The impact of information and communication technologies on book challenge trends in the United States: An analysis

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Abstract

The rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICT), such as personal computing, the explosive proliferation of computing devices, and widespread availability of the Internet, has led to a sea change in the way individuals access and interact with information Inasmuch, ICT has not only changed the reading behavior but also the reading choices. This study empirically explores how ICT has impacted the number of banned books, individuals' opinions about banned books, and the retention of banned books. The data collected by American Library Association about book banning across the United States since 1990's is used to examine the research objectives. The findings reveal that book challenges are on the decline in the United States, although the path is by no means straight and clear. As ICT adoption has grown within the US, it has impacted the success of book banning activities across the country and the tactics used to challenge books.

Keywords

Introduction

In the United States, libraries have historically been established to provide free access to books and other information to all library patrons, with limited consideration given to the content of the materials themselves. This intent can clearly be seen in the mission statement of the American Library Association (ALA), which is "to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all" (ALA, 2012, Mission Statement). However, this goal of free access to information has not been without controversy (Foerstel, 2002). In many communities, individuals have requested the removal of materials otherwise freely available through the library, resulting in a list of *banned books*, or books which some consider to contain material objectionable to the individual or the society at large. Numerous books have been banned in communities across the United States since the early 1900's (Doyle, 2010).

In recent years, the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT) has greatly enriched an individual's access to information about virtually every topic known to mankind (Carr, 2010, Cunningham & Coombs, 1997). The ease of use and broad availability of ICT has led to it being increasingly used by individuals for their information processing and communication purposes, supplanting previous tools, such as reference books and telephone exchanges. New technological innovations such as social networking and Web 3.0 services have eliminated major barriers to the free flow of information (Knight & King, 2010). In libraries, the distributed nature of information on the Internet has led to change in the role of librarians, since academic libraries are no longer the sole custodians of information (Anunobi, Ifeyinwa, & Okoye, 2008) or the sole access point of information (Haywood, 1995). In addition, with the growth of materials available solely in electronic formats, academic libraries have been faced with the additional challenge to manage resources available in print formats, electronic formats, or both.

The ready availability of ICT has also enabled access to information about objectionable material which was previously unavailable (Maycock, 2011). However, little work has been completed quantitatively exploring how the advent of ICT has influenced the practice of book banning. The intention of this research is to help fill that gap.

The objective of this study is to explore two key questions. First, what impact does ICT have on the practice of book banning in the United States? Second, how does ICT impact the nature of book challenges themselves? The answers to these questions can be considered from multiple perspectives. From the perspective of an individual, does ready access to banned books and information about them lead to an increased or decreased resistance to book banning at libraries? From the perspective of communities, does it appear that ICT has helped make communities

more tolerant or less tolerant of objectionable material in the library, or changed the success rate of book banning activities? As the role of librarian's transitions from being gatekeepers of information to being educators on the role of free information in society, these answers may also help provide direction to modern librarians in addressing requests to ban books.

Literature Review

History of Book Banning

From the invention of the printing press, which first made books widely available to the population at large, book banning has existed in societies around the globe. Though book banning has been primarily associated with authoritarian regimes, religions institutions have routinely encouraged the practice through implementation and doctrine (Tamney & Johnson, 1997; Bald, 2011).

The United States of America charted a new path away from this practice with the adoption of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (Congress of the United States of America, 1789). The freedom of speech guaranteed by the first amendment has been cited as a legal justification in numerous court cases, most notably Pico v. Island Schools, to protect access to information within the United States (Doyle, 2010).

While the courts have largely supported individuals' rights to freely access information, the burden has always been on individuals to obtain the information in the first place. Historically, this has required that the individual either purchase the material for himself or access the challenged content through a local library. For most of US history, public libraries in the United States have been common central repositories of information for the entire community, supported through local taxes. The centralization of access and support via community funding means that attempts to remove objectionable material from general circulation has traditionally come in the form of a challenge to available library materials rather than products in book shops (Jenkins, 2008).

Materials in libraries have been challenged for a variety of reasons, including sexual, religious, and social reasons (Burke, 2010). To address this, the Library Bill of Rights adopted by the American Library Association dictates, "materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval," and, "libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (American Library Association Council, 1939). However, despite such decrees from the American Library

Association, book challenges and removal of materials from library collections across the United States persist to this day (Doyle, 2010).

Though libraries continue to struggle with challenges to collected material, the landscape in which they perform their service to the community has changed. The preponderance of multiple formats and information access points via ICT make limiting access through abridging a library collections less effective than it has been historically (Knox 2015). In light of such changes, the role of libraries in responding to book challenges and book banning has become primarily educational. In 1982, the American Library Association through its Office of Intellectual Freedom, instituted Banned Books Week, an annual celebration held in September to promote awareness of frequently challenged materials (American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2013). Since its inception, libraries have used Banned Books Week as a platform to educate the public about the impact of censorship to society and promote greater readership of challenged materials, independent of the format.

Banned Books and Information and Communication Technology

The rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICT), such as personal computing, the explosive proliferation of computing devices, and widespread availability of the Internet, has led to a sea change in the way individuals access and interact with information (Carr, 2010; Knox 2015). One stream of research argues that Internet has changed the individual's reading behavior and how they interpret the information (Brown 2001; Loan, 2012). For instance, individuals reading behavior on internet seems to brief, less structured, non-linear (Brown 2001). Moreover, while digital environment encourages readers to explore many topics extensively, but at a superficial level (Bowman 2002; Loan 2011). Inasmuch, online reading is characterized by more time spent on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, and nonlinear rather than in-depth and concentrated reading (Liu, 2005). Thus leading to reader's lacks the ability to read deeply and to sustain a prolonged engagement in reading. While interesting most of the prior observations are made at a theoretical level through opinions and arguments (Loan, 2012).

Another stream of studies focus on how ICT has enabled information access and availability. TICT has enabled individuals to overcome personal, economic and geographical barriers to access books and information about books, giving them more opportunities to learn about the world than ever before (Knight & King, 2010). Recent initiatives including Google Books, Project Gutenberg, HathiTrust Digital Library and International Children's Digital Library are making access to information more affordable. In addition, e-books (electronic books) have become a widespread alternative to printed books within the last decade (Young, 2009b). E-readers such as the Nook or Kindle allow users to download free e-books from websites or purchase them from distributors (Young, 2009a). A recent survey shows that 19 percent of

respondents (N=2252) owned or used a hand held device or a e-book reader such as Kindle ® or Nook® for book reading and 24 percent of respondents used tablet computers such as iPad, Samsung Galaxy, or Kindle Fire to access information on books. More interestingly, out of the books read in the past 12 months, 47 percent of them were in electronic format (Princeton Survey Research Associates International, 2012).

Along with sharing third party content, it has been widely noted that ICT has also facilitated access to and exchange of information directly (Haywood, 1995; Carr, 2010). For instance, an individual can share his/her thought on sites such as Twitter or Facebook and get feedback from scores of users nearly instantaneously (Tufekci, 2008; Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010). With these tools, individuals now have even more freedom to form their own opinions based on an open exchange of information rather than simply abiding by existing norms.

ICT is also changing how individuals interact with libraries, which are serving increasingly as gateways to resources in digital formats through public internet access instead of filling the traditional role as a repository of books (Haywood, 1995). Owners of E-readers can borrow books for free from the local library via Overdrive and share them/lend them to other people (Young, 2009a). This, along with other inventions arising from ICT, such as e-commerce, and social networking, have successfully eliminated many historical impediments to free expression and greatly increased access to banned books (Foerstel, 2002; Knight & King, 2010). As a result, ICT has changed the face of censorship and book banning both inside and outside of the library (Simmons & Dresang, 2001).

Managing or controlling information exchange via the Internet has proven to be a herculean task to many organizations/countries (Knight & King, 2010). For example, when China tried to block free access to information on Google, the search engine automatically redirected the Chinese users to its Hong Kong's search engine rather than restrict access entirely (Womack, 2010). Similarly, the book *The Chocolate War,* which has been the frequent target of censors and appears at number three on the American Library Association's list of the *Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books in 2000–2009,* is available to read on Sparknotes.com.

More interestingly, the objections to challenged books have become increasingly specific as ICT has become more widespread (Foerstel, 2002; Knox 2015). For instance, a challenge to the book *The Chocolate War* in 1981 cited *"offensive language and explicit descriptions of sexual situations in the book."* Compare this to a 2007 challenge, which noted that the book was *"peppered with profanities, ranging from derogatory slang terms to sexual encounters and violence"* (Doyle, 2010, pages 174-176). This suggests that the attitudes towards challenged books have been changing along with the emergence of other contextual factors such as technology (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xin, 2012). In sum, ICT has not only affected the reading practices but reading choices as well. This study helps extend these observations by exploring

issues such as how ICT has impacted the number of banned books, individuals' opinions about banned books, and the retention of banned books.

Methodology

Starting in 1990, the American Library Association began collecting information about book banning across the United States and storing it in a searchable database within the organization. Even though book banning significantly predates the generation of the database, the Internet and related ICT did not begin achieving large scale adoption until the 1990's, after the collection of book banning information began (Eisingerich & Kretschmer, 2008). Due to this parallelism between the information collected in the Banned Books Database and the emergence of ICT, the data set provided a rich source for longitudinal comparison. Data on the total number of book challenges, reason for challenge by year, type of library in which the challenge occurred by year, book descriptions and the individual or group challenge initiator by year was utilized to examine the impact of ICT on banned books. Due to confidentiality requirements, no personally identifiable information was collected or included in the statistical data provided by the American Library Association. Since this is an exploratory study, frequency analysis was completed on collected data. Graphical illustrations are listed in the results and discussion section.

Results and Discussion

The results and trends will be discussed in two groups: the first exploring the impact of ICT on book challenges and their consequent success, and the second exploring the impact of ICT on the communication strategies involved with book challenges.

ICT and Book Challenge Trends

The overall impact of ICT on banned books was analyzed by performing frequency analysis of total number of challenges and total successful/unsuccessful challenges across time. The outcome is displayed in figures 1 and 2.
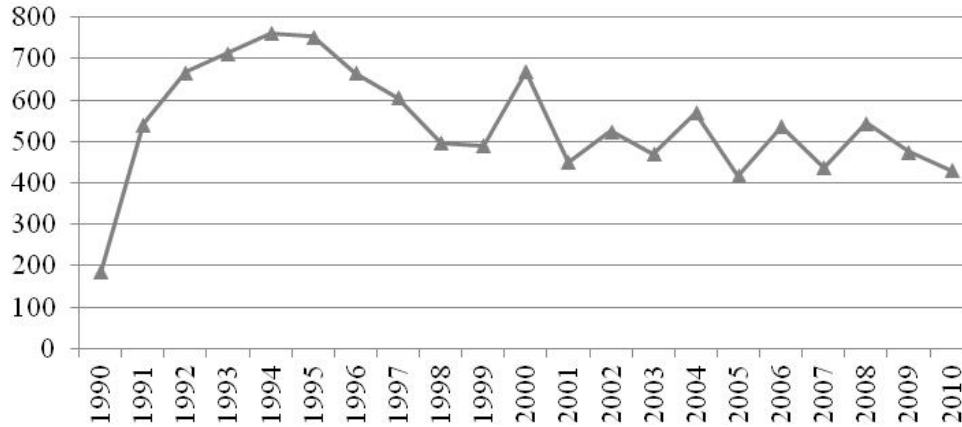
Figure 1. Total number of challenges over time

The graph in figure 1 indicates that the number of challenges has followed a generally downward trend, although marked with significant variation over time. The number of challenges peaked from years 1991 to 1996 (mean = 683), slowly declined from 1997 – 1999 (mean = 531), and encountered a sudden surge in 2000. Interestingly, the number of challenges (mean = 485) since 2001 has stabilized somewhat, with a generally slower decline in the number of book challenges recorded. The data point for 1990 is conspicuously low relative to the rest of the data, but it is important to note that this was the year that the ALA began its banned books initiatives, including tracking challenges via online database, increasing public awareness about banned books, and enhancing access to resources allowing individuals to share their opinions.

This change in pace around 2000 and general downward trend over time suggests that there may be an important influence of ICT on book challenges, both through increasing awareness of book challenges in communities and through allowing more informed discussion of these challenges. The trend observed here affirms the notion that ICT has changed the reading behavior, that is, individuals reading behavior on internet seems to brief, less structured, and superficial (Brown 2001). Another interpretation of the trend can be explained through individuals adoption of ICT to gain access to more information about books so they can frame their own opinions rather than relying on the community perceptions. This is confirmed by recent surveys: a 2012 Pew Internet and American Life survey on library services found that 51 percent of those surveyed used online database searches to find information about books (Rainie & Duggan, 2012).
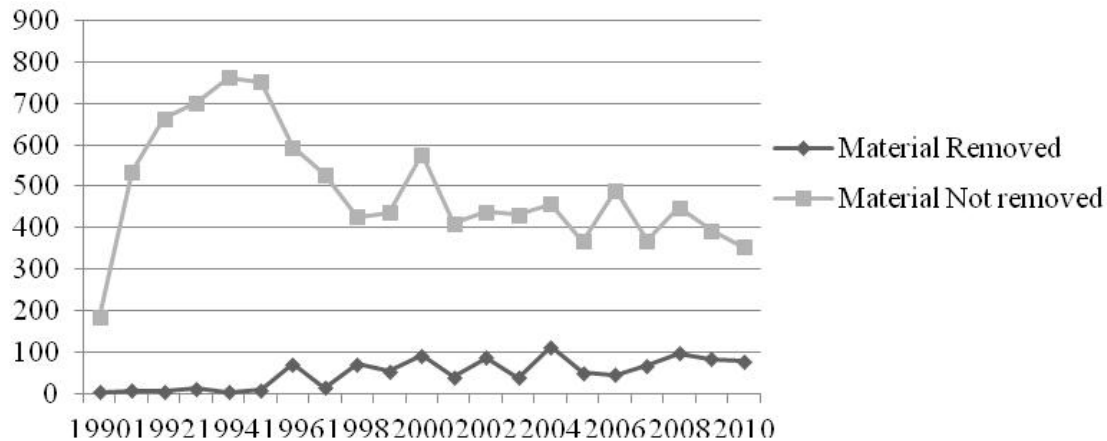
Figure 2. Challenged material - Removed versus not removed

While the number of book challenges has decreased and stabilized over time, the results of book challenges (Figure 2) suggest a more nuanced story. The number of books not removed as the result of book challenges shows a pattern very similar to that of book challenges – a quick growth and decrease in the 1990's, followed by stabilization with some variation in the 2000's. In addition, the quantity of material not removed has been significantly greater than that of material removed in every year over the past 20 years. However, the frequency of removing material as a result of challenges has increased over time, from virtually no material removed in the early 1990's, to an average of just under 100 materials a year in the late 2000's.

As with the number of book challenges, this phenomenon also closely tracks the growth of ICT within the United States, and suggests that groups are not only using ICT to increase awareness of banned books for the purpose of keeping them free, but also potentially for the purpose of having them banned. This makes intuitive sense. While ICT allows individuals to make more informed decisions about controversial materials, it also allows those seeking to ban materials to better organize their campaigns and present their arguments in a more focused and forceful manner. Similar to observations made by Knox (2015) this findings highlights the importance of the modern librarian's role in serving as an educator regarding controversial materials.

Using ICT to Communicate Book Challenge Activities

In addition to the book challenges themselves, the methods used to challenge books have also changed over time. These changes are indicated in Figures 3 and 4, which depicts the number of challenges submitted versus not submitted, and published versus not published respectively.
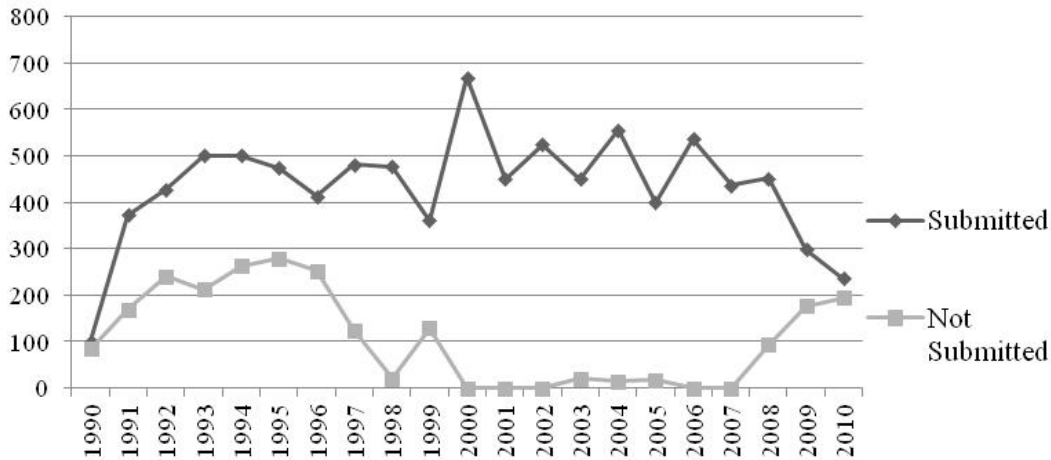
Figure 3. Number of challenges submitted versus not submitted

Submitting a challenge means that the challenge was submitted to the OIF by a concerned individual or group. If a book challenge is tracked in the database but not submitted, this indicates that OIF identified the challenge via other means. Reviewing the frequency of challenge submission, the patterns again suggest the influence of ICT in book challenging activities. More specifically, the number of submitted challenges has varied considerably over time, following three distinct behavior patterns over the last 20 years, while the long term trend has remained relatively flat. In the 90's, changes from year to tend to follow trends, with large numbers of challenges both submitted. In the late 90's and the first portion of the 2000's, the changes from year to year became erratic. This corresponds to the trend which suggests the initially ICT was used to access information resources, but later as ICT offered more advanced tools (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) individuals started using it to garner support from external members and make informed decisions. In other words, with the widespread use of the Internet and a greater availability and use of communication tools, meaning that activities each year may be based on more rapid and immediate reactions versus long-term strategy.

In 2008 and beyond, the number of submitted challenges have dropped dramatically, while the number on non-submitted challenges has followed a corresponding rise. This follows the recent growth in social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and suggests a change in overall user behavior with respect to submitting challenges. In some years throughout this period, the variation has been especially pronounced - the number of challenges submitted in 1999 is 361, followed by a record 669 challenges submitted in 2000.

This variation appears to be more orderly through the history of challenges not submitted. In the 1990's, the pattern of non-submission shows a path of increase and decrease closely following the number of book challenges overall. From 1998 through 2007, the number of non-submitted challenges each year is very low and consistent, interrupted only by a blip in 2000 where the

number of challenges submitted had a sharp decrease while the number of challenges not submitted showed a sharp increase. Since 2007, the trends for both submission and non-submission have changed dramatically, with a sharp increase in challenges non-submitted and a sharp decrease in challenges submitted. Interestingly, this coincides with the explosive growth of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the ICT realm, which have demonstrated their power for organization and rapid communication in events ranging from wedding showers to national revolutions. While not fully definitive, the trends since 2007 suggest that groups seeking to challenge books recently may be following less conventional paths than before to rally support for their cause.
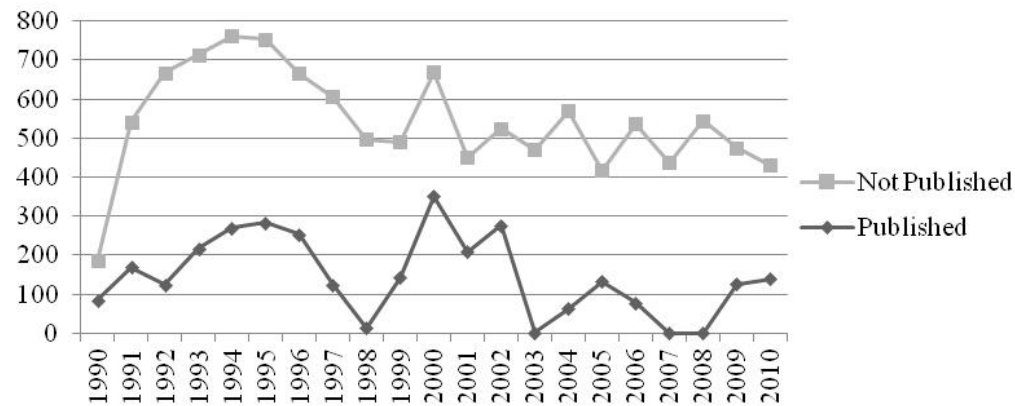

Figure 4. Number of book challenges - Published versus not published

Figure 4 shows the number of book challenges published versus not published since 1990. In the context of this research, a published challenge means the information on the challenge was picked up by traditional media outlets and distributed to the community at large. The trend for non-published challenges follows a path very similar to that of book challenges in general (Figure 1). The number of book challenges published followed a path consistent with overall challenges through 1998, at which point significant and non-trending variability ensued, with sharp peaks during late 1990's to early 2000's (mean= 373).

This figure in particular highlights how ICT has created venues for widespread information exchange in today's digital arena. For instance, the recent incident regarding Orangeburg County Library South Carolina's ban on Alan Moore's book graphic novel "Neonomicon" is widely discussed by general public/fans on venues such as Twitter, YouTube, and has 619 fan followers on Facebook (as of 9/8/2013). This example indicated people are willfully using these venues to discuss book challenges and distribute information to the communities at large.

Conclusion

Book banning has a long and checkered history within society, continuing even into the present day. The growth of ICT has led to significant changes in many corners of society, including book banning, where it has influenced the frequency of book challenges and their success rates within the United States. In this study, ALA data regarding book challenges, bans, and strategies was reviewed to examine trends in book banning associated with the growth of ICT. Overall, book challenges are on the decline in the United States, although the path is by no means straight and clear. As ICT adoption has grown within the US, it has impacted the success of book banning activities across the country and the tactics used to challenge books.

These trends in book challenges serve to highlight the increasingly complex role libraries play in the distribution of information to their communities. While American librarians were once the gatekeepers of information, the widespread growth of ICT means that their role must take on a greater educational component than in years past. As libraries grow to meet these challenges, their role in protecting access to information may change, but it will remain their place to educate and inform users for years to come.

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