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Opposing book bans: a resilient and subversive information practice

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Abstract

Introduction. In this paper, we discuss the concepts of censorship, resilience and information precarity. We explain the framework of information precarity and emphasise the agentic responses of marginalised communities, then show that book bans restrict vital access to valuable information. Yet marginalised communities respond through resilience and subversive practices to oppose book bans.

Method. Reflective, conceptual essay; no empirical data.

Analysis. The paper utilises prior research to demonstrate how marginalised communities respond agentially to information precarity (as illustrated, in this paper, with book bans).

Results. Opposing book bans through subversive and proactive actions is a form of resilience demonstrated by marginalised communities.

Conclusion. Censorship, particularly through book challenges, is one way that people attempt to maintain inequity and information precarity. When marginalised communities oppose book bans, they are working to preserve access to diverse books. This approach needs to be critically examined in future work.

Introduction

Information precarity is a framework for recognising both the systemic information barriers and the agentic ways in which marginalised communities resist and overcome those barriers. Espinoza Vasquez and Oltmann (2025: p. 505) defined information precarity as

the politically induced, systemically enforced conditions through which marginalized populations experience unstable, insecure and unreliable access to and literacies of information, exacerbating their underlying/existing social, political, legal, and economic vulnerability and exacerbating inequity. (see also Stewart-Robinson, 2022).

The institutions that surround us in daily life – such as governmental agencies and nonprofit organisations, as well as the regulations, policies and guidelines that are the foundation of these institutions – shape our actions and perspectives. Importantly, we must recognise that these institutions were created by and for the dominant members of society, and they inherently privilege the dominant groups (Butler, 2009).

For example, in many federal government agencies in the US, paperwork, rules and directions are available only online and only in English, despite the fact that over 350 languages are spoken in the US (usa.gov, n.d.) and approximately twelve per cent of people lack *any* access to the Internet (the figure is much higher if we consider irregular access to the Internet, slow connections and those reliant on smartphones for access) (Goldberg, 2024). This digital inequity disproportionately affects racialised, minoritised and low-income people (as does the language divide), meaning that Communities of Colour often have significantly less access to governmental information and websites than the dominant (White) community in the US. This affects access to an incredibly wide array of government resources. In this way, we can see how the interconnectedness of institutional systems, humans and organisations both creates and perpetuates inequality. Similarly, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, much K-12 education pivoted online for one to three semesters (depending on the school district). In households with no, low or unreliable access to the Internet, children were often unable to complete their schoolwork, placing them behind their peers in education. We can thus see how the constellation of institutional decisions, economic forces, social relationships and actions together exacerbate inequities.

In addition to helping us understand that inequality is reinforced by the interdependence between humans, institutions and organisations, this information precarity framework recognises that those who experience information precarity have agency and take concrete actions to better their lives and challenge systems of institutional inequity (Espinoza Vasquez and Oltmann, 2023). Marginalised communities may take defensive, proactive or subversive actions in response to information precarity (Espinoza Vasquez and Oltmann, 2023). Defensive actions often occur when people initially experience new barriers and do not ‘*know the nature and extent of the barrier*’ (p. 8; see also Kitzie et al., 2020; Greyson, 2018). With a proactive response, individuals anticipate precarity and utilise community knowledge to overcome or respond to it. A subversive response to information precarity means that individuals ‘*skillfully and purposefully took actions that challenged the status quo, to counteract barriers which perpetuated their precarity*’ (Espinoza and Oltmann, 2023, p. 10). These different responses are deployed tactically and purposefully in daily life as people and communities encounter informational barriers.

Barriers to information access: book bans

Modern life, for many people, contains many barriers to accessing information. These are often most pronounced for various marginalised communities because, as described above, institutions and systems are designed by and for the dominant groups, often at the expense of traditionally marginalised groups. Furthermore, dominant groups (such as White people) often benefit from the

lopsided systems of information access; thus, challenges to these systems are frequently met with opposition.

To make this discussion more concrete and immediate, we turn to the problem of book bans in public and school libraries. (While our paper focuses on book banning in the United States, book bans are increasingly common across many national contexts.)

Book challenges in America have been steadily on the rise over the past several years; the American Library Association (ALA) reported a 1553 per cent increase in book challenges from 2020 to 2023 (ALA, 2024). Furthermore, ALA estimates that 85 per cent of challenges may go unreported, meaning that the actual number of book challenges could be much higher. The books most frequently challenged during this time span nearly always have authors or protagonists who are People of Colour and/or members of the LGBTQ+ community (ALA, 2023). This point is worth emphasising: the sharp escalation of book challenges in the US has focused almost exclusively on books by and about marginalised communities.

As far back as 2014, Lo (2014) noted that book challenges often targeted books with diverse protagonists (see also Oltmann, 2017; Knox, 2019). This trend has expanded as the number of challenges nationwide has expanded. For example, in 2023, ALA reported that books featuring LGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals were targeted in 47 per cent of censorship attempts (ALA, 2023). Spoon and Langrock (2024) reported that 59 per cent of the book bans reported by PEN America were ‘children’s books featuring diverse characters or nonfiction books about historical figures and social movements’ (para. 5). Similarly, Goncalves et al. (2024) examined over 2,500 books banned in 2021–2012 and reported that banned books were more likely to be written by People of Colour and feature People of Colour.

Alter (2024) reported that, ‘Censorship efforts have become increasingly organized and politicized, supercharged by conservative groups like Moms for Liberty and Utah Parents United, which have pushed for legislation that regulates the content of library collections ... Many of the targeted titles feature L.G.B.T.Q. characters, or deal with race and racism’ (see also Harris and Alter, 2023).

When people challenge the inclusion of certain books in a library, typically they are concerned with the content and the way(s) the content is presented; after analysing challengers’ discourse, Knox (2019) concluded that ‘what the challengers want is a sanitized view of diverse peoples’ stories—one that does not take into account what it means to have a non-dominant identity in American society’ (p. 34).

Challenges to books, in the US, have gone beyond the stereotypical image of concerned parents in a local library. For example, in 2022, a pastor in Tennessee burned a dumpster full of books that he deemed ‘demonic’ (Sung, 2022). In 2024, a political candidate in the state of Missouri used a flamethrower on books that she viewed as controversial in an ad, with the implicit promise that she would further attack libraries and their collections if elected (McMunn, 2024). The state of Utah declared thirteen books forbidden in school libraries and said the books had to be destroyed (Hanson and Bedayn, 2024), and South Carolina similarly banned seven books statewide (Hall, 2024). Many public and school libraries in the US have dealt with angry patrons and parents at board meetings. Such patrons may become very aggressive, engaging in name-calling and pulling book passages out of context to increase shock and discomfort. As Stroshane (2021: p. 20) writes:

Combative disruptions have also been taking place at public library board meetings over books, displays, and programs. Just as with school boards, public library board elections are seeing heavy conservative political influence opposed to promoting racial equity and gender inclusivity.

Librarians have lost their jobs, and funding for libraries has been cut drastically (Jensen, 2024). Legislative attacks against libraries in the US have increased, as well (ALA, 2021). For example, a bill in Idaho would prohibit librarians from making materials available to minors, if the material includes homosexuality or sexual intercourse (Kottke, 2024; see also Alter, 2024).

These attacks against libraries and their collections are part of broader campaigns to control societal narratives about who belongs and who is worthy. Book bans are one vector of this campaign, along with state and federal bills to limit discussion of topics like critical race theory and LGBTQ identities. DeVenny (2023) articulated the underlying purpose of these attacks:

Characterizing discussions of race, gender, and LGBTQ+ experiences as ‘anti-American,’ as some lawmakers have done when introducing these measures, begs the question of who gets to be an American ... what becomes clearer each day is that there’s a well-coordinated and increasingly prominent effort seeking to narrowly define what it means to be an American and who gets to lay claim to Americanism – in a thinly-veiled attempt to maintain and exacerbate a power stronghold over historically marginalized groups (para. 2).

This excerpt demonstrates that book bans (and many proposed laws, often suggested in parallel with book bans) are driven by a desire to keep marginalised communities marginalised. Attacks against libraries and their collections are part of broader campaigns to control societal narratives about who belongs and who is worthy. As marginalised groups tell their stories without sugarcoating, dominant groups have become increasingly hostile. We argue that attempts to ban books – particularly books by and about People of Colour and the LGBTQ community – are a way of creating barriers to accessing vital, valuable information, thus perpetuating marginalised groups’ vulnerabilities. In turn, this can affect the information practices and choices of these (and other) communities.

Access to information – including information in diverse literature – matters. Practically speaking, access in a library can translate to enhanced education, job opportunities and professional development, improved health and overall development, and so on. More broadly, books and other forms of information can help individuals build a sense of belonging and develop a sense of their own self. In her foundational piece, Rudine Sims Bishop explained the importance of diverse literature:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (1990, p. ix).

Botelho (2021) elaborated on these points, noting that ‘Texts as mirrors reflect how society is organized through language use (discourse). As windows, books offer a panoramic view of how power is enacted through words and images’ (p. 123; see also Oltmann, 2017; Cahill et al., 2023). For example, LGBTQ youth may suffer from isolation, uncertainty and negative stereotypes regarding their sexuality and acceptance from friends and family, but reading about teens with similar experiences can improve their self-esteem and support systems. It ‘creates opportunities for individuals to reflect on their own experiences, often gaining more self-awareness and understanding. It allows individuals to see themselves as part of the world they inhabit’ (Oltmann, 2017: p.414). In addition, books as windows provide ‘the opportunity to learn how to function in a culturally pluralistic world’

(Naidoo, 2014, p. 6). Himmelstein (2021) explained that 'books can dispel stereotypes and offer a more balanced view of the world to kids who grow up in homogeneous environments' (p. 23).

Betsalel and Shechtman (2017) suggested that, 'through identification with story characters, children connect to their own difficulties and find solutions to personal problems' (p. 474). Their research focused on Israeli youth who experienced parental loss or absence and lived in foster homes; the research shared superhero stories with these children:

The assumption was that treating them with superhero stories may empower them and provide them with hope for their future. Superhero stories were chosen because superhero myths are metaphors of one's journey to find meaning in life through the service of others in need. Furthermore, [many] superhero stories are based on parental loss experienced at an early age, and involve patterns of surviving trauma through becoming a superhero...Building on the strength of superheroes, children are offered options of developing optimism, hope, love, forgiveness, courage, and creativity (pp. 474, 476).

In the superhero stories, youth were able to see examples of redemption, motivation and resilience, which led many of them to develop new, focused, positive goals for their future (such as academia, sports and military service; p. 485). These superhero stories, then, served as sliding glass doors for the youth in the study. They were able to enter new (fictional) worlds and viscerally experience the emotional growth of the main characters, which in turn affected their own growth.

Importantly, McNair (2016) noted that we all have complex, multi-faceted identities, and thus there are multiple ways that we can feel seen or reflected in literature; a particular book may be a mirror for some parts of our identity, while serving as a window in other ways (see also Hughes-Hassell, 2013). Likewise, it is essential to note that Bishop developed these metaphors of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors as rationales for including diverse, multicultural perspectives in schools and libraries. O'Donnell (2019) said that Bishop's approach calls for 'more culturally relevant practices' in schools and libraries (p. 18), such as purposefully seeking out materials that portray racial and ethnic minorities in accurate, relevant and positive ways, in contrast to stereotypical, narrow and negative perspectives.

Resisting precarity, challenging book bans

Despite the recent surge in book bans, information by, about and for People of Colour and the LGBTQ community continues to grow and be celebrated. As described above, marginalised communities have agency and actively respond to counteract the information precarity they face. Rather than being perceived as faceless, hapless victims, marginalised individuals should be seen as agentially challenging barriers and inventively solving problems. To the best of our knowledge, there is no systematic documentation of how marginalized communities are responding to ongoing book challenges, but we can point to several examples of agentic responses; in particular, we recognise both proactive and subversive responses to attempts to ban books.

In 2021, for example, the school district in York, Pennsylvania, instituted a *quiet* book ban: without a formal announcement, the school board voted to ban hundreds of items on a list compiled by a diversity committee to serve as a resource guide in York schools (Paz and Cramer, 2021). A student group, the Panthers Anti-Racist Union, led successful student protests to overturn the ban. As Pendharkar (2023) explained:

the protests in Central York are among at least a dozen examples nationwide of students organizing to resist books bans in recent years as the restrictions on works housed in school libraries and classrooms have spread across the country. The student resistance is a small,

but growing trend as districts continue to limit students' access to books and other materials" (para. 6).

These students, along with supportive parents, teachers, and community members, are subversively challenging so-called quiet book bans. Rather than acquiescing to censorship, these students are agentially pushing back and demanding equitable access to stories by, about and for marginalised communities (which are, often, reflective of these students).

At least six US states (California, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Vermont, and Washington) have passed laws that effectively ban book bans in libraries and/or schools. These can be seen as proactive steps to protect access to information in libraries. Karnowski and Cataline (2024) described the benefit of such laws for marginalised individuals:

The move to quash book bans is welcome to people like Shae Ross, a queer and out Minnesota high school senior who has fought on the local level against bans on books dealing with sexuality, gender and race. Ross, 18, said she is encouraged to see her governor and leaders of other states are taking the fight statewide (para. 2).

In our view, these book ban challenges are an example of collective resilience - a powerful way that marginalised individuals and communities navigate information precarity. They are subversive political information practices through which marginalised groups actively resist oppressive structures.

Although defined many ways in the literature, many individual-focused conceptualisations of resilience focus on it as 'a dynamic, interactive process that supports positive outcomes in the face of acute and/or chronic stressors' (Theron et al., 2017, p. 493; Brooks, 2006). Resilience is understood to be problem-based: that is, there must be some risk or adversity that a person experiences; then the individual works to overcome or solve the adversity through creative and meaningful deployment of their inner resources. Tilliot et al. (2022) noted that 'resilience is multifactorial, and seemingly influenced by environmental, familial, biological, interpersonal, cultural and community factors' (p. 135). Key components of resilience include traits such as 'the ability to control temperament, exhibit friendliness, elicit positive attention from family members, and maintain a positive self-concept and self-esteem ... initiating autonomy with tasks, developing independence, taking a proactive approach to problem solving, maintaining persistence and concentration with jobs and taking pleasure in novel experiences' (Tilliot et al., p. 136). Similarly, Richards et al. (2016) defined resilience as 'achieving positive outcomes despite challenging circumstances, successfully coping with trauma, and evading negative paths associated with risks' (p. 1; see also Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012; Richards, 2006).

Many researchers have studied how to develop resilience, particularly in youth; data demonstrates that resilient youth are more likely to overcome adversity, avoid risky behaviours and achieve personal success (see Richards et al., 2012). 'Resilience-based interventions' try to identify and evaluate 'both internal and external resources and assets' that can be developed or utilised by individuals experiencing adversity (Richards et al., p. 2). Within this body of work, several scholars have studied how storytelling can aid in building resilience. For example, Mayaba and Wood (2015) found that stories could instil a sense of hope and perseverance in children. Markland (2024) reported that 'storytelling builds essential emotional and cognitive skills that equip children to navigate life with resilience, empathy, and self-assurance' (p. 41). In a two-year study, Beaudoin et al. (2016) tracked over 350 children and found that narrative therapy and writing their stories helped youth to develop the skills of resilience. In an extensive review of the relevant literature, Ramamurthy et al. (2024) reported that

storytelling methods/interventions do influence resilience in children ... Storytelling provides a way for individuals to make sense of their hardships, find meaning in them and recount their stories of difficulty and adversity (p. 537; see also East et al., 2010).

In their study, Theron et al. (2017) used African folktales (first recounted by African elders) to help build resilience in South African youth. Theron et al. (2017) explained, 'We asked African elders across South Africa to tell us stories that they remembered hearing when they were children and that encouraged them to *keep going* when life was challenging' (p. 494; emphasis in original). These folktales were then vetted by psychologists to select ones that had 'resilience-promoting potential' (p. 494). These stories, the authors suggested, were '*respectful of the constructive cultural norms, values and expectations*' (p. 502) of the children specifically because the stories were African in origin and nature. In Bishop's (1990) terms, we might say these stories served as windows and mirrors for the youth: they were able to see themselves and their worlds reflected in the stories, and they looked through *windows* to learn about resilience.

Nonetheless, resilience has been widely criticised as a concept, because it can inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequities by placing the burden of adaptation on marginalised communities, rather than addressing underlying structural issues (Borges-Mendez and Caron, 2019; Smith et al. 2022). In other words, resilience has the potential to implicitly assign responsibility for systemic issues to vulnerable populations, thus normalising inequity and diverting attention from the structural changes necessary to address root causes of marginalisation.

Too often, conceptualisations of resilience have '*fundamental shortcomings including a superficial understanding of the structural nature of inequality and power with respect to how social relations and political interests guide decision-making and opportunity for any entity (e.g., community, institution, household)*' (Borges-Mendez and Caron, 2019, p. 6; see also Vale, 2014). Likewise, Bene et al (2014) criticised the concept of resilience for its '*inability to appropriately capture and reflect social dynamics in general and issues of agency and power in particular*' (p. 606).

For example, some families lacked adequate Internet access during the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting their children's ability to complete schoolwork online. Resourcefully, these families turned to free Wi-Fi available through nearby fast-food restaurants (Ebrahimji, 2020). A simplistic, individual-focused resilience approach would applaud this innovation and likely stop the analysis there, rather than examining the structural inequities that prevent these families from accessing affordable Internet and that have persisted post-lockdown (for a more systemic approach to this problem, see Ali, 2021). Complex socio-political and economic factors, along with systemic, institutionalised racism and classism, all played a role in creating such situations.

Therefore, in this paper, we advocate for *resilience* as defined by Borges-Mendez and Caron's framework (2019), as a collective and transformative process. We see this process as enabling communities to confront systemic inequities – specifically those rooted in political, social and religious impositions that affect access to information. Borges-Mendez and Caron described four advanced to *decolonising resilience*: this approach recognises that local actors are capable of collective action to enact self-reliance; emphasises local and indigenous learning and institutions; encourages the inclusion of previously excluded communities; and emphasises '*horizontal micro-connectivity, deliberative practices, and coordination between organizations in civil society and communities*' (p. 8).

By decolonising resilience (Borges-Mendez and Caron, 2019), we can attend to both individual and systemic levels, identifying that structural inequities often create the precarious situations that

require resilience. Furthermore, decolonising resilience appreciates that resilience is *already happening* at the individual and community levels, as marginalised folks agentially solve problems and persist in their daily lives. From this perspective, then, finding ways to recognise, celebrate and promote resilience can be seen as both a proactive and a subversive approach to precarity.

For example, People of Colour are continuing to tell their stories – stories by them, about them and for them. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in Wisconsin has documented how many children's books it receives (from publishers) that are by and about BIPOC individuals, as well as other aspects of identity (including disability, LGBTQ and religion). The number of books by BIPOC creators and about BIPOC characters has been increasing since 2015; the number tripled from 2015 to 2020, although the rate of increase has since slowed somewhat. In 2023, 49 per cent of children's books documented by the CCBC had a primary or significant secondary character who is BIPOC; furthermore, 40 per cent of books were by a Person of Colour. Of the books the CCBC received in 2023, 7 per cent featured a primary or significant secondary character / human subject with a disability or were about one or more disabilities, 7 per cent featured LGBTQ+ themes or characters, and 4 per cent featured a minority religion.

The Panthers Anti-Racist Union adopted a community-driven approach to knowledge access rather than succumbing to censorship. Their collective and self-reliant actions did not depend on external advocacy organizations or policymakers. By standing against the ban, students made sure that their own stories, identities and experiences were included in the curriculum, which helped make literature about marginalised populations more accessible. The policy changes achieved by the Panthers Anti-Racist Union and the changes tracked by the CCBC illustrate how resilience and subversive information practices can lead to significant systemic change.

About the authors

Author bios:

Dr. Shannon M. Oltmann's research focuses on access to information and how it is often curtailed or restricted. Her collaborative work has frequently studied censorship and book banning in many contexts. In addition, she utilises the framework of information precarity, with colleagues, to investigate lack of access and agentic responses.

Dr. Espinoza Vasquez's research examines how marginalised communities and activists leverage Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to combat inequities. Her transdisciplinary and participatory approach involves collaboration with stakeholders and emphasises the importance of broader social, technological and environmental contexts when underserved communities create their own support systems.

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