

Research report

Forum: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Issue: Evaluating the impact of censorship in literature and education on access to knowledge and cultural expression in regions with limited intellectual freedom

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Introduction

Censorship restricts the ability of authors to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions freely. Writers may self-censor or modify their works to conform to societal, political, or cultural expectations, ultimately dampening their creative spirit and diluting their message. The history of censorship goes a long way back to even before Christ, when for example Socrates was executed for ‘corrupting the youth’ with his ideas. He tried to manage to get his audience to opine for themselves, instead of letting the men in power form their beliefs. Ever since, censorship has refrained millions of citizens from accessing all literature, so governments can shape the opinion and beliefs of their civilians to their liking.

A more modern example is Nazi Germany, who conducted a mass book burning of works by Jewish, communists and modernist authors. This held many university students back from reading ‘un-German’ books, following orders from Joseph Goebbels, who called these works moral corruption. In this case, censorship was used by a dominant culture to suppress the voices of the minority.

Censorship in education is a different story. The teacher has full control on what is taught and chooses topics to be discussed, Therefore, a self-directed and innovative language teacher with a broad knowledge of censorship can be a significant role player in the language classroom to facilitate the discussion of controversial youth literature. So, the language teacher has the most dominant role in the school in selecting appropriate texts and promoting reading, even if these texts include controversial issues.

In this Research Report multiple sides of the issue will be discussed like: the affected literature, controversy and education, and the benefits of censorship with this a timeline, major parties and precious attempts to solve it will be given.

Definitions of key terms

Censorship

The suppression or removal of writing, artistic work, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.

Controversy

Prolonged public disagreement or heated discussion.

A challenged book

A book that someone tried attempted to impose on others their views and opinions about what is appropriate or fitting reading material. When a challenged book is banned, the complainants have usurped the rights of those who might choose to read the book.

Dissemination

The action or fact of spreading something, widely.

SDG16

Sustainable Development Goal 16, focusing on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

General overview

Affecting Literature

Censorship refrains readers of literature free flow of ideas or limiting freedom of expression. It often targets literature that challenges prevailing norms, ideologies, or power structures. When certain voices are silenced or marginalized, it hampers the exploration and representation of diverse perspectives, limiting readers' exposure to alternative viewpoints and hindering cultural and intellectual growth. In other words, it refrains readers from having the ultimate freedom of reading or educating themselves. Which causes an incomplete understanding or appreciation of their opposite angle. It also worsens the loss of heritage and cultural history, by erasing or distorting historical records, depriving future generations of insights into their cultural heritage. When critical or dissenting voices are silenced, the complete narrative of a society's history is compromised, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the past.

Limited access to knowledge and ideas is affecting literature too, because censorship restricts readers' access to a wide range of literature, preventing them from exploring diverse perspectives, questioning established narratives, and engaging in critical thinking. This limited access impedes intellectual growth and stifles the development of a well-informed society. Lastly the undermining of democratic principles is influencing the literature, since freedom of expression and access to diverse ideas are fundamental pillars of democratic societies. When censorship limits these freedoms, it undermines democratic principles, inhibits a culture of open dialogue and transparency, and curtails citizens' ability to make informed decisions. It is vital to challenge and address censorship to protect the free exchange of ideas and uphold the importance of diverse, thought-provoking literature. Safeguarding freedom of expression allows literature to fulfill its potential as a catalyst for social progress, cultural understanding, and intellectual growth.

The UN established a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. This issue fits under SDG16, primarily focusing on promoting peace. In this case, the states are committed to ensuring the safety of journalists, public access to information, reducing corruption, enhancing public participation, and protecting human rights.

Controversary and Education

Controversiality is a difficult concept to define because it is linked to a person's morality, and there for an interesting topic when talking about education, since the teacher decides what is to

be taught, and what the students learn. It gives the teacher the power to shape the opinion of the children and taking the ability to create their own.

In other words, by reinforcing biased perspectives and impacting cultural and historical knowledge, censorship poses a threat to a well-rounded education. Censorship in education limits access to the information necessary for your intellectual growth and development. It impedes research and restricts academic freedom. By controlling what information is available, educational institutions and governing bodies can manipulate the narrative and limit your exposure to diverse perspectives.

In essence, censorship in education restricts your access to a wide range of information, impeding your ability to conduct thorough research and limiting your academic freedom. By controlling what information is available, educational institutions impose a narrow scope of knowledge, hindering your intellectual growth and development. It's essential to advocate for open access to information in order to foster a well-rounded education.

Examples of banned books

One of the main ways censorship limits access to information is through the banning or restriction of certain books or materials. These decisions are often made based on subjective judgments, rather than objective criteria, which can hinder your ability to explore different ideas and viewpoints. For example, if a controversial book is deemed inappropriate or offensive, you may be denied the opportunity to critically engage with its content and form your own educated opinions.

Books like Harry Potter are banned in parts on the United States and some other nations, since the witchcraft themed fiction unsettles various religious groups. The book became challenged and restricted in several states. Although this is not the most challenged book. The Hate U Give (THUG), by Angie Thomas places nr.7 in 2024. It follows a sixteen-year-old girl who witnesses the police shooting of her best friend Khalil, exploring themes of racism, identity, and activism in a divided society.

Roald Dahl, who died at age 74, had a history of making anti-Semitic comments and including racist tropes and language in his works. For example, he originally wrote characters like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory's Oompa Loompas as an African Pygmy tribe. In James and the Giant Peach, the Grasshopper declares at one point: "I'd rather be fried alive and eaten by a Mexican." Dahl has also been called a misogynist for his unfavorable depictions of women in books such as The Witches. In 2018, The Guardian reported that the British Royal Mint rejected a proposal to mark the 100th anniversary of Dahl's birth with a commemorative coin. The idea was rejected on the grounds that he was "associated with anti-Semitism and not regarded as an author of the highest reputation."

Benefits of censorship

In some occurrences, blanking out certain works could have positive impacts. One of censorship's primary advantages is its ability to prevent disseminating sensitive information that

may threaten national security or public safety. Government censorship also plays a crucial role in protecting classified data and hampering threats from external entities seeking strategic insights by controlling what information reaches the public domain. Security measures such as redacting confidential materials or restricting access to certain government information channels are essential to national defense mechanisms. This delicate balance between safeguarding vital secrets and ensuring transparency in governance is a complex challenge faced by governments worldwide.

Censorship plays a role in preserving social harmony and stability by regulating content that could incite unrest, violence, or disruptive behavior within a community. Censorship aims to prevent the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and war propaganda, which can fuel tensions and exacerbate social conflicts, by controlling the dissemination of sensitive information. It also contributes to maintaining order and civility by filtering out content against societal norms and protecting individuals from harmful influences. Upholding cultural norms through censorship ensures that values and ethics deemed important by society are respected. This fosters a cohesive community where diverse perspectives can coexist peacefully. In this way, censorship is a tool for shaping public discourse and safeguarding collective well-being.

Major parties involved

Germany

Germany has a big role in censorship, because of the mass book burns. On May 10 1933, university students in 34 university towns across Germany burned over 25,000 books, while performing the Nazi salute. It contained works from among others, Helen Keller, an American whose belief in social justice encouraged her to champion disabled persons, pacifism, improved conditions for industrial workers, and women's voting rights.

Catholic Church

The Index Librorum Prohibitorum, established by the Catholic Church, was a catalog of books that were forbidden to Catholics. It aimed to prevent the spread of heretical ideas and protect the faith. The Index was officially discontinued in 1966, but it had a significant impact on literature and intellectual discourse for centuries.

United States

In the United States every state has its own regulations when talking about what is censored and what can be accessed. Harry Potter is banned in some cities in Tennessee for religious reasons for example, and 'to kill a mockingbird' is being restricted in some states, and there are many other books. This is the most frequently occurring type of censorship, other kinds such as silencing do not arise often in US, because such freedom of speech is protected by the first amendment to the US Constitution.

Article 19

Article 19 works worldwide to combat censorship by promoting freedom of expression and access to official information. With partners in over 30 countries, Article 19 develops standards to advance media freedom and assists individuals to campaign for the free flow of information.

Timeline of Key Events

399 BCE The execution of Socrates

May 10 1933 Nazi-Germany conducts mass book burning

1559 - 1966 Index Librorum Prohibitorum

1873 The Comstock Laws

5th feb 1987 The establishment of Article 19

Previous attempts to solve the issue

In order to fix the problem, multiples have gotten into action, by spreading awareness, or joining groups that are combating censorship can be effective. Many well-known institutions are organizing in a fierce and large-scale fashion, such as the state of Illinois passing a ban on book bans within its public schools and libraries, becoming the first state to do so. The world's largest publisher, Penguin Random House, has also entered the fray, filing a lawsuit against a book-banning school district in Florida.⁵ PEN America, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Educators Association are all at the forefront fighting against censorship. And, of course, the ALA has hosted its Banned Books Week for years to bring together the literary community and to raise awareness of the dangers of censorship. This year, however, the ALA has introduced a new program as well.

At the ALA's recent annual conference in Chicago, author and activist Ibram X. Kendi gave a moving keynote speech at the Rally for the Right to Read: Uniting for Libraries and Intellectual

Freedom. In his speech, Kendi praised librarians as modern-day freedom fighters. "The freedom fight has chosen every single person who treasures books, who treasures knowledge, who treasures the truth. The freedom fight has chosen every single American, who recognizes that an institution without books about racism, without books about homophobia, without books about the Holocaust, without queer characters, without books by authors of color, is not a library, it is a propaganda shop masquerading as a library."

Possible solutions

Promoting Open Literature

A solution to this issue is the promotion and encouragement of open literature. This includes examples such as promoting and creating digital libraries or providing offline access tools for countries/regions that have their internet restricted. Equally important, is the spread of awareness. Informing the public will surely help fix the issue, as enough people can always make a meaningful change.

Strengthening guidelines

Another very crucial and broad solution is expanding and improving existing guidelines and laws on censorship of literature, such as Article 19. If treaties are internationally strengthened, we can slowly start lessening the impact and extent of censorship in literature. Even though these frameworks already exist, their enforcements is inconsistent. By strengthening compliance mechanisms and increasing accountability for violations, the international community can gradually reduce censorship's scope and impact. Stronger treaties would provide a more reliable foundation to protect access to knowledge, encourage cultural expression, and defend intellectual freedom worldwide.

Further reading

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