

Censorship on the Rise: A Review of Book Challenges in America in 2023

Jennifer Elaine Steele¹

¹Louisiana State University

Abstract: In 2023, the United States witnessed a significant rise in censorship and book challenges across the country, particularly in schools and public libraries. Using a narrative review approach, the article investigates the cultural, political, and educational dynamics that fueled these trends. The year saw increased legislative efforts, particularly in conservative-leaning states, aimed at restricting access to materials deemed inappropriate for young readers, with a focus on books addressing LGBTQIA+ themes, racial inequality, and other sensitive topics. Supporters of these measures argue for parental rights and protecting children from content they believe is unsuitable, while opponents see these actions as a direct threat to intellectual freedom and educational diversity. Public and school libraries became battlegrounds where librarians, educators, parents, and advocacy groups clashed over the scope and limits of free expression. This narrative review highlights key instances of book bannings and challenges and analyzes the legal and societal implications of restricting access to literature. The article also examines how these debates reflect broader cultural divides in the U.S., with issues of race, gender identity, and political ideology at the center of the controversy. In conclusion, the article discusses the potential long-term impact of censorship on educational systems, intellectual freedom, and the role of libraries as spaces for free inquiry and diverse perspectives.



Introduction

In 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) reported a significant surge in censorship and book challenges across the United States, highlighting a concerning trend in the landscape of intellectual freedom. According to ALA data, the number of challenged books reached unprecedented levels, with numerous titles facing scrutiny and removal from libraries and schools. The number of titles targeted for censorship increased by 65 percent in 2023 compared to 2022. Overall, efforts to censor a total of 4,240 unique titles were documented in 2023 (“ALA Reports” 2024). Public libraries were frequent targets in 2023, with the number of titles targeted for censorship at public libraries increasing by 92 percent over the previous year; and school libraries seeing an 11 percent increase (“ALA Reports” 2024).

This increase in censorship reflects a broader cultural and political climate where debates over content in educational and public spaces have intensified. Books addressing topics such as race, gender, and LGBTQIA+ issues have been particularly targeted, signaling a growing polarization over what is deemed appropriate for various audiences. Seven of the ten books on the American Library Association’s “Top 10 Most Challenged Books of 2023” list were cited as containing LGBTQIA+ content. Overall, titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47 percent of those targeted in censorship attempts (“ALA Reports” 2024). The American Library Association’s “Top 10 Most Challenged Books of 2023” list (“Top 10 Archive” n.d.) included:

1. *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe
2. *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson
3. *This Book is Gay* by Juno Dawson
4. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
5. *Flamer* by Mike Curato
6. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
7. (TIE) *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins
8. (TIE) *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews
9. *Let’s Talk About It* by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan
10. *Sold* by Patricia McCormick

The rise in book challenges has sparked vigorous debates about the balance between protecting young readers from potentially controversial material and upholding the principles of free expression. Advocates for intellectual freedom argue that these efforts to restrict access to diverse perspectives undermine the very essence of educational enrichment and critical thinking. Conversely, those supporting the challenges often frame their arguments around concerns about age-appropriateness and moral values. As this issue continues to unfold, the

ALA's data underscores the urgent need for dialogue and policies that safeguard the right to access a wide range of viewpoints while addressing the complexities of modern educational environments.

Using a narrative review approach, the study sought to address the following research question:

RQ: How did book challenges and related legislative actions in 2023 shape access to materials in U.S. public and school libraries, and what common mechanisms and outcomes characterized these censorship efforts?

Literature Review

Examples of censorship exist throughout history, “from the Spanish Inquisition or the New England witch hunts to the book burnings of Nazi Germany” (Molz 1990, p. 19). The term “censorship” can be traced back to its Latin root *censere*, which means to “estimate or assess” (Curry 1997, p. 9). In ancient Rome, a censor was “a magistrate whose original functions of registering citizens and their property were greatly expanded to include supervision of senatorial rolls and moral conduct” (“Censor” 2020, para. 1). According to *The Oxford Reference Dictionary*, a censor is “an official with the power to suppress parts of books, films, letters, news, etc. on the grounds of obscenity, risk to security, etc. – to treat (books, films, etc.) in this way” (Hawkins 1988, p. 144). Today, “censors can be parents, government officials, or even librarians themselves. Censorship can come in different forms, including book banning or even book burning” (Steele 2024, p. 2).

In the United States, book banning is not new, with the practice dating back to Puritan times. In 1637, a man named Thomas Morton published a book titled “New English Canaan.” It criticized “conservative Puritan life” (Rossen 2021, para. 4), which Morton had become familiar with after moving to Massachusetts in 1624. His book was perceived as an attack on “Puritan morality” (Rossen 2021, para. 5), and so the book was banned, as was Morton himself. He was refused entry back into Massachusetts until his death in 1643 (Rossen 2021).

Throughout the history of the United States, examples of censorship and censorship attempts within its public libraries abound. While public libraries have traditionally been seen as bastions of free access to information, censorship in these institutions is not a new phenomenon. In the history of public libraries, censorship is “as old as the public library movement itself” (Thompson 1975, p. 1). As Wiegand (2015) put it, “Censorship was never far from public library

practices” (p. 36). Since their beginning, American public libraries have faced censorship issues (Steele 2017, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Wiegand 2015).

Throughout this history of censorship, issues surrounding sexuality have long been at the heart of many book challenges and other censorship attempts. LGBTQIA+ content has historically been targeted according to many analyses of censorship trends over the last several decades (Doyle 2000; Foerstel 2002; Harer and Harris 1994; Karolides, Bald, and Sova 2005; Sova 1998; Woods 1979). Some state legislatures have even gone so far as to limit state funding for public libraries that do not agree to restrictions on certain controversial LGBTQIA+ materials (Barack 2005; Oder 2006).

In schools, the debate over book censorship is particularly heated, as educators and school boards grapple with balancing the need for inclusive, diverse literature with the desire to protect students from material deemed harmful. Some school districts have implemented policies to remove books that address topics such as systemic racism or sexual identity, often in response to parental complaints. Since 2021, there has been a significant rise in the number of books challenged and banned by school districts across the United States (Steele 2024). In the 2021–2022 academic year alone, more than 2,500 books were banned across 138 school districts in 32 states, affecting 5,049 schools and nearly 4 million students (Pendharkar 2022). Notably, 41 percent of these banned books featured LGBTQ characters or themes. This includes 671 titles that directly explore LGBTQ topics or include main or major secondary characters who identify as LGBTQ, with 145 of those titles specifically focusing on transgender individuals and their experiences (Pendharkar 2022).

Data has shown that in addition to books about LGBTQIA+ characters, books featuring people of color have been disproportionately challenged or banned in schools. 40 percent of all books banned from July 2021 to June 2022 contained protagonists or important secondary characters of color, representing 659 unique banned titles. Additionally, 338 titles specifically explored issues of race and racism, accounting for 21 percent of all books that were banned (Pendharkar 2022).

With schools frequently banning books representing the voices of traditionally marginalized and underrepresented communities, especially those of color or members of the LGBTQIA+ community, “this can lead to students feeling as if they are not wanted or they don’t belong” (Steele 2024, p. 6). According to Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom:

The students are telling us that when a book that reflects their life and experience is removed from the shelf, it’s an act of erasure...And

particularly gay, queer, and transgender teens, black teens, teens of color are stepping up at board meetings to say that having these books is important, that to take them away is a real message to them that they are not part of the school community, that they don't belong. (Pendharkar 2022, para. 23)

The broader implications of book censorship in public libraries and schools extend beyond individual challenges to specific titles. The growing wave of book bans raises important questions about who gets to decide what is appropriate for readers, and whether censorship efforts reflect broader political and ideological battles. Advocates for intellectual freedom argue that students and the public benefit from exposure to a wide range of perspectives, including those that challenge their assumptions or deal with difficult topics. Conversely, those in favor of book bans believe that schools and libraries have a responsibility to protect young readers from content they view as harmful or inappropriate. As the debate continues, it highlights the tension between the desire to safeguard children and the fundamental right to access information and diverse ideas.

Methods

This narrative review focused on documented incidents of book challenges and related legislative actions occurring in 2023 within U.S. public and school libraries. Coverage was intentionally limited to these two institutional settings and to selected state-level legislative examples in order to capture the most visible and policy-relevant arenas in which censorship debates unfolded during the year. Sources were identified through reports from professional organizations, major news outlets, and publicly available legislative records, with emphasis on cases that were well-documented and corroborated across multiple outlets. Featured cases were selected because they illustrate common mechanisms of censorship in 2023—such as funding pressure, removal or relocation of materials, criminal or administrative penalties, and parental-choice compromises—while also reflecting differing local outcomes. Together, these illustrative cases provide a representative cross-section of how censorship efforts manifested across varied political and geographic contexts.

Results

Public Library Challenges

Keeping along with past censorship trends, many of the books challenged in public libraries in the United States throughout 2023 dealt with LGBTQIA+ related themes. Topping ALA's "Top 10 Most Challenged Books of 2023" was

Gender Queer: A Memoir, a 2019 graphic memoir that was written and illustrated by Maia Kobabe. It recounts the author's journey from adolescence to adulthood and their exploration of gender identity and sexuality, ultimately identifying as being outside of the gender binary. Initially, *Gender Queer* received only a small printing and was marketed toward the older teen and adult demographic. It increasingly entered the collections of high school and middle school libraries after receiving an Alex Award in 2020 ("Alex Awards" n.d.), an award given by the American Library Association to "books written for adults that have special appeal to young adults ages 12 through 18" (Alter 2022, para. 22). Since 2021, its inclusion in American libraries, both public and school libraries, has been frequently challenged by parents and others, based on the presence of some sexually explicit illustrations. The American Library Association ranked it as the most challenged book of 2021, 2022, and 2023 ("Top 10 Archive" n.d.).

One example of a challenge involving *Gender Queer* as well as several other titles dealing with LGBTQIA+ themes occurred at Samuels Public Library in Front Royal, Virginia. Samuels Public Library, founded in the 18th century, is structured like a nonprofit organization that receives the bulk of its funding from Warren County taxpayers. In June 2023, the county's Board of Supervisors voted to withhold 75% of the library's funding unless the library board amended its bylaws to grant the county greater authority over its governance (Barakat 2023). According to Melody Hotek, president of the library's board of trustees, and Eileen Grady, the library's interim director, this decision stemmed from pressure by a small activist group who assert that "any children's book with LGBTQIA+ characters or themes is pornography" (Barakat 2023, para. 5). This group, known as "Clean Up Samuels," maintains that their primary concern is ensuring the library board remains accountable to the taxpayers who fund it (Barakat 2023).

In response to "Clean up Samuels," defenders of the library created "Save Samuels," a community group that is opposed to the censorship of books that contain LGBTQIA+ topics and characters. Hotek and Grady have tried to find a middle ground between the groups—separating books that reference sexuality in any way in a new section called "new adult" and parents having the ability to place restrictions on their children's library cards (Barakat 2023).

Another example with a more positive outcome for intellectual freedom advocates occurred in Homer, Alaska. In January 2023, the Homer Public Library Advisory Board voted to keep books featuring LGBTQIA+ themes and characters in the children's and young adult sections as opposed to moving the materials to a separate location, keeping the 55 challenged books where they were currently located. This commitment followed Director Dave Berry's earlier decision to deny a petition signed by 500 people to move reading

materials. The petition asked that the library remove, or transfer, books that promoted transgender ideology, drag queens, and LGBTQIA+ themes (“Alaska” 2023). After losing the petition, resident Madeline Veldstra appealed Berry’s decision, noting that the public library removed Dr. Seuss books “due to racist content” (“Alaska” 2023, para. 9). Berry remarked that he can relate to parents who want to protect their children, but that the public library has a responsibility “to ensure everyone who visits has the tools that they need” (“Alaska” 2023, para. 12).

These cases highlight the increasing tensions between advocates of intellectual freedom and individuals or groups pushing to restrict access to materials that reflect LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences. While some public libraries have faced punitive funding threats and political pressure for maintaining inclusive collections, others have stood firm in their commitment to equitable access and representation. The contrasting responses in Virginia and Alaska demonstrate the complexity of these challenges, with local values, governance structures, and community advocacy playing pivotal roles in determining outcomes. As public libraries continue to navigate these conflicts, their decisions will shape not only the availability of diverse materials but also the broader cultural discourse around inclusion, identity, and the rights of all individuals to see themselves reflected in the public sphere.

School Library Challenges

Like in public libraries, many of the books targeted in school libraries in 2023 dealt with LGBTQIA+ related themes. One frequent example would be *Flamer*, a semi-autobiographical graphic novel by Mike Curato (2020). The story is set in 1995 at a Boy Scouts summer camp, and centers on the character Aiden, who is bullied for his appearance, including acting in a manner that is considered stereotypical of gay men (Curato 2020). The book came in at number five on the American Library Association’s “Top 10 Most Challenged Books of 2023” list (“Top 10 Archive” n.d.).

One example of the book being challenged in 2023 occurred in Cobb County, Georgia. The Cobb County School District, Georgia’s second largest school district, removed two books from 20 of its school libraries after the school board voted to fire a teacher for reading a book about gender-identity to their fifth-grade students. The two books, *Flamer* by Mike Curato (2020) and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews (2012) were eliminated from Cobb County school libraries due to containing discussions of sex, profanity, and LGBTQIA+ people (Amy 2023). According to John Florestra, the district’s chief strategy and accountability officer, “Our board and superintendent are clear — any book, video, or lesson which contains sexually explicit content is

entirely unacceptable and has no place in our schools” (Amy 2023, para. 5) Jeff Hubbard, the president of the Cobb County Association of Educators, commented that this can lead to librarians “being disciplined or fired” (Amy 2023, para. 6).

Advocacy coordinator for the Georgia Media Library Association, Nan Brown stated that it’s important that students be able to see themselves and others in books, and questioned the removal of *Flamer*, which had been awarded a Lambda Literary Award in 2021 (“Lambda Literary” 2024), in addition to being nominated by Georgia librarians for a statewide award. With these challenges, Hubbard fears that teachers in Cobb County will begin to censor their classroom libraries, and that the rules placed by the school board will become increasingly vague, confusing teachers on what they can, and can’t, teach (Amy 2023).

A challenge also occurred in Newtown, Connecticut, when the Newtown Board of Education agreed unanimously on a compromise that kept the two challenged books, Mike Curato’s (2020) *Flamer* (Curato 2020) and *Blankets* by Craig Thompson (2003), on school shelves, if school administrators created a process that supports the choices of guardians on their own children’s access to the books, and other related materials (Flesher 2023). School officials noted in a board meeting that “*Flamer* had never been checked out and that *Blankets* had been checked out once since 2013” (Flesher 2023, para. 13).

Republican board members, Janet Kuzma and Jennifer Larkin, resigned after this compromise, with Kuzman saying that her resignation was “due in part by the behavior of people attending the school board’s public meetings” (Flesher 2023, para. 5). Like Kuzman, librarian Suzanne Hurley said at an earlier school board meeting that she and her library colleagues had been accused by community members of “negligence and incompetence” (Flesher 2023, para. 10). Newtown board member Allison Plante recognized that the process of reaching this compromise had “monopolized the time and attention of the board for two months” (Flesher 2023, para. 15).

Another 2023 book challenge occurred in the Central Bucks School District in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Resident Shannon Harris submitted the challenge paperwork for *Living Dead Girl* by Elizabeth Scott (2008), claiming the book is about pedophilia which Harris considers a violation of the new policy on the topics of sexual content and nudity (Ciavaglia 2023). This is one of the 68 books that Harris identified in Central Bucks School District through the organization, Woke-Pa, whose mission is to “reclaim their schools from activists that promote harmful agendas” (Ciavaglia 2023, para. 4).

The district’s new policy requires that a review committee be created for the challenged book and that the committee include the district’s library coordinator

and language arts coordinator. The superintendent then has the sole discretion on who serves on the outside challenge committees (Ciavaglia 2023).

In addition to LGBTQIA+ and sexually explicit materials, religious texts were also challenged in school libraries. In Salt Lake City, Utah, the Davis School District was asked to remove the Book of Mormon from school libraries. The complaint was based on the passage of Utah's state legislation that prohibits pornographic or indecent reading materials in public schools and followed an earlier December complaint of removing the Bible from school library shelves. A Davis district review committee decided in May 2023 to keep the Bible in the high school libraries, but not for younger grades (Fortin 2023).

The curriculum director for Utah Parents United, Brooke Stephens, stated that the complaints against religious texts “minimized the real concerns of parents” (Fortin 2023, para.10), while Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, hopes that these same complaints will encourage school boards and state legislators to “think more carefully of what they’re doing to school libraries” (Fortin 2023, para.19). Ken Ivory, Republican state representative, described the complaints against religious texts as “antics that drain school resources, while also fully trusting Davis School District’s review process” (Fortin 2023, para. 21).

The growing number of school library challenges in 2023 underscores the intensifying clash between those seeking to restrict access to materials they find objectionable and those advocating for intellectual freedom and inclusive representation. While some districts, like Cobb County, have taken punitive actions against educators and removed award-winning books due to their LGBTQIA+ themes or perceived sexual content, others, such as Newtown, have attempted to strike a balance by empowering parental choice while maintaining access. These controversies reveal a broader cultural debate over who gets to decide what students read, and they place educators and librarians at the center of increasingly politicized and emotionally charged battles. The inclusion of religious texts in recent challenges further complicates the conversation, exposing the inconsistencies and far-reaching implications of censorship policies. As these disputes continue to unfold, the future of school library collections—and the educational values they reflect—will likely depend on the persistence of both local advocacy and a renewed commitment to the foundational principles of education, free inquiry, and equitable access.

States and Censorship

In 2023, in addition to unprecedented numbers of book challenges across the nation, state governments also enacted laws regarding what books will be available in their schools and public libraries. In 2022 Florida became the first in what would become a wave of red states to enact laws making it easier for

parents and guardians to challenge books in school libraries they deem “to be pornographic, deal improperly with racial issues or are in other ways inappropriate for students” (DeMillo, Izaguirre, and Riccardi 2023, para. 2). In March 2022 Governor Ron DeSantis signed a law that,

Requires schools to open to the public any committee meeting where books will be reviewed for purchase, and to make all material available for public review before it is approved. It also mandates that schools post all the selection criteria they use in choosing books. (Solochek 2022, para. 12).

In Arkansas, Republican Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed a law in March 2023 that could impose criminal penalties on librarians who knowingly provide “harmful” materials to minors (Vrbin 2023). The law also established a process for the public to challenge materials and ask they be relocated to a section minors can’t access. According to Vrbin (2023),

The law allows people to “challenge the appropriateness” of school or public libraries’ offerings and have them reviewed by a committee of five to seven people selected by school principals or head librarians. The committee would vote on whether to remove the material after hearing the complainant’s case in a public meeting, and a complainant may appeal the committee’s decision if the majority votes no. (Vrbin 2023, para. 4)

Additionally, “Appeals at school libraries would go to the school board for a final decision, and appeals at public libraries would go to the county judge or the county quorum court” (Vrbin 2023, para. 5).

In April 2023, Indiana lawmakers gave their final approval for a bill that would require school libraries in the state to publicly post a list of reading materials they offer and to provide a complaints process for community members (Rodgers 2023). The bill would also not allow schools and librarians to argue, as a legal defense, that the materials in their libraries have educational value, but would allow them to argue for “literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” (Rodgers 2023, para. 2). Supporters of the legislation expressed concern that students would have access to materials that are sexually inappropriate or pornographic, while critics explained that the same legislation would open the door to banning materials because some people don’t like the topics (Rodgers 2023).

Also in April of 2023, Missouri Republicans introduced another rule that would require public libraries in the state to certify that they have policies to restrict obscene materials, or face funding cuts. Missouri librarians state that the Republican lawmakers' concerns are unfounded, as there are already policies in place to prevent sexually explicit materials from being a part of their children's sections, as well as systems in place that allows the public to challenge books. Additionally, after a public outcry, the Missouri Senate later restored \$4.5 million in funding that had previously been eliminated from the state budget in March of that year (Cineas 2023).

In June 2023, Governor John Bel Edwards of Louisiana signed into law a bill that restricts Louisiana minors' access to materials that the bill defines as sexually explicit (Hutchinson 2023). Earlier that year, Edwards remarked that he didn't think that the bill was necessary, instead, he said that "the biggest challenge was getting children and young adults into the libraries" (Hutchinson 2023, para. 2).

Senate Bill 7, written by Senator Heather Cloud, requires that libraries create a card system so that guardians can prevent their children from checking out inappropriate materials. Free speech activists and LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups are dismayed and worried about the governor's decision to sign the bill; raising concerns about the implications for LGBTQIA+ youth and established library processes. Louisiana libraries are now required to set up the new card system and implement new standards for material reviews that would give local library boards the final say on what is appropriate. If libraries do not comply, they face losing funds from the State Bond Commission and local governments (Hutchinson 2023).

The year 2023 saw a rise in state governments enacting laws regarding what books will be available in their schools and public libraries. With Florida beginning the wave, several states followed suit, including Arkansas, Indiana, Missouri, Louisiana, and others. These laws typically focused on limiting access to materials involving themes such as race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Proponents argued that the legislation was necessary to protect children from controversial or explicit content, while critics saw it as a form of censorship that restricted intellectual freedom and marginalized certain voices. The debate intensified across the country, with some states pushing for more transparency and parental involvement in book selection, while others opposed the restrictions, viewing them as an infringement on educational rights and access to diverse perspectives. The legal landscape surrounding these measures remains contentious, reflecting broader cultural and political divides.

Discussion

Censorship in public libraries and schools has far-reaching consequences that can reshape the landscape of intellectual freedom and access to information. The long-term impact of censorship extends beyond immediate restrictions, influencing how societies engage with diverse ideas and critical thinking. For libraries, the threat of censorship erodes their role as protectors of free inquiry, reducing their ability to serve as spaces for diverse perspectives and open dialogue. The removal of books or other resources from public access limits the ability of individuals to engage with ideas that challenge their worldview. Libraries should be places where individuals, regardless of background or belief, can access materials that inspire critical thinking and broaden their understanding of the world. Censorship undermines this mission, curtailing opportunities for individuals to engage with literature that may provoke meaningful dialogue and self-reflection.

In schools, censorship narrows the scope of education and stifles critical thinking, producing students who are less equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world. When books are banned or heavily scrutinized, students lose access to diverse perspectives that help them develop critical thinking skills and empathy. Literature that explores sensitive or controversial topics, such as race, gender identity, and socio-political struggles, often helps students understand complex social issues. Censoring these works deprives young people of the opportunity to engage with different viewpoints and form their own opinions in a thoughtful, informed manner.

In the realm of intellectual freedom, censorship sets a dangerous precedent for the suppression of ideas, particularly those of marginalized communities. Books and materials that center on LGBTQIA+ themes, racial justice, or alternative political ideologies are often targeted, reinforcing existing power imbalances and excluding the voices of underrepresented groups from mainstream discourse. This suppression can lead to a skewed perception of history and current events, contributing to ongoing cycles of discrimination and inequality. Ultimately, censorship weakens democratic values by stifling the free exchange of ideas essential for a vibrant, informed society.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited to documented incidents occurring in 2023 and therefore does not capture longitudinal trends before or after this period. The analysis focuses specifically on public and school libraries, excluding academic and special libraries, which may have experienced different patterns of challenges. Because the study relies on publicly reported cases and media coverage, it may overrepresent highly visible controversies while underrepresenting smaller or informally resolved challenges. Additionally, the selected legislative examples

are illustrative rather than exhaustive, limiting the ability to generalize findings to all states or districts.

Future research should examine longitudinal data to determine whether the patterns identified in 2023 represent a sustained shift or a peak within a broader cycle of censorship activity. Comparative studies across states or regions could further analyze how differing political climates, governance structures, and community advocacy efforts influence outcomes. Quantitative analyses of challenge frequency, material types, and demographic impacts would also strengthen understanding of national trends. Finally, research centering the lived experiences of librarians, educators, students, and community members would provide deeper insight into the professional, educational, and psychological effects of sustained censorship pressures.

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