

Evolution of Language in Book Bans: A Critical Analysis of Increasingly Contentious Rhetoric

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Abstract

Challenges and complaints about books are not new phenomena, but the unprecedented rate at which censorship attempts are now occurring in the United States is a new development that has many people concerned. This study aimed to illuminate the themes in language and rhetoric used in book challenges, and to determine if these had changed over the last 10 years. Our team analyzed over 200 formal challenge documents submitted to public libraries, conducted 12 interviews with librarians, and collected 49 questionnaires from library staff from across the US. Results demonstrated that language and rhetoric used by patrons has changed over the last decade, with terms such as “inappropriate,” “obscene,” and “offensive” among the most common, as well as more contentious terms such as “pornographic,” “pedophilia,” and “grooming” increasing in frequency. Materials containing themes surrounding children and young adults, LGBTQ+ issues, and race/ethnicity subject matter were the most heavily targeted. Our research also found that while the majority of challenges were submitted by individuals, these challenges borrowed language from political movements and organized censorship groups. For the purposes of this project, we limited our research to public libraries and librarians, and focused strictly on print materials.

1. Introduction

Public librarians in the United States are reporting record numbers of book challenges in 2023, the majority of which concern “books written by or about a

person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.”¹ Libraries that have yet to face censorship attempts may still be re-examining their objectionable content policies and confronting many of these same issues, in anticipation of future challenges. Despite the increasing number of book challenges, a very small number of people are responsible for a disproportionate number of challenges in public libraries.² This small number of people may have different objections to the content they attempt to censor than most of the library-going public. While the ALA has extensively covered the increasing frequency of attempted book censorship in public libraries³, the actual content or rhetoric included in these challenges is generally not published in the aggregate. There is very little research focusing on the rhetoric used by challengers during the most recent decade, a topic that is worthy of exploration as there have been major cultural shifts linked to the increase in challenges around race-related and LGBTQ+ themed books. Identifying specific shifts in language and ideology may serve to better prepare librarians in managing book censorship attempts.

The purpose of our research is to identify and decipher how the language of book challenges in public libraries has evolved over the past 10 years (2013-2023) and what groups or types of books this language targets by evaluating patron written

¹ American Library Association. “Book Ban Data,” March 20, 2023.

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/book-ban-data>

² H. Natanson, “Objection to sexual, LGBTQ content propels spike in book challenges.”

³ American Library Association. “Book Ban Data.”

complaints and data collected through librarian interviews and surveys. The objective is to understand trends within language used in complaints over the last decade that can guide objectionable content policies that preemptively address the most common concerns of would-be censors, protecting both communities' free access to information and librarians' own position within those communities. By analyzing 12 interviews and 49 survey responses from librarians and library advocates, as well as 218 documented book challenges from public libraries, our data suggests that there has been an increase in contentious rhetoric in book challenges, particularly surrounding sexuality, LGBTQ+, and racial themes, in the past 3-5 years after a relatively stable pattern of language concerning appropriateness for children.

2. Literature Review

Americans have generally become more tolerant of diverse viewpoints over the last 70 years, partially due to an increase in formal education.⁴ Why, then, are we now seeing “the highest number of attempted book bans since ALA began compiling data about censorship in libraries more than 20 years ago?”⁵ During the first eight months of 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) recorded a record 695 formal attempts to challenge more than 1900 individual titles.⁶ This increase is disconcerting, not just in terms of public access to library materials, but for the future of librarianship as a profession. The narrative which casts book challenges as the activity of only one small subset of society carries the danger of painting these incidents as anomalies - divorcing them from widespread changes in political discourse, shifting

social norms, and ongoing conversations between the LIS profession and the general public.

Historically, book censorship attempts in U.S. public libraries have reflected the social concerns of that time. For example, the 1950s brought an increase in the number of book challenges citing “communist ideology,” the 1980s brought increased concerns regarding books with “environmentalism themes,” and prior to 2000, the most common concern among would-be censors was “sexual themes” or “obscenity.”⁷ An evaluation of the previous research on book challenges demonstrates that the majority are aimed at three broad categories of subject matter, representing specific groups of people and (arguably) also representing the social concerns of our time.

The first category is books related to race, racial justice, discrimination, Indigenous peoples, Black people, and people of color.⁸ In the last ten years, research has shown an increase in complaints and challenges related to these demographics, which directly correlates with the growth in published diversity-minded material.⁹ The second category encompasses books with LGBTQ+ content, which are often books characterized as “sexual” or “obscene” by challengers.¹⁰ Though book challengers may have modified the phrasing of complaints in recent years (i.e. using words such as “sexually explicit” and “youth-targeted pornographic literature” rather than the previously preferred “pro-homosexual”), it is clear that they specifically target LGBTQ+ themes.¹¹ The third most common theme is young adult and children’s literature,¹² with challengers often using language framing book bans as attempts at “protecting” children or creating “safe” spaces.¹³

The issue of censorship is more complex than a reflection on these three broad themes of materials can

⁴ Brett, Jeremy, and Mary E. Campbell. “Prejudices Unshelved: Variation in Attitudes toward Controversial Public Library Materials in the General Social Survey, 1972–2014.” *Public Library Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (January 2016): 23–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2016.1163961>.

⁵ American Library Association. “Banned and Challenged Books: 2023 Preliminary Data from the American Library Association.” *Unite Against Book Bans*. Access date 12-3-23.
<https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/ala-releases-preliminary-2023-book-ban-data/>

⁶ American Library Association. “American Library Association Releases Preliminary Data on 2023 Book Challenges.” *Dealing with Censorship Challenges* (blog), September 19, 2023.
<http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2023/09/american-library-association-releases-preliminary-data-2023-book-challenges>.

⁷ Marisa Shearer, “Banning Books or Banning BIPOC?,” *Northwestern University Law Review Online* 117 (2022), https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1323&context=nulr_online.

⁸ Shearer, “Banning Books or Banning BIPOC?”

⁹ Shannon Oltmann, *The Fight Against Book Bans* (New York: Bloomsbury Libraries Unlimited, 2023).

¹⁰ Nyby, “The Demography of Censorship: Examining Correlations between Community Demographics and Materials Challenges in Canadian Libraries.”

¹¹ Loretta M. Gaffney, “No Longer Safe: West Bend, Young Adult Literature, and Conservative Library Activism,” *Library Trends* 62, no. 4 (2014): 730–39,
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2014.0019>.

¹² Anderson, Jaclyn Lewis. “The Classification of Censorship: An Analysis of Challenged Books by Classification and Subject Heading.” *Endnotes* 5, no. 1 (June 2014): 1–18.

¹³ Gaffney, “No Longer Safe.”

adequately provide, however.¹⁴ Research librarian Stephanie Birc offers:

*“When we have conversations about book banning, we focus our attention on the tangible object – the books... I don’t think I’ve ever seen a banned book display or program about the people harmed/intended to be harmed by the destruction or restriction of access to literature. And yet that is exactly what book banning is intended to do – to disrupt the transference of knowledge, ideas, and information between people.”*¹⁵

Our study of language and rhetoric in book challenges is situated on the foundation of research laid by many information science writers and researchers over the last few decades. Most notably, it has been influenced by researcher Emily J.M. Knox, PhD, MSLIS. Knox states that “Understanding why people attempt to remove, relocate, or restrict books in an age of ubiquitous access is one of the more puzzling aspects of contemporary challenge cases...At its root, challenging books is a symbolic practice. That is, challengers are attempting to make a statement...Their arguments demonstrate that they believe that their communities and institutions should share their personal values.”¹⁶ Knox also suggests that “challengers often focus on their perception that modern American society is in a state of decline. Their discourse tends to use terms that indicate destruction, decay, and deterioration. To combat this turn of events, they draw on broader discourses that employ the language of war and protection.”¹⁷

Previous research evaluating the broad ramifications of book challenging has also indicated that challengers are increasingly relying on the use of legal language¹⁸ and personal harassment of library

staff, and that this yields more success in banning books.¹⁹ Additionally, it has been identified that groups are using increasingly criminally-charged language to describe LGBTQ+ books, such as “pornography” and “grooming.”²⁰ Much of the previous research on this topic was conducted prior to this most recent spike in book challenge attempts over the last five years, and there is little research reviewing the specific language used by challengers over the past decade. As a result, we saw the need to further this discussion on censorship and book banning by focusing our research on the language and rhetoric people are using when challenging materials, and how this may have changed over the last 10 years.

3. Research Tools & Design

For our research tools, we chose to use standardized open-ended interviews, questionnaires (Google Forms), and document analysis research techniques in order to better understand the original language and rhetoric being used when a book is challenged in a public library setting. Sampling was based on several key inclusion criteria: 1) Documents that recorded the original language used by patrons making formal book challenges within the 2013-2023 date range; 2) Librarians and library staff working at public libraries who have encountered book complaints submitted by patrons; and 3) Data that was available and verifiable given our research timeline. Our team reached out to numerous states in an effort to obtain broad regional representation. Data was analyzed using Cross-Case Analysis techniques coding for themes and specific keywords used (See Appendix D. Code Book for Analysis for representation).

For quantitative analyses, surveys were sent to 30 different states in the United States. A total of 49 responses were received. Descriptive statistics were generated indicating the number of each response to a particular question and the percentage represented by a particular response. This is in order to better understand “who” was responding to the survey. For the population served by a given library, the data were summarized as the median, range, mean and standard deviation. A pie chart was used to present the distribution of population sizes served by the responding institutions.

As independent variables, responses were classified with respect to the state from which the response was received and the population size served

¹⁴ Jenkins, Christine A. “Book Challenges, Challenging Books, and Young Readers: The Research Picture.” *Language Arts*, Research Directions, 85, no. 3 (January 2008): 228–36.

¹⁵ Birc, Stephanie. “A New Prohibition Era: Book Banning, Prison Abolition, and Librarians.” *Education for Information* 38 (2022): 415–22.

¹⁶ Knox, Emily J.M. “Society, Institutions, and Common Sense: Themes in the Discourse of Book Challengers in 21st Century United States.” *Library & Information Science Research* (07408188) 36, no. 3/4 (October 2014): 171–78.

¹⁷ Emily J.M. Knox, “Society, Institutions, and Common Sense: Themes in the Discourse of Book Challengers in 21st Century United States.”

¹⁸ Schroeder, Ryan L. “How to Ban a Book and Get Away With It: Educational Suitability and School Board Motivations in Public School Library Book Removals.” *Iowa Law Review* 107, no. 1 (November 1, 2021): 363–90.

¹⁹ LaPierre, Suzanne. “Book Bans in the Social Media Age.” *Computers in Libraries* 43, no. 3 (April 2023): 30–34.

²⁰ Gira Grant, Melissa. “Out of Print.” *New Republic* 254, no. 4 (Apr 2023): 14–23.

by the responding library (estimated by the respondent). The effect of different states of survey responses was of interest due to demographic, political, and other differences that might affect survey responses. However, the limited sample size of total responses made performing an analysis at the state level challenging. In order to assess geographic effects on survey responses within this limitation, we chose an arbitrary divider in order to dichotomize the data into approximately two equal groups reflecting geography. Derivative variables were generated with respect to a responding state being east or west of the Mississippi River (giving a measure of geographic variation) and the responding library system serving a population size greater than or equal to/less than the median value for the sample. For the latter measure, three responses did not report a value for population served. These missing values were replaced with the median value for the state from which the response was received.

For dependent variables, responses were classified as “Yes,” “No,” or “I don’t know”/no response. As above, these are summarized descriptively as absolute numbers of responses and a percentage of the survey population. Responses to the following questions were considered for quantitative analyses:

1. Have informal challenges to library holdings been received?
2. Did informal challenges lead to removal of library holdings?
3. Have formal challenges to library holdings been received?
4. Did formal challenges lead to removal of library holdings?
5. Have you (the respondent) noted a change in the language of challenges over the last 10 (ten) years?

The correlation between the independent variables (location east or west of Mississippi River and size of served population of library greater or lesser than the median for the sample) and the dependent variables above were assessed by correlation coefficient. A p-value equal to or less than 0.05 was pre-specified for statistical significance. Data was initially collated using Excel (Microsoft, Bellevue, Washington) and then analyzed using Stata (version 18, StataCorp, College Station, Texas).

4. Document Analysis

We received and analyzed a total of 218 challenges of books in public libraries. The documents collected included all submitted book challenges received by the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse at the State Library of Oregon between 2013-2023, all submitted book challenges collected in Pierce County, Washington between 2013-2023, all submitted book challenges collected in Burbank, California between 2018-2022, and all submitted book challenges collected from Sacramento Public Library, also in California, between 2013-2023. These documents varied in form and included material reconsideration forms created by public libraries and filled out with typed or hand-written responses by patrons, some typed responses from public library staff informing the patron of the result of their challenge and their evaluation of the material based on the library’s collection policy, email correspondence between library staff and patrons, and Google Forms created by Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse at the State Library of Oregon and completed by public library staff members across Oregon reporting book challenges from patrons. The majority of the themes in these book challenges related to representations of race

“violence against animals”
 “talks about vagina, penis, and sex” “Pornographic”
 “Unsuited to Age” “traumatizing, extreme violence, appalling” “Violence celebrated”
 “too grown up for children” “written to have undue influence on the reader” “extremely graphic”
 “[I don’t want] my 12 year old to know how girls have sex” “Racist memorabilia”
 “Graphic nudity and eroticism” “the description referred to them as a family, but there are two dads” “spreads misinformation” “Swear words”
 “completely inappropriate for children’s picture book.. Pornography” “encourages sexual experimentation” “offensive language”
 “The publication unfairly celebrates the black man and promotes a left wing agenda” “an affront to Native people”
 “Promotes false religion, specifically will cause the reader to put faith in man and not god” “tells kids that adults are wrong about gender”
 “This man’s proclivity to pedophilia is something I don’t want to come into innocent hands.” “stereotypical images of African American children”
 “Not fit for most readers” “...show two dads as a family... should not be among the kid books but in the section of the library on homosexuality”
 “The content and language seems too mature for elementary students. Not only might they misunderstand it, they may take it literally.” “Burn it.”
 “child pornography” “I feel this book is teaching people to be negative, insulting, disrespectful, dishonest, rude, inconsiderate, and ill-mannered.”
 “Homosexuality” “objected to a reference to Cinderella as a “slut” and deemed the poem violent and abusive to women and girls”
 “Drugs” “teaching people to be negative, insulting, disrespectful, dishonest, rude, ill-mannered” “encourages teens to experiment”
 “deliberate nonconsensual affection” “Book normalizes and desensitizes viewers from extreme violence, rape, and hatred.”
 “The book was a gross and disgusting chronicle of unusual sexual practices.” “inappropriately provocative” “borderline pornographic”
 “book was a gross and disgusting chronicle of unusual sex practices” “inclining [readers] to commit socially destructive action” “racist”
 “completely unnecessary” “Vulgar, nudity, male sexual orgy, weird, sick and disgusting.” “Rip up this book and burn it” “anti-family”
 “surprising me that my tax dollars are paying for it...” “anti-religious statements” “racism”
 “mentions slavery without condemning it” “not suitable for sensitive audiences”
 “racist depiction of Africans” “inappropriate”

Fig. 1 Words & Phrases Used By Patrons

and ethnicity, pornographic and sexually explicit materials, materials for YA and children, and representations of LGBTQ+ (see Table 1). Among all of these types of challenges, further objections were made regarding the language used in these materials. Patrons commonly used the terms “inappropriate,” “obscene,” and “offensive” to describe their negative evaluation of the books challenged. These terms were especially frequent in the challenges of materials for children and YAs. In addition to concerns about appropriateness, challenges of youth books were commonly coupled with objections regarding themes of race, sex, and LGBTQ+.

Table 1. Top 5 Categories Coded in Document Analysis

<u>Code #</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Times Coded</u>
8	Children’s & YA	84
5	Sexual Content	79
4	Race & Ethnicity	39
9	Language	28
3	LGBTQ+	24

Language used by patrons in their requests for reconsideration of materials for YA and children periodically accused library staff of criminal intent, using words like “pedophilia” and “grooming.” This trend was also evident in our analysis of the results from our interviews and survey responses. Additionally, while most patrons requested books to be recategorized, restricted by age, or removed from the library’s collection, some suggested disposal, defacing, and even burning of the challenged books.

Table 2. Top 5 Sub-Categories Coded in Document Analysis

<u>Code #</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Times Coded</u>
8.1	Inappropriate for Children	55
5.1	Pornographic/ Sexually Explicit	42
4.2	Racism	22
8.2	Excessive Violence	13
5.2	Obscene	12

5. Survey Results

Our survey, which included twelve questions (both closed and open ended) regarding librarians’ experiences with formal and informal book challenges, compiled data regarding the changes over the last 10 years. The questionnaire was sent to librarian contacts across the country, and 49 individuals responded. States represented include California, Florida, Maine, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, and Washington.

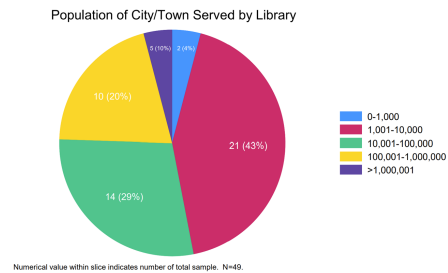


Figure 2. Population

5.1. Quantitative Findings

Our team performed quantitative analyses where possible to see if trends could be identified by state, city population size, or region. See Table 3 for a summary of survey respondent characteristics. Surveys were sent to 30 different states, and a total of 49 responses were received. Responses were received from eight states and one region (“Northeast”). The majority (n=31/63%) were received from states east of the Mississippi River. This was selected as a criterion to dichotomize the location variable, giving some information regarding geographic variability. For the size of population served by a responding library, estimates were simply obtained from the respondent. For three responses, no size was reported. To fill in these missing values for analytic purposes, the value was assumed to be the median value of the other values from the responding state (for all three, there were adequate responses from other library systems to determine a median value).

The median size of population served was 16,000, with a range of 480 to 2,215,000. The mean population served was 206,576, with a standard deviation of 440,867. The data were skewed in favor of smaller libraries, and were not normally distributed.

To examine the distribution of population sizes served by the responding libraries, data were grouped into orders of magnitude by powers of ten (see Fig. 2). The majority of responses came from less populated

cities/towns, with 43% in the 1,000-10,000 range, and 29% in the 10,000-100,000 range. Two responses were received from library systems serving less than 1,001 patrons and five responses were received from systems serving more than 100,000 patrons.

Table 3. Survey Respondent Characteristics

Response, n	49
Respondent States, n (%)	
California	3 (6)
Florida	4 (8)
Maine	19 (39)
“Northeast”	1 (2)
Ohio	1 (2)
Oregon	11 (22)
Texas	1 (2)
Vermont	6 (12)
Washington	3 (6)
Position Relative to Mississippi River, n (%)	
East	31 (63)
West	18 (37)
Reported populations served by respondent libraries	
Median	16000
Range	480-2215000
Mean (standard deviation)	206576 (440867)

Informal challenges to library collections were reported by the majority (n=38/78%) of respondents (Table 4). Only two (n=2/4%) reported that informal challenges led to removal of a challenged book. Almost all informal challenges were received from individuals (n=38/78%), with only one (n=1/2%) coming from an organization.

Formal challenges were reported less commonly by those surveyed (n=19/39%). Formal challenges were more commonly reported to lead to removal of a library holding than an informal challenge (n=5/10%). Again, the majority of formal challenges were received from individuals (n=21/43%) rather than organizations

(n=1/2%). The majority of respondents (n=27/55%) indicated uncertainty in the source of formal complaints (“I don’t know”), which may reflect respondents whose libraries had not received any formal challenges to library materials.

Table 4. Survey Responses Regarding Challenges to Library Holdings

Variable	Value
Informal Challenge Received, n (%)	Yes 38 (78%)
	No 8 (16%)
	I don't know 3 (6%)
Remove Book Informal Challenge, n (%)	Yes 2 (4%)
	No 41 (84%)
	I don't know 6 (12%)
Majority Source of Informal Challenges, n (%)	Organizations 1 (2%)
	Individuals 38 (78%)
	I don't know 10 (20%)
Formal Challenge Received, n (%)	Yes 19 (39%)
	No 25 (51%)
	I don't know 5 (10%)
Remove Book Formal Challenge, n (%)	Yes 5 (10%)
	No 36 (74%)
	I don't know 8 (16%)
Majority Source of Formal Challenges, n (%)	Organizations 1 (2%)
	Individuals 21 (43%)
	I don't know 27 (55%)
Change in Challenge Language over 10 years, n (%)	Yes 19 (39%)
	No 14 (29%)
	I don't know 16 (33%)

Respondents were asked their opinion as to whether the language of challenges had changed in the last 10 years. The plurality (n=19/39%) indicated that this had happened, although a sizable minority (n=14/29%) indicated that this had not happened. Again, a large minority also indicated that they did not know (n=16/33%).

We next attempted to assess whether there was any correlation between the independent variables (location E/W of Mississippi; served population size greater than or equal to/less than the median). Dichotomization of these two variables was deemed necessary to maximize statistical power in this limited sample size. For the dependent variables, responses that were negative or “I

	Location of Library E/W of Mississippi	Size of Served Population Greater or Equal to/Less than the Median.
Informal Challenge Received	0.2707/0.0599	0.0042/0.9771
Formal Challenge Received	0.2424/0.0685	<u>0.3933/0.0052*</u>
Remove Book Formal Challenge	0.1627/0.2641	0.2092/0.1492
Change in Language	0.0018/0.9904	0.0581/0.6915
Values are tabulated as the correlation coefficient and p-value (ρ/p-value). A p-value ≤0.05 is designated as being statistically significant.		

Table 5. Correlation Analyses

don't know" were aggregated into a single value, allowing each question to be classified for statistical purposes into "Yes" versus "No/I don't know).

Again, this was undertaken to maximize the power of the statistical test (correlation coefficient) to detect a difference, if one exists. For the questions regarding whether a library holding was removed due to a challenge (informal), and majority source of challenges (both informal and formal), there were an insufficient number of responses indicating or organization as the source of a challenge to allow for a statistical test.

Thus, for these questions, assessment of the correlation of the answers with the independent variables could not be undertaken.

The only statistically significant correlation identified was between receipt of a formal challenge and the median population size served by the library (Table 5). This was positively correlated, implying that a library serving a larger population correlated with a report of receipt of formal challenges to library holdings. None of the other correlations achieved statistical significance.

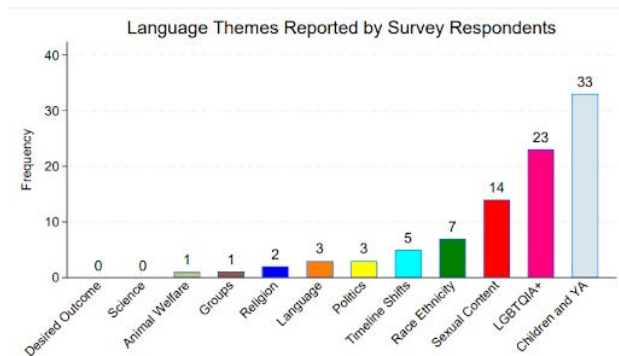
5.2. Qualitative Themes in Language.

Our questionnaire included open-ended questions that would provide information about what types of books were being targeted by book challenges and what language was being used in informal and formal book complaints. Librarians were asked:

1. What genres/types of books and/or subject matter have received complaints/challenges?
2. What language or rationale is used in book challenges/complaints?
3. If you have noticed a difference in the types of books challenged, and/or the types of concerns, what have you observed?

Answers provided by respondents were coded based on themes in language traits (See Appendix D. Code Book for Analysis) and analyzed (See Fig. 3). The most common theme (69% of reported book complaints) reported by librarians was in the "Children's and YA" category, with the term "inappropriate" showing up in 17 out of 49 questionnaires. LGBTQ+ was the next highest category (47%), with the words "inappropriate," "obscene," and "pornographic" commonly cited. "Sexual Content" was the third highest category (29%) with "inappropriate" being the most commonly used word. "Race and Ethnicity" was the fourth highest (14%); this category had a wider range of language and was more difficult to find themes, but some words/phrases identified include "racists imagery," "racist towards white children," "propaganda," and "woke."

Fig. 3



We also analyzed responses to determine if there were differences in language by state. Some states are more strongly represented in questionnaire results, and thus it is difficult to make comparisons on an individual level. Two states were left out of the analysis - Texas (due to no response to the questions) and "Northeast" (as it is not a state, and there was only one response). However, some differences by state are apparent. Florida, Maine, and Oregon, for example, rank highest in the "Children's and YA" language category, while California ranked highest in "LGBTQ+" themes. Florida and Maine were the only states with "Religion" as an identified theme. All states except Washington included LGBTQ+ language themes.

6. Interview Findings

We were able to conduct 12 standardized open-ended interviews with librarians from around the United States for our research. We specifically sought out librarians who had experience working with patron complaints and/or reviewing written material challenges. In our interviews, many expressed that there has been a clear shift in the language used by patrons within the last decade, and particularly within the last 5 years. Most librarians we interviewed indicated that the majority of complaints or challenges are dealt with informally, through one-on-one conversations with patrons or in online forums. Though these types of complaints and challenges do not always escalate to the level of a formal written complaint or a book ban attempt, there *has* been a shift in the language patrons are using.

Every librarian we spoke with identified an increase in complaints regarding materials with LGBTQ+ and/or sexual content over the past decade. They also spoke of increases in complaints regarding

content related to race or racial issues. Some felt that there had been an overall *decrease* in the number of challenges surrounding foul-language concerns (such as those related to profanity or cursing)

The 2016 presidential election and Donald Trump’s presidency were repeatedly brought up, with librarians expressing that patrons now felt free to use words that were aggressive or hateful in their complaints.

“Maybe that’s underlying what was there all along...It was suddenly okay to say things that were hateful...it was coming from the very top...There was a shift that happened, and then it was normalized in a way I just hadn’t seen before.”

– Oregon Library Director

The murder of George Floyd and rise of the Black Lives Matter movement was also described as a cause for the shift in discourse. Interestingly, the rise of challenges regarding materials related to race and racial issues were heard from both ends of the spectrum. Some patrons challenged materials viewed as supporting “racial stereotypes,” promoting “outdated depictions of racial minorities,” or that were identified as being simply “racist.” Other patrons were, during the same time period, submitting complaints regarding materials with “too much diversity” or that were perceived as being “racist to white people” or concerning “critical race theory.” One librarian discussed her belief that this rise in complaints regarding LGBTQ+ and racial themes is happening parallel to an increase in the diversity of published literature that is now available:

“The other factor that’s definitely playing into how this conversation plays out over the [last]

10 years...what is available now in terms of the complexity of the literature has really changed and shifted... We are seeing more and more diverse voices represented... we’re publishing more people of color; authors of color...And maybe there’s a consciousness of how race plays into those stories, but there’s so much more than a black character, so much more than a Latino character. They’re a complex, complete person who is Latino... And for certain readers, that’s more frightening to encounter. That’s more unnerving, right? Because it’s less reductive...some people really would like to keep [them] stuck in that reductive phase where all they are is black, or all they are is Latino, and that they’re not full, complex, interesting human beings... So I think sometimes we’re seeing readers react to that, to their discomfort and their own inability to see communities of color or queer folk as complex, interesting, layered people. ”

– Oregon Youth Services Librarian

A theme that came up regularly in these interviews was the belief that much of the language used by patrons was not original to them, but rather that they had borrowed their language from influential media sources or from specific organizations:

“LaVerna In The Library, a Facebook group associated with right-wing group Utah Parents United... where they are trading tactics, trading information about books... and that is driving a large chunk of the challenging going on this year.”

“It’s coming from the Moms [for] Liberty...”

Inappropriate
 Deviant Discriminatory Indoctrination Violence
 “Shocking to me” “too much diversity” Perverts LGBTQIA+ Grooming Fallatio
 “Christian nationalist”
 Normalizing Profanity “Racist to white people” “Political agendas” Pedophiles Misinformation
 Cursing “Not appropriately balanced” “Homosexuals and lesbians” Outraged “Critical race theory” Indecent
 Flippant “Outdated depictions of racial minorities” “It has ‘Gay’ in the title” “Offensive images of black people”
 Obscene “Sickening, the bible forbids it” “These laws are fraudulent, They are not legally married.” Appropriate
 “Talked about the founding fathers being slaveholders, but not enough about their Christianity” Groomers
 Offensive “Shouldn’t have in the library” “This is of the devil. God does not sanction this perversion of marriage”
 “Depicts nudity of child victims of sex crimes” “Harmful to our to transgender youth in our community”
 “Sexual content” “LGBTQ people are going to burn in hell” “Defying authority” “Character talks back”
 Graphic Pornographic “Historically inaccurate” “Adult themes” “Awfully ‘booby’” Vulgarity
 Frightening “I don’t believe in it” “Not age appropriate” Gender Pedophilia Satanism
 Misogyny “Sexual language” Ideology
 Pseudoscience Unsavory

Fig. 4 Words & Phrases Heard From Patrons

“They were taking language right off of Fox [News]”

“I saw in this person's writings...catch phrases or terms that are used more broadly in this National Book banning movement.”

Librarians also voiced that many patrons will elect alternative forms of protest against materials, rather than submit formal written book challenges with the public library. Tactics included book defacements, hand-written objections inside of books left for other patrons to find, turning books around on their displays, and checking out materials they found objectionable and refusing to return them. While our research team was not investigating this phenomenon as part of our study, it came up during our interviews so often that we felt these stories should be included in our final paper:

“A man did come into the library that day and announced to one of my colleagues that his intention - he had brought in his library card - that day was to check out all the queer books and keep them at home, so that no one else could have access to them”

– Oregon Youth Services Librarian.

“We just migrated to a new discovery layer BiblioCommons, which lets people leave reviews and star things, and we've had a couple individuals go through every transgender book that we own and give it a half star...and say that ‘this is inappropriate indoctrination’... Anything related to the gender binary, transgendered ideas, sexuality in general, especially LGBTQ material. But of all the complaints related to LGBTQ, I'd say three quarters are probably focused on the transgendered ideas, the non-binary ideas...”

– Florida Intellectual Resources Manager

“Two moms checked out the entire Pride display and refused to return them, in protest, saying that books about gender identity and sexuality were ‘inappropriate for children’. They wanted the books permanently removed. Of note, the branch that experienced this had had a Pride display for over 10 years, and had never had an issue until this occurred in 2023.”

– Supervising Librarian in California

“But we do have groups who come in together and when they leave... a lot of our obviously

queer books are hidden. They're turned backwards, so that the spines are no longer out, or they're slipped behind other random shelves, and eventually you find them because you're shelving and you're like, what's this book doing back here? There's a group of homeschoolers who come in on a regular basis. And after they leave - I have three different lists of queer lit: we have a “Gay Books for Kids” and then “Lesbian Books for Kids”, and then kind of the catchall, “Trans, Bisexual...and Other Identities Books for Kids” - and all of those will be turned backward so that you can't see [what the topics are] from a casual glance.”

– Oregon Youth Services Librarian

Librarians also brought us stories of personal harassment, where the heated words people were first using to describe books they were challenging, were now suddenly also being applied to the librarians themselves.

“He did this big expose thing where he called me and the teen librarian ‘pedophiles and groomers’. Wow. And that's definitely language that until the last couple of years, we really had never encountered in any kind of pushback about library materials. But I would say that's been a really big change in the last couple of years, is throwing out those terms... And of course, we are not pedophiles or groomers, like those are really triggering words for everybody, right?”

– Oregon Library Director

When we asked librarians their impressions about possible underlying motivations behind book complaints, responses included:

“My perception is that for the most part, anybody who brings a concern, or requests removal, or reconsideration of any sort, is that they think they're doing good work. They think that what they're doing is just common sense there. They all think they're acting in the best interest of a vulnerable population...They feel that this book is kind of pseudoscience, and that its presence in the library is an endorsement of legitimization of its point of view. And so they feel that they are fighting, not just hate speech, yes, but also misinformation.”

– Maine Library Director

“The vast majority of them are challenged based on including LGBTQ characters or situations.”

– Washington Teen Librarian

“What does that mean when you say, ‘I don’t believe in it’?...But, I mean, I suppose what she’s really saying is I’m not comfortable with it being acknowledged. I’m not comfortable with it being talked about as though it’s normal, as though it’s okay.”

– Oregon Youth Services Librarian

We were fortunate to have several librarians volunteer to speak with us about their experiences, especially given our short time-frame for data collection. In our interviews, it is clear that librarians are passionate about their work and are eager to share their stories. In closing, they offered some final thoughts:

“I do believe that people can always question...I think that when you select materials for the public, you have a responsibility to address each concern seriously. But I also feel that when you’re representing an entire community that you can’t bow even to a majority rule when you have members of the community for whom this book is perfect... Our community is made up of a very diverse group of people...So you’re selecting for an entire community and to remove a book from the library, you have to have some pretty strong reasons, in my view.”

“It is very hard as a librarian. To go through something like this, or to feel like you’re constantly fighting against this and it can be really wearing. And so I think it’s really important for us as librarians to figure out how we take care of ourselves and how we get the support that we need. Or I think we’re going to stop doing the hard work, and instead we’re going to choose not to order the titles that we know will be controversial.”

“What so many kids desperately need - whether it’s masturbation, or LGBTQ issues, and queer romance and and being aromantic, and being asexual and being trans - they desperately need that to be talked about as though it’s normal so that they don’t feel so

out of step... People have to see themselves reflected and talked about in ways that are positive and normal.”

7. Discussion

There are two notable themes in our findings found across all three methods. First, book challenges and complaints have endured a change in language over the last decade. Second, language themes are concentrated around Children’s/YA and LGBTQ+ with a recent increase around Race/Racial Themes. The surveys provided important quantitative data that exhibit how library staff have witnessed these changes, the frequency of themes identified, and data based on geographic location. Given the sample size, we were not able to draw definitive conclusions regarding geographic location, or how this may reflect or influence the language used by challengers.

Survey results show a plurality of respondents (39%) believe they have witnessed a change in language over the last decade, particularly in how rhetoric is used. The interview analysis suggests that language changes during the last decade notably spiked within the last five years. These changes occurred during social and political shifts in the country which were specifically referenced by librarians, including the change in presidency and the murder of George Floyd and subsequent BLM movement.

As the increase in challenges echoes the social landscape, so does the language used. Our research showed that while individuals represent the majority of objections to public library books, the identical language and rhetoric used in complaints implies a common source, whether it is an online group, social media, or news source. One librarian director shared that a newly-appointed city council member claimed to be personally put-off by a Pride display, though she believed the member (who she knew well) was only speaking out of pressure to behave according to expected norms as the “conservative” candidate. The documents we analyzed also showed that the complaints in the last few years have begun using more politically charged terms, like “woke” or “indoctrinate,” and continue to target children’s/YA, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC materials specifically.

Our analysis of the written book challenges shows that “Children’s and YA” language themes are most prevalent, found in 51% of all book challenge documents we received; “inappropriate” was the most commonly cited word (37% of all complaints). After Children’s and YA, the highest-ranked categories were “Sexual Content” (also 51%), “Race & Ethnicity” (28%), “LGBTQIA+” (27%), and “Language” (11%).

Several librarians felt that, while the focus on these specific themes is troubling, it is also the evolution of language toward more aggressive and criminally-charged language that has made a profound impact on their ability to serve the community. The documents analysis supports this claim: there was repeated use of terms like “pedophilia,” “groomers,” “obscene,” and even phrases like “attempts to sexualize our very young kids.” Challengers may use such language to impugn the intent and influence of book authors and library staff; these characterizations may paint them as being ethically and morally corrupt. This type of prosecutorial language shows up not just on written complaints, but also in conversations with patrons, town hall meetings and on social media platforms. The reported change in rhetoric over the last decade reveals a trend toward challengers using increasingly disparaging and contentious language that does not simply describe the book content to which they object, but specifically attacks human beings.

We found that book censorship attempts continue to reflect social concerns, but are increasingly politically motivated, reaching language barriers that inflict harm on the personal and professional lives of many who support the presence of said challenged books in a library. Our research further supports Knox’s belief that challenges are symbolic; as one of our interviewees postulates those who are challenging books believe they are helping “vulnerable population[s].”

Our interviewees, on more than one occasion, cited their impression that these complaints and challenges appear to be motivated, in part, by the belief that they serve a protective function, in most cases, serving to protect children or young people. However, there is also an alarming lack of nuance in the discourse, with patrons relying upon the use of disparaging and dehumanizing language in order to prove a point or further a cause. Critically, complaints/challenges do not take into consideration their accuracy or community impact. This leaves library staff in the position of having to advocate on the part of the larger community, effectively serving as defense counsel for challenged materials in an adversarial, rather than collaborative, process.

8. Limitations

First and foremost, we must acknowledge that our research team represents a limited range of perspectives, particularly in terms of interpreting data about racially- and ethnically-based book challenges; all six of our research team members are white. Our research would be richer for the perspectives of more

BIPOC librarians, and the overall lack of BIPOC perspectives on this research team is a limitation to our interpretation of our data.

While we sampled documents and surveyed and interviewed librarians from a geographically wide array of state and local libraries, the majority of our responses came from typically left-leaning states like Washington, Oregon, Maine, and Vermont. Collectively, our research team reached out to over 30 state libraries and library associations, but many states (including Idaho, Florida, North Dakota, and Texas) do not compile book challenge data at the state level, and other states and state library associations were unwilling to share the data they did possess or simply did not respond. Different survey techniques might be able to yield a greater number and variety of responses. Other potential data sources should be sought, and librarians and information professionals are well situated to identify such sources. For example, searching news reports for book challenges might be one way to derive additional information about the book challenge phenomenon.

Some individual librarians might be unwilling to participate in book challenge research because of controversies surrounding book challenges in their areas. One interviewee reported that some librarians have faced warnings, suspensions, and even terminations for speaking out against book banning; others have been harassed and subjected to public exposure (“doxxed”). Though our survey was anonymous, public libraries are subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, and librarians may fear that private conversations may become public knowledge and used against them. Collectively, this means that our data better reflect the state of book challenges in a subset of communities, characterized in our quantitative data, rather than being a comprehensive survey..

Finally, our research was limited by time constraints. The necessity of generating our research question, gathering and analyzing data, and presenting our findings within a 10-week academic term meant we could not wait more than a week for libraries and librarians to respond to our inquiries. Many library systems required that an FOIA request be submitted in order to gain access to challenge records, a process that can take weeks or even months to get a response. We limited our scope of inquiry to printed materials in public libraries only. Many book challenges take place in school libraries, and challenges to library collections routinely include DVDs, music, displays, and events. Future research into the language of book challenges

would benefit from addressing one or more of these limitations.

9. Future Research

An exploration of the language surrounding books challenged for racial content may be a useful dimension of our findings upon which to expand. Some challenges were related to outdated racial terminology and outright racist or stereotypical content, but other books were challenged because they were written by BIPOC authors and/or contained BIPOC lead characters. Narrowing the focus to books challenged for racial content may provide a clearer picture of whether vague terminology like “inappropriate,” which could refer to queer, sexual, vulgar, violent, and/or racial content, is being used to censor BIPOC books in particular. By contrast, expanding the focus of this investigation to include school libraries, which have been the site of many book challenges by parents concerned about their children’s reading materials, and/or to library displays, events, and non-print materials would provide a more complete understanding of the language used to challenge books and the contrasts, if any, between the way this language is used in public versus school libraries.

Another avenue of research we discovered is the relationship between specific book complaint language and where it is borrowed. As the research suggests, much of the language in complaints is borrowed from social media, news, groups, and other forms that reinforce echo chambers on themes that have become controversial over the last five years. An analysis of these groups and media with respect to geographic location could provide meaningful data to public or school libraries about borrowed rhetoric. This was unfortunately outside of our scope for the current research, but for future research, this information could show how to pierce an echochamber within a community to help close that gap that widened in this decade.

Finally, our study focused on public libraries. There are other types of libraries in which unfettered access is a principal ideal: research libraries, such as those at universities, government document repositories, and highly specialized library collections. For comparison to our results, asking similar questions of staff in such facilities would be enlightening, to determine whether the controversies of public libraries are also blowing into the rarified world of research libraries.

10. Conclusion

Our research confirms that language used in book challenges has changed over the last 10 years. There has been an increase in rhetoric aimed at censoring books connected with LGBTQ+, race/ethnicity, and politically-based themes. Some of this language has become increasingly contentious and violent toward materials, such as in examples where words like “rip it up” or “destroy this book” were written on challenges.

Concern over what children are reading has always been the top reason for materials challenges. This theme was the #1 reason for challenges in our data until 2023, when LGBTQ+ themes shared the #1 spot. The words “pedophile,” “pornographic,” and “disgusting” are words we encountered throughout all three of our research methods. A survey responder mentioned, “book challenges used to focus on language/profanity, but every complaint I've heard in the past two years has been about LGBTQIA books.”

We contend that in a media-saturated world, rhetoric is easily mimicked. Much of the language in book challenges over the last decade may have derived from social media, as well as radio and television pundits. Nearly all of our interviewees perceived significant changes to book challenge rhetoric in the last 3-5 years, as well as evidence of rhetoric influenced by censorship groups such as Moms for Liberty and LaVerna in the Library. A Cambridge librarian mentioned she sees “[the] repetition of...catch phrases or terms that are used...more broadly in this like National Book banning movement.” An Eastern Washington librarian commented on challenges she received to *Gender Queer*, “I mean, it was pretty clear that neither one of them had read the book” implying that these patrons had been prompted by outside sources encouraging them to complain. People and groups are challenging books sight unseen, based on social chatter. Another Northeastern librarian commented, “challenges are certainly more organized in recent years.”

In the last few years, organized groups have begun challenging hundreds of books at a time, which has led to innovative solutions by libraries such as limiting challenges to one book at a time, or requiring challengers to reside in the district where the library sits.

One limitation that librarians and staff perhaps face in addressing challenges is lack of clear guidance on what constitutes a valid basis for challenging a library holding. Our study did not attempt to address this directly, but the lack of such administrative preparations for dealing with book challenges means that many challenges are likely to be ad hoc. In the

eyes of potential challengers, librarians and staff are simply impediments on the road to their objectives: removing something they disagree with. This is not a new problem. As Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote in a 1964 obscenity ruling, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [“hard-core pornography”], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it...” For librarians, this is not sufficient. Establishment of clearer guidelines as to what constitutes a valid basis for a challenge may make the process more objective, removing the librarian from the adversarial aspects of the interaction.

Librarians are also doing immense work to de-escalate complaints so they do not rise to the level of formal challenges. As one library director posits, training librarians in how to have conversations about intellectual freedom prevents most complaints from turning into formal challenges:

“I talk about... the core value[s] of intellectual freedom and...opposing censorship. My staff know how to have that conversation really well...people want to feel heard and...there's often no need for it to become a formal complaint. They might not walk away completely agreeing with you, or happy, but they may walk away not feeling like they need to pursue it further, which I think is the best use of everyone's time and energy.”

Perhaps our best chance to address these increasingly contentious challenges is to heed this advice: listen to patrons, understand how to explain intellectual freedom effectively, and learn how to have a thoughtful and respectful conversation with our community members. Words do matter.

9.1. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the librarians who took the time out of their busy schedules to speak with us, fill out our survey, and/or dig up records for our study. Librarians are our heroes and we aspire to do the same kind of good work they modeled for us. Many thanks to Professor Ricardo Gomez for guiding us, inspiring us, and shining the light forward in this challenging and informative class. Our TAs, Daniel Kryger and Erin Beneteau: I’m sure you do not get enough kudos for all of your behind-the-scenes work. We appreciate you. Lastly, we would like to raise a metaphorical glass to Emily Knox, PhD, MSLIS, who has laid the foundation for our work. She is a

trailblazer in the world of studying book challenges and bans.

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University of Washington
Information School

HOW WE TALK ABOUT BOOKS WE DON'T LIKE

The Language & Rhetoric of Book Challenges/Bans 2013-2023

Research Team:
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August W. Guskowski
Liz Landeche
Jessi Zumwalt

WE WONDERED HOW THE WORDS PEOPLE USE WHEN THEY COMPLAIN ABOUT BOOKS MIGHT HAVE CHANGED DURING THIS TIME.

So we interviewed 12 librarians, conducted 49 questionnaires with library staff, and collected 218 written book challenges from around the United States.

THE NUMBER OF BOOK CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES HAS BEEN INCREASING OVER THE PAST DECADE.

A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict access to materials based on the objections of a person or group.

LIBRARIANS TOLD US THEY HEARD THESE KINDS OF WORDS FROM PATRONS:

h diversity" "Perverts LGBTQIA+ Grooming Falatio
ionalist" "Political agendas" Pedophiles Misinformation
3 people" "Political agendas" Pedophiles Misinformation
xuals and lesbians" Outraged "Critical race theory" "Indecen
as" "It has 'Gay' in the title" "Offensive images of black peop
aws are fraudulent. They are not legally married." "Appropriat
slaveholders, but not enough about their Christianity" "Groom
s of the devil. God does not sanction this perversion of marria
"Harmful to our transgender youth in our community"
turn in hell" "Defying authority" "Character talks back"
inaccurate" "Adult themes" "Awfully 'booby'" "Vulgarity
not age appropriate" Gender Pedophilia Satanism
sexual language" Ideology"
- "Offense Unsavor

Inappropriate
Discriminatory
Deviant "too much diversity"
"Shocking to me" "Christian nationalist"
Normalizing Profanity "Racist to white people" "F
Cursing "Not appropriately balanced" "Homosexuals and le
Flippancy "Outdated depictions of racial minorities" "It has 'l
Obscene "Sickening, the bible forbids it" "These laws are frat
"I talked about the founding fathers being slaveholders
Offensive "Shouldn't have in the library" "This is of the devil
"Depicts nudity of child victims of sex crimes." "Harmful
"Sexual content" "LGBTQ people are going to burn in hell"
Graphic Pornographic "Historically inaccurate"

WE LEARNED THAT THE WORDS PEOPLE ARE USING HAVE CHANGED.

There has been an increase in rhetoric that complains about books featuring LGBTQIA+ themes, racial issues and political themes. Some of this language has become more violent and we saw words like "burn it" written on challenges.

WE LEARNED THAT CONCERN OVER WHAT CHILDREN ARE READING HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE TOP REASON FOR CHALLENGES

This theme was the #1 reason for challenges until 2023, when LGBTQIA+ themes shared the #1 spot

WE LEARNED THAT IN A MEDIA-SATURATED WORLD, RHETORIC IS EASILY MIMICKED

"Folks on the either end of the political spectrum...would be using the language that is popular in those circles. You pick up the shared vocabulary of your community."
-A Cambridge, MA librarian

WORDS CAN CAUSE REAL HARM

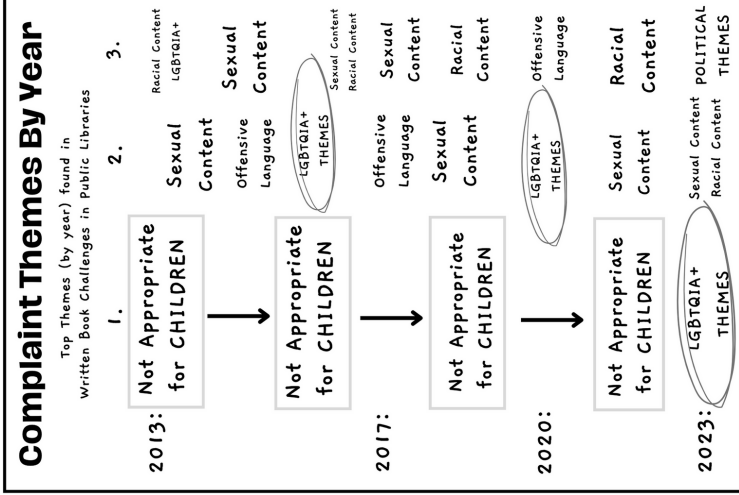
"INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN" "PORNOGRAPHIC/SEXUALLY EXPLICIT"

We found this phrase 80 times in our research!

We found these phrases 51 times in our research!

"He called me and the teen librarian 'pedophiles and groomers.' Wow. That's definitely language that until the last couple of years, we really had never encountered in any kind of pushback about library materials...And of course, we are not pedophiles or groomers, like those are really triggering words for everybody, right?"

A Library Director -



"I think that when you select materials for the public, you have a responsibility to address each concern seriously. But I also feel...you can't bow even to a majority rule when you have members of the community for whom this book is perfect... Our community is made up of a very diverse group of people."

Retired Children's Librarian -

"It is very hard as a librarian...to feel like you're constantly fighting against this and it can be really wearing. And so I think it's really important for us as librarians to figure out how we take care of ourselves and how we get the support that we need. Or, I think we're going to stop doing the hard work, and instead we're going to choose not to order the titles that we know will be controversial."

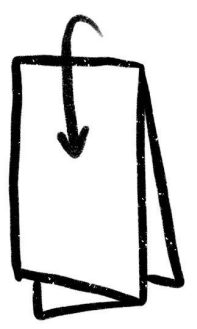
-An Oregon Library Director



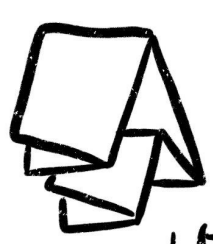
THE 8 PAGE ZINE! BUILD A BOOK



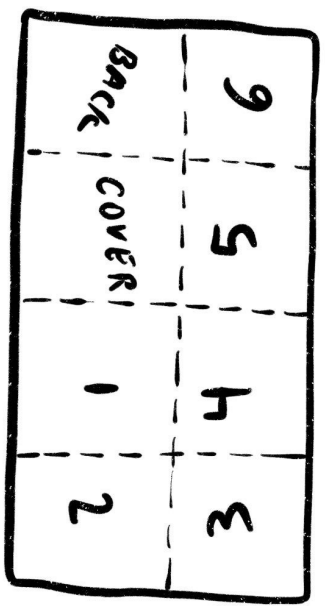
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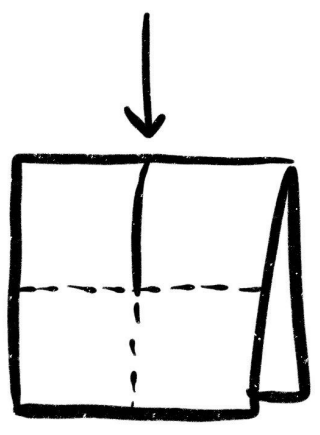
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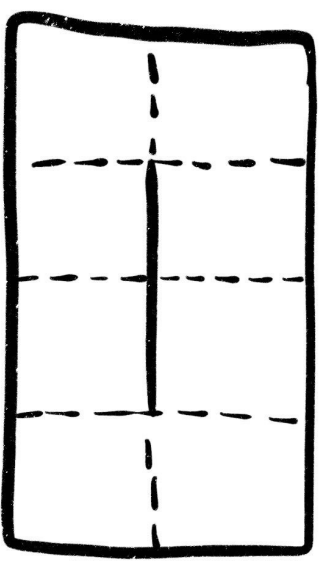
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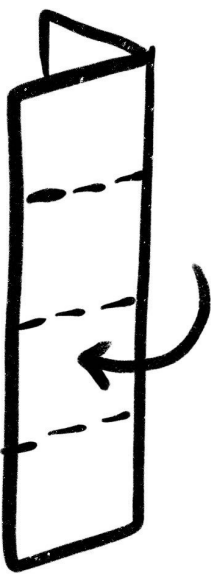
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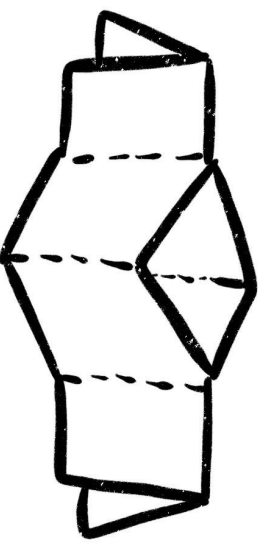
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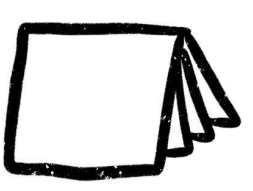
YOU WANT A SLIT IN THE MIDDLE



fold



Pop Out MIDDLE



FOLD FLAT AND DONE