

On the front lines of access: librarians discuss book bans in the Netherlands and the United States

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Kurzfassung: In der Universitätsbibliothek von Nimwegen führte die unabhängige Filmemacherin Ivana Smudja ein Interview mit zwei Verfechterinnen des Zugangs zu Informationen: Marjolein Hordijk und Norma Fötsch. Gemeinsam beleuchteten sie die Realität verbotener Bücher in den Niederlanden und den Vereinigten Staaten, erörterten die Beweggründe für Zensur und reflektierten über die Bedeutung der Lesefreiheit.

Abstract: At the university library in Nijmegen, Ivana Smudja, an independent filmmaker, met with bibliophiles and access-to-information advocates Marjolein Hordijk and Norma Fötsch. Together, they explored the reality of banned books in the Netherlands and the United States, unpacked the motivations behind censorship, and reflected on the importance of the freedom to read.

What follows is an edited transcript of this conversation, published alongside a short **audiovisual summary** that was released earlier.

Transcript by Norma Fötsch and Marjolein Hordijk

Video and questions by Ivana Smudja

1. What can we see on the table here, and what makes these books special or controversial?

Norma Fötsch (NF): My colleagues regularly organise exhibitions to raise awareness about specific issues. The table next to us is an example of this; it focuses on banned books and shows textbooks on banned books and examples of banned books.

Throughout history, books have been banned or access to them has been restricted. The reasons for these can vary greatly and include political, religious or social reasons, or the fact that they contain sexual content. The list of controversial books is incredibly long.

2. Could you show us an example of a banned book? Why is this book banned?

Marjolein Hordijk (MH): Banned books? I could bring my whole bookcase. “The Hate U Give” is one of the most frequently banned books in American school libraries, and one of my favourite books. The reasons given include concerns about coarse language, drug use, and sexual scenes and references. It is also claimed that the book is anti-police and promotes a particular social agenda.

The book is about a girl, Starr, who grows up in ‘the hood’ but attends a white school outside the neighbourhood because her parents think it’s better for her. As a result, she feels out of place in both groups. Until the moment comes when her best friend is killed by a white police officer who thought the boy was pulling out a weapon. It was actually a hairbrush. A Black Lives Matter movement against the police emerges. As the key witness, Starr eventually decides to speak out and she becomes the figurehead of these demonstrations.

So you could argue that all the issues mentioned earlier, such as coarse language and sexual scenes, are being used as grounds for removing a book from a school library. But it certainly raises eyebrows. After all, isn’t it far more likely that people simply don’t want books that empower black communities? Because this doesn’t fit with the conservative white American narrative?

3. What does it mean when a book is ‘banned’? Does it refer to a legal prohibition, or to the removal of books from libraries, for example?

NF: When a book is banned, it is worth checking precisely what is prohibited. Is printing or distribution prohibited, or is access to the book restricted? For example, if the ban concerns printing the book, it may be that someone else holds the copyright, meaning you are not permitted to do so. If the issue is more about the content, however, it could be considered censorship. Censorship involves government supervision of spoken and written expressions that it deems objectionable. Measures can range from the removal of publications and blocking access to the internet to intimidation and arrests.

In the Netherlands, you do not need prior permission to publish anything. There is also no such thing as an index of banned books. However, the distribution of texts can be prohibited by the courts after publication, and authors can be prosecuted for inflammatory texts, for example.

In the United States, ongoing book bans often involve the removal of books from school libraries. Access to these books is restricted. These restrictions are often initiated by non-governmental organisations, such as Moms for Liberty. Therefore, book bans are not just government-imposed, but community-led too.

4. What is your opinion on how we should deal with difficult or controversial books? Should they always be made available?

NF: When it comes to dealing with controversial books, conflicting interests come into play. Let me introduce you to two examples.

The first concerns the right to free speech versus anti-discrimination law. Freedom of speech is an important right that should be respected. But should we accept that anyone can publish or republish books in which a Nazi spreads hateful thoughts and calls for the killing of anyone who does not conform to the norm? No, we should not accept it, and you probably know the book I’m talking about: “Mein Kampf” by Adolf Hitler.

Another example of conflicting interests is the need for access to the original text versus adapting it to modern language. Some children’s books use the n-word. Should we destroy the original books and only make the adapted versions available? This is a real example. In Denmark, for instance, there was a significant debate surrounding the adaptation of Halfdan Rasmussen’s children’s poems. Ultimately, eight of his poems were not republished due to their racist content, but the original book containing all the poems is still available.

These examples demonstrate that the issue of banning books is complex. But don't get me wrong, governments and communities would be wise to avoid banning books. A true democracy can tolerate different perspectives.

There are plenty of other ways to deal with questionable publications. As a publisher, for instance, you could publish an annotated edition of a controversial book. As a library, you could offer textbooks alongside the original book to explain why it is harmful or discriminatory. As a reader, you could choose to read books that highlight different perspectives.

5. Are there any banned books or books with restricted access in this library? How do you make that decision?

NF: The Radboud University Library's core task is to provide essential books and materials for study and research. This distinguishes it from a public library, which serves a broader public purpose. Furthermore, our aim is not to preserve every book, since we do not fulfil an archival function. Our current collection has been carefully developed in close consultation with the faculties. Every new acquisition is subject to careful assessment to determine its potential contribution to study and/or research. The criteria used for this assessment may vary from publication to publication and from faculty to faculty.

6. What is the current climate in the US and Europe with regard to sensitive or controversial titles?

MH: We must not assume that book bans only happen in other countries. Here in Europe, too, we are seeing a strong shift towards right-wing conservatism. Here, too, there are books that are under attack. These are, in particular, books relating to gender and sexuality. When populism is on the rise, there is no need for critical thinkers. Books give people a broader perspective and encourage them to think for themselves.

7. In the United States, an increasing number of books are being removed from school libraries. Is this indeed the case, and what kind of books are we talking about?

NF: Unfortunately, I can be brief about this. This picture is accurate. In the US, books are being removed from school libraries. Since 2021, PEN America has been monitoring which books are being removed. PEN America is an organisation dedicated to literature and human rights. According to their records, almost 10,000 titles are no longer permitted in school libraries. Notably, the majority of these books are about people of colour, such as "The Hate U Give", which Marjolein mentioned, as well as books about queer and political issues.

An example of a queer book is: "Gender Queer: A Memoir". It was written and illustrated by Maia Kobabe. The protagonist discovers what it means to be nonbinary and that they are romantically attracted to others, but not sexually attracted to anyone. Despite this, the book has been banned for its sexual content. The book "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic" by the great Alison Bechdel has also been banned for its sexual content. The book is about the author's coming of age as a lesbian and deals with gender roles and dysfunctional family life, among other things. One final example I would like to share with you is "Maus", a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman. It recounts the experiences of a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust. It took me a while to find out why this book was banned. It turned out that the depiction of naked mice representing Jews in a concentration camp was the reason for the ban.

Books are often banned on the grounds of sexual content. However, this argument is applied very selectively in the US. It is primarily employed to prohibit books that address unwelcome topics, such as racism, gay and lesbian sexuality, and critical historical reflections.

8. Are any books banned in the Netherlands? If so, which ones and why? And if not so, have there ever been plans to ban certain titles?

MH: At present times, no books are banned. “Mein Kampf” was banned for a very long time, but that was partly because the book could be kept off the shelves due to copyright. When the copyright expired, there was a debate about what to do with the book because of its hateful content. Ultimately, an annotated edition was published. I think it is important to continue having these kinds of discussions.

In the Netherlands, it is enshrined in law that libraries are autonomous in choosing the composition of their collections. The government cannot intervene in this. However, social or religious pressure can influence this. For instance, there are many schools with a religious basis that refuse to include books, often gender-related, in their collections. Libraries and schools are constantly discussing this issue. They are seeking a balance between their own ideals and the reading enjoyment of many children.

Although in practice, titles can only be banned if they are extremely hateful and discriminatory, it is very rare for a book to actually be banned. However, retailers such as BOL.com and NBD Biblion, a library supplier, do make a selection. They do not actively offer those books.

9. What are the implications of certain books being banned from schools and universities? What consequences may this have?

MH: Put very simply, you can’t be something you don’t know about. If you’re a young boy and you feel that you’re more attracted to other boys, but you’ve never heard of ‘being gay’, then you can’t be gay. Because you don’t know what it is.

Banning books creates a very one-sided view of the world. But that doesn’t mean all these other feelings don’t exist. It leads to one-sided representation and unhappy children who don’t fit the mould. That’s a lot of children. Anyone and everyone who doesn’t fit the heteronormative white mould won’t recognise themselves. It’s precisely those books that provide mirrors and windows. In a mirror, you can recognise yourself, and a window gives you a different view of the world.

When you talk about banning books by critical thinkers or influential writers, you are erasing parts of history. You are erasing people’s identities. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the first step towards dehumanisation.

10. Why is it so important for a democratic society to have free access to books and knowledge?

NF: For a democratic society to thrive, people must understand political decisions, question them critically, and take action themselves. Books, journals and other academic and non-academic publications provide background information and offer different perspectives. Without this information, we cannot assess current events critically, nor can we take action.

Nearly 4,000 unique titles are on last year’s list of banned books. Most of the affected titles involve publications on LGBTQIA+ topics, race, and politics. The aim is to prevent young people

from reading these books. The aim is to make these books invisible. However, it's not just about making these books invisible; it's also about making queer people, people of colour, and left-wing individuals invisible.

On a personal level, I believe that free access to books is a necessity, not a luxury. It is a prerequisite for a society in which diversity and equal treatment are valued. For instance, removing queer books from school libraries excludes people and renders queer individuals invisible. As a child in the 1980s, I would have loved to read books about two girls falling in love, for example. However, I couldn't find any. Consequently, as an adult, I have struggled to find the right words. Fortunately, these books now exist, and I am happy for young people, hoping that these books will remain available to them.

11. What is your view on the future? Do you think that more books will disappear, or that banned titles will be reinstated?

MH: We haven't hit rock bottom yet. In the Netherlands, we're seeing coordinated campaigns gaining traction, such as the 'Week van de Lentekriebels' project for primary schools, which introduces pupils to sex and relationship education, and campaigns targeting certain authors. They're having the desired effect. People are complaining to their children's schools and speaking out on social media. There are political parties currently sitting in the House of Representatives whose manifestos call for the desexualisation of school textbooks. Many authors have now started to self-censor out of fear. Publishers are also asking their authors to delete passages. We live in a time when a children's book author received so many death threats that he had to be put under security protection and leave his home. This is already happening, and although I hope we will get past this very soon, I fear it will take some time and is likely to get even worse.

12. You are organising and participating in a screening of the documentary "The Librarians" at the city film house, followed by a discussion on book censorship in the US. Why is this discussion important, and what do you hope to achieve with the event?

NF: I would like to use this opportunity to emphasise the importance of libraries and free access to information. My personal aim is to raise awareness of this issue. I want my colleagues and friends to see what is happening, and the documentary "*The Librarians*" by Kim A. Snyder shows this in a really compelling way.

I have previously watched this documentary. Afterwards, I felt a mixture of powerlessness and anger, but also a desire to take action. I am not the only one who felt this way. Marjolein just told me that becoming active is also the topic of the manifesto "Doe Iets", published last year by ProBiblio. It's about activism in libraries. When I think about what I can do, a lot of activities come to mind. You could think of supporting special libraries and archives like "The Black Archives" in the Netherlands or the "Transgender Archives" in Canada. But the easiest and most obvious one would be reading banned books.

MH: For me, it's important to show people that what's happening in America isn't just a distant problem. They're ahead of us, but we're not far behind. I want to make people aware of this. At the same time, I want to inspire people to take action. We're part of this ourselves and can take action ourselves. If we don't, we too run the risk of slipping down that path. The arts, including books, are the first to suffer. We must take this warning very seriously.

Norma Fötsch is a librarian at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. In her spare time, she is working on her PhD thesis. Access to information is a central theme in her work and research. She is also active in a network for queer librarians.

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Marjolein Hordijk is program director of the Vrijheidscolleges Foundation, director of the Novio Magica Fantasy Book- and Film Festival, and a freelancer. She previously worked as a librarian at the Gelderland Zuid Public Library in the Netherlands. She now remains connected to the library world through her freelance work.

<https://truebeliever-events.nl/>

Ivana Smudja is a film director based in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. She graduated in 2009 with a degree in film direction from the European Institute of Design in Milan. Since 2012, she has worked in the commercial film industry, first as an assistant director and later as a director. During her formative years, she also worked at Teatro Piccolo di Milano and Vice Italy, where she developed a documentary-style approach, blending it with her distinctive artistic vision. Today, Ivana focuses on socio-historical documentaries that explore topical issues such as freedom and democracy.

<https://www.ivancyew.com/>