The Geography of Censorship: Communities, Challengers, and *Harry Potter*

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Abstract

The *Harry Potter* series was one of the most censored books when it was first published. Through the use of the census and other publicly available data attempts to answer the following questions using the *Harry Potter* series as a case study: Is the perception of the pervasiveness of challenges accurate? Are there any commonalities among communities that experience challenges? Are some types of communities more prone to challenges to others? What are the characteristics that might unite these communities? The paper investigates the commonalities and differences among 23 communities that experienced challenges to *Harry Potter* during the years 1999-2007.

Keywords: censorship, intellectual freedom, geography, Harry Potter

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1 Introduction

In the United States, challenges to materials in public institutions are fairly common. Although the data on challenges demonstrate that they happen in communities of all types across the country, when the general public hears about such incidents, they tend to believe that they are solely a Bible Belt or small town phenomenon. Researchers often state that the ubiquity of challenges is one of the most perplexing aspects of working in a library—one never knows when a book will be challenged or which will book will be targeted. The American Library Association, one of the primary aggregators of book challenge statistics, noted that 463 challenges were reported in 2012. Although the association does not release geographic information for the challenges, its materials on book challenges do note that, since statistics were first collected in 1982, requests for removal or relocation have taken place in all 50 states.

The investigative framework for this paper is based on an article written by Barbara Luebke (2000) in response to Douglas Archer's work on religion and intellectual freedom. Luebke notes that she views religious censorship as essentially a community issue. There are residents of her small town in Indiana who move to her location because they believe that it is conservative. Often these new community members are surprised to find out that the community is much more heterogeneous than they expected. Luebke writes that this group tends to be "very vocal about what they believe should be acceptable to everyone" (Luebke, 2000, para. 2). It is possible that this insider/outsider narrative and the perception that a given community does not live up to particular expectations may partially explain the justifications that are given for many challenges. This paper argues that, in essence, community change drives complaints regarding materials in the library.

This paper, which is concerned with the communities in which challenges take place, attempts to answer several questions concerning the ubiquity and pervasiveness of challenge cases. These questions include the following: Is the perception of the pervasiveness of challenges accurate? Are there any commonalities among communities that experience challenges? Are some types of communities more prone to challenges to others? What are the characteristics that might unite these communities? In order to address these questions, this paper discusses challenges to the *Harry Potter* series and explores the communities in which these incidents took place. It delineates some of the communities' uniting characteristics and also

discusses how these communities differ. It is hoped that by better understanding the geography of censorship, librarians and other information professionals can be better prepared for any book challenges that might occur in their institutions.

This study constitutes a pilot study for a larger research project and was conducted in order to test the methodology and viability of the project. The larger research endeavor will focus on all publically available challenges cases within a given time frame and will include demographic and other information from the U.S. Census and the General Social Survey along with data from interviews and/or focus groups.

2   On Challengers

Although as noted above, challengers come from all demographic groups, there is one defining characteristic that unites them — challengers tend to be parents. In fact, as James LaRue notes, they tend to be parents with children between the ages of 4-6 and 14-16 (LaRue, 2007, p. 71). In previous work, the author of this study found that challengers also tend to share certain worldviews including a fear that contemporary society is disintegrating, concern regarding the protection of children's innocence, and a common sense interpretive strategy that they apply to all texts (Knox, 2012). However, there has been very little research that systematically locates and describes the various locations and communities in which book challenges take place.

One exception is the 2009 Mapping Banned Books Project (http://civic.mit.edu/blog/petey/mapping-banned-books-2012), a joint project between the American Library Association, the MIT Center for Civic Media, and the National Coalition Against Censorship, the map uses publically available data to locate where challenges have taken place in the United States. The creator of the map, Chris Peterson, notes that the map demonstrates how geographically dispersed challenges are and how much is still not known about challenges cases. The map was updated in 2011 (http://goo.gl/maps/pWk6).

There has also been work on communities that have experienced challenges and censorship. For example, Louise S. Robbins's the *Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown* (2001) focuses on a public librarian in Bartlesville, Oklahoma who, in the 1950s, was accused of being a communist sympathizer. Although the case was ostensibly about communist planted propaganda that was planted in the library, Robbins notes that members of the community were actually concerned about Brown's work for racial equality. Another work that focuses on censorship and communities is Shirley A. Wiegand and Wayne A. Wiegand's *Books on Trial* (2007). Like Robbins's book, it also centers on the presence of communist works in Oklahoma. Wiegand and Wiegand detail a local raid on a progressive bookstore and its implications for the community.

3   Challengers to *Harry Potter*

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is the focus of this paper. First published in the United States in 1998, the series was the target for many challenges. The author chose *Harry Potter* for this paper because it allows the reason for the challenge to remain constant while exploring the different communities in which the challenges took place. In almost all cases, the books were challenged because they included the theme of witchcraft. According to Robert P. Doyle's *Banned Books* (2010), between 1999 and 2007 there were approximately 50 challenges to the individual books in the *Harry Potter* series. Reasons for banning also included themes such as death, killing, drinking animal blood, the occult, or satanic deception. However, in almost all cases, witchcraft is also mentioned.

Although it is not the focus of this paper, one might surmise that most of the challenges to the *Harry Potter* series were brought by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. It should be noted that though these terms are used interchangeably by the general public, they do not describe people with the same set of religious beliefs. Evangelicals are generally understood to be Christians whose theology emphasizes a personal relationship with Jesus. They may or may not right wing in their orientation. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, are often considered to be a subset of evangelicals and believe in the inerrancy

of the bible, are hostile to modern theology, and are often critical of authenticity of other Christians (Barr, 1984) . However, even with these theological differences, both of these groups would be concerned with the occult aspects of *Harry Potter* and the mass consumption of such problematic material.

There have been several investigations into censorship and the *Harry Potter* series. These tend to be essays that attempt to understand what challengers mean by the term "witchcraft." Peter H. Denton (2002), for example, notes that concern over witchcraft is really more of a deflection for challengers and that they are much more concerned about the popularity of the books. Denton notes that "the real issue here isn't witches, its culture, and more specifically, popular culture. The problem isn't so much Harry Potter, as *Harry Potter* books, which are ending up on far more bookshelves in children's bedrooms than Mandy Goes to Bible Camp" (Denton, 2002, p. 29). Although challengers are concerned with exposing children to the occult, this fear is often encompassed with concerns regarding how children are raised in contemporary society. Denton does note, however, that Rowling's universe does not necessarily match a Christian moral universe in that sometimes there are not equivalent consequences for certain behaviors. That is, bad behavior does not always lead to punishment and vice versa.

Another author, Perry L. Glanzer (2004), takes higher-level view and argues that controversies over *Harry Potter* were actually over clashing worldviews. He argues that there are some individuals in contemporary society who are truly concerned with the themes found in *Harry Potter* and argues that teachers should take their concerns seriously. In particular, Perry argues that educators should respond to these challenges without hypocrisy by acknowledging the power of books and exposing children to many different worldviews throughout the course of their education.

Similar to Denton, in her article on the social context of *Harry Potter* challenges, Amanda Cockrell (2006) argues that popularity might be one explanation for people's uneasiness with the *Harry Potter* series. She also notes that fundamentalist Christians might be more apt to blame the occult for any poor behavior that they observe in their children. Cockrell quotes a study which found that fundamentalist parents tended to equate fantasy with deceit. Cockrell argues that *Harry Potter* is controversial because the series' universe is rooted in the real world and because Rowling is a skilled parodist of fundamentalists. Regarding the first point, Cockrell states that Rowling's vision of witchcraft actually matches how challengers understand witchcraft to operate. For fundamentalist Christians witchcraft is "like angels or the voice of Satan, it is out there, unseen but ready to swallow up the hapless child who can be turned toward its seductive allure, and that it actually works" (Cockrell, 2006, p. 26). Although we cannot see it, Rowling's witchcraft exists in our own world, an idea that ties well with certain understandings of the occult. Cockrell also argues that the Dursleys, Harry Potter's aunt and uncle who adopt him after the death of his parents, are a caricature religious belief. "Coarse, pragmatic materialists the Dursleys are but medieval they also are. They believe in magic, and therefore fear it deeply" (Cockrell, 2006, p. 28). The Dursleys, who are portrayed as oafs throughout the series, are like those who challenge the *Harry Potter* series—they also believe that magic exists. As with the previous explanation, Cockrell notes that Rowling's portrayal seems to be too real for some in our society.

These studies are exemplars of the work on the people who challenged *Harry Potter*. As noted above, these studies did not focus on the various characteristics that defined the communities in which these challenges took place. This paper attempts to explore the traits that unite or divide such communities.

4   Method

All information for this paper comes from Robert P. Doyle's 2010 bibliography, *Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read*. The challenges to books in the *Harry Potter* series took place between 1999 and 2007. Only the first five books of the series are included in the bibliography. In many cases several books in the series were challenged at one time.

The author used Census.gov to find county information for cities that were listed. Counties were used as the unit of analysis in order to maintain consistency across all of the cases. From an initial list of approximately 50 challenges, 23 counties were included in the study (Appendix A).[1]

In order to better understand the demographic makeup of a particular community, the following information was collected for each county and will be described in more detail below: 1. Total population for the years 1990, 2000, and 2010 2. Percentage of population identifying itself as white for 1990, 2000, and 2010 3. Median Income for the years 1989, 1999 and 2005-2009 4. Educational attainment of residents for 1990, 2000, and 2010 5. Number of Christian adherents. The author chose these data points because they seem to most broadly define how one might describe a particular community: by size, racial makeup, income, and education. Although other data might also be included, these constituted starting point for the pilot study.

The U.S. 2010 Census[2] defines population as the count of individuals in a given location during a specific time period. Percentage white is the percentage of the given population who self-identify as White. Median income was used over mean in order to have a better sense of what most people make in a particular county without any outliers that might obscure the average. Adherent data comes from Religious Congregations and Membership Study[3]. Adherents are defined as a complete count of the individuals affiliated with a congregation.

Although it would be possible to run statistical tests on the data collected for the study, the author decided that only descriptive information was necessary. Statistical tests would show if there were significant differences between two data points given but, as will be discussed in further detail below, it is probable that the *perception* of change in these communities matters more to the challengers than the *actual statistical significance* of change among the different data.

5   Map of *Harry Potter* Cases

One of the most important aspects of this study was simply mapping the locations of *Harry Potter* challenge cases. Since these cases are instigated due of books' theme of witchcraft, one might surmise that all of the cases took place in states that have large populations of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. However, the cases covered all regions of the country, not just in the Bible Belt or conservative areas.

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[1] All cases in South Carolina were removed because no city was given.

[2] http://www.census.gov/2010census/

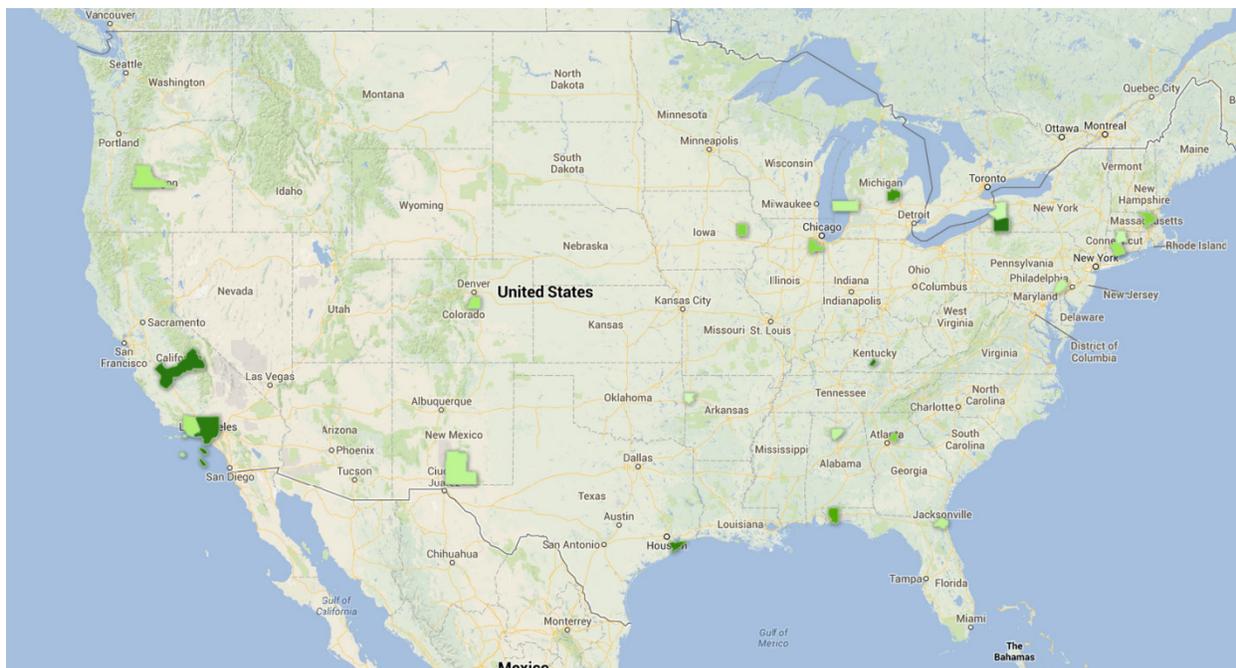[3] http://www.rcms2010.org/compare.php

Figure 1

6 Findings

Although there was not one defining characteristic that covered all of the counties that experienced *Harry Potter* challenges between1999-2007, there were several patterns that could be discerned through careful examination of the demographic data. These have been divided into three major categories each discussed in turn below: religious changes, educational changes, and population changes. The author would like to reiterate that these are preliminary findings.

6.1 Religious Changes

As noted above, "religious adherents" refers to the number of people reported as members by local Christian congregations. One of the most interesting findings in the communities that challenged *Harry Potter* was the volatile nature of these numbers. There is no defining characteristic among the various communities. Some experienced an increase (Fresno, CA 40-47%) while others experienced a large drop (Otero, NM 73.4% - 46.2% from 1990-2000. In areas where there was a decrease in overall population numbers, one sees a corresponding decrease in the number of adherents (Cattaragus NY 48% - 41.6% and Saginaw, MI 57.4% - 49.5%). However one can also see in these numbers that membership in churches dropped from around half of the population to around 2/5ths and, in the second case, from a clear majority to just under half.

It is important to recall that the reduction of congregants can result in the closing of churches in neighborhoods. That is, this decrease can have a physically manifestation in the community. On the other hand, in communities that saw an increase in adherents, it is possible that this increased particular individual's confidence in flexing his or her political muscle over institutions such as the public school or library.

6.2 Educational Changes

Without exception, every community that experienced a Harry Potter challenge also experienced an increase in the number of people who had obtained bachelor's degrees by the age of 25. One of the communities had a large increase in this number was Douglas, Colorado which saw a jump from 40.7% up to 51.9% from 1990 to 2000. Ottawa, Michigan's population of individual's with BAs increased from 18.7% to 26% and Chester, Pennsylvania from 34.7% to 42.5% during the same time period.

It is difficult to know how this change in educational status among community members was perceived. It is possible that these college-educated individuals brought new ideas about reading and religious practices with the. Recall the Luebke quote above in which she mentions that some people moved to her community in order to be surrounded by conservative individuals. It is possible that these changes in educational attainment indicate why they did not find the communities they expected in these areas.

6.3   Population Changes

Perhaps the most interesting characteristic found in all of the communities that experienced a *Harry Potter* challenge was that they all also experienced a change in the racial makeup within these communities. Even when there was a slight decrease in the overall total population, there were concurrent drops in the percentage of people identifying as white. For example, even though the population in Erie, New York dropped from 968,532 to 950,265 from 1990 to 2000, the percentage of the population that was white dropped from 85.9% to 82.2%. In Cattaraugus, New York, the population dropped slightly from 84,234 to 83,955 while the percentage of that was white dropped from 96% to 94.9%. ON the other hand, counties with slight increases in population such as New Haven, Connecticut (804,219 to 824,008) experienced significant changes in the racial makeup in the county (85.5 to 79.4 percent white) from 1990 to 2000.

As noted above, it is difficult to know how these changes in population composition would be perceived by communities. It is possible that these changes in the racial makeup would be perceived as a threat to the cohesiveness of the community by challengers. However, it is impossible to verify this without further investigation.

7   Future Directions

Similar to many pilot studies, this investigation into the communities that experienced *Harry Potter* challenges exposed more questions than it answered. Although there were some tenuous similarities among the communities, only one characteristic (changes in racial demographics) was found in all of the counties. It should also be noted that this study did not include a control group and such changes might be found in communities that did not experience a challenge.

In light of this, there are several different directions that this study might take. As noted above, this paper is a pilot study for a larger investigation into the geography of censorship. The larger project will have three parts. The first will consist of updating the Map of Censorship. It is hoped that the map will be dynamic and indicate the year of the challenge, location, reason, and initiator. The second part of the study will look more in-depth at the 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 project will consist of interviews and focus groups with librarians and challengers for a small number of geographically diverse challenge cases.

8   References

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9 Table of Figures

10 Appendix A – Counties with *Harry Potter* Challenge Cases

State	County
AL	Cullman
AR	Crawford
CA	Fresno
CA	Los Angeles
CA	Ventura
CO	Douglas
CT	Hartford
CT	New Haven
FL	Duval
FL	Santa Rosa
GA	Gwinnett
IA	Linn
IL	Will
KY	Russell
MA	Middlesex
MI	Ottawa
MI	Saginaw
NM	Otero
NY	Cattaraugus
NY	Erie
OR	Deschutes
PA	Chester
TX	Galveston