

## Introduction: The History of Censorship and What Censorship is

Censorship, in the United States, is viewed as a violation of the First Amendment—particularly, the right to free speech. Throughout US history, however, the First Amendment has been interpreted in different manners. Other definitions of censorship have also been proposed, with the general sentiment being that “something is withheld from access by another”. In the 19th century, the United States government attempted to censor material that contained obscenity, claiming that obscene material was not protected by the First Amendment. Furthermore, censorship in public libraries has especially focused on censoring books related to racial backgrounds, religious viewpoints, and more. There has also been a history of censorship in schools, with many Supreme Court cases ruling in favor of students. Throughout the 20th century, censorship became more focused on forms of entertainment, such as movies and music, especially in relation to ‘scenes of passion’ and ‘LGBTQ material’. Finally, the 21st century has brought about the question of what content on the internet is protected under the First Amendment due to the easy access of material on it. The question especially focuses on concern for younger children and their access to pornography as well as social media content. Censorship by the government in the 21st century often is carried out by *jawboning*, where government officials informally pressure individuals or institutions in order to censor material. To combat this, people suggest addressing censorship with transparency, which would make it required for government officials to disclose exactly what they are censoring.

- <https://journals.ala.org/index.php/jifp/article/view/7208/10293>
- <https://www.cato.org/briefing-paper/shining-light-censorship-how-transparency-can-curtail-government-social-media>

## Government Censorship

Censorship undermines a free society by restricting individuals' ability to access different viewpoints, particularly when governments limit speech or press freedom. Government censorship takes away citizens' autonomy to form opinions, stopping debate and suppressing dissent. Such actions create an environment where only state-approved narratives persist, which infringes on personal and collective freedoms. Censorship weakens democratic processes, as political power is consolidated by limiting the voices of the opposition and controlling the information available to the public.

- <https://adfflegal.org/article/censorship-incompatible-free-society/>

American public opinion on press freedom reveals a deepening partisan divide over its importance in society. The report indicates that while a majority support press freedom, Republicans and Democrats differ on its role and impact, with some perceiving the press as biased and others viewing it as essential. This divide influences public trust in the media and the type of information citizens consume. Such partisanship can create efforts to censor or support specific media outlets, shaping political discourse by emphasizing certain viewpoints over others, further dividing society.

- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/23/most-americans-say-a-free-press-is-highly-important-to-society/>

## Infringement on freedoms

American first Amendment rights, people's freedom in China

- From a legal perspective, censorship also has some issues when dealing with laws such as the First Amendment. Globally, however, censorship may not have regulations and could even be propagated by the government, such as China's restrictions on all widespread media. Freedom of speech in the USA is a right of the people, and infringement upon it is banned, but unregulated censorship and media banning are different subtle ways that organizations and people in power are able to get away with the suppression of voices against them. Banning the use of certain media sites and sources is a major way of blocking out certain voices that disagree with the oppressor's views, and through this restriction, minorities lose their ability to spread awareness and reach others of similar problems.

Identity and Expression

- Expression of opinions and freedom of speech are important globally and with the addition of social media and online news sources, information and voices from around the world are able to be heard and broadcasted. However, with new forms of censorship, expression and identity are being harmed and restricted, and with that comes conflicts, many of which disproportionately harm suppressed people and minorities.

## Statistics

- <https://pen.org/report/narrating-the-crisis/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/23/pen-book-bans#:~:text=More%20than%2010%2C000%20books%20were,from%203%2C362%20the%20previous%20year.>
  - “8,000 instances of book bans took place in Florida and Iowa, as both states enforced sweeping laws targeting classroom material” (PEN America, 2023).
  - “Nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults (73%) say the freedom of the press...is extremely or very important to the well-being of society,” (Eddy, 2024).
  - “Regardless of how free they think the press currently is, 41% of Americans are extremely or very concerned about potential restrictions on press freedoms in the country,” (Eddy, 2024).
- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/23/most-americans-say-a-free-press-is-highly-important-to-society/>
- <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/05/918520692/facebook-keeps-data-secret-letting-conservative-bias-claims-persist>
  - What Americans believe about media censorship/freedom of speech for media

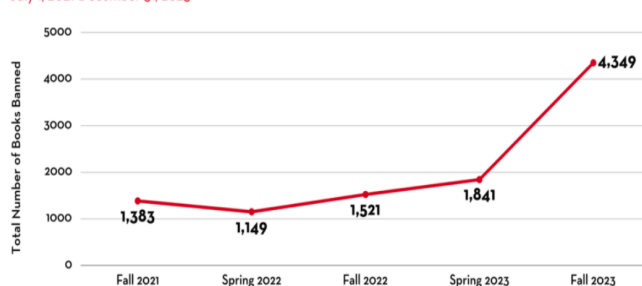
## Examples of censored media

Many states, (especially conservative ones), banned thousands of books during 2023. In fact, across the country there were “4,349 instances of book bans across 23 states and 52 public school districts,” (Blair, 2024). Some notable examples are Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of An African Family*, and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It To The Mountain* (The Guardian). Both of these books feature grueling themes of identity, individual autonomy, racism, and even simple morality. These themes are paramount to the way in which we live, and by censoring them it strips children from learning about these topics.

- <https://www.npr.org/2024/04/16/1245037718/book-bans-2023-pen-america>
- <https://pen.org/report/narrating-the-crisis/>
- Book Bans in the US (especially in conservative states)

## Book bans recorded per semester

July 1, 2021-December 31, 2023



Data from PEN America's Index of School Book Bans.  
Bans credited to the fall school year were added to the spring semester of that year.  
Fall Semester is defined as July 1- December 31 and Spring Semester is defined as January 1- June 30.