



# Society, institutions, and common sense: Themes in the discourse of book challengers in 21st century United States



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## ABSTRACT

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. In order to better comprehend this largely symbolic phenomenon, this study focused on the arguments that book challengers employed to justify the removal, relocation, or restriction of books in 13 challenge cases in public libraries and schools across the United States between 2007 and 2011. Three sources of discourse, which were coded for common themes, were analyzed. The first consisted of a variety of documents, obtained via state open record requests to governing bodies, which were produced in the course of challenge cases. Recordings of book challenge public hearings constituted the second source of data. The third source of discourse consisted of interviews with challengers. The study found the following common themes in challengers' worldviews: First, they saw contemporary society as being in a state of decline and were concerned with preserving the innocence of children in the midst of this decay. Second, they constructed public institutions as symbols of the community that must represent their values and aid parents in their difficult role as boundary setters. Finally, challengers demonstrated a reverence for the books as a material object and employed common sense interpretive strategies. It is hoped that this analysis will offer a starting point for comparing the discourse of challengers to the discourse of other social actors and aid librarians and other information professionals in providing effective responses to challengers to materials in their respective institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 21st century, books are ubiquitous. They can be purchased for immediate download from the internet or ordered through Amazon. They are available for checkout at a public library down the street or can be torrented onto a personal computer. However, even in this age of ready access to texts, people still seek to remove, restrict, or relocate books in schools and public libraries. It is difficult to understand what such individuals are trying to accomplish when they fill out requests for reconsideration for a particular book. Do they believe that their request for the relocation, removal, or restriction of the book will mean that it is no longer accessible to those who wish to read it? It is clear, if one considers the various methods of access given above, that this is not possible. Instead, it is productive to look toward the realm of symbolic action to understand this phenomenon.

The study presented here attempts to provide some answers to the question of why people challenge books in public libraries and schools. In particular, it focuses on three aspects of challengers' worldviews: their views of society, childhood, and parenting; their construction of public institutions; and their understanding of the practice of reading and the symbolic power of books. That is, this study demonstrates that

book challenges are best understood as practice that is not primarily about the book itself but what the book and the institutions represent to the challenger. In particular, the study focuses on a particular aspect of what one might call the discourse of censorship. Note that this is not a discourse unique to the challengers in this study, but, using the lens of a culturalist discourse approach (Keller, 2005) it informs a reality wherein only some members of a given community should have access to certain types of information. This approach to discourse focuses on how groups use both language and symbolic power to attempt to impose their will on another group of people. Although the discourse of censorship as a whole includes such justifications for practices such as book burnings, redacting documents, and state-sponsored censorship of the internet, this article focuses on arguments for the censorship of books in public institutions in the United States.

## 2. Problem statement

Along with their seeming futility, another unique aspect of book challenges is their effects on the community. Individuals on both sides of the issue are willing to take vocal stands in public. Community members who have never appeared at a school or library board meeting will attend in order to voice their opinions. Often these meetings are emotionally fraught with individuals on both sides passionately arguing

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for their point of view. Issues of intellectual freedom, the role of public institutions, and the effects of reading are of great importance to understanding how individuals construct society and communities.

It should also be noted that book challenges occur much more frequently than might commonly be thought. Although the [American Library Association \(2013\)](#) logged 464 challenges in 2012, this statistic only accounts for those that were reported to the association. It is possible that the actual number of challenges was much higher. The ubiquity of the challenges, the passion of the individuals involved, and the effects that they have on the public's access to information make book challenges worthy of study.

As will be discussed below, much of the research on intellectual freedom and challenges focuses on legal issues, librarians, and institutional responses. Although they are seemingly low stakes events, challenge cases concern the nature and transmission of knowledge and can sometimes tear apart communities and undermine support for public libraries and schools. In spite of this, there is little empirical research in library and information science and other fields on the people who bring challenges and why they continue to do so in the age of near ubiquitous access to texts.

Through analysis of common themes within the discourse of censorship, the study identifies the contours of the worldviews of people who challenge materials in public libraries, public school libraries, and public school classrooms. In particular, the study identifies challengers' construction of society, parenting, and childhood; their understanding of the role of public institutions in society; as well as their construction of the practice of reading.

### 3. On challenges and challengers

A challenge is defined here as an action wherein an individual or group formally files a complaint with a school or library to remove, restrict, or relocate a particular book. It should be noted that challenges do not always lead to banning or the complete removal of the material. Challenge cases often follow a standard procedure that is set by institutional policy. After filing the formal complaint, if the challenge is not resolved, the request is escalated up the administrative ladder and sometimes culminates in what is called a challenge hearing. These meetings can often be highly charged with much time given over to public comments on the book in question. At the end of this process, the school or library board makes a final decision on the status of the book in the institution.

The term challenger, rather than censor, will be used for people who bring requests for a change of status within a public institution. The term censor, although sometimes used to describe the individuals discussed in the research, is highly contested and challenger more accurately describes the actions of such individuals and groups because, as noted above, challenges do not always lead to banning.

It should also be noted that this study includes cases concerning books that were challenged in public school curricula, as well as those in public and school libraries. As the focus of this research is on the discourse of censorship rather than the individual characteristics of the challenged books, such materials meet the criteria for inclusion. Even though the mandatory aspect of assigned readings changes the context for challenges somewhat, the act of challenging a particular book in the curriculum raises the question of why challengers take a private act (choosing what their own children will read by choosing to opt out of certain assigned readings) and make it a public one (deciding what other people's children will read by choosing to challenge the book in question). As will be demonstrated below, challengers make an a priori assumption that reading a particular book will be harmful to all children, whether the book is in a public library or read for a class, and it is this assumption that ties all of the arguments analyzed here together. Public schools and libraries are also linked in this study because of their symbolic role for challengers—namely that the books on shelves of the school and public library, as well as the books assigned in the classroom,

should reflect the values of challengers. As will be shown below, the arguments that challengers use for removing, relocating, or restricting a particular book remain remarkably similar whether the challenge is to a book in a library collection or in a school curriculum.

### 4. Theoretical frameworks: worldviews, symbolic power, and textual interpretation

Worldviews are defined here as an interpretive lens that offers individuals two different methods of comprehending the world. First, they are a foundation and framework for understanding everyday life. That is, they allow individuals to make sense of the world around them. Second, worldviews provide roadmaps for action that give people an idea of what they should do next in a particular situation. This definition of worldview is based in social constructionist theoretical framework, especially the work of [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#). There are several concepts discussed in this work, and in others that descend from it, that are important in understanding the definition of worldviews given above. The first is the concept of a stock of knowledge which [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#) define as a system of signs based in language in which we frame our everyday interactions with the world. Stocks of knowledge are made up of types and typical actions—two ideas developed by [Schutz and Luckmann \(1973\)](#). Types are abstract, incomplete, relative, and relevant constructions that individuals create of objects in the world. Although these types can include fellow human beings, they also include inanimate objects such as a book. For example, as will be argued below, books are of a particular type for challengers in that they are revered objects that contain (or should contain) true knowledge.

Typical actions, according to [Schutz and Luckmann \(1973\)](#), constitute the roadmap for action aspect of worldviews described above. They provide information for “how to get things done” and how to react to another individual's actions. A typical action might include, for example, the interpretive strategies that one uses when reading texts. It should be noted that [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#) argue that stocks of knowledge are passed down from generation to generation through social institutions via the process of socialization.

Along with social constructionism, this research is also rooted in the theory of practice of [Bourdieu \(1987\)](#). An attempt to understand how people live in the world, Bourdieu located his theory midway between structuralism and subjectivism. He argued that it is a theory of practice because it attempts to explain how individuals act in a given situation within both institutional and personal constraints. [Bourdieu \(1987\)](#) states that people's lives are neither wholly subject to their personal psychology nor to the structures of the social world. In reality, people operate in a dialectical relationship between the two. Especially important is the idea of symbolic capital and power of [Bourdieu \(1989\)](#). One of four types of capital (along with cultural, economic, and social), symbolic capital is a disguised form of monetary or economic capital that is most readily associated with prestige or authority. Symbolic power is often misrecognized as sound judgment or legitimate action and is used by certain groups within society to dominate others.

The final theoretical framework for this study concerns textual interpretation and the book as a material object. Research on textual interpretation concentrates on reading as a social and collective practice ([Gilmore, 1989; Long, 1992](#)); print culture studies, on the other hand, often focus on the importance of the book as a material good ([Darnton, 1979; Jardine, 1998; Selcer, 2010](#)). Following the work of [Fish \(1982\)](#), this study seeks to elucidate the interpretive strategies of challengers. Interpretive strategies are the implicit decisions regarding analysis of a text that one makes before, during, and after the act of reading. As will be demonstrated, challengers' interpretive strategies are strongly influenced by a common sense or monosemic interpretation of text. This strategy holds that texts “mean what they say and say what they mean” and there is little room for interpretive strategies grounded in, for example, allegory or metaphor. It is possible that

monosemic interpretive strategies are based on a particular conceptualization of rational thought rooted in the common sense philosophical tradition that was popular in the United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Segrest, 2010). Common sense Scottish philosophy has long exerted a strong influence over fundamentalist and evangelical culture in the United States (Noll, 1985). Marsden (1991) notes that when evangelical and fundamentalist Christians read the Bible, they rarely do so using allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolic interpretations. Although not all challengers are conservative Christians, it is clear from their discourse that many share a particular understanding of how texts work that is quite similar to the common sense tradition. Challengers also share an interpretive strategy based on rationality, especially when it comes to understanding how those who—to use Davidson's (2004) term—possess an “undisciplined imagination” read texts (p. 114). This can best be described as a strategy wherein “things are thought best described exactly the way they appear, accurate with no hidden meanings” (Marsden, 1991, p. 157). As will be shown below, this method of interpretation is defined by challengers throughout their discourse and is applied to many different texts, not just the Bible.

These theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for understanding the worldviews of challengers including how they construct society, how they understand the practice of reading, and why they feel it is problematic for public institutions to include certain types of books in their collections and classrooms.

### 5. Previous research on challengers

As noted previously, much of the research in library and information science on intellectual freedom focuses not on challengers but on librarians and institutional responses to challengers (Knox, 2014). These studies tend to focus on frameworks for information ethics (Doyle, 2002; Frické, Mathiesen, & Fallis, 2000); legal discussion and policy (American Library Association, 2010; Baldwin, 1996; Braunstein, 1990; Jones, 1999); and historical case studies (Robbins, 1993; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2007). The few writings on challengers tend to be essays and handbooks rather than empirical studies. One notable example is the *New Inquisition* by LaRue. LaRue focuses on the reasons why people challenge materials in libraries by recounting his experiences as a director of a public library system in Colorado. LaRue (2007) notes that challengers are often “in awe of the written word” (p. 51) and that challenges can be understood as an attempt to redefine the mission of the public library to one that is more in keeping with the challengers' worldview.

Another example is an article in *Library Journal* titled “Toward Understanding the Censor” which focused on the psychology of challengers. Poppel and Ashley (1986) wrote that challengers have two primary motivations. First, they have inflated feelings of self-worth as citizens (what might be called a high sense of community). Second, they are greatly concerned with the moral foundations that they instill in their children.

There have been two recent dissertations in the field of library and information science that focus on groups that bring challenges to school and library materials. The first, by Kingrey (2005), focused on conservative Christian groups and their understanding of the terms intellectual freedom and censorship as well as how these groups understand the rights and responsibilities connected to these ideas. In other words, she explored how outsider groups that sometimes encourage their members to challenge materials in schools and libraries construct the concept of intellectual freedom, which is usually defined by librarians and civil libertarians. Kingrey found four key themes in the documents from the conservative groups. First, these groups define censorship narrowly and as being solely the domain of the government and, therefore, challenges are not censorship. Next, they tend to have a negative view of human nature and see it as either corrupt or corrupting. Third, the conservative Christian groups prefer the rule of the majority over the rights

of the individual. Finally, they tend to distrust people who disagree with their ideas regarding intellectual freedom (Kingrey, 2005, p. 80).

The second dissertation, “Intellectual Freedom and the Politics of Reading” by Gaffney (2012), used reader-response theory to argue that challenge cases are, in essence, arguments over the nature and purpose of the public library in contemporary society. She determined that libraries are targets of conservative social groups because they offer competing understandings of the meaning of access to information, the practice of reading, and importance of libraries in communities.

Instead of concentrating on the materials that are challenged or institutional responses to challenges, as much of the research in this area has, this article focuses the motivations of challengers themselves. It is particularly concerned with exploring why they try to remove, restrict, or relocate items through empirical research. However, rather than focusing on groups or historical figures, it centers on the justifications that individual contemporary challengers use in their testimony against objectionable material in order to explore if there is a community of discourse that unites challengers even if they are not members of the same social action groups or are widely dispersed geographically.

### 6. Procedures

The procedures employed in this study included identifying challenges, collecting documents that contained challengers' arguments, and analyzing the documents for common themes. Although the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) collects statistics on challenges, in order to maintain anonymity of reporters, the OIF does not release non-aggregate information to the public. In light of this, the researcher employed several methods to find challenge cases. First, the researcher created Google Alerts that searched for combinations of the following terms: censorship, challenger, complaint, comment, banned, hearing, book, public, board, and library. These alerts were delivered to the researcher's personal email address once a day. Once a new challenge case came through, a separate alert was created using keywords, including location and name of book, for that particular challenge. These alerts were delivered to the researcher's email address in real time. The OIF's news-only email list, IFACTION, also provided information regarding challenges. Finally, the researcher encouraged librarians at conferences or other professional gatherings to contact her when they received challenges in their own institutions. Out of a set of over 50 possible cases, 13 challenge cases that took place between 2007 and 2011 are included in this study (Table 1). As noted above, both public school and public library challenges are included. Although these institutions serve different purposes, they are still connected through their status as public, tax supported institutions and, therefore, according to challengers, should reflect the values of the community.

For each challenge, the researcher attempted to secure three sources of discourse. The most important factor for including a source was that it contained the voices and arguments of the challengers themselves. The first source consisted of recordings of public hearings concerning the removal, restriction, or relocation of books in public institutions convened by the administration of the institution. The second source was comprised of documents including forms, emails, and letters from the challengers that were produced through the course of a challenge case. These were obtained through state public records act requests. Interviews of challengers constituted the final source of discourse.

As noted previously, when staff members are not able to resolve challenges at an early stage in the process, there is sometimes a challenge hearing at which members of the public and the governing boards discuss the relative merits of the book in question. There are generally two types of hearings. One is a hearing that is entirely devoted to discussing the challenged books. These types of hearings are often called as “special meetings” of the governing board. The second type of hearing takes place in the course of another meeting, such as during the school or library board's regular monthly meeting. Both of these meeting types

**Table 1**  
Challenge cases.

Place	Date	Challenged institution	Challenged material	Documents	Hearing	Interviews
Carrollton, TX	2011	Carrollton Board of Education	My Mom's Having a Baby	Yes	No	Yes
Central York, PA	2010	Central York School District	Stolen Children	No	No	Yes
Clarkstown, NY	2011	Clarkstown Board of Education	Perks of Being a Wallflower	Yes	Yes	No
Conway, SC	2011	Horry County Board of Education	Push	Yes	Yes	No
Greensboro, NC	2010	Guildford County Board of Education	Hoops	Yes	No	No
Helena, MT	2010	Helena School District	Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lewiston, ME	2007	Lewiston Public Library	It's Perfectly Normal	Yes	No	No
Merrill, WI	2011	Merrill Area Public Schools	Montana 1948	Yes	Yes	No
New Bedford, NH	2011	Bedford Board of Education	Water for Elephants	Yes	Yes	No
Seattle, WA	2010	Seattle Board of Education	Brave New World	Yes	No	No
Spring Hill, FL	2010	Hernando County Board of Education	Snakehead	Yes	No	No
Stockton, MO	2010	Stockton School District	Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian	Yes	Yes	No
West Bend, WI	2009	West Bend Public Library	Various	Yes	Yes	No

include time for public comment and are held in public facilities that are open to all members of the public. Two procedures were employed for collecting data from hearings. First, several public institutions sent the researcher recordings as part of the documents requested in public records requests and others posted video recordings of hearings and meetings on their websites. One public hearing that the researcher attended is also included. After collection, the recordings were fully transcribed.

For each challenge case, the governing body was sent a request that cited the state's Freedom of Information or Public Records Access laws. These requests asked for any records that related to the case including the original complaint, letters, emails, minutes, and recordings. Administrative bodies sent responses both electronically and in hard copy. Documents received from these requests were included in the final set of data only if they included the challengers' own voices. This meant that meeting minutes were often excluded because they often contained only paraphrases of public comments. The majority of the analyzed documents consisted of the original requests for reconsideration forms, letters, and emails.

Interviews with individuals who were substantially involved with challenge cases were the third source of discourse for this study. Information from public records and newspaper articles often included identifying information for the original complainant and his or her supporters. Potential interviewees were first contacted via type-written, posted letters. Once a challenger responded to the letter, either via phone or email, they were sent a follow-up letter that included appropriate consent forms for the interview. Out of 36 initial requests, ten challengers initiated contact, and three agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted over the phone, audio-recorded, and then transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured and the questions were designed to encourage interviewees to reflect on their beliefs and experiences regarding libraries, reading, and the challenged books.

As noted above, this study specifically focuses on the arguments that challengers employ to justify the removal, restriction, or relocation of books in public institutions. These arguments are considered to be a particular aspect of the discourse of censorship, which, following the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Schutz and Luckmann (1973), provides both context for and the construction of the social world. More specifically, the challengers' discourse is, following the work of Keller (2005), a culturalist discourse that combines both language and symbolic power to affect the distribution of particular types of knowledge within a community.

The arguments were analyzed for common themes using Atlas.ti qualitative research software. Codes were developed using a hybrid method. Some codes were from a previous study conducted by the researcher (Knox, 2013) and others emerged from the challengers' own arguments. The coding scheme was divided into three categories: "worldviews," "libraries and other institutions," and "readings practices/effects/books" (see Table 2). These codes were applied at

approximately the paragraph (3–5 sentences) level in order to have sufficient context. Paragraphs often received multiple codes.

Three major themes emerged in the analysis of the challengers' discourse. Due to space constraints, only representative quotations are given for each theme.<sup>1</sup> These include necessary context with pertinent words and phrases indicated in bold; other than gender, however, no identifying information for the challengers is given.

## 7. Themes in the discourse of challengers

The discourse of censorship, as exemplified by the challengers in this study, reveals three common themes that draw on broader culturalist discourses in contemporary society. The first theme centers on what challengers understand to be the slow destruction of contemporary society, especially with regard to its lack of protection of children. Although the first theme is broad, the second is more narrowly focused on the local community and its institutions. Challengers' discourse frames public institutions as a public face of the community and, because of this, these institutions must always represent the values of the community. Finally, the third theme centers on the practice of reading and the importance of the book as a material and cultural object within challengers' worldviews.

### 7.1. Society, destruction, and innocence

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. In order to combat this turn of events, they draw on broader discourses that employ the language of war and protection. They are especially concerned with the effect that this decline has on children especially with regard to maintaining their innocence, which is, as will be demonstrated below, a defining characteristic of youth.

An example of "society in decline" can be found in the following quote from a Request for Reconsideration Form from Clarkstown, New York:

The theme of this book is an extreme version of "coming of age" of our current society which has been infiltrated by different forms of media pushing illicit sex, graphic situations and an ultracausal view of morality. Do we need to join in on the assault on decency?

Especially of note in this short quotation is the use of the term "current" which seems to imply that at some time in the past society was "better"—a common discourse of nostalgia often employed in the so-called culture wars (Hunter, 1992). The implication is that there

<sup>1</sup> The findings of this study are expanded in a forthcoming monograph: Knox, E.J.M. (2015). *Book banning in 21st century America*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

**Table 2**

Coding scheme.

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1.0 Worldview
1.1 Appeals
1.1.1 Common sense
1.1.2 History
1.1.3 Christianity
1.1.3.1 Bible
1.1.4 Morality
1.1.5 Law
1.1.5.1 Constitution
1.1.5.2 Local law
1.1.6 Majority rule
1.1.7 Policy
1.2 Children
1.2.1 Innocence
1.2.2 Corrupting children
1.2.3 Characterizations
1.3 Expertise
1.3.1 Parents
1.3.2 Teachers
1.3.3 Social workers
1.3.4 Other roles
1.4 Censorship
1.4.1 Positive
1.4.2 Only by government
1.4.3 Definitions
1.4.4 Banning books
1.4.4.1 Justifications
1.4.4.2 Slippery slope
1.5 Inappropriate material
1.5.1 Characterizations
1.5.2 Determinations
1.6 Safety
1.6.1 In library
1.6.2 In school
1.6.3 In community
1.7 Society
1.7.1 Morality
1.7.2 Values
1.7.3 Changes over time
1.8 Community
1.8.1 Control
1.8.2 Standards
1.8.3 Values
1.8.4 Evaluation of library materials
1.9 Parents
1.9.1 Control
1.9.1 Rights/authority
1.9.2 Roles
1.9.2.1 Not fulfilling role
1.10 Classifications
1.10.1 Age
1.10.2 Books
1.10.3 Movies
1.10.3.1 Ratings
1.10.4 Music
1.10.4.1 Ratings
1.11 Reponses
1.11.1 Various feelings
1.11.2 Actions
1.12 Judgment
1.13 Taste
1.14 Legitimacy
2.0 Libraries and other institutions
2.1 Public library
2.1.1 Procedures
2.1.2 Collections
2.1.3 Librarians
2.1.4 Responses
2.1.5 Policies
2.1.6 Space
2.2 School library
2.2.1 Procedures
2.2.2 Collections
2.2.3 Librarians
2.2.4 Responses
2.2.5 School policies
2.2.5.1 Curriculum

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**Table 2** (continued)

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2.2.6 Space
2.2.7 School administrators
2.2 Local government
2.3 ALA
2.4 ACLU
2.5 Other institutions
2.6 Helping parents
3.0 Reading practices/effects/books
3.1 Practices
3.1.1 Previewing material
3.1.2 Reading aloud
3.1.3 Discussion
3.2 Effects
3.2.1 Embarrassment
3.2.2 Inculcation of values
3.2.3 Implantation of knowledge
3.2.4 Loss of innocence
3.3 Writing
3.3.1 Appropriate
3.3.2 Storylines
3.3.3 Cannot be read aloud
3.4 Materiality of books
3.5 Pornography arguments

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has been some unspecified change that allows media to thrust unwanted material upon the innocent, which is, in fact, a stealth alteration, as media of this kind has been “infiltrating” society—sometimes without people being aware of its existence. The term “assault” is also of interest for its aggressive tone.

The evolving role of parents plays a major part of this structural shift. Parenting is considered to be “natural” in the challengers’ discourse, but it is a role that requires considerable aid from the community. Parents are boundary-setters for their children, but institutions such as public libraries and schools must help parents by reinforcing these boundaries in their curricula and collections. Challengers also argue that this particular role for public institutions is even more important if one considers how many parents “fall down” on the job, because they are either unwilling or unable to provide enough time and care for their children.

Closely related to the view of society in decline is a concern for maintaining the innocence of children. This anxiety was well-stated by one of the interviewees who noted that “So for me, it’s just a little about taking away that childhood innocence when you...you know expose them to that kind of violent imagery you can never get that out of your head.” Here the interviewee is worried that reading the book in question will reduce the child’s innocence and expose him or her to adult concerns, a state of being that can never be changed.

Children are described as the members of society who are most in need of protection from its decline. Similar to other common discourses in society regarding children’s development (Robinson, 2013), they are understood to be wholly innocent in challengers’ discourse. Innocence, for challengers, is defined as a lack of knowledge about negative or objectionable issues or ideas. The innocence of children is constructed using two different models. Some challengers view children as a *tabula rasa*, in whom negative behaviors and characteristics such as sexuality, obscenity, and violence are learned through exposure to media that portray such behaviors. Other challengers construct childhood as a time of latency. That is, negative behaviors and characteristics are already part of a child’s overall character but they are triggered through exposure to objectionable media. In either case, children’s innocence must be protected at all costs from exposure to books that might portray such negative behaviors or have characters with negative characteristics. These constructions of childhood innocence are familiar to anyone who studies child development or children’s literature (Dresang, 2003; Jenkins, 2008; Miller, 2014; Robinson, 2013); however, one of the more interesting characteristics of challengers is their insistence that everyone in the community share their ideas about what is suitable

for children. As mentioned earlier, this protection can only be accomplished with the help of public institutions within the community.

These two overarching themes regarding society and the innocence of children were found throughout the challengers' discourse. In general, challengers constructed society as a fragile backbone for life that, at its best, should provide proper morals and values to its members. When society is in decline, as exemplified by the "infiltration" of problematic media, it is unable to provide these morals. Since the 1960s, there have been large shifts in American society that are just beginning to be felt as a new generation comes of age. Challengers view these shifts as changes in the structures and institutions that shape society. In essence, society and civilization have altered over the past 50 years due to shifts in sexual mores, greater acceptance of obscenity, changes to gender roles, and the ubiquity of violence in society as a whole and in media in particular. For challengers, inappropriate materials in public institutions are both a symptom of and a cause of these changes. In light of these societal shifts, challengers expect public institutions to play a particular role within their communities.

### 7.2. Public institutions as symbols of the community

The role of public institutions in society is a major theme in challengers' arguments for removing, restricting, or relocating a book. Public schools and libraries are not simply buildings but public symbols that are often seen as the outward face of a local community and are therefore subject to the control of taxpayers. These institutions should aid parents in their difficult roles by helping to protect the innocence of children. The staff and administrators of these institutions can accomplish this by making wise choices when deciding which media the community's children should be exposed to.

Both of these ideas can be found in the following remarks by a speaker at a public hearing in Clarkstown, New York:

I don't know who made the decision to buy the book at all. But you know what's embarrassing? What's embarrassing is how did a book like this get into the school anyway. And the book is called the Perks of Being a Wallflower, and furthermore, our superintendent said about a book, that this type of book that could mold and shape our children for all society. And the conviction that appears to be moral. It's an absolute embarrassment. This book is a disgrace that shouldn't even be in the school.

A key term in this statement is "embarrassment." The speaker seems to be embarrassed that his community is now known as a place that would "endorse" such a controversial book. By referencing the superintendent, the speaker presumably believes that the school's administration has deliberately caused harm to the community's children a disservice by allowing them to read the book in question.

As demonstrated in their discourse, challengers construct public schools and libraries as institutions that confer legitimacy onto knowledge. When certain materials are chosen for inclusion over others, these materials are not simply available for access or to merely to expose the reader to ideas but gain the endorsement of the community through its public symbol, that is, the public institutions it supports. Since public libraries and schools are seen as outward symbols of the community, the presence of controversial materials on either the library shelves or in the curriculum means that the community itself views these books as legitimate knowledge. This is related to Bourdieu's conceptualization of symbolic capital as a concealed form of economic capital. Community members' tax revenue is transformed into public institutions; therefore what the institutions decide to collect or teach must represent the values of the community.

A related argument that challengers make is that the policies and procedures of public institutions are opaque. Although they operate under the aegis of elected boards, public libraries and schools are run by bureaucratic hierarchies that exert significant control over both

collections and curricula. Due to their bureaucratic nature, the mechanisms by which decisions are made in these institutions are often unclear to the general public and challengers argue that the policies of these institutions make it difficult to understand how the decision to include the controversial material was made.

Although some challengers argue that public institutions should only have legitimate knowledge in order to provide for the "safety" of children and to account for the use of community taxes (Knox, 2013), it is interesting to note that others construct public libraries as embodiments of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Individuals who challenge books in school curricula and libraries sometimes argue that they are not censors because the book would still be available in the local public library. Some challengers view the two institutions as very separate—public libraries are venues for collecting many different types of knowledge while the school should only offer ideas that are deemed "legitimate." Individuals who challenge materials in public libraries, on the other hand, did not have recourse to this particular argument and often stated that the public library should also only contain knowledge that demonstrates the values of the community. However, it should be noted that, even in the case of public school libraries and curricula, challengers voice concerns regarding certain books and not others. That is, it is only in certain circumstances that they are willing to take what is fundamentally a private act (choosing what their children should read) into a public act (choosing what other children should read) by exercising their symbolic power over the work of public institutions.

All of these arguments are connected to the view that public institutions have a duty to help parents raise children. Many of the challengers argued that this is an important part of the mission of these institutions. Without clear procedures and adequate knowledge of how materials are chosen, parents cannot be certain that public libraries and schools have children's best interests in mind when choosing books for collections and curricula. Also, as noted above, as some parents are considered inadequate, challengers argue that it is imperative for institutions to make decisions that will protect the innocence of children who receive poor guidance at home. According to the challengers, children's innocence is in peril due to the nature of the books that are challenged and the possible effects that reading them might have on children.

### 7.3. Common sense interpretation and the importance of the book

One shared theme in the discourse of censorship is the importance given to the book as a material object. Challengers see books as more than just a series of words on page but as the final result of an extended legitimating process. This legitimacy is important because reading is considered to be a practice that has effects on the very character and soul of the reader.

These ideas can be found in the following quote from a letter-writer in Merrill, Wisconsin:

On the form it is asked what we believed the theme of this book is. We heard of the misuse of power along with others, however, those supporting this book don't seem to want to ask how a 12-year-old lusting after his aunt, getting sexually stirred at the thought of a young girl being sexually abused by her uncle, among others, fit into this novel. These things are very disturbing and I would question the author's mindset and what he was thinking by putting these things in the book, as they have nothing to do with the misuse of power.

This letter writer implies that books can harm individuals and that the author of the book in question is using the power of the book improperly by including objectionable material within its pages. There are real effects from reading and authors should be cautious with regard to what they publish. These effects are possible due to challengers' particular understanding of how books operate and interpretive strategy of texts rooted in a common sense point of view.

For challengers, books have special significance within the world of media. There are several reasons for this. First, challengers operate within a framework that is highly influenced by a philosophy that emphasizes the power of books to change individual lives. Second, the relationship between the reader and the text is intimate and immediate. Books, unlike other types of media, cannot be censored unless text is blacked out (this is rarely advocated by challengers) or the book is taken away from the reader. Finally, as noted above, the process of publishing legitimizes texts. This is a circular relationship wherein a text is legitimate because it is in a book while, simultaneously, the book confers this characteristic onto any text contained within it. As demonstrated in the quote above, challengers find it astonishing that authors would take the time to write books with inappropriate material and also that publishers would allow such material in a book.

To expand on the theoretical framework given above, common sense interpretations of text are rooted in the idea that all texts are monosemic (i.e., have a stable referent) and can only be interpreted in one way. For challengers, this is a highly literal interpretive strategy where texts embody the colloquialism “what you see is what you get.” The words on the page both mean what they say and say what they mean. Challengers argue that children are particularly vulnerable to being affected by texts because they lack critical distance from the text. To use the words of Davidson (2004), they have an “undisciplined imagination” (p. 114) wherein they are prone to mimic what they read on the page. Challengers often discuss the mechanics of reading as a practice where pictures are created in one’s head as one reads; that is, one creates “mind movies” of images from the text. In fact, for many challengers, reading, itself, is a mimetic process in which reading about particular events in a text is the same as living through them.

Texts not only lead to mimesis in the mind but in the physical world as well. Challengers’ discourse demonstrates a pervasive fear of children engaging in poor behavior after reading about such actions in a book. This is related to children’s lack of critical distance from the text and speaks to the view that reading has effects on both long and short-term behavior. For challengers, the practice of reading has real consequences for one’s life. The effects of reading harmful material can be divided into two types: first, reading objectionable books may lead to short-term effects such as undesirable behavior or emotions and, second, such harmful material may have long-term effects such as the corrosion of one’s overall character and soul. That is, challengers use a causal argument when justifying the removal, restriction, or relocation of certain books. Exposure to texts that contain obscenity, violence, stereotyping, and other negative themes will lead the reader to acting on what they read, having bad morals in the future, or both.

Overall, reading is considered to be a powerful practice for challengers. This is demonstrated in three common arguments in challengers’ discourse. First, books as material objects convey legitimacy to the texts that are contained within them. Second, challengers’ worldviews include a common sense interpretation of text, wherein there is no possibility of polysemy. Finally, reading harmful texts is directly linked to harmful effects on one’s character. (It should be noted that the opposite is also true, reading good books leads to good character.) Such an understanding of reading helps explain why challengers attempt to censor books—in essence, reading is a powerful practice that can alter the trajectory of one’s life.

## 8. Conclusions

This study explored key reasons why, in the contemporary cultural moment, people attempt to restrict, remove, or relocate books in the age of ubiquitous access to texts. Although there were differing emphases in tone depending on the offending book, in all 13 of the analyzed challenge cases challengers’ discourse included common themes related to society, institutions, and the interpretation of texts. At its root, challenging books is a symbolic practice. That is, challengers are attempting to make a statement about reading and their communities

when they challenge books. Their arguments demonstrate that they believe that their communities and institutions should share their personal values.

There were three primary themes found in the discourse of challengers. First, challengers’ worldviews focus on how society is slowly crumbling due to shifts in its structure over the past fifty or so years; the challenged books are simultaneously a symbol of these changes and a symptom of them. Closely related to this is the desire to protect children’s innocence, whether latent or congenital, from harmful media that is available to them due to society’s decline. Second, public institutions such as schools and libraries are expected to help parents in protecting children from harm. They are a public face of the community and operate as symbols of community values. Finally, challengers’ discourse focuses on both the importance of the book as a material object that legitimizes texts, as well as on monosemic interpretations of texts. These themes, along with the ideas that children are prone to mimesis and have an undisciplined imagination, help to explain what challengers are trying to accomplish in their endeavor to remove, restrict, and relocate books. Although these arguments, especially concerning the power of reading, are not unique to challengers, as noted earlier there have been no systematic studies of challengers’ discourse in the LIS literature.

The practice of challenging books has less to do with accessibility *per se* and is more directly related to issues of community, public institutions, and the practice of reading. For challengers, the presence of a book in a library collection or school curriculum implies that the community—through its institutional proxies—approves of the ideas and concepts presented in the text. It is this implied approval and children’s exposure to it that seems to drive challengers’ actions toward the futile act of removing, restricting, or relocating a book. It is possible that challengers view the presence of a book in a library collection or school curriculum as an indication that those institutions and, by extension, their communities approve of the concepts found in the text written inside it.

This study provides some context for understanding the culturalist discourse that challengers’ use to justify their actions. Further, it demonstrates that challengers argue for exercising their own symbolic power as members of the community in order to shape the development of their own and other people’s children’s identities through the regulation of materials for personal development in both public libraries and schools. It is hoped that the delineation of themes in challengers’ discourse will aid librarians and other information professionals when they face challenges in their institutions and that the findings will provide a foundation for future comparative discourse analyses.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There are two separate projects that will come out of this initial work. First, the author will expand the research presented here on challengers’ worldviews and reading practices, as this area of study is vital to understanding why books continue to be targeted in an age of ubiquitous access to media. Second, as part of a research team, the author is embarking on a project to understand the scope of censorship in 21st century United States. This project has three parts. The first involves creating a comprehensive, dynamic map of challenges in the United States that will display challenges by year, location, reason, and initiator. Second, the team will conduct an in-depth investigation into communities that experienced challenges during a defined time frame. Using data from the Census and the General Social Survey, the researchers will be able to more clearly define the geography of censorship using both statistical and survey data. Finally, the third part of the project will consist of interviews and focus groups with librarians and challengers for a small number of geographically diverse challenge cases. It is hoped that these two projects will increase our knowledge of both who brings challenges and why they do so.

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