

# The Surge in Censorship Impeding Intellectual Freedom: The Challenge and Possible Solutions

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## Abstract

As the cornerstone of libraries, Intellectual Freedom (IF) is inherently connected with the dissemination of Information. Hence, any curtailment to IF inevitably hinders the core of their functionality. IF has been in more turmoil over the past three years than ever. Per the latest statistics, censorship has increased in numbers, intensified tactically, and induced by violence with the hype of socio-political influences in the US. Also, inevitably, there are echoing incidents reported in Canada. This unusual amplification in numbers and virulent nature of censorship attempts has resulted in a drastic curtailment in the functionality of libraries, dwindling librarians' capacities to uphold IF and ensure accessibility, inclusivity, and acceptance within library premises, resulting deprivation of the right to information and freedom of expression. While reflecting on the significance of IF and how censorship affects librarianship, this study apprehends how this challenge affects the libraries and librarianship and its users in praxis arguing that this issue could be addressed only through research-backed, practical solutions. This paper presents some theoretical and pragmatic approaches that are worth adopting not only in upholding IF but also in enhancing inclusivity, accessibility, and acceptance within libraries. This research collates the contemporary knowledge on IF and censorship and reflects on the statistical evidence available on the latest tendencies in censorship in the US and similar incidents reported in Canada. Furthermore, in suggesting solutions, this study also sheds light on some interdisciplinary standpoints and certain generic approaches.

**Keywords:** Intellectual freedom, censorship, de-platforming, book bans, librarianship

**A**lthough the library has transcended its role in many respects, the cardinal function of a library is to disseminate information, and the rest have either derived from it or a necessary extension of it. However, posing the biggest challenge to this core functionality of libraries, the latest statistics indicate an alarming surge in

various censorship attempts resulting in a catastrophic impediment to intellectual freedom (IF)- one of the core values of librarianship. As an institution that has been historically crafted and influenced by multiple social, cultural, religious, and political factors, the challenges encountered by the library and librarianship are quite complex and hard to give a clear, one-swell-swoop explanation, let alone a straight-forward, solid answer. Hence, flagging these rising censorship attempts that interfere with IF (the challenge) as the biggest challenge libraries are currently confronted by, it broadly discusses the key concepts -IF and censorship and their interrelationship; the difficulties librarianship faces in upholding IF; statistical evidence of the newest tendencies in censorship; and finally, brings insights into possible ways to respond to this challenge.

### **Intellectual Freedom (IF)- The Core Value of Librarianship**

IF is considered one of the most recognized yet contested, misunderstood, misused, and misconstrued concepts and its evolving nature often makes providing a full-fledged definition for IF a herculean task. Admitting that IF is diversely perceived, Knox defines it as “the right to access the whole of the information universe without the fear of reprisal from the powers that be” (Knox, 2023, p.1) capturing the cardinal element of IF – ‘access.’ According to Dresang IF is “the freedom to think or believe what one will, freedom to express one’s thoughts in unrestricted manners and means, and freedom to access to information and ideas regardless of the content or the viewpoint of the author(s), or the age background or beliefs of the receiver” (Dresang, 2006). This definition captures another key aspect of IF- ‘expression.’ In addition to those, enshrining another critical aspect of IF: ‘communication’, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) states, “[e]veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (UDHR, 1948). Thus, IF ensures expression (the rights of the speaker) and access (the rights of the receiver of the information) both separately and simultaneously (communication).

IF is further denoted as a democratic ideal (Oltmann, 2016). From a rights perspective, Access to Information, Freedom of Expression, and the Right to Communicate are considered the linchpin rights of IF- the presence of which is

compulsory for the realization of IF leading to ‘human autonomy and fulfillment’ (Mathiesen, 2012, p.14). Hence, it is understandable that any threat to either of these aspects could lead to an infringement of IF and vis-à-vis.

As the bedrock of librarianship, IF underpins every aspect of its professional responsibilities. To this end, the professional initiatives by ALA to integrate IF into its core values and key documentation pertinent to librarianship have been highly acknowledged (Bossaller & Budd, 2015, p. 30), though the absence of an ‘official’ uniformly assigned definition to IF has been diagnosed as a challenge in outlining the scope of IF in the purview of librarianship (Jones & LaRue, 2021, p.3). However, LIS professionals have a solid and vivid consensus regarding the centrality and integrality of IF within librarianship (Immroth, 1985, p.2). Thus, it is admittable that IF is not confined to the mere rhetoric of LIS but has been ingrained in its scholarship and wider profession by now.

Article 2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CCRF) ensures IF and acknowledges that it should be exercised within ‘reasonable limitations.’ These limitations are well-captured by the Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries officiated by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA, 2016). Therefore, it is also questionable whether the UDHR’s ‘absolutist’ standpoint is reflective of the true ambit of IF in praxis (Popowich, 2021, p. 43). Accordingly, as any right would, the Right to Intellectual Freedom is not absolute and should be exercised within legal limitations.

### **Intellectual Freedom and Censorship**

Censorship is simply the antithesis or inverse of IF which is why Doyle states that “[it] constitutes a case against all forms of censorship” (Doyle, 2001, p.44). While IF guarantees every user’s accessibility to all sorts of resources, censorship operates to deny or restrict it. ALA defines censorship as “a decision made by a governing authority or its representative(s) to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library resource based on a person or group’s disapproval of its content or its author/creator” (ALA, 2021). This definition captures different censorship practices, which can be passive or active involving the 4Rs- Redaction, Restriction, Relocation, and Removal of material (Knox, 2023, p.6). Censorship is associated with inherently

high social and political valences and is said to be ‘mostly in the eye of the beholder’ (Knox, 2023, p.4). Hence, the meaning of censorship is not static and keeps evolving.

It is necessary to be mindful that, though the outcomes are categorically violative of IF, censorship is multifarious ranging from book bans, internet filtering, book challenges, forceful removal of materials from shelves, and de-platforming etc., and comes through different agents. In confirmation, ALA emphasizes that “[censorship] can be subtle, almost imperceptible, as well as blatant and overt, but harmful” (ALA, 2012). Owing to this, unwavering attention to these censorship challenges is required for the safe future of libraries, LIS professionals, and the entire patron population.

### **Statistical Depiction of the Challenge**

The critical findings of the latest report released by the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) of ALA *inter alia* indicated the number of book challenges that targeted unique titles in 2022 as 2,571, marking a 38% increase compared to 2021; most of which were authored by or represented LGBTQIA+ members, indigenous peoples, and people of colour; nearly 51% of censorship demands were related to school libraries while 48% were of public libraries; 90% of the claims challenged multiple titles, of which 40% demanded a total removal or restriction of over 100 books in one go and 12 states in the US have amended their criminal obscenity statutes to impose criminal liability against the librarians and educators (Caldwell-Stone, 2023, p. 4). Also, the nature and the scope of the demands seemed to transcend books invading the privacy, liberty, and safety of library workers and their families through defamatory social media attacks, doxing, harassing, and jeopardizing their employment and their lives. Also, it disclosed that the organized attacks on the funding and insurance plans as the newest tactic used to coerce librarians to censorship demands (Caldwell-Stone, 2023, p.4).

Showcasing some differences and shifts in dominant tendencies compared to those in the US, it is evident that the above distressing tendencies are considerably echoing in Canada as well (Nyby, et al., 2024, pp. 385-386). The Canada Border Services Agency effectuates ‘customs censorship’ by restricting the importation of periodicals into Canadian borders under its ‘Quarterly List of Admissible and Prohibited Titles,’ which is considered and condemned as the biggest censorship spree in Canada (Montpetit, 2023). Moreover, the lack of awareness of the nature of this challenge and

the challenge reporting mechanisms among library professionals and the public (Nyby, et al., 2024, p. 398), seem to hamper the efforts in upholding IF, exacerbating the crisis in Canada.

### **Why is this Alarming?**

As socially embedded institutions, libraries cannot function in a vacuum. Thus, unlike in previous years, other than the matters related to indigenous, and black populations, the increased tensions concerning LGBTQIA+ communities, have made the censorship threat that has already been levelling upon the IF, more visible, acute, and intense (Shumaker, 2022; Caldwell-Stone, 2023). Further, these censorship attempts, from simple complaints to well-organized, violent, and strategic attacks on libraries and their workers not only intervene in the library's functions but also jeopardize the safety and well-being of its professionals.

ALA acknowledges IF is the basis for democracy, and therefore libraries are not only the conduits of information but also that of democracy (ALA, 2017). When IF is curtailed the chances for the citizenry to access diverse ideas and make informed decisions become limited. Thus, the impacts of this challenge transcend the libraries, and their professionals adversely affecting the democracy. As the last bastions of IF, libraries are one of the few public spaces left for 'unfettered communication' and 'investigation' (Buschman, 2005) with the unique potential to provide the "information seekers" and "speakers" of a safe space to "try things out" (Blitz, 2006, p.884). Hence, this censorship surge is alarming as it continues to obstruct the free flow of information impeding IF.

### **Ways To Respond: Some Insights into Possible Solutions**

Solutions to this complicated issue must be anchored on solid theoretical and pragmatic grounds. Adopting Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic capital' and 'theory of Practice' to the LIS context, Knox highlights three phenomena, namely, codification, institutionalization, and investigation the whole of which contributes to the 'practical philosophy' of librarianship which can be used as a vehicle to 'systematize' and 'reinforce' the process of strengthening and safeguarding IF (Knox, 2014, p. 8). The insights for solutions suggested below are based on the 'Practical Philosophy of

Librarianship' which tends to channel the inherent control librarianship has over their collection policies, budgets, material selection etc. (Knox, 2014, p. 8).

IF has already been codified, adequately or more so, yet criticized due to the lack of clarity, nuances, and contradictions. Also, considering the intensity of the challenge mere non-binding policy documents seem inadequate. Hence, under the codification aspect, reviewing and giving legal enforceability to those codes becomes necessary. Further, some libraries have initiated progressive policy reforms by adopting one policy governed by principles of IF instead of multiple selection policies per resource (Gail Borden Public Library, 2023). It is also highlighted that IF entrenched strong programming policies are essential to deal with this challenge while ensuring staff safety (Pekoll, 2019, p.40). Thus, 'codification' increases the symbolic capital of library professionals which could be utilized in advancing IF.

'Institutionalization' underpins the idea of 'experts protecting experts. Though there are enough organizations that pledge to uphold IF, without proper investigative powers, they seem incompetent to handle this challenge. This has been criticized as an 'institutional lacuna' of ALA, in general (Popowich, 2021, p. 43). Therefore, forming an accountable professional body vested with necessary investigative powers, such as the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in England, seems crucial. Also, as librarianship is an unregulated profession in Canada, national-level unionization could add an extra layer of protection to LIS professionals in the pursuit of upholding IF.

'Investigation' – producing knowledge through scholarly research and non-scholarly means, is also critical in this pursuit. A robust theoretical framework gives libraries a better understanding of IF and enables them to defend and explain the significance of IF to their stakeholders more effectively (Oltmann, 2016, p. 291). It is noted that the lack of research pertinent to IF also hinders upholding IF (Dresang, 2006, p. 171). It is further suggested to adopt interdisciplinary approaches in research which are lacking in LIS (Oltmann, 2016, p. 167). The symbolic capital produced hereunder could enhance awareness and provide the professionals with a solid theoretical ground to address this challenge.

In addition to the institution-specific policies, utilizing the symbolic capital generated through investigation, LIS professionals can apply the 'Oakes Test' for logical

preliminary selection and deselection decision-making (Atkin, 2012, p. 242). This two-part test was introduced in *R. v. Oakes* [1986] 1 S.C.R. 103, to decide when the judiciary could override a legally protected right under the reasonable limitations of the CCRF. In this context, library professionals should understand that the rule is to uphold IF not to deviate from it. To override this rule and conclude the alleged censorship call is reasonable and justifiable, proportionately positive answers need to be obtained for the following questions:

- a) Is the effort towards overriding the IF rational and non-arbitrary?
- b) is the impairment caused to IF minimal?
- c) is the good aimed to achieve through censoring sufficient to outweigh the negative impacts caused by the infringement of IF in question?

Also, LIS professionals should be cognisant that the guidelines on handling complaints place no obligation on them to remove or relocate the challenged item (ALA, 2010). It acknowledges the patron's freedom of expression rather than giving them a right to vote over the library collection (Knox, 2014, p. 19). Though it is often overlooked, the professionals' understanding of their scope of responsibility is critical when dealing with censorship issues.

## Conclusion

With the recorded surge in various censorship attempts, IF has been under attack over the past three years. Besides being incapacitated in delivering its primary function- dissemination of information for all, these censorship demands have led the librarianship to question the very norm IF, where their profession and ethical conduct are anchored. As statistically depicted, censorship attempts have increased in numbers, intensity, form, and violence it entails. As manifested above, it is comprehensible how this challenge affects the heart of librarianship and beyond and why it is a complicated, multi-faceted, and dilemma-packed issue to which finding a black-and-white answer is impossible. Hence such a challenge could only be addressed through research-backed, pragmatic solutions unique to LIS, capitalizing on the symbolic power of librarianship broadly through codification, institutionalization, and investigation.

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