

Why We Shouldn't Ban Books: The Effects of Censorship on Children and Young Adults

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Introduction

In an ever-growing culture where knowledge is everywhere, the topic of censorship may seem irrelevant and outdated. However, censorship is not strictly an action or a practice. Rather, it is more a code of conduct, a belief held (most times) by those in power. Though censorship began with the banning of books, the issue has changed as society and technology have and so the topic is still just as relevant as ever. Censorship now occurs in new forms and through new means, while still influencing the mediums of past centuries; censorship is an ever-evolving problem. It doesn't just affect literary pieces (fiction or otherwise), but all of the avenues we receive information from. With so many ways to obtain knowledge in this digital age, there are just as many ways to censor and restrict access to that knowledge, creating a hierarchical society where knowledge is power. Where there is censorship, there always seems to be a power struggle close behind—whether it be between religion and followers, government and citizens, or individual and society, the struggle has always existed and continues to grow.

What makes censorship such a dangerous and complex idea is that many people see it in only a single context: the banning of fictional literature. However, censorship is much more than that. At the very root, censorship is not simply about the disrupted distribution of a written piece. Rather, it is about the *contents* of the piece: censorship aims to restrict the circulation of *ideas* (Mullally, 2002). And when one idea falls prey to censorship, *all* ideas are at risk of following suit. The danger now lies in the fact that this can occur in *any* context: literary books, history textbooks, news articles (and similar media outlets), and more recently, the internet and e-books.

However, it is the ideas and messages in books that make them so incredibly valuable to us as a society. I believe it is not only wrong (based on our First Amendment right) to censor sensitive or possibly controversial information, but measurably damaging to the psychological, emotional and social development of children and adolescents. this paper aims to prove that excessive censorship is detrimental in a multitude of ways.

History

Attempting to ban access to books perceived to be too controversial is not a new concept. In fact, according to Claire Mullally, humanity has been trying to “[censor] books for as long as people have been writing them” (2002). Censorship dates as far back as Ancient Greece and to the philosophical beliefs of Plato. *The Republic*, which describes the perfect society and how to achieve it, clearly states that certain pieces of fiction (referred to as “myths” [Levin, 2012] and “fables and legends” [Mullally]) should be discarded and eliminated (Levin, 2012). Plato encouraged the disposal of any piece of fiction that wasn’t approved by The Guardians for fear of such stories causing corruption or anarchy within the society itself; primary targets of this kind of censorship include stories that may portray resistance against authority or put The Guardians in an unflattering light (Levin, 2012), which would lead to disobedience and the eventual destruction of society. Plato believed that “absolute control” (Levin, 2012) was

necessary for a society to survive, and to achieve this, “indoctrination is crucial” (Levin, 2012)—that is, a culture in which question or criticism for authority or common belief is forbidden.

In Plato’s time (380 BC is when *The Republic* was written), any written work was done by hand, and often times there were very few (if any) copies in circulation. The few books that did exist were owned exclusively by high-ranking citizens within the community—mainly scholars and monks (Wishnia, 2009). Because of this, censorship was frighteningly easy to accomplish (Mullally, 2002), and continued to be an easy and common practice across the world: In 212 BC, for example, notorious Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang exercised extreme acts of censorship not only by persecuting over 400 scholars—having them buried alive—but by also burning the books they wrote in an attempt to better control his empire (Gracie, 2012); likewise, there are instances of textbook censorship in places like India, where the representation of one group was found so offensive the book was removed from circulation (Shahana, 2004). Though the book was used to educate, the egos of others took precedent.

Censorship eventually became a bit more difficult to enforce following Johannes Gutenberg’s creation of the printing press. The printing press revolutionized the world by allowing mass production of literature (books, newspapers, etc.). Although Gutenberg created the printing press in 1440 AD, it wasn’t until around 1500 that mass production became commonplace; by 1500, every major European city had a printing shop (Wishnia, 2009), thus making books more easily accessible than ever before.

Despite this new challenge, religious officials and government leaders across the world still attempted to regulate the consumption of literature. Censorship now occurred before and after production for fear that “subversive...ideas” (Wishnia, 2009) would spread, and anarchy would ensue (in this context, anarchy means a state in which the government [or ruling class] is not able to exercise absolute power). Attempts to censor pre-production include King Henry VIII of England mandating that any manuscript about to be published must be turned in to authorities, publication pending the approval from the Church of England (Mullally, 2002), while Pope Alexander VI “threatened to excommunicate anyone who printed anything without clearing it with the...Catholic Church” (Wishnia, 2009). In France, King Francis I “issued an edict prohibiting the printing of books” (Mullally, 2002) altogether. Likewise, the Roman Catholic Church created the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which included both specific titles that were to be banned and an overall set of guidelines to help religious officials decide what was allowed to be printed and what wasn't. The *Index* was first published in 1557 (Mayl, 1998) and was only recently dismissed in 1966 (Mullally, 2002).

Up until this point in time, censorship was rooted almost solely in religious ideologies, and censorship in America followed suit when Puritan authorities confiscated and destroyed a pamphlet from European settler William Pynchon in 1650 (Mullally, 2002). Though it was only a pamphlet, not an actual novel, authorities still “condemned” (Mullally, 2002) the pamphlet and burned it in the marketplace for all to see; Mullally states that this event is “considered to be the first book-burning in America” (2002).

While *The Republic* was written nearly three-thousand years ago, and the *Index* was abolished a mere fifty years ago, the idea of censorship, as well as the motivations to censor, have not

changed at all. The only aspect of censorship that has changed is the media it affects, especially in Western civilization.

The Psychology of “No”

You can't always get what you want is a common phrase in society, as well as an iconic rock lyric. But in psychology, it is a concept that has received notable amounts of attention (Wu, Chen & Greenberger, 2015; Regnerus, 2007; DeWall, Maner, Deckman, & Rouby, 2011; Parker & Burkley, 2009). and has been tested repeatedly (as well as a common title for said tests). Wanting what one can't have has become known as the Forbidden Fruit Effect, and the dictionary defines it as “something that is attractive because it is not allowed” (*Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary*). While mostly used within the context of relationships, the forbidden fruit concept spans across many areas of life, including, of course, the area of censorship.

In regards to censorship, banning books with sensitive content is not just the morally irresponsible response; it is also the *psychologically* incorrect response. For a multitude of reasons, banning or restricting access to anything is counterproductive; banning material elicits the forbidden fruit effect banning something makes people want it more than they would have if it were simply readily accessible to them (thus, *you can't always get what you want*). But why is

this? Dr. Pauline Wallin tells us there are three specific reasons that cause this: heightened attention, perceived scarcity and psychological reactance (2005).

Heightened attention is a straightforward concept that states when something is limited in some way—in this case, banned—an individual will “immediately pay more attention to it” (Wallin, 2005). Instead of thinking about what *can* be accessed, the mind will hone in on the single thing that *cannot* be accessed, thus making it “seem very important” (Wallin, 2005), much more important than it actually is. Wallin states that heightened attention may even “escalate into obsession” (2005). When something is banned from our possession, people tend to fixate. Though this concept alone is compelling enough to explain why banning is counterproductive, it also sets the psychological stage for Wallin’s following reasons.

Similar to heightened attention is perceived scarcity. This occurs when the individual falsely believes that the restricted item is not just more important, but also more *valuable* than it was before. According to Wallin, the “scarce...supply” (2005) causes the “perceived value [to increase]” (2005), thus making it seem both more interesting and worthy of attention. Furthermore, perceived scarcity also comes with threat—the threat that, because an item is so forbidden, it must also be in high demand, thus other people must also want to obtain the thing as well. This thought not only causes the individual to want the item more, but also makes them willing to do anything to secure it (Wallin, 2005). The urge to obtain, regardless of the cost, stems from George Loewenstein’s Information-Gap Theory (Strong, 2014). According to Loewenstein’s theory, when we cannot have what we desire, “a gap between what we know and what we want to know...[and people] feel the need to...do whatever it takes to bridge that gap”

(Strong, 2014). In short, people get curious—so curious that it results in “strange behavior”

(Strong, 2014) or as Wallin called it: *obsession*.

Finally there is psychological reactance. Another popular term in the psychological field, this refers to “an aversive affective reaction in response to regulations or impositions that impinge on freedom and autonomy” (Moss, 2016). In short, this refers to a sort of mental rebellion that takes place when an individual is faced with an external force that is limiting to their freedom in some way. Wallin states that there are both emotional and behavioral components to psychological reactance. Emotionally, a person will reject the limitation (*Try and stop me from getting what I want*), while behaviorally the person will usually engage in “some type of rebellious action” (Wallin, 2005) that contradicts or pushes back on the limitation.

Similarly, a study done by Kira Varava and Brian Quick used movie ratings to establish and test the connection between freedom threat perceptions, psychological reactance and the forbidden fruit effect. In this study, Varava and Quick attempt to determine how movie ratings affect perceived threats to freedom in teens; they theorized the more explicit the rating (most explicit being NC-17), the more likely forbidden fruit effect would take place (2015). Meaning, the more exclusive the rating, the more likely it would be that teens would want to see or would go see the movie. In accordance with the hypothesis, the experiment found that “more restrictive ratings are often ineffective because they make the inappropriate content more desirable to adolescents, increasing the likelihood that they will see it” (Varava & Quick, 2015) (which is an exact exemplification of the forbidden fruit effect).

Furthermore, Varava and Quick discuss the psychological process that takes place when we encounter psychological reactance. Varava and Quick's description of this process is complementary to Wallin's. There are four stages that we pass through, each with unique emotional behaviors: *freedom, freedom threat, reactance, and restoration of freedom* (2015). *Freedom*, the most straightforward of the stages, includes all the things (emotions, behaviors, etc.) that individuals feel they exercise the right to control, as "individuals value their right to choice" (Varava & Quick, 2015). *Freedom threat* ensues when "an obstacle makes it difficult to exercise an established freedom" (Varava & Quick, 2015), obstacles are described as being anything that hinders a person's freedom to choose, including parental interference. *Reactance* is described as a "negative emotional state" (Brehm via Varava and Quick, 2015) when faced with a freedom threat. Finally, is *restoration of freedom*, in which the individual finds some way to reenact their freedom to choose. In Wallin's piece, this corresponds to acting out in some rebellious manner, either psychically or emotionally. Varava and Quick describe these means as being direct or indirect. Direct restoration is "engaging in the forbidden behavior" (Dillard & Shen via Varava & Quick, 2015), while indirect methods include increased attention paid to or increased admiration of the act or those involved in the act (Varava & Quick, 2015).

This experiment proves how banning or attempting to restrict access to certain materials can actually increase the chances of said materials being consumed or sought out more. Thus banning materials is actually counterproductive to the reduction of their consumption. Though this experiment discussed visual media platforms, the psychology is the same and the effects will yield the same results in the context of book banning.

It is also worth mentioning that many books are turned into movies, thereby making this study twice as relevant. Book-to-movies that receive more adult ratings (PG-13 or R) now have a higher appeal. The sensitive material parents didn't want their children consuming now appears in two contexts. Examples of book-to-movie translations that include sensitive content include *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), *Gone Girl* (2014)—both of which are rated R—as well as *Paper Towns* (2015) and *Mockingjay* (2014) (part of the *Hunger Games* series, of which the entirety of the series was banned in certain places) which acquired PG-13 ratings. With these, and many more examples, in mind, it is extremely important to consider the repercussions of the forbidden fruit effect and how knee-jerk reactions (banning) to material deemed sensitive can be counterproductive to the cause.

In another study conducted by David W. Hall and Kathrin F. Stanger-Hall (2011), it was proven that restricting or banning access to information is quite often both counterproductive and detrimental to the people (adolescents) it is trying to protect. Hall and Stanger-Hall assessed the effectiveness of abstinence-only education in reducing pregnancy rates and STD contraction rates; they found that schools that abide by this policy almost always have higher rates of teenage pregnancy (2011). Furthermore, they found that this trend has increased in frequency over the past ten years (when the abstinence-only programs were first initiated). They have proven that restricting access to factual, relevant and practical information “clearly... is ineffective in preventing teenage pregnancy and may actually be contributing to the high teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S.” (Stanger-Hall KF & Hall DW, 2011). According to the study the trend “remains significant” (2011) after taking into socioeconomic, ethnic, educational opportunistic and medical factors into consideration (2011); this means that the high pregnancy rates were not

caused by, related to or influenced by any social, educational or medical advantages or disadvantages. The sole correlation to the high pregnancy rates was the sex education they were receiving.

Thus, Hall and Stanger-Hall proved the ineffectiveness of banning comprehensive sex education, and how this ban on sensitive information has actually been counterproductive to the initial goal. In regards to censorship, this study shows how simply ignoring or dismissing potentially sensitive information can actually harm the development of children, especially during their formative years.

The Effects of “No”

In the previous section, it was discussed that restricting access to things makes them perceivably more valuable and therefore, more likely to be consumed or sought out, thereby essentially proving that banning something is an ineffective way to deal with it. We have now learned the *why* of censorship—why banning something doesn't work. Now we need to find out the *what* of censorship—what happens to the mental, emotional and intellectual development of an adolescent who has been banned from information.

Books are banned for many different reasons as far as context goes, but in general, information is banned or restricted because there is something seemingly offensive or dangerous about it. And, generally speaking, literary books with sensitive content tend to sit uneasily with

protective or overprotective parents; often times, the parents of the readers do not believe their children to be ready to handle the information a book may or may not discuss; they believe the information is damaging or harmful to the child, and that it will cause the child trauma in some way. In an attempt to shield children from the dangers of (possibly) mature content, parents will challenge a book in the hopes of having it removed from either the public or school library, thereby eliminating the child's access to the material. (In this instance, we are excluding retail bookstores as sources for information, as most children under 16 do not have jobs and therefore cannot buy items as easily as adults can.) When parents are reactive to material and attempt to take it away, by preventing a child access to discomforting ideas, not only does the material become more interesting (as discussed in the previous section), but it also influences the child's psychological development.

Paul Bohn, a practicing psychiatrist at UCLA, gave a seminar about the topic, stating that “many parents will do anything to avoid having their kids experience even mild discomfort, anxiety, or disappointment” (Gottlieb, 2011). However, this is detrimental to the child. While it may seem counterproductive or even cruel to allow children to feel discomfort (physical or emotional, mild or moderate), it is actually essential to their mental development that they experience these feelings. By preventing children from feeling discomfort—some parents see this as *protecting* their children—they and are, in fact causing serious developmental damage that can last for decades after childhood has passed. Experiencing discomfort throughout childhood enables children to gain coping skills that they will rely on heavily when they eventually become adults. Without these experiences, the coping mechanisms do not develop and the child will become a maladjusted adult.

In early childhood, discomfort generally stems from shock, a feeling that an experience is unfamiliar, and therefore, frightening to them. It is only through experience that they are able to overcome this fear and learn to cope independently from the comfort of their parents. In the face of such discomfort, Bohn says, children must be given a chance to “experience...confusion... figure out what just happened...and then briefly...grapple with the frustration” (Gottlieb, 2011) of the situation. When a child is given the freedom to go through this process in its entirety, they develop the necessary coping mechanisms; while a parent may provide comfort, it is vital to the process that the child works through the incident on their own for the initial portion of the time. Time spent coping alone helps the child develop stronger feelings of security (Gottlieb, 2011) in that it teaches children that even “if something unpleasant happens, [they] can get through it” (Gottlieb, 2011), meaning they learn to be a little less reliant on others. Although children will still be fairly reliant on their parents, as they are still young, this solitary struggle plants the seeds for future independence. According to Bohn, “in many instances... the child recovers fine on [their] own” (Gottlieb, 2011). Providing comfort shortly *after* something negative has happened strengthens the impact the comfort will make on the child, as it proves that, even when scary or painful things happen, comfort is not far away (Gottlieb, 2011). Thus this mental process teaches resilience, endurance and independence, even with the parent’s help.

Bohn states that parents tend to interfere with their children’s growth, often jumping in too soon, “protecting their kid when [they don’t] need protection” (Gottlieb, 2011). Parents believe providing instant comfort to a child is helpful. However, Bohn says that this results in a child who “has no idea what discomfort feels like and will have no framework for how to recover when [they feel] discomfort” (Gottlieb, 2011). There are no coping mechanisms for the everyday

frustrations of life, because prior to adulthood, the individual didn't have any frustrations. When the individual experiences discomfort in adulthood, they do not know how to handle themselves or the situation; they become anxious and often times resort to turning to their parents for constant for help and comforts, "instead of attempting to figure out how to deal with it themselves" (Gottlieb, 2011). Parents that are too caring, too comforting, too protective, create children that become emotionally dependent on the parent, and therefore become helpless in the face of obstacles, no matter how major or minor. This can result in a variety of future symptoms.

Lori Gottlieb, author, clinical psychologist and colleague of Bohn, states that many of her patients happen to be young adults (early 20's to early 30's) that feel anxious, depressed and overall unhappy for unknown reasons (2011); it has been proven that mental and emotional disorders are more and more common with each new generation (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2015) Furthermore, all of Gottlieb's patients described their childhoods in a similar way: they had extremely attentive, providing parents and generally happy childhoods. It is because of this that Gottlieb and Bohn both agree that overprotective and over nurturing parents can cause psychological damage to their children, even without knowing it or meaning to. By trying to shield children from emotional or physical pains, parents teach their children that they are incapable of handling stress (2011). Without these experiences, children cannot develop what child psychologist and author Dan Kindlon calls *psychological immunity* (Gottlieb, 2011). In the same way our bodies build up immunities to keep us from getting sick constantly, the mind needs "exposure to discomfort...and struggle" (Gottlieb, 2011) in order to stay healthy. A child who does not understand hardship will become an adult who "break down anytime things don't go their way" (Gottlieb, 2011). In a sense, overprotective parents are mentally and emotionally

crippling their children. Instead of developing a mental disorder, as Gottlieb discusses, like anxiety or depression, an alternate side effect of overprotection could be aggression (Hadit & Lukianoff, 2015). Overprotected and emotionally inexperienced children mature into maladjusted adults who not only *can't* encounter something uncomfortable, but may even *refuse* to. This refusal can manifest in negative, aggressive ways.

A huge issue with discomfort is that it can be caused by virtually anything; it depends heavily on the person. Sometimes it is the physical pain of a scraped knee, other times it is the emotional disappointment of getting cut from team try outs, still other times it is the mental anxiety that comes from learning. This concept is referred to as *accommodation*, a term coined by Jean Piaget that explains how we make sense of the world.

Piaget believed that humans are “born with schemes operating at birth that he called ‘reflexes’” (Huitt & Hummel, 2003); these schemes (reflexes) can also be described as inborn knowledge that is used for survival. As a child grows and is exposed to more of their environment, the schemes likewise grow, and become more complex (2003). Piaget theorized there are two ways in which we learn: through the cognitive processes of *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Assimilation is “the process of using...the environment so that it can be placed in preexisting cognitive structures” (Huitt & Hummel, 2003), meaning that, when we encounter something new, we force the new information to fit into ideas we already have. An example of this would be a child mistakenly confusing a balding man and a clown, due to the two having similar hairstyles (McLeod, 2009). In contrast, accommodation is “the process of changing cognitive structures in order to accept something from the environment” (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). This means accommodation occurs when the information gathered through previous

experience does not apply to the situation at hand, and the individual must change their way of thinking (their scheme) in order to make sense of what they are experiencing. An example of this would be the child from the previous example noticing the differences in behavior and appearance between the balding man and a clown, thereby changing and refining their idea of what a clown actually is (McLeod, 2009). Piaget believed that people—both children and adults alike, as both continuously learn—experience a mental discomfort when utilizing these processes, as it disturbs an individual's equilibrium (the “balance between schemes and the environment” [Huitt & Hummel, 2003]). Thus, in certain circumstances, learning can be uncomfortable. This can be especially true for children with overprotective parents.

Discomfort can also stem from encountering foreign or uncomfortable ideas. In regards to censorship, foreign topics discussed within texts can lead to accommodation, and the mental discomfort associated with obtaining new ideas. Books are not just sources of entertainment, they are also learning tools—a book does not need to be strictly academic to be educational. Knowledge is amassed through experience and exposure, assimilation and accommodation. With this information in mind, it is easy to see how excessive protection and censorship can damage children--and the adults they will become-- psychologically.

Books are banned or censored because of vulgar, sexual, mature or saddening topics. The main argument is exposure to ideas of this nature is damaging or traumatizing to the child. However, ignoring these topics and providing excessive (over) protection, as discussed in *this* section, is actually what damages children. Reading is another way children can develop the psychological immunity they need in order to survive. The pain conveyed through an author's words can trigger accommodation and force the child to reassess what they thought they knew,

thus helping them become more intelligent, emotionally mature and understanding individuals; reading is a safe and efficient way for children to receive exposure to the discomforts of real life without having to personally experience it (Flood, 2013). Working through a painful experience, as stated by Gottlieb, Bohn, Kindlon, and many others, helps the child develop life-long coping mechanisms for real world problems.

Additionally, having a child question these topics provides a chance for the parent to not only teach, but bond with their child. It is much more effective to discuss and provide comfort instead of a parent attempting to erase (prevent) a negative experience completely with seemingly benign lies or 'sweet nothings' (e.g. *Don't worry, I would never let something like that happen to you*). In letting a child experience discomfort, children come to learn that parents will be present to help them through whatever is happening. This not only helps the child become "more emotionally secure" (Gottlieb, 2011), but also more trusting of the parent. Thus making any comfort the parent provides far more impactful (Gottlieb, 2011). Furthermore, reading about the hardships of others (fictional literature) teaches and increases empathy (O'Connell, 2014), a quality that the digital age is actually eliminating from the human brain and interactions (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Wagner, 2015). This is especially troubling for academic fields. New studies show that uncomfortable ideas on college campuses are in threat of censorship from an unlikely source.

Reporter Erica Hellerstein, author and constitutional lawyer Greg Lukianoff, and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt discuss a new trend among college students: student-imposed censorship for the sake of emotional health (2016; 2015). According to Lukianoff and Haidt, today's college students want "to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might

cause discomfort or give offense” (2015) in an attempt to protect themselves-- notice the key word ‘discomfort’! It seems today’s young adults are having an adverse emotional reaction to uncomfortable ideas and want campus policies to reflect their own personal ones, rather than accepting any discrepancies. In extreme instances, things like spelling/ grammar corrections, clapping and small talk have been banned from campuses (Wold, 2015). However, censorship will only make the problem worse: avoiding what gives one anxiety (discomfort) does not soothe or resolve the anxiety (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2015). Avoidance (censorship) validates the fear, makes it harder to encounter and harder to overcome. Hellerstein states that some groups of college students “can, and have, gone too far in their calls for suppressing ‘hateful’ speech” (2016), or foreign ideals. Meanwhile Will Creeley, who is the vice president of legal and public advocacy at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, claims “there seem to be a worrying number of instances where students are asking the authorities to sanction or punish speech that they disagree with” (Creeley via Hellerstein, 2016). While there may be other factors at play here--political involvement for one-- Lukianoff and Haidt point out that Millennials, anyone born in 1980 or later, were the first generation to have actively protective parents; Millennials “got a consistent message from adults: life is dangerous, but adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm” (2015). This seems to suggest that the first generation to receive extra-to- overprotective parental attention has also become a generation of adults, in their 20’s and 30’s, that seem to be struggling with sources of discomfort.

Discomfort can come from anywhere, and parents cannot protect their children from every possible pain that they may or may not encounter. It is, quite simply, impossible. Therefore, it is crucial to the child’s development that they be taught about life before going out into the world,

with no experience, to live it. Without the chance to explore negative experiences, emotions and thoughts, children are turned into fragile shells of the adults they could be. By allowing our children to experience sadness, anger, fear, disappointment, we are giving them a priceless tool that they will rely on for their entire adult lives.

Political Implications of Censorship

It's been discussed that censorship is wrong in both moral and developmental contexts, however, this does not inherently mean censorship is wrong in a legal context. This section will explore whether limiting access to literature is legally wrong, and what the implications of this decision mean for censorship in a broader context.

First, it is important to define the difference between *unconstitutional* and *illegal*. The constitution is defined as “a document that formally states the powers...the people have consented to grant to their government...a constitution governs government” (Rogers, 2012). It decides what the government can and cannot do and what the people will and will not tolerate from its leaders. A constitution can be changed only by “another written, ratified document” (Rogers, 2012), which is more commonly known as an *amendment*. Guidelines established by constitutions are upheld throughout the country (in this case, we are referring strictly to America and American political policies).

Inversely, a law is defined as “a rule of conduct or action ...formally recognized as binding or enforced by a controlling authority” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). This means that the government creates the limitations for the people (“law governs persons” [Rogers, 2012]). Also, a law can be changed “by the legislature that originally passed it” (Rogers, 2012). Therefore, laws are easier to change and vary from place to place.

Therefore, when individuals act improperly, it is considered illegal; whereas when the government acts improperly, it is considered unconstitutional. Thus the concepts of unconstitutionality and illegality are not mutually inclusive. In the legal sense, this is a simplistic concept; however, when applied to censorship the issue becomes a bit more complex.

The First Amendment prohibits “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press” (US Const. amend. I). While this is widely known to mean it protects an individual’s right to speak without fear of legal consequences, its protection extends beyond simply speaking. The Cornell University Law School has further specified that the freedom of expression (N.d.) is also protected. The ACLU also identifies freedom of expression as “artistic expression” (2006), thereby including “books, theatrical works and paintings... posters, television, music videos and comic books -- whatever the human creative impulse produces” (2006). Because there are now a lot more avenues in which ‘speech’ is present, that also means that, wherever a form of ‘speech’ is, it is protected; “the government cannot limit expression just because any listener, or even the majority of a community, is offended by its content” (ACLU, 2006). Therefore, censorship imposed by the government is considered unconstitutional (ACLU, 2006).

However, there are still notable limitations to what is broadcast in the media. TV shows, for example, are not permitted to use profanity or show detailed sex scenes. Doesn’t this count as a

form of censorship, as it is instituted by the government? And isn't it unconstitutional? The short answer is no.

In regards to regulation, the courts have made a distinction between *obscene* and *indecent*. *Indecent expression* (ACLU, 2006) is a term created by the courts that serves as a sort of loophole for allowing a certain amount of lewdness in media. This concept is most notable in late night TV programs that advise viewer discretion before beginning. Indecent expression, according to the courts, "is entitled to some constitutional protection, but that indecency in some media (broadcasting, cable, and telephone) may be regulated" (ACLU, 2006). So while there are instances where censorship is seemingly allowed, it is done in such a way that does not actually qualify as censorship (especially the type of censorship discussed in this paper). This type of indecency is allowed to exist on the condition it is shown late at night when children will be least likely to be exposed to it (ACLU, 2006). Therefore, it is more of a cautious regulation than an instance of censorship.

Additionally, there are acts of censorship by individuals or small, localized groups. This type of censorship is not only the primary focal point in this paper, but also the most common form of censorship in modern society. Censorship imposed by individuals, under the First Amendment, is a bit difficult to understand. To deny an individual or a group the right to express disagreement or even boycott a book they find disagreeable would be, naturally, unconstitutional. It has been discussed that freedom of expression is a constitutional right, regardless of its delivery; whether it be via mouth or keyboard, expression deserves protection. Still, it is perfectly legal for anyone to express dissatisfaction with a form of media (book, magazine, etc.) (ACLU, 2006).

However, censorship--specifically removal-- of literature seems to stand in legal limbo. The ACLU of Vermont student handbook states the answer to the question *Can school officials remove books from the school library?* is both yes and no (2009). How can this be? It is because censorship can be unconstitutional but not illegal.

Alone, or as a group, parents (as parents are the primary challengers of books, according to the American Library Association) are just individuals; the decision to remove a book from their child's possession is more of a personal parenting choice, despite prior evidence that exposure is healthy. It becomes censorship when a book is pushed for removal from public access, that is from a school or town library. Schools have been given the right to regulate what books stay in the libraries (the right to regulation was discussed earlier in this section), but the motive for removal must be assessed before removal commences. The ACLU student handbook states a book must be deemed extremely and consistently vulgar to warrant its removal; otherwise, removal based on controversial topics is considered suppression of ideas, and is unconstitutional (2009).

Cases have been made on behalf of books prone to removal that said removal would be a violation of the students' constitutional rights. The most famous case of this is the *Board of Education, Island Trees School District v. Pico*, which took place in 1982 (Mullally, 2002). Mullally has even gone as far to say that this case is "the most important court decision to date concerning school libraries and the First Amendment" (2002). In this case, the school board acted independently of a review committee and removed several books from the library on the grounds that the contents were too controversial and immoral for students to access (Oyez, n.d.). Students Francis Pico and Steven Pico sued the school on the grounds that the First Amendment

rights of the students had been violated. Though initially the courts sided with the board, the students won an appeal; the school board then appealed to the Supreme Court, where ultimately it was decided in a 5-to-4 ruling in favor of the students (Mullally, 2002). It was stated that “although school boards have a vested interest in promoting respect for social, moral, and political community values, their discretionary power is secondary to the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment” (Oyez, n.d.), thereby deciding that books cannot be removed “simply because [the board] members disagreed with their idea content” (Oyez, n.d.).

This case has set the standard for book banning in school libraries, and continues to do so. Since this case “litigation involving book censorship in schools has usually turned on the rights of a school board to control classroom curricula” (Mullally, 2002).

The American Library Association (ALA) reports that at least 311 books were challenged in 2014, while estimating that roughly 80% of challenges or removals are not reported (2014). This supports a claim made by the The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that “pressures [of censorship] have mounted in recent years, and English teachers have no reason to believe they will diminish” (Fink, 2014). Furthermore, the ALA reports that in 2014, of the 311 books challenged, 38% of challengers wanted the books removed from the town’s public library; 36% wanted the books removed from schools; and a mere 11% wanted the books removed from the school *libraries* (2014). This distinction suggests that parents--as parents comprised the largest percentage of challengers (35% in 2014 and 40% in 2015)-- do not simply want books taken out of libraries, but also banned from the entire premises. This trend seemed to taper in 2015, as 45% of challengers wanted books removed from public libraries, while the school premises was replaced with curriculum (28% of challengers petitioned for this), while 19%

wished to ban books from the school library (ALA, 2015). Despite this, it is clear that parents are pushing more aggressively to limit any possible exposure their children might receive.

Furthermore, the increase in challenges from 2014 to 2015 (a 5% increase) also supports the NCTE's claim that the push to censor is not likely to slow down.

With this in mind, it is difficult to identify the exact legal standing censorship has. Though the courts generally tend to support controversial books, it seems as though decisions are made on a case-to-case basis, as there is no definitive answer. This inconsistency with legal standards raises concerns about the status of free speech. While the law tends to protect free speech and has prevented instances of unjust censorship in the recent past, the fact that there are many instances of societal (and subsequently legal) disagreement, raises the question: why does society continue to bicker within itself over something it is supposedly entitled to? Are our rights as indisputable as we think? And what does this mean for the future of free speech?

Counter Arguments

Undoubtedly, there are those in society who view censorship as a dying issue. One article, in particular, is famous (or perhaps infamous) for its response to the Banned Books Week (BBW) campaign, which is sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA). Ruth Graham's "Banned books week is a croc" makes quite a few claims that undercut the severity of censorship as a societal concern, using information from the ALA's own reports. Graham states that the ALA and BBW engage in "fear-mongering over censorship" (2015) to further its own cause, and

that censorship is all but extinct in America, as the amount of books actually removed from libraries are much lower than the amount of books reported or challenged. Both of these claims are detrimental to the protection against censorship.

From that first confiscated pamphlet (discussed in the *History* section) to present day, censorship in America has come a long way. In this regard, Graham is not wrong. She states that: “if your local library declines to carry what you want to read these days, there has been no time in history where it’s easier for you to read it anyway” (2015). This is absolutely true; thanks to legal suits like the *Pico* case, it has become significantly harder for public institutions to ban books. However, it is the intentions of BBW that are severely misconstrued.

The primary goal of BBW is to draw attention to and celebrate the ability to read freely. (Whether the tone is a bit facetious is debatable.) This is expressed quite plainly in BBW’s slogan: “celebrating the freedom to read.” It is meant to inspire, to encourage people to read, not to trick society into fearing censorship. The ALA selects which books have been the most challenged throughout the year and promotes them. Often times, the most challenged books are simultaneously the most popular books by societal standards, at any given time in social history. For example, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *1984* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are among the most repeatedly challenged books (Butler University, n.d.) in American history; more recent titles include *The Hunger Games* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. While there are many more, these are just some of the more notable titles. Because society has continuously fought to keep censorship at bay, BBW works as a way to honor that effort and to keep the topic fresh in the public’s mind. If the ALA did not run this campaign every year, censorship as an issue could very well fade into a non-issue, as Graham demonstrates with her second claim.

More importantly is Graham's claim that book banning isn't a serious issue in modern society. She first claims that books are not, and generally cannot, be banned anymore due to instances like the *Pico* case (in which it was ruled that school boards cannot remove books they may personally find offensive). Granted, it is true that in recent years actual book removal from libraries (school or public) has been lower than in the past: the ALA reports that between 2007 - 2012, only 4 books were "completely removed from circulation" (Graham, 2015). This statistic, in comparison to the thousands of books challenged, is all but nonconsequential.

However, by her own admission, Graham states that "there's evidence that the small annual number of these instances is ticking upward" (2015). The Huffington Post reports that from 2012 to 2013, there was a 53% increase in book banning incidents: 49 incidents across 29 states in 2013 (2013). The main reason for book banning is sexually explicit content; other popular reasons include profanity, nudity, violence, homosexuality, drugs and novels that oppose religious (often Catholic/ Christian) beliefs (Crum, 2013). It is also reported that books written by "minority authors" (Huffington Post, 2013) tend to be banned or challenged for portraying culturally relevant hardships that are deemed inappropriate. Even in 2016, classic novels are being removed from school libraries: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* were removed from the premises in response to one parent's complaint over racial slurs (NBC), although these books use racial slurs to illustrate "an accurate picture of the period and all its ignorance" (Cellania, 2011), meant to be used as learning tools-- not to perpetuate hate and racism. Perhaps the sudden rise in censorship is linked to a rising awareness of and sensitivity to political incorrectness. It could be possible that the confrontation of uncomfortable

ideas (Hellenstein, 2016) is causing a classic, knee-jerk reaction (Cellania, 2011) to the material at hand.

In any case, these instances, all very recent, prove that while society has made a drastic impact in the fight against censorship, the issue itself continues to persist. It also proves that BBW is still relevant and necessary in drawing attention to censorship issues, even in modern society.

With all this in mind, it is easy to assume that censorship really is not a serious problem anymore. But one very troubling aspect of Graham's argument is the way in which she uses the term. By referring solely to BBW, Graham limits the term 'censorship' to a strictly literary context. While this is the most traditional context, it is not the only context.

Technology has advanced faster than ever before and continues to expand at a seemingly endless rate. The internet alone is something previous generations only dared to dream about. Yet in modern times, it is a mundane reality, so ingrained in the everyday lives of millions that we sometimes don't even notice anymore. Cyberspace has developed so far beyond its original purpose, even in the past twenty years. The world is larger and more accessible than ever.

That being said, there are many more avenues in which information is shared, sometimes legally, sometimes illegally. The internet is driven by user content; without users, without people feeding information into these digital spaces, the internet comes to a halt. It is society that fuels cyberspace. User generated content, many times inspired by external sources, have become the focus of big corporations and lawmakers alike. New issues are arising: who has the right to control information output, especially in a space where information is supposed to be limitless? Who gets compensated? *When* do they get compensated? Who does the information belong to?

Censorship comes in many forms, and is very dangerous because of that. It is not a strictly literary issue; books are not the only medium that can be censored. What Graham fails to recognize is that censorship is simply happening somewhere else-- it is moving from the page to the screen. Less people are focusing on books because they are looking towards the internet.

Cyberspace: Censorship in the 21st Century

As discussed earlier in this paper, although literary fields are the most common targets of censorship, it is an issue that affects many other fields as well. In addition to other traditional mediums like textbooks, in the ever-growing digital age, cyberspace is now the primary forerunner for censorship attempts.

Much like books, the struggle to control the internet has existed since its creation. First created in 1958, the internet, in its most primal state, was “a collection of interconnected computer networks linked by copper wires [and] fiber-optic cables” (National Coalition Against Censorship, n.d.). The internet used to be a room full of enormous, floor-to-ceiling computer machines that communicated with each other via physical connections—very different from what we as a society use today. It was created by the U.S. Department of Defense as a safety precaution in the event of a nuclear war; the internet was originally intended to keep lines of communication open to government officials during a crisis (NCAC, n.d.). It wasn't until 1993 that the internet, as we know it, first became available to the general public. The internet was

created by the government to protect the public, but now the internet needs the public's protection from the government.

By 1996, three major acts are passed regarding internet usage: (1) the Communications Decency Act, which prohibited "posting 'indecent' or 'patently offensive' materials in a public forum on the internet" (NCAC, n.d.); (2) the Electronic Communication Transactional Records Act, which required internet service providers to keep and produce the usage records of their customers in case of governmental involvement; and (3) the Child Pornography Prevention Act which simply extended existing laws regarding child pornography to include digital media (NCAC, n.d.). Since 1996, (as discussed in the previous section) there have been dozens of instances in which regulatory efforts have arisen and the legality of such efforts have been debated.

Recall, just four years ago (2012), the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Protect IP Act (PIPA) were created in an attempt to monitor and restrict internet usage. These acts were created with the intent of preventing foreign websites that were providing illegal (infringed) content (Electronic Frontier Foundation, n.d); however, with the way the bill was written, many websites that were compliant with infringement laws could also be subject to removal. The main concern, regarding SOPA specifically, was that websites built around user-generated content would cease to exist. This includes very popular websites such as Deviant Art, Etsy and SoundCloud (EFF, n.d.). Even online powerhouses like YouTube may have been destroyed (permanently shut down) had these bills been passed earlier in our digital history (EFF, n.d.). SOPA and PIPA made it so anyone could blacklist a website, even if there was no copyright violation found by a

court of law (EFF, n.d.). Furthermore, search engines would have been required to delete domain names (NCAC, n.d.).

There was a national outcry from internet users because the bills would affect so many more websites than originally intended. These bills were seen as an attack on free speech by internet users everywhere, as even “political and other speech from the Web” (EFF, n.d.) were in danger of being blacklisted. Essentially, if it was on the web, it wasn't safe. The bills were stopped by a campaign started by the EFF that entailed mass petition signing and protests, which became known as the Internet Blackout (EFF, n.d.).

In addition to censorship already dominating literary fields (discussed throughout) and surfacing in educational/collegiate fields (discussed by Heidt, Lukianoff and Hellerstein), the effects of censorship also are also overflowing into newer, uncharted territory. Digital literature (ebooks), as well as where they're found, are slowly becoming a new point of interest to censors.

Robert Doyle of the Illinois Library Association (ILA) comprised a list of challenged and banned books in 2014 and 2015; of these books was *It's Perfectly Normal*. The book, written by Robbie harris in 1994, has since become a multi-book series that uses hand drawn illustrations of anatomy, masturbation and even sexual acts for educational purposes. In addition to the physical book finding itself in legal trouble (Rossuck, 1997), the ebook has since followed suit. Parents and teachers were appalled by this book, claiming it had no right being in schools for any age group, and that any explanations of sex should be conducted in the home.

The challenging of an ebook shows a clear movement from traditional mediums to more modern avenues and it's a trend that seems to be growing: Amazon has a history of removing ebooks from the Kindle store as well as from the personal e-libraries of Kindle customers. Books

subjected to removal range from user generated content to literary classics. This is especially ironic, as Amazon's original focus was books-- its tagline was "Earth's biggest bookstore" (Turner, 2011).

While Amazon allows users to submit their own work, and claims to never censor user generated offerings (Hawley, 2010), the company has a history of doing just that. In line with the kind of censorship discussed throughout this paper, Amazon (or, the "thought police," according to Ken Fisher [2009]) engaged in traditional censorship by eliminating all user access to self-published ebooks of a mature and questionable nature without warning, save for an email sent out post-removal. The challenge with these cases is the material; of the ebooks removed, genres included incest erotica and pedophilia. While to most, these topics are extremely disagreeable, their removal does pose an interesting (or perhaps conflicting) moral and political question: with classic novels like *Flowers in the Attic* and *Lolita* readily available for purchase, should user-generated ebooks be pulled for content of a similar nature? And moreover, don't these instances mirror those of prior cases discussed throughout this paper, in that an individual's preference should not interfere with the access of the majority? Issues regarding content like this also triggers self-reflection in individuals: should personal objection override political rights, especially when individuals are not being forced to interact with the material itself? To remove these books that mirror *bestselling* novels seems hypocritical.

While Amazon removed the books in response to user criticism, journalist Kristen Hawley questions whether Amazon should be expected to "police every single title available on its site" (2010). According to Hawley, to allow open submissions and then to remove some because a portion of customers find it offensive is suspiciously anti-free speech. Hawley also insinuates

that if Amazon assumes responsibility for every user generated title posted, the submission guidelines may become too strict (2010). Stricter submission guidelines imply an imposed limitation to forms of expression, which could be considered an infringement on free speech. Additionally, journalist Leta Shy points out that these books are sought out by customers to some degree, so there must be at least a minimal audience for authors to cater to (2010). The only clear conclusion that can be drawn from this is a perfect example in which censorship is seen creeping into digital user generated creation, much like the way SOPA and PIPA would have.

Classic novels like *1984* and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell have also been subjected to removal by the online powerhouse (Stone, 2009). In this instance, however, it was not an issue of content, but copyright. In 2009 Amazon deleted “unauthorized copies” (Cheng, 2010) of the novels; the books were uploaded “by a company that did not have the right to them” (Stone, 2009), and the distribution of rightful profits was comprised. Again, Amazon removed the novels in the same way the self-published pieces were. This resulted in a lawsuit that Amazon settled with the promise that future book removal would only occur under very specific circumstances such as payment or malware issues (Cheng, 2010). (Meanwhile, simply ‘settling’ a case to resolve it is a practice in American politics that is growing more and more popular.) And though no other cases have caught national attention, The New York Times reports that unauthorized ebooks have found their way into the Kindle store multiple times before (Stone, 2009) and it is a common practice for Amazon to silently remove them, much to the irritation of Kindle users everywhere. Of the more notable titles removed over the years was one of the *Harry Potter* books (Mysterious George Orwell refunds, 2009). What does Amazon’s business practices say about corporate involvement and influence on censorship?

Amazon's ability to remotely remove books without permission from the elibraries of Kindle users reveals a new problem unfolding in the issue of censorship. The issue, while complex in legalities, was fairly one dimensional until this point. Now it taken on a dualistic nature. On one hand, Amazon is guilty of removing ebooks for ideological reasons, which (despite taking on a new medium) mimics the kind of censorship discussed throughout this paper; on another hand, however, Amazon is now instituting a brand new form of censorship: commercial censorship. Instead of censoring with the intent to preserve moral integrity, Amazon is censoring in order to protect somebody's profits. If Amazon, one of the most notable and successful online giants, can decide via executive order, who can access what and when, what kind of effects will this have on other businesses (digital, user-based, or otherwise)? Much like Amazon's legal case for the removal of *1984*, it seems as though a financial settlement (or payoff) can solve any legal discrepancy. Censorship rooted in monetary interest influencing what people have access to is not only a sad reflection of current democratic policies, but a frightening new development in censorship practices. Does Amazon's motive justify the means used to achieve the goal? Or has a new precedent unknowingly been set? Commercial censorship is the new evolution of what society has already dealing with for centuries. With a new environment to cultivate expression (the internet), and with politicians out there hoping to regulate it, there is no telling what may happen or how censorship may further change. Though SOPA and PIPA did not pass, the intent still lingers.

The NCAC estimates that 80% of Americans use the internet and 4.5 billion websites exist (n.d.). This creates a vast digital landscape in which both creative and serious expression can occur. The internet is accessible to anyone, anywhere at anytime, making it a virtual breeding

ground for information, and participatory culture is at an all time high. Henry Jenkins defines *participatory culture* as a community “in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (2015). However, it is a term that is flexible in meaning; Mizuko Ito furthers this explanation to include passive activity, stating that participatory culture also occurs in instances where community members are “part of the shared practice and culture” (2015).

Essentially, a participatory culture can exist both when there are users who generate content as well as users who act as an audience for the content. It is not required that every user needs to create content to contribute. Furthermore, danah boyd states that “youth engage for personal, educational, political and social reasons” (2015). Essentially, a participatory culture can exist anywhere a group of people feel connected in some way. Generally this connection stems from experiences or beliefs, thus promoting a safer and more open environment for content generation. Many times, digital communities come together through and for political means. Participatory culture tends to reflect and mirror political processes; to deny the American public the ability and space to contribute freely and communally in digital communities is an affront to American ideals.

With this in mind, it is easy to see how information can grow at such a rapid rate digitally. It is also the exact reason why internet censorship is a serious concern. With so many contributors present on the internet, it is difficult to contain, and aside from already existing copyright laws, the internet is still moderately unregulated (NCAC, n.d.); thus the internet has become “a free speech battle ground and target of censors” (NCAC, n.d.). This is a very dangerous time in our digital history: “the internet has had immeasurable cultural, economic and political impacts on

society...suppression of viewpoints and distortion of information harm open discourse” (NCAC, n.d.).

For many, the internet is the primary source of information, so there is much give and take within digital communities. It is also an outlet for millions of users (creatively or otherwise). Having the freedom to express oneself in ways that are meaningful to the individual is extremely important for mental and emotional wellbeing. If the internet becomes too censored, not only will people be losing a main channel of self expression, but society as a whole will be losing all the meaningful and influential contributions that have come from digital mediums. Many write the internet off as a source of *memes* and click bait, but this is just a small segment of the impacts of the internet. Just a few concepts popularized by the internet and open discourse include: cultural appropriation, feminism and #BlackLivesMatter, all of which are legitimate social movements that have existed for years within politically charged communities. However, before the widespread reach of the internet, some of these concepts were limited in impact. Given the level of influence participatory culture has on today’s society, censorship of open communication would only harm society’s ability to grow.

Closing

Censorship has existed alongside humanity for millions of years. Wherever expression exists, repression is not far behind. As theorized, censorship is damaging in many contexts. And this paper has discussed the ways in which censorship is damaging to society. Psychologically, censorship often heightens interest and attention to the subject it's supposed to suppress; it also damages the emotional and mental health of children and young adults. Without exposure to negative feelings, children will be unable to handle hardships in adulthood. Acquiring psychological immunity is key to a healthy mental state. Educationally, censorship reinforces helplessness and mental oversensitivity to discomfort learned in childhood. Though censorship is primarily warded off by the First Amendment, the security of that right seems to be in question with the advancement of the internet. There are no real forms of censorship at play, thanks to the shutdown of SOPA and PIPA, however, legislation like it may be suggested again in the near future. Whether it be book or website or spoken word, censorship has been, and will continue to be a serious issue in society. Luckily there are still many organizations that speak out against censorship and events are run every year, like Banned Book Week, that renew the public's interest in the subject and keep people informed. In this digital age, it is easier than ever to get informed and involved. It is important to keep that door open, and to keep censorship at a minimum.

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