

Drained-pool Politics Versus Digital Libraries in U.S. Cyberspace

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U.S. libraries in cyberspace are suffering from and combatting a series of actions and campaigns that aim to eliminate them rather than allocate mental bandwidth for diverse titles—in other words, digital libraries are dealing with modern-day drained-pool politics. As public, school, and university libraries become increasingly digital, the ability to simply switch off the entire library becomes more of a threat. With the internet being both literacy's greatest enemy (it represents a single point of failure) and ally (it has been almost universally adopted), volume of access, money, and grey area legislation often play a large role in intellectual freedom. Book banning—a naturally polarizing issue—has not yet found balance when it comes to books, magazines, audiobooks, movies, and music within digital libraries. Though the capability to ban one book exists as it does in the physical world, access to digital libraries has become all-or-nothing in many instances around the nation. There is no consistency of approach across states, municipalities, or even school districts, with federal law applying only on a case-by-case basis.

For example, Brevard Public Schools in Florida caused a stir last year when access to Epic, the digital library software students had become accustomed to for leisurely family reading time, mysteriously disappeared.¹ The school district cited an inability to comply with a new state law that requires all instructional material available in the digital library to be reviewed. While this loss of access primarily affected students under the age of 12 attending schools in the district, digital library bans have a way of expanding into the adult age group and the general public who may be receiving an entirely different type of education. In July 2023, Mississippi state law essentially barred everyone under the age of 18 from the Hoopla and OverDrive digital libraries.² In Texas, patrons of the Llano County Library System—adults included—celebrated a small victory by having a federal judge restore some digital library access and the local government decide against the retaliatory closure of the libraries who filed the suit.³

When it comes to mass media, the category digital libraries belong to, there is a fine line between telling the stories of the people who make the world go round and promoting an idea or way of life. The realities of society can't be treated as elephants in a room, when they are in fact the shared experiences of communities hiding in plain sight to avoid ostracism. That is, these are not stories that everyone knows about and refuses to acknowledge, but stories that people who most need to make a connection or understand a different viewpoint may never know exist. As the world depicted in *Fahrenheit 451* becomes closer to reality, there are both current tools in place and rebalancing efforts emerging.

In September of this year, California took the opposite approach of Texas and Florida when its governor banned book bans in schools with state law.⁴ The bill was signed just months after

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access to the Sora digital library was taken away from Orange Unified School District students and families.⁵ Many public libraries in the state of California already operate under a “universal borrower” policy that allows state residents to obtain a library card at any library, which provides access to a multitude of digital library materials. In Georgia, a similar budding program exists. Public libraries participating in the PINES program allow residents to obtain cards at any participating library within the state. These preexisting tools facilitating access help to keep the intellectual freedom scale stable while newer programs hope to rebalance a tilting scale.

Some libraries and literacy organizations are taking a direct and national stand against book bans by opening their digital libraries nationwide to provide access to those who should be intellectually free. The Brooklyn Public Library launched its Books Unbanned program to provide digital library access nation-wide to teens and young adults within the 13–21 age range.⁶ The program has grown with the Boston Public Library, LA County Public Library, San Diego Public Library, and Seattle Public Library all offering a variation. The Digital Public Library of America’s Banned Book Club created an entire digital library consisting of books that had been banned “somewhere.”⁷

Broader legislation is needed to protect access to the truth, access to reality, and access to viewpoints sidelined by aggressive idealism. Digital libraries are a melting pot for all the diverse people and experiences that make up the world. A story that is hard to hear is not a story that is wrong to listen to; writers are supposed to elicit emotion to help readers spend some time in someone else’s shoes.

To learn more about this multifaceted issue, visit the American Library Association’s intellectual freedom advocacy webpage: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom>.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bailey Gallion, “Brevard Public Schools cancels free online library, math game to comply with new state law,” *Florida Today*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.floridatoday.com/story/news/education/2022/05/04/brevard-public-schools-removes-access-epic-prodigy-florida-parental-rights-education-law/9629061002/>.
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- ³ Andrew Albanese, “Judge Finds Texas Library’s Book Bans Unconstitutional, Orders Books Returned,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, April 3, 2023, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/91903-judge-finds-texas-library-s-book-bans-unconstitutional-orders-books-returned.html; William Melhado, “Llano County library supporters declare victory as officials decide not to close all branches,” *The Texas Tribune*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/04/13/llano-county-library-books/>.
- ⁴ Johnathan Franklin, “New California Law Bars Schoolbook Bans Based on Racial and LGBTQ Topics,” *NPR*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/26/1201804972/california-gov-newsom-barring-book-bans-race-lgbtq>.
- ⁵ Jill Replogle and Michael Flores, “A Parent Complained About a Digital Book. Then an Orange County School Board Suspended the Whole Library,” *LAist*, February 3, 2023,

<https://laist.com/news/education/school-district-book-banning-censorship-app-conservatives-orange-unifed>.

⁶ “Books Unbanned,” Brooklyn Public Library, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/books-unbanned>.

⁷ Christopher Parker, “Readers Can Now Access Books Banned in Their Area for Free With New App,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/banned-book-club-app-180982592/>.