

# The Battle for Intellectual Freedom: Book Censorship in Canada and the United States

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To Cite: London, A. (2025). The Battle for Intellectual Freedom: Book Censorship in Canada and the United States. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 5(2), 1-8.  
<https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder130>

## Abstract

Over the past three years, the American Library Association (ALA) and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) have documented an unprecedented exponential rise in book banning and censorship efforts across the United States and Canada. This surge has led to more books being permanently removed from collections across all types of libraries—most predominately in public and school libraries—and has intensified debates over intellectual freedom, a fundamental principle of libraries and democratic societies. A disproportionate number of challenged books contain BIPOC and 2SLGBTQ+ content, reflecting the growing right-wing moral panic concerned with protecting children from topics deemed “inappropriate” like diversity, gender and sexuality. The rise of organized, systematic, and legislative efforts to censor books, driven by “parental rights” groups, highlight the intersection of political polarization, with conservative elected officials advancing bills to restrict access to diverse materials, particularly in the United States. In response, Library and Information Studies (LIS) professionals must develop robust policies, advocate for intellectual freedom, and engage in community dialogue to defend diverse collections. Events like the CFLA’s Freedom to Read Week and the ALA’s Banned Books Week play a crucial role in resisting censorship, and professional advocacy and political engagement remain essential tools in upholding intellectual freedom. Overall, LIS professionals must engage in advocacy and public education at local, organizational, provincial/state, and federal levels to oppose book banning and promote awareness of the fundamental principle of intellectual freedom.

**Keywords:** book censorship, intellectual freedom, access, advocacy, librarianship

A growing body of statistical data, institutional reports, scholarly literature and media coverage indicates that the dramatic rise in book censorship poses one of the most pressing contemporary challenges to the field of Library and Information Studies (LIS). As a disproportionate amount of the books being challenged contain BIPOC and 2SLGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> content (ALA, 2024a; Nyby, n.d.), this is an issue which reflects the current precarity of the greater societal respect for certain marginalized groups. This increase in calls to ban books has resulted in more books being permanently removed from collections (ALA, n.d.-b; McKay, 2024; Nyby, n.d.; Wong, 2024) and has called into question the fundamental principles of intellectual freedom that are essential to libraries and democratic societies. The organized, systematic, and legislative methods (ACLU, 2024; PEN America, 2022) that have been used to undermine intellectual freedom and devalue libraries are deeply concerning. As intellectual freedom is a cornerstone of the field of LIS, this issue is a point of debate filled with contention and anxiety both within and outside the field.

LIS professionals have a responsibility to uphold the principles of intellectual freedom, access and equity (ALA, 2024b) through the development of robust policies, procedures and advocacy work. These efforts are driven by rising political polarization and right-wing groups' responses to growing visibility, inclusivity, and promotion of diversity in race, gender, and sexuality in library collections and broader public discourse. By examining the causes of the recent rise in book challenges, monitoring the ongoing situation, and addressing the consequences through various approaches, library professionals will be better equipped to uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and advocate for diverse and inclusive collections.

### **Recent Increases in Book Challenges**

The American Library Association (ALA) has been documenting the number of incidences of challenges and the number of unique titles challenged since 2001 (Laviertes, 2023). In the past three years, the ALA has documented an unprecedented exponential rise in book banning and censorship efforts by individuals and groups. The surge in the number of challenges comes in part from groups challenging multiple titles

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will use the 2SLGBTQ+ abbreviation, as it is commonly used in the Canadian context, even though LGBTQ+ is the more common acronym used in the United States.

in large batches, sometimes dozens or hundreds at a time (ALA, n.d.-c). The number of unique book titles challenged in American public, school and academic libraries steadily hovered around 250-300 per year since 2000, until a 733% increase from 223 in 2020 to 1,858 in 2021. The number then jumped 38% in 2022, with 2,571 titles challenged. In 2023, the ALA reported a 92% increase from the previous year with 4,240 unique titles challenged, now the largest amount ever documented (ALA, 2024a). The ALA's preliminary data for 2024 shows 1,128 titles were challenged between January 1 and August 31—a 41% decrease from the same period in 2023. Therefore, it can be predicted that the total number of unique titles challenged in 2024 will decrease.

Unfortunately, there is a limited amount of data available for book challenges in Canadian libraries when compared to the United States. The reports published by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) also illustrate a sharp increase in book challenges in recent years, though not to the same extent as in the United States. The CFLA reported a 123% increase in the number of challenged titles in 2023 (144) compared to 2022 (61), though the CFLA claims this large jump is “largely owing to increased publicity of the Canadian Library Challenges Database” (CFLA-FCAB, 2024, p. 1). The CFLA also reported a record number of incidents of challenges in 2022 with 91 incidents (CFLA-FCAB, 2023). Overall, these statistics show a recent troubling increase in challenges in both the USA and Canada, highlighting the timeliness and urgency of this issue.

### **Groups Behind Book Challenges**

Prior to 2020, the vast majority of challenges were raised by individual parents of school-aged children (ALA, n.d.-c). In recent years, fewer challenges have come from parents who are concerned about a specific book their child picked up from the library, or one-off instances of reporting to school boards. Instead, self-described “parental rights” groups have played a large role in the ongoing book censorship movement. These groups have emerged quickly since 2021 and range from small online social media groups to large organizations like Moms for Liberty, a nationally run organization with over 200 chapters across the United States (Moms for Liberty, n.d.). Similar groups exist in Canada such as Blueprint for Canada, Parental Rights Coalition of Canada, Protect Literacy, Parents as First Educators and Woke Watch Canada. These groups

endorse the idea that the grade school curriculum in Canada has become too focused on “activism”, “ideology” and “the woke agenda” (Blueprint for Canada, n.d.). This idea then translates to attempts to exert control over the education system through book censorship. While book challenges have predominantly been initiated by right-wing groups, there are examples of book challenges from left-wing groups. For example, in 2021, the record for the most challenges on a single book in a single year was set by *Irreversible Damage* by Abigail Shrier, a book widely labelled as transphobic, with 19 separate challenges (CFLA-FCAB, 2022).

### **Contemporary Anti-2SLGBTQ+ Movement**

In a broad sense, public opinion in Canada and the USA have shifted toward greater acceptance of two-spirit, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and to a lesser extent, transgender individuals, over recent decades (Garretson, 2018; Rau, 2024). Despite this general increase in important legislative protections and social visibility for 2SLGBTQ+ people over the last twenty years, an anti-2SLGBTQ+ movement in both countries has gained significant traction in the 2020s (The Economist, 2024). Many challenges to pro-2SLGBTQ+ books stem from fears of sexually explicit content in children's materials, reflecting a broader moral panic over 2SLGBTQ+ visibility in society (Drenon, 2023).

In 2023, 47% of challenged book titles in the USA contained representations of 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals (ALA, n.d.-b). Similar findings were reported in Canada by the CFLA, with 38% of challenges targeting pro-2SLGBTQ+ content (Nyby, n.d.). The top five most challenged books in the USA in 2023 all contain positive or normalized depictions of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals (ALA, n.d.-b). The top five most challenged books in Canada in 2023 all contain sexual education or 2SLGBTQ+ content (CFLA-FCAB, 2024). This comes from the unfounded belief that non-heterosexual, non-cisgender individuals are “sexually deviant” and a danger to children and youth (Hart-Brinson, 2016). The moral panic around 2SLGBTQ+ issues has also notably surfaced in Canadian libraries through protests against drag queen storytime events (Maker, 2023). Challenges to drag events in the library have largely centred around concerns about “grooming,” “indoctrination”, and “sexualizing children”. Protests to these events have

occurred across the country, and account for a significant number of 2SLGBTQ+ related challenges in Canadian libraries (Nyby, n.d.).

### **Recommendations for Possible Solutions and Interventions**

There is significant advocacy work being done across Canada and the United States to fight against book censorship. In Canada, Freedom to Read Week is an annual event that raises awareness about censorship and encourages Canadians to commit to intellectual freedom. In the United States, the ALA created Banned Books Week to provide informational material for libraries, book display suggestions and ideas for how individuals can get involved in the fight against book banning (ALA, n.d.-a). These actions taken at a local level can be helpful in bringing the issue to the public consciousness, however, the development of concrete procedures and policies that keep books on shelves is imperative to resisting censorship. This includes librarians being prepared for collections to be scrutinized and for regular review and updating of intellectual freedom policies when applicable (ACRL, 2023). Establishing a clear, structured plan for addressing challenges enables a more proactive approach and helps reduce conflict between librarians and those who challenge the book(s).

Elected officials have immense power regarding libraries that exist in public institutions. Staying aware of municipal, provincial/state and federal politics and resisting weaponized anti-2SLGBTQ+ policies as an individual or as part of a library activism group or association can also be beneficial (Miller et al., as cited by Throne & Stewart, 2024). Overall, librarians must work on a local, organizational, provincial/state and federal level to advocate against book banning and educate the public on the importance of the core principles of librarianship: equity, access, intellectual freedom and privacy, public good and sustainability (ALA, 2024b).

### **Conclusion**

The interconnected issues of increasing political polarization, opposition to critical race theory and increasing anti-2SLGBTQ+ sentiment in right-wing circles, as well as the overall devaluation of libraries, have all contributed to the massive rise in book censorship efforts over the past four years. Developing an open dialogue with the community served, as well as being politically involved can also help resist the growing wave of book censorship. Although the preliminary statistics for book challenges in 2024

show an anticipated decrease in unique titles challenged this year (ALA, n.d.-b), library workers look towards the future with trepidation, with cultural and political forces placing the field at a precarious crossroads between insecurity and stability.

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