

A new prohibition era: Book banning, prison abolition, and librarians

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Banned Books Week is a hallmark tradition among US-based librarians and the American Library Association. Yet, the ALA and librarians across the profession are excluding the most significant and egregious violations of intellectual freedom and access to literature and information in our so-called free society – the US prison system. In this essay, the author discusses the significance of carceral book banning and why libraries' interest divergence from social and prison justice movements are counterproductive and uphold systems of racial injustice.

Keywords: Banned books, mass incarceration, libraries, prison abolition, interest convergence

1. Introduction

Each September, US-based librarians, media specialists, and information professionals load book carts and decorate displays to promote intellectual freedom and warn patrons of the socio-political ills of book banning. This time-honored tradition has become known as *Banned Books Week* and is a core project of the *American Library Association* (ALA)'s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), which supplies library workers with infographics, data, and talking points on historical and current book banning trends. Consistently (and unsurprisingly for those of us engaged in CRT), book banning practices most frequently target marginalized authors.

However, ALA's data-collection efforts for tracking book banning efforts are squarely focused on K-12 schools and public libraries. As a result, our LIS professionals in the US are ignoring the largest and more insidious form of book banning and information restriction impacting our communities – prison book banning. This is not simply an oversight of our field; it is an ethical failing of our racist and capitalist society.

2. Getting real about book banning

Our professional discourse on book banning is in dire need of transformation – in *how* we talk about banned books and *who* is included in the conversation. This transformation must begin by expanding banned books discourse to include and

involve incarcerated people. And our discourse on book banning efforts and practices needs to push beyond the usual surface-level talking points. We need to examine systems of censorship more thoroughly by moving beyond the libraries and schools – to the prisons – to understand book banning for what it really is – a method of political, social, and economic oppression that directly impacts racialized people.

When we have conversations about book banning, we focus our attention on the tangible object – the books. We have displays of objects which have been challenged or banned. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen a banned book display or program about the *people* harmed/intended to be harmed by the destruction or restriction of access to literature. And yet that is exactly what book banning is intended to do – to disrupt the transference of knowledge, ideas, and information between people. Book banning is about constraining thought. In prisons, where people's bodies are already physically constrained, all that is left to confine is their minds and spirits. If we, as a profession, are going to be advocates for intellectual freedom, then our advocacy must be extended to all and to those who have been stripped of their most basic human rights: incarcerated people.

ALA has made official statements regarding *prisoners' rights to read* and access to information, the former centers prison librarians rather than the actual inmates. The OIF blog or American Libraries magazine will occasionally feature *content relating to prison book bans*.

ALA has already laid the groundwork with the Censorship Database and Banned Books Week; it would be a natural progression to expand this work to include prisons more intentionally and overtly and other carceral environments. It is time for the ALA to begin tracking, collecting, and – most importantly – reporting this data as vigorously and consistently as they do with challenged and banned books in schools and libraries. This would support new research and discourse, allowing us to better understand policies, practices, and methods for restricting information and how incarcerated people and their external networks are impacted.

It is not as though prisons are a minor or fleeting issue. The US incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation. In the US, there are more jails and prisons than there are degree-granting colleges and universities (Ingraham, 2015), and the prison system is the nation's leading mental health service provider (Chang, 2018).

3. Why not prisons?

In September 2022, the author of this commentary submitted a research inquiry to the ALA OIF regarding the challenged book database and whether it captured data on challenged and banned books in prisons. ALA does not make the raw data available to researchers, even upon request. OIF confirmed that “prisons are included in the OIF statistics (McIntosh, personal communication, September 12, 2022)” regarding challenged books, but it remains unclear how prisons are represented in relation to public and school libraries. The representative from OIF indicated that statistical data

about carceral book banning is not delineated in Banned Books Week educational materials provided to library workers, including infographics, challenged book lists, and posters (McIntosh, personal communication, September 12, 2022).

So, why is ALA OIF seemingly overlooking the most significant and systematic method of book banning in American society during Banned Books Week? What is lacking is an *interest convergence* within the profession and among library workers for prison abolition. The concept of interest convergence was first introduced by Derrick Bell, the CRT "movement's intellectual father figure", in an article for the Harvard Law Review discussing the Supreme Court's decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* (Bell, 1980; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012, pg. 5). In his analysis of the decision, Bell explains how the decision to desegregate the South was not based on morality or equality but rather because "segregation was... a barrier to further industrialization in the South," and it "could make the transition from a rural, plantation society to the sunbelt with all its potential profit only when [segregation] ended (Bell, 1980, pg. 525)."

Intellectual freedom is a basic professional value that should be the driving force behind our shared interest convergence as library and information professionals. White women with higher education dominate the field, lead our professional organizations, and make decisions within our institutions¹. There is more conflict of interest than convergence. While most librarians would not consider themselves among the white elite, many of us benefit from privilege(s): racial, gender, economic, education, etc. Yet, racism (and prisons *are* a tool of white supremacy, as I'll discuss later) "advances the interests of both white elites and working-class [whites], large segments of society [with] little incentive to eradicate it (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012, pg. 8)."

So, here are a few thoughts as to why we are not talking nearly as much about prison book banning:

1. Most library workers and information professionals work outside of prisons, and we do not feel that incarceration is an issue to relevant to us, as individuals or to our communities
2. Prisons and prisoners are removed from society and the public eye, and these practices are taking place out of sight and out of mind
3. The public has a negative view of prisoners and is willing to justify book banning and other dehumanizing practices
4. Prisons restrict access to books and information in different methods from schools and libraries
5. Some library workers and information professionals may even be against book banning in general but support book banning in prisons due to safety concerns.

¹Statistical data shows extreme racial and gender disparities in the library profession. A 1998 study by the ALA found that the US library workforce was overwhelmingly white women in both academic (86.75% white; 67.99% female) and public (86.55% white; 78.91% female) library settings (Lynch). In 2012, racial diversity among US public librarians improved slightly, increasing non-white representation from 13.45% to 15% (Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services).

ALA OIF's is missing the mark as a preeminent national and international organization by failing to recognize the crisis of carceral book banning and the converging interests of library workers with prison workers and prison abolitionists. Organizations like *Prison Legal News* and *Books to Prisoners* have already demonstrated that it is possible to track, compile, and report on carceral book banning through FOIA requests. ALA has the economic power and organizational structure to support this work long-term. ALA is even supported by an interest group, *Library Services to the Justice Involved* (LSJI),² of library and information professionals who could support OIF in this effort. There are members of LSJI who are interested and/or engaged in this type of work, though gathering, maintaining, or reporting data on restricting access to literature and information is not part of LSJI's official charge (Jordan-Makely, personal communication, September 12, 2022).

4. Incarceration in America

Prisons have become an undeniable and unavoidable part of US daily life, due to our economic dependency on the prison industrial complex. Even if one has never spent a day in jail, one feels the effects of the prison system in one's life in invisible ways because it shapes how people move through society – where people can live, what services they can access, what rights they may retain.

In the 1980s and 90s, there was a prison construction boom that brought jobs and economic stability to struggling, rural white communities – many communities that were former sundown towns and sites of racial terror (Abu-Jamal & Fernández, 2014; Davis, 2003; Loewen, 2005). Now, in those same communities, predominantly Black and Brown incarcerated people are forced to labor (for unfair wages or entirely no pay) in a range of jobs – building furniture, *putting out forest fires*, in call centers, in food production, and *grave digging during the COVID-19 pandemic*. According to a preliminary study by Alexis Logsdon (2019), prison labor is even used in several states in library and archival digitization projects.

The idea that prison book banning has anything to do with safety or rehabilitation is a fallacy. Restricting access to literature and information serves to sustain the prison industrial complex (Davis 2003), by any means necessary. The methods, policies, and practices of prison book banning demonstrate this (which will be explored in a future publication of my continuing work on this topic), as does the data.

I work as a librarian in Connecticut, which ranks 38th in the US in overall incarceration by population but 2nd and 3rd incarceration racial disparities among

²It is worth noting that LSJI may include library and information professionals who work in carceral settings, who are DOC employees. We must also address how DOC-employed library workers are impacted by power dynamics and interest convergence/conflict of interest in the development and implementation of prison policies about granting access or restricting access to information and the possible consequences of the latter.

Black and Hispanic inmates, respectively (Sentencing Project, 2019). As of spring 2022, nearly 40% of the state's prison population was awaiting trial and over 50% were incarcerated for non-violent offenses (Correctional Research Unit, 2022, pg. 1; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021, pg. 30).

The state of Connecticut presumes that incarcerated people (mostly Black and Brown, mostly convicted of non-violent offenses or not at all convicted) to be violent. Connecticut's policies are written similarly to other incarcerating agencies – with racially neutral language. The implementation of literature restriction policies disproportionately impacts the disproportionately Black and Brown prisoner populations.

In the self-declared “land of the free” there are more prisons than universities and the carceral system is the nation's leading mental health service provider. The US imprisons adults and children in various carceral environments – prisons, jails, detention centers, community correctional facilities, work camps, etc.

Racial disparities in prisons are well documented fact, and in 2020 Black and Latine inmates represented 62.86% of the total inmate population in federal and state prisons within the US (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021, pg. 10), despite *Black and Latine peoples comprising 31.88% of the total US population in the same year*. What's more, federally housed inmates are even less likely to have been convicted of violent offenses, as 92.2% of inmates have been convicted of non-violent crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021, pg. 32). Yet, just like state facilities, federal prisons implement their own policies prohibiting access to literature and information.

And, regardless of an inmate's legal status or their location within the carceral system, all prisoners experience *carceral citizenship* – an “alternative legal reality” in which individuals are subjected to different laws than the public. As part of this alternative reality, inmates are subjected to “collateral consequences” for rule-breaking and may be sanctioned if they are found in possession of contraband literature (Miller and Stuart, pg. 533). Sanctions carry hefty consequences, including solitary confinement (i.e., literal torture) and loss of time from one's sentence.

5. Methods of restriction

There are three significant ways that prisons restrict or prohibit inmates from accessing literature and information:

- *Traditional bans* may be familiar to most library workers. A single title is reviewed for content concerns and a decision is made on a case-by-case basis. One major difference is that there is no public discourse and typically the only way to know what is or is not banned is to submit a FOIA request. In Connecticut, books sent via mail are reviewed by individual correctional employees and a Central Media Review Board. Library materials are also subject to review by a review board. This method results in many states banning tens of thousands of titles, including Florida, Illinois, and Texas.

- *Content-neutral bans* in which a policy has been implemented stipulating that books sent to prisons must be new, in the original packaging, and shipped directly from a bookstore (in some states, only from pre-approved vendors). Such policies work in tandem with traditional bans and are never used as stand-alone policies. This method of restriction blocks organizations like Books to Prisoners from supplying inmates with free reading materials and instead places a cost burden on inmates' external support networks.
- *Pay-to-read eBooks* are the latest and most insidious trend in carceral literature restriction, though prison-supplied tablets are marketed as an entertainment solution by suppliers like JPay and Global Tel-Link. Tablets are provided to inmates at no cost but with a costly catch – they must pay for *everything* – apps, messaging, movies, music, and eBooks. And they pay well over the market rate. Inmates can access a range of pre-selected public domain titles via their tablets, but they are charged a flat fee or a per-minute rate (costing an average of \$19.99 per title) (Eldon, 2020; Finkel, 2019). Some states, like West Virginia, receive a kickback in tablet profits (Finkel, 2019), creating a system of economic exploitation that feeds off not only the inmates but also the unincarcerated community.

6. Getting on the same page

The US system of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex are what political prisoner and scholar Mumia Abu-Jamal calls a “vast machinery of repression” (Abu-Jamal, 2015). It is a machine of the most intricate design, with many cogs and wheels and fueled by the human soul. A system that exploits and capitalizes on human suffering for capitalistic gain through forced labor. Restricting access to literature and information has a crucial function in the machine's operating system, as do the DOC workers who interpret and enforce book banning policies at their own discretion.

To present, ALA OIF and pockets of library workers in the profession have been outspoken about carceral book banning – from a standpoint that it is unjust, immoral, or against our professional values. However, as Derrick Bell explains, historically, morality has not been the driving force behind systemic change, whether in the abolition of slavery or racial desegregation (Bell, 1980, pg. 525). Similarly, altruism will not result in the seismic shift so desperately needed within the library profession and the ALA.

It is true that we, as library and information professionals, have a vested interest in intellectual freedom. But what other values do we have? Do we not value access to information, which in prisons is inhibited through economic exploitation and abuse? Or what of our value for our communities and the people we serve, which include people impacted by the justice system? As public funding for community services gets cut and re-directed to the policing and the criminal justice system, the role of libraries is ever evolving. Library workers – in addition to being information experts

– are also social workers, career experts, after-school centers, community centers, and more.

Library workers, information professionals, ALA, and other library organizations – we cannot remain on the fence about the societal impact of prison injustice. Mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex are antithetical to many other *core librarianship values*: confidentiality and privacy, democracy, diversity, the public good, and social responsibility. If this seems controversial or – dare I say the forbidden word? – *political*; sitting in a position of power, authority, or influence and consciously choosing to maintain a conflict of interest that benefits some and represses minoritized people *is* political.

Conflicts of interest and interest divergence show up in our daily work in a multitude of ways, including, paying lip service to DEI; avoiding difficult conversations because it makes us uncomfortable; and the culture of niceness that prevents authentic dialogue. By neglecting incarcerated people in Banned Book Week activities (and possibly other areas of LIS discourse and advocacy), the LIS profession is complicit in the maintenance of racial capitalism³ and white supremacy. CRT can help us LIS professionals better recognize, understand, and address the ways interest divergence appears in our library systems and workflows.

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³Racial capitalism is the commodification of racial identity, or “degrading that identity by reducing it to another thing to be bought and sold (Leong, 2013, pg. 2151).” The prison industrial complex commodifies race through forced labor, performed by disproportionately Black and Brown inmate populations.

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