

How Should Books be Censored?

The censorship of books has existed since the days of early Roman civilization. It is a process in which material that is deemed offensive, treasonous, obscene, or otherwise dangerous is oppressed, banned, or destroyed. Censorship has persisted and evolved throughout history as human communication methods and general moral values have shifted and developed in different ways. As time went on, censorship became less of a literal weapon that destroyed the lives and works of authors like the Roman poet Ovid or Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, and more of a steadfast method of control and moderation employed by authorities in both open and closed societies (Aliprandini and Wagner 1). Whether or not a person agrees with the practice of censorship itself, while still a debatable topic, is not as empirical and realistically grounded as addressing censorship as it has, and will, exist. The real debate is whether the power to censor literature should be in the hands of the industry that releases it, or up to the government to decide what is socially acceptable.

Industries that sell and advertise products have to abide by guidelines that establish what they are allowed to make money marketing. They stay within these guidelines by using things like labels and warnings to establish the intended consumer audience and protect people from material that would not be deemed appropriate for them. With literature, these regulations are what attempt to keep publications like Playboy magazine out of the hands of minors and make sure sensitive topics like outdated racial vocabulary and political violence do not reach people deemed unprepared to comprehend the magnitude of the messages therein. The basis of a self-regulated system of security is for the sake of consumers, giving them the ability to act

within their own discretion while still enforcing some rules for books that are available for purchase.

The system of industry self-censorship that is traditionally used remains workable and preferable to Federal regulation according to Rhoda Rabkin, an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (Rabkin 28). Books that are released into the world today are consistently labeled and marketed towards the demographic that they intend to sell the most copies to. Based on the content of the book and the author's message(s), the intended audience is decided and the book is then catered towards it in favor of selling the most copies. This content is screened by booksellers and publishing companies in order to honestly and appropriately market their product, and the labels seen on such works that give recommended age levels for readers or warnings of explicit or adult-only content is the prime example of a voluntary system of censorship. Exactly like the ratings systems of the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) or the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board), the self-policing of books based on their content is not explicitly done by law in each case, but has become part of a societal and industry norm that follows a trend to "effectively restrict the dissemination of offensive materials to young people." (Rabkin 33).

The general consensus over what materials should and should not be in the hands of impressionable minors aids the debate. Whereas great literary achievements that have questionable societal and personal significance are subjects of discrepancy among parents, school districts, and scholars, publications that consistently offer salacious or offensive material are not. While a debate all its own, the argument that magazines such as Playboy or Hustler possesses no "inherently harmful material", as put by Civil Libertarian William Stayton, are

highly disregarded in favor of a more commonsensical argument against minors having access to such works (Platt 45). With this consensus upheld, the process of censorship becomes a little bit easier thanks to a clear benchmark of obscenity offered to an industry that must already perform a “constant balancing act with legal threats of regulation and categorizing literature for the purpose of prohibition or ratings” (Platt 45). Social science on the topic of simulated violence in an entertainment setting and real violence is controversial, with sources citing that a consistent flow of gratuity can lead to real life violence, while others, such as Seymour Feshbach, a critic of social learning, propose that children can parse the difference between “playing war” and “kicking one’s mother” (Platt 46). While not a stunning endorsement of censorship itself, the consensus of keeping material with a certain level of violence or sexual material out of the hands of minors is clear to the process of industry self-regulation.

Not all people will agree that an industry is needed or can be trusted to take the necessary measures to properly protect minors from inappropriate material. “Most American parents want to restrict children’s access to entertainment glamorizing violence, sex, drug use, or vulgar language.” Industry failings in attempting to self-regulate were brought to light in fall of 2000 during FTC hearings that concluded that media companies market their specifically mature content to minors, despite the outrage of parents (Rabkin 27-28). As most media is restricted under guidelines, and not much is enforced by actual legislation, the barrier between marketing to minors and adults can become blurry as trust in companies bends back and forth and products offer appeal to multiple demographics. The paradigm shift that has occurred over the past few decades also lends confusion to the debate. Compared to the “conservative country” (Rabkin 31) that America could be considered in even the 1930s, the content of entertainment today is

significantly more emphatic of violence and sexual content. If those in charge of marketing books, especially to minors, are not on par with the ideals of parents in modern society, then parents themselves are left with the responsibility.

Another noticeable issue with industry-level regulatory censorship is how confusing it can become to minors and parents looking for age and individual appropriate material. Additionally, considering the nature of complex books to feature mature themes, the ability of children of advanced reading levels despite their age to find books still deemed fit for them is slim based on most book labelling systems. Confusing or seemingly mislabeled books are a source of duress for parents as the already tangled world of media that is and is not safe for their children. The vague nature of ratings and surrounding enforcement of them is a point of contention in multiple industries, especially considering that legal action against obscenity differs from that of the objectionable content that “contemporary parents” are concerned with; drug use, general violence, or occultism, for example (Rabkin 30). Left to the discretion of parents, the generally accepted guidelines already given will be followed, as even parents that agree with increased censorship in principle, refuse to invoke change because they are “too busy working, worrying, drinking, or watching television.” (Cheer 80). This bringing to light the issue of industry labels that are inconvenient for parents as well as for general consumers trying to suss out drivel from literature in a confused system of guidelines and suggestions.

Government control in society is seen as a large issue, especially in America, where a rich history of decisions and legislative actions have greatly influenced the lives of almost the entire nation. When it comes to literature, government censorship is the ability for laws and lawmakers to decide what is and is not appropriate for general society. These strict rules, rather

than suggestions and guidelines would offer a specific and controlled option to the industry preferred system. A government board of censors regulating the media we are allowed to purchase and read through booksellers and newsstands would replace parental discretion and case-by-case assessments almost entirely, and would crack down on the exposure of minors to material deemed inappropriate because the same government that has been attempting to pass bills that limit violence in the media would be in direct control of what people are allowed to read or allowed to buy.

Within the context of the United States, it is currently against the First Amendment rights of citizens to restrict the sales or marketing of most books, as long as they do not pose legitimate danger or other forms of tangible risk, but in other countries, legislation that targets media like movies, games, and books is known to exist (Rabkin 30). These laws are passed in other countries primarily to protect minors from harmful or influential material within mass media, and the same fundamental argument applies in the US with books. Due to the difference of the First Amendment, much of the material parents object to on a general basis is not legally targetable as it represents the exact freedoms of speech and expression the author's possess in the United States. The proposed guidelines and warnings, but not rules, that protect minors from certain books are not seen as adequate measures by scholars such as David Lowenthal, an emeritus professor of political science at Boston College who vehemently despises the state of American media, describing it as being "subjected to so ubiquitous and persistent an assault" (Cheer 80). A solution to said assault is suggested by Lowenthal would entail enlisting a group of "distinguished citizens" and having their decisions "guided by law and subject to review by higher courts" (Cheer 80).

Other scholars argue that while the liberties afforded to us via freedom of speech are constitutional, the safety guaranteed us by surrendering certain rights far outweighs our loss (Rabkin 30). In the form of attempted ratings acts and regulation legislature seen in cases like *Freedman v. Maryland* (1965) and *Roth v. United States* (1957), the cases for government censorship of the mass media has persisted and been drawn upon as leading examples of attempts to change how we see the First Amendment in regards to entertainment. The government already is able to withhold and censor documents released to public, literature that arrives to us from other nations, and can investigate possible threats to national security under the guise of literature or news (Aliprandini and Wagner 1). Giving the government the further ability to moderate what books we have access to beyond the current legal definition of obscenity has been asserted as an answer to the desires of American parents. The extending of these powers to the point where they are allowed to pass bills into laws that specifically censor literature within the US is a small price to pay, some debate, compared to having threats right beneath our noses and having no control over them.

Opponents of Government censorship claim that the stifling or maiming of creative expression is all that can come from a government control of the media we are able to read. Citizens like William Bennett argue that the solution to problems within the media come from debate rather than from rigorous censorship (Cheer 80). Historians also argue that the infuriating policies that keep the classification of historical documents make for a terrible support to introducing government control of the censorship of literature (Holden 1218). In further support of keeping censorship to a minimum, arguments against government control cite the Patriot Act, under which the FBI “can access medical, school and library records of any US resident without

a warrant.”(Aliprandini and Wagner 1). Such behavior is seen as contrasting the positive nature of censoring the books allowed into the public eye, further surrendering control to higher authorities-not dissimilar to closed society relationships between the populace and its governing body. The prevalent issues with government censorship are summarized by the information withheld by the government currently, and the possibility of government control contradicting the first amendment, which would lead to more significant debate around what the U.S. government would be allowed to do outside of the rules set forth in the constitution.

The debate over how we should censor books includes the strong arguments of scholars and thinkers from both sides, with some supporting industry controlled censorship that remains constitutional, but relies more heavily on individual discretion; others supporting government controlled censorship that would put less of a chance on possible offensive material getting into the hands of minors, but pushes the envelope on how the First Amendment is perceived and followed. Some can agree over overt works and publications, but other forms of common ground are few and far between. Censorship in literature is a powerful and impactful process that drastically affects the final product, and the debate of where the power of censorship should lie remains to be settled.

Works Cited

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