 2), have attempted to prioritize the security of Americans, especially minors, rather than their choice of literature.

The argument posed by experts on the side of government-controlled censorship states that the increase in personal as well as national security is large enough to outweigh the decrease in personal freedom and the ability to determine what is appropriate for the general populace. Because of the existence of the First Amendment in America, the censorship of literature through outright laws meets considerable opposition and oftentimes failure due to the material not being both “patently offensive” and “utterly without redeeming social value” (Rabkin 30). The source of inspiration for many of these laws comes from the legal restrictions to media that exist in other nations, namely the United Kingdom and Australia, where censorship laws were recently passed in order to stop the dissemination of infamous online terrorist publication *Inspire* at the possible sentence of anywhere from ten to fifteen years in prison, per issue (Bamford 78-79). While inherently against the First Amendment Rights of American citizens, the proposed

security of having government controlled censorship, in a legally supported setting, would fundamentally eradicate all instances of threat to minors on par to that of Tobacco companies and their advertising campaigns throughout the eighties and nineties (Rabkin 38-39). The current definition of what is considered obscene in literature by the government was set by the Supreme Court in 1971, and sets a precedent for rulings that makes finding literature legally obscene considerably difficult (Micah and Cushman 2). A legally supported system of government-controlled censorship would make rulings that fall under highly discretionary terms, as already defined, more rigid and clear in nature according to proponents of legal standards of unified censorship like the National Institute on Media and the Family and other children's health groups (Rabkin 38).

While the concerns of the American government are legitimate, and the security and safety of information that reaches the public is important, the strength of security is rendered insignificant versus the ability to have freedom in this instance. The ability for an individual to decide what is and is not appropriate for themselves and their children is too valuable when contrasted with rigid rules and strict codes deciding what is right and what is wrong for the general public. In addition to weighing freedom and security, the ambiguous nature of studies relating to the link between real-life violence and violence displayed in media like books depletes the affirmation of arguments on both sides. A system of industry self-censorship more closely relates the role of the censor to parents as they make the final say in deciding what their kids are permitted to read. Therefore, the government should not be allowed to determine censorship laws or rules, and that responsibility should remain within the bounds of the literary industry.

Censorship within the industry of booksellers and publishers is comparable to that of movies, music, and games, insofar as they all have guidelines attached to them, in some capacity, in order to clearly and effectively market to their intended audiences (Rabkin 29). In many cases, the extensive research an author does in order to write a vivid and accurate book can lead to misinterpretations by people with a cursory knowledge of the topic, and can very easily bring books with high degrees of realism or personal significance to be banned or challenged (Boyd and Bailey 656). Understanding the media released and the audience it is released to is a large part of the argument for industry-controlled censorship in the form of recommendations and self-policing. Books that are considered “acknowledged children’s classics” like *Huckleberry Finn* can easily be mimicked by unaware children and deemed racially insensitive and offensive without proper context (Rabkin 33), a context provided by parents, teachers, and reinforced by literary industry policies. As books begin to spread in more and more varied ways with the introduction of the internet, the methodology of censorship or recommendation of literature has to become more unified in order to effectively keep material of an appropriate nature within the audience it was made for, and the disparate views of censorship between governments only makes this challenge grow. Totalitarian governments like China’s find it more and more necessary to heavily censor and block public access to readings on the internet (Aliprandini and Wagner 2), something that is feared will occur in the US.

Censorship of literature has been forced to evolve over a long period of time. Censorship had much stricter enforcement, and although most punishments for violating guidelines surrounding censorship have lessened in severity since the days of being burned at the stake like philosopher Giordano Bruno, and imprisoned and possibly murdered in USSR-controlled

twentieth century Russia, numerous issues exist in today's world concerning the severity of punishments for arguably expressing American freedoms under the First Amendment (Aliprandini and Wagner 2). Congressional action over global terrorism efforts have lead to concerns that American legislation will become more akin to that of Britain and Australia, where violation of censorship guidelines can have consequences like over a decade in prison (Bamford 79). For example, the Patriot Act allows the FBI to access library records of US residents, which can lead to any number of serious, technically constitutional, punishments to be cast down from the United States government (Aliprandini and Wagner 2).

A vital area in which censorship and its effect on literature takes place is in schools. "School authorities face great complexities and inevitable challenges when deciding to make or not to make censorship decisions in schools." (248) according to Ken Petress in his article *The Role of Censorship in School*, and those complexities are within a teacher's discretion to ultimately determine. School censors tend to follow methods of censorship in order to avoid material that what contradict or inhibit what is intended to be taught in schools (Petress 248). Even without direct government influence, heavy censorship can take place in classrooms at the behest of parents and members of the school's community that possess concerns over certain books or text (Petress 248). In *Boundaries for Contemporary Literature: The Role of Censorship and Choice*, Jen Denzin discusses how her class had the choice to read controversial books, and how, despite the flagrant obscenities, disturbing imagery, and detailed violence present within Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, and John Schwartz's *Blueprints of the Afterlife*, all books that were read over the course, the students' interests were piqued more when given the choice of any book to read over being handed a required reading

material. Under strict government control, the required student readings would not deviate in the nature that a classroom like Denzin's allows.

Censorship in literature remains to be an area of contention among experts regarding its overall societal effect and its merits in constitutional legality. Government-controlled censorship hypothetically solves the problems minors face in the world of literary media, but is too costly to the average citizen, and has major drawbacks that are not present in industry self-censorship. The authors and booksellers that market literature understand the media they are selling and the audience they are selling to much better than the government does, and that lends itself to giving more power over censorship to said industry. The continued freedom of citizens to read what they please without fear of receiving severe punishment from violating government-instilled laws surrounding literature is what industry designed censorship offers. As well as affording these liberties to citizens, the trust placed in the hands of parents and other reliable authority figures is complemented by industry guidelines that form recommendations for readers rather than strict rules that bar books from certain demographics. Censorship continues to be a significant issue in American society, and the world at large, but the ability for the Government to control said censorship would be entirely undesirable compared to a rational and more traditional system of industry self-censorship.

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