

Industry insights

Bookshops, censorship and freedom of expression

State of play, common challenges and
resources to stand up against censorship



What are Industry Insights?

RISE Industry Insights is a series of research papers that investigate priority topics for the bookselling sector. They give insights into key issues, policy reforms and external initiatives that affect the sector. In addition, they provide network members with tools to engage with relevant political stakeholders, culture sector professionals and private sector representatives to ensure that their priorities are adequately upheld and supported.

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About RISE Bookselling

Resilience, Innovation and Sustainability for the Enhancement of Bookselling' (RISE Bookselling) is a three-year EU co-funded programme run by the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) for its network members, aimed at upscaling, reinforcing and maximising the capacity and resilience of the European bookselling sector.

About EIBF

The European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) is a non-commercial European and international umbrella organisation representing national booksellers associations and booksellers across Europe and worldwide. Our mission is to represent our members and their interests on a global platform, as well as to provide a forum for cooperation and foster the exchange of best practices.

About Creative Europe

Creative Europe is an EU programme that supports a wide range of cultural and creative sectors, as well as encouraging cooperation and exchanges among cultural organisations and artists within Europe and beyond.

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Introduction

Bookshops are open spaces where people can meet, explore new ideas and find books that challenge their views, books that teach them about the world and about others. Many booksellers are fierce defenders of free speech and keen partisans of social justice movements, which is displayed through the books they carry and the platform they offer to authors and other underrepresented voices. For these reasons, the international book community has watched with distress how, over the past decade, increased political, ideological and religious polarisation has led to different types of book censorship being imposed around the world. We have also seen an increase in the cases of vandalism, attacks, aggressive and anti-social behaviour directed towards bookshops and booksellers, as well as libraries and other places with the purpose to give access to books

Against this backdrop, the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF), together with its RISE Network, are deeply

aware that freedom of expression is a right that, even though enshrined in UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, can never be taken for granted. Through our efforts to counter cultural censorship and the testimonies brought to us from booksellers from the RISE Network, we have become aware that there is a need to map out the current situation – to provide a state of play of book censorships currently imposed, as well as the common challenges and resources that already exist to counter them. By doing just that, this Industry Insights paper aims to raise awareness on the extent of current book censorships, as well as the extent of the violence that is taking place against bookshops around the world. We also hope that this may serve as a resource for booksellers so that they can feel less isolated, knowing that what they might have experienced is, unfortunately, not unique and, most importantly, that they are not alone in the fight against book censorships.

Methodology

This Industry Insights brings together information and testimonies collected from the international book community, as well as international press, over the course of the past year.

The testimonies that give a unique insight into the topic by showing the lived experiences of booksellers were gathered through interviews and workshops that took place at various book trade events during 2023 and 2024, such as the RISE Bookselling Conference in Lisbon, the Frankfurt Book Fair and the American

Booksellers Association's (ABA) annual conference, the Winter Institute. Booksellers and representatives from national booksellers' associations were heard in order to give a full picture of the issue at hand.

All additional information was collected through desk research, looking into trade press and international press publications.

Cases of book censorship

In the following section, we will look at different cases of book censorships that have been imposed across Europe, America and Australia. As we shall see, censorship is either imposed through legislative measures, or simply through aggressions, protests and threats by local citizens and advocacy groups aiming to intimidate and provoke booksellers to

impose self-censorship. Ultimately, the goal of legislative censorship is to severely restrict, or even prohibit, the public's access to books that portray certain kinds of ideas and people.

France

The case

In July 2023, French author Manu Causse's Young Adult novel *Bien trop petit*, which explores themes such as sexual awakening, sexism and consent through a young teenage boy's point of view, was placed under age limitations by the interior ministry for alleged pornographic content.¹ The decision was taken based on a law from 1949, under which a special commission exists to validate the publication of children's literature, ensuring that no works aimed at minors contain elements of antisemitism, homophobia and pornography, among other things.² Thus, this political intervention prohibits the book, which was already recommended for 15+, from being sold to anyone under 18 years old.

French booksellers' reaction

The French book sector reacted strongly towards the decision to censor Manu Causse's novel, expressing their incomprehension at a decision to censor a book that has been carefully edited for a young audience when actual pornographic content is currently so easily accessible for minors on the internet. The French booksellers association (Le Syndicat de la librairie française, SLF) "considers that Manu Causse's book, like the collection to which it belongs, aims to help teenagers discover and come to terms with their sexuality, and not to promote pornography."³ Moreover, they question the soundness of a ruling based on a law that is 75 years old and ask for an investigation if the law is fit for purpose in the present day.⁴

However, the SLF affirms that their members will respect the law although certain technicalities as to how it is to be practiced remain – how do you sell a book that is prohibited to minors? Of course, it is easy to verify someone's age when they wish to buy something in the physical bookshop by asking for their ID, but what about online? Initially, there were many questions, especially in terms of online sales, as many smaller bookshops' e-commerce websites don't have the necessary IT programmes to verify the age of a customer at the point of sale.⁵



Further reactions

Following the interior ministry's decision to censor *Bien trop petit*, the book reference was swiftly removed from the Pass Culture app – the platform used for youngsters to spend government-funded vouchers on cultural services and goods, including books – despite the fact that many of its users are over 18 years old.⁶

In response to the censoring of *Bien trop petit*, award-winning author Nicolas Mathieu took to Instagram to criticise the decision under the hashtag #WhenIWas15.⁷ The initiative grew, and soon became a book with the same name, collecting 70 men and women's accounts of how literature played a role in awakening their sexuality and their first teenage emotions. The book was published by Manu Causse's publishing house, Editions Thierry Magnier, part of the Actes Sud publishing group, and allowed authors and members of the publishing community to rally in support of Manu Causse and against the interior ministry's decision to impose censorship.⁸

Moreover, Editions Thierry Magnier decided to attack the recent decree and the 1949 law. They argue that there are already sufficient laws in France that prohibit homophobia, racism, antisemitism and pornography aimed at young people and that, therefore, there is no need for a censorship law like that of 1949.⁹

At the time of writing, though the process launched by Magnier is underway and justice is following its course, *Bien trop petit* is still placed under age restrictions. Nevertheless, the book sector has now had enough time to adapt so that the book is available to buy online in certain bookshops' webshops, with new editions being printed with the words *Underage Sale Prohibited*.



Hungary

The case

In 2020, *A Fairy Tale for Everyone*, by authors Dorottya Redai and Boldaszar Nagy, caused great controversy as it received harsh criticism from far-right politicians in Hungary, including Prime Minister Viktor Orban.¹⁰ *A Fairy Tale for Everyone* is a retelling of traditional fairy tales in an updated, more diverse and inclusive way – with queer characters and reversed gender roles. Just before its publication, the book was branded as ‘homosexual propaganda’ by far-right politicians, who encouraged the public to boycott the book. Despite the attempts from the governing party to silence and hamper the release of the title initial print run of 1,500 copies sold within two weeks as the book received a lot of attention from both national and international press.¹¹

In 2021, Hungary’s far right government introduced a legal instrument under which books like *A Fairy Tale for Everyone* can be censored. The so called ‘Child Protection Law’ prohibits any portrayal of LGBTQI+ people in materials meant for children, be it movies, TV-shows, or books. In practice, this means that no such content can be broadcasted or sold to children. The law has been severely criticised for conflating homosexuality with paedophilia and is modelled in part on a Russian law against ‘gay propaganda’.^{12 13}

Hungarian booksellers’ reactions

Since the law was passed it has been put in practice on multiple occasions and several bookshops have been fined for ‘improper display’ of books containing LGBTQI+ characters. For instance, in 2023, the Lira bookshop was fined €32,000 just for having placed bestselling author Alice Oseman’s graphic novel and LGBTQI+ coming of age story, *Heartstopper*, in the children’s section.¹⁴ According to the law, which has been severely criticised, not only for its discriminatory nature, but also for its many instances of legal unclarity, booksellers are obliged to wrap books portraying queer characters in plastic – to keep minors from leafing through them – and to place them out of reach for children.¹⁵

In response to the fine, Lira immediately took legal action and the case further exposed how poorly the legislation had been drafted, as Lira won the case with a strategy that was largely based on a missing comma, without which the meaning of a crucial sentence is changed. The legislation declares that books depicting LGBTQI+ characters “*should be marketed separately from other products only in sealed packaging.*” Due to the missing comma in front of the word ‘only,’ the sentence



reads that only books that are displayed separately (from the children's section) should be wrapped in plastic. And since Lira had not separated *Heartstopper* from the children's section, they did not need to wrap the book and therefore the court concluded that there had been no infringement of the law and ruled in Lira's favour.¹⁶ The court thus decided that, as there was no infringement, there could be no sanctions and found that there was no need to evaluate whether the book in question contained sentences 'promoting homosexuality,' which, of course, Lira also argued against.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the example of Lira's victory stands out in its singularity; looking at the bigger picture, it does seem like the Hungarian government has achieved its goal to censor books containing LGBTQI+ characters. Fear of seemingly arbitrarily imposed fines and the legal uncertainty brought on by the vague language and phrasing of the 'Child Protection Law,' has made many bookshops take actions to comply with the law.

For example, in 2023, Libri, one of Hungary's largest bookshop chains, started wrapping books with queer themes and characters in plastic, keeping them away from the reach of minors. It is, however, worth noting that such actions were only taken after the chain, which is also one of the country's largest publishing houses, was acquired by the government-funded Mathias Corvinus Collegium.¹⁸

While it must be stressed that not all Hungarian booksellers follow the Child Protection Law's recommendations, fear of insurmountable fines is forcing many smaller, rural bookshops to take precautions and comply with the law's requirements.¹⁹

Further reactions

Shortly after the law was passed, the European Commission took legal action against the anti-LGBTQ+ child protection law by bringing Hungary to the EU Court of Justice for violating LGBTQI+ rights.²⁰ In April 2023, 15 EU member states had joined the legal case.²¹ At the time of writing, a court ruling has not yet been made.



USA

In recent years, the USA has seen a surge of new bills that in different ways restrict or prohibit school children's access to certain books. As a result, many school districts across the country are making the executive decision to either restrict access to, or to remove completely, certain kinds of books from the school library. Such decisions are either the result of a book being challenged, or they are taken to protect librarians and educators from potential penalties due to these new bills.²²

Anyone making banned books available to students can be charged with felony. This, of course, includes booksellers. When you add to this the general ideological and societal polarisation that has swept through the country, it is perhaps not too surprising that the American Booksellers Association (ABA) are reporting that *"booksellers [in the USA] are facing a climate that is hostile to the right to read."*²³

The case

A study conducted by PEN America in 2023 showed that, in the 2022-23 school year, 3,362 instances of book bans were recorded in US public school classrooms and libraries. Schools in Florida, Texas, Missouri, Utah and Pennsylvania were mostly affected. Because of these bans, students were denied access to 1,557 unique book titles and the works of over 1,480 authors, illustrators, and translators.²⁴

Currently, the most frequently targeted books are those by, about and for the LGBTQI+ community, people of colour and other minority groups – i.e. books that challenge conservative views of society, the binary and heteronormativity. Moreover, over the past year, books specifically written for younger audiences on themes such as mental health and wellbeing, sexual orientation, physical abuse, grief and death are also being increasingly targeted.^{23 24}

Book banning is not a new phenomenon in the USA. What is new, however, is that, as of

late, books are increasingly being banned as a result of pressure from individual state legislation. There are numerous examples of bills that in various ways hamper free speech, and many more are being drafted or in the process of implementation.²⁵

The ABA has a complete list, in the form of an interactive map, of all legislation limiting free speech and the right to read. Some examples of such laws that have passed and been implemented are the Indiana HB 1447, which allows parents to request a book that is 'harmful to minors' to be removed from the library and the Florida HB 1557, which prohibits instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity through third grade, i.e. when the pupils are 8-9 years old.²⁶

In most cases, these legislations explicitly target libraries and schools, but that does not mean that booksellers are not impacted. As champions of reading, literacy and historically marginalised groups, booksellers are not just affected economically as vendors to school districts, but also existentially as their *raison d'être* is being challenged.

There are however, two pieces of legislation that will have direct impact on booksellers, should they come into effect. We will have a closer look at these below.

The Arkansas Act 372, passed in 2023, makes it illegal to distribute material deemed as "obscene" to minors. A written work's "appropriateness" would be decided in county quorum courts, and books deemed "harmful to minors" would need to be put in a restricted section of the library or bookshop, inaccessible to readers under 18. The law has been heavily criticised for being poorly drafted and vague, leaving room for legal uncertainty, all but guaranteeing that if a book was to be challenged within the scope of the legislation, it would most certainly be banned. Librarians and booksellers could face up to a year in prison if they make such banned books available to children.²⁷

Despite the fact that the bill was passed and signed into law on March 31st 2023, a preliminary injunction, i.e. a temporary suspension of the law, has stopped it from coming into force. The injunction was issued in response to a legal challenge by the ABA and other coalition partners. Arguing that the bill is in violation of ABA members' and coalition partners' First Amendment rights to free speech under the U.S. Constitution, the ABA, together with its coalition partners, has sought a final injunction from the state of Arkansas, which would permanently block the bill.³⁰ At the time of writing, a permanent injunction has not been reached.

The Texas READER act/Texas HB900, passed in 2023, aims to force Texas booksellers to rate "sexual content" in any book they have ever sold or will ever sell to a school district. This means that they would have to go through their entire catalogue, also retrospectively, rating and potentially recalling thousands of books from previous sales, before being allowed to conduct business with schools.³¹

However, just like the Arkansas Act 372, the ABA and its coalition partners contested the law and succeeded in having HB900 put under a temporary suspension. Besides violating the First Amendment, the ABA argued that the law would be anticompetitive, giving an advantage to large players like Amazon as independent bookshops do not have the resources to conduct such extensive reviews as the law requires. Therefore, independent bookshops would be unable to sell to educational institutions and thus lose a crucial part of their income.^{32 33}

American booksellers' reactions

The American Booksellers Association (ABA) has been steadfastly fighting back against restrictive bills hampering free speech through the internal committee, American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE), which is part of ABA's advocacy efforts.³⁴ Through coordinated actions, together with allies from the book sector and beyond, ABFE has opposed state legislations that threaten the right to free expression in several states, including all of the above-mentioned bills.³⁵ You can follow the progress of the legislative procedures of bills that threaten the right to free expression on ABA's dedicated webpage '[ABFE Oppositions Map](#)'.³⁶

Moreover, ABA has over the past years endeavoured to empower their members to fight back against bills that threaten free expression, through different resources, such as a toolkit, as well as dedicated workshops and panels at ABA organised conferences. As an example, in February 2024, at the ABA's annual conference, Winter Institute, a panel named 'Banned books preparedness' gathered booksellers and a representative from the human rights organisation ACLU who in different ways fight censorship.³⁷ Among other things, the panellists discussed the most efficient ways to oppose bills. Interestingly, they noted that, when fighting legislation attempting to restrict access to books, such as the Arkansas act and the Texas READER act, while the first intuition is to argue that such laws are in breach of the first amendment, such arguments are not always as effective as expected. In their experience, politicians and legislators were more responsive to arguments outlining how book bans are bad for business, i.e. bad for the US economy and capitalism in general.³⁸

USA and Moms for Liberty

PEN America explains that the recent book banning trends in America are most often spreading through coordinated campaigns led by a vocal and highly organised minority of groups and individual actors who challenge books and advocate for "content-based restrictions".³⁹ Out of all book bans recorded in school districts in the school year 2022-23, 87 percent had a nearby chapter or local affiliate of such advocacy groups.⁴⁰

As an example, the nation-wide organisation *Moms for Liberty* is one of the main groups that object to books containing 'critical race theory', 'gender ideology', as well as diversity, equity and inclusion.⁴¹ The American Booksellers Association elaborates that "*this movement frames itself as being about parental rights, but in fact it constitutes a small number of parents restricting the rights of a larger number of people.*"⁴²

Ireland

Though the right to freedom of expression is enshrined in the Irish constitution, there are censorship laws and a Censorship Publications Board in the country that may restrict freedom of expression under certain circumstances. These laws may be invoked to limit or ban books, films, magazines, newspapers, online content and other forms of mass communication if it's considered: unacceptable, offensive, obscene or likely to incite hatred or violence⁴³

Books that have been banned in Ireland include *Country Girls* by Edna O'Brien, which portrays women as sexual beings in the 1960s, and *The Dark*, by John McGahern, which deals with themes such as child abuse and grooming committed by parents and the clergy.^{44 45} Moreover, until 2018, the year when abortion was legalised in Ireland, publications providing information about or advocating for the right to abortion was prohibited. Book bans do, however, not occur very often. The last book that was banned was *The Raped Little Runaway* by Jean Martin in 2016, which was also the first book to be banned in 18 years.⁴⁶

Book bans are enacted in the country by the Censorship Publications Board, an independent established under the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929. It consists of five members who are appointed by the Minister for Justice. Its role is to examine books and recently published periodicals that have been referred to the board by a customs or excise officer, or, which is most notable for this paper, by a member of the public.⁴⁷

Recent developments and Irish booksellers' reactions

In recent years, a number of activist groups not unlike the American Moms for Liberty, called the *Natural Women's Council*, the *Irish Education Alliance* and the *Parents Rights Alliance*, have staged protests and tried to have books providing information on gay and transgender issues removed from public libraries in Ireland. They claim that such books contain "pornographic contents that would be X-rated if seen in a film."⁴⁸

In a somewhat contradictory sense, the censoring authority can, on certain occasions, be beneficial for the book sector. For instance, should a bookshop be targeted by an activist group that asks them to remove a specific title from their shelves, the bookshop can always refer to the fact that the book has not been banned by the Censorship Publications Board, and that, therefore, they are allowed to sell it in the bookshop. It does, however, not stop activist groups from organising and through other means, such as intimidation, try and force booksellers to restrict minors' access to certain books.



Further reactions

In 2021, Ireland took a leap forward as incumbent Minister for Justice, Helen McEntree issued an appeal to repeal the Censorship Publications Board, citing that such a body is essentially backwards and has no place in modern day Ireland. McEntree said,

“

In the almost one hundred years of the censorship of publications legislation, there has been a dramatic shift in social policy and societal values in Ireland. [... The] repeal of the Censorship legislation will reflect the reality that the Censorship Boards are of limited relevance in a modern society⁵⁹

HELEN MCENTREE

Minister for Justice for Ireland

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The Minister for Justice continued explaining that a repeal of the Censorship laws would in no way impact the prosecution of possession of child pornography or the circulation of threatening or abusive material – there are other laws that remain to oversee this. Should the process progress as expected, Ireland’s censorship laws may be repealed before the end of 2024⁵⁰



Australia

In Australia films, video- and computer games, and publications, such as books, can be restricted or censored under the Classification Act from 1995.⁵¹ The aim of the Act is to protect minors from “material likely to harm or disturb them [...and to] take account of community concerns about [sexual] violence and the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner.”⁵² The Act stipulates a list of classifiable themes, including violence, sex, drug use and nudity. Like the Censorship Publications Board in Ireland, Australia’s classification laws establish a Classification Board. Its members are appointed by the Governor-General of Australia, i.e., the representative of the Monarch of Australia, currently King Charles the III.

Like in Ireland, anyone wishing to have a book censored or placed under age restriction can refer it to the Classification Board, who will evaluate the book based on the classification laws. In most cases, the board deems that there is no need to censor the book, though there are, however, a few books that have been censored under the Classification Laws. *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis is an example of a book that was given a ‘restricted classification’ by the Classification Board. The book had to be sold in a sealed wrapper and only to adults.⁵³

In 2015, Adelaide bookshop Imprints Booksellers experienced first-hand the enforcement of the Classification Laws, as copies of *American Psycho* had to be removed from the shelves by order of the police. This was the result of 1. a production error by the publisher, which had resulted in a small number of copies being released without the required plastic wrapping and 2. a customer reporting to the police that the bookshop was selling copies of the book without plastic wrapping.⁵⁴

Recent developments and Australian booksellers’ reactions

In an interview with Robbie Egan, Chief Executive Officer of Book People, the Australian booksellers association, Egan noted that though there have been no recent cases of book bans in Australia, there are a growing number of people challenging LGBTQI+ books and reporting them to the Classification Board. An example of such a book being challenged is *Gender queer* by Maia Kobabe. Though Kobabe’s book was not deemed to merit censorship by the Classification Board, Australian booksellers are concerned by this nascent trend of book challenges.



The lived experience of booksellers

As previously mentioned, many booksellers are not only passionate about spreading knowledge and stories through books, but also keen partisans of social justice movements. Because of their activism, and because bookshops make up the part of the book ecosystem that meets customers and its community first-hand, they sometimes face harsh criticism and even violence for the books they do or do not carry, and for the positions they do or do not take.

The next section will take a closer look at the lived experience of a few booksellers. We shall see how they went through external and internal pressure and how it sometimes resulted in them choosing either not to carry certain books or not to voice their opinion on social media and other communication channels. We shall also see how they took action and removed books from the shelves based on their own personal convictions.

Italian booksellers refusing to sell racist and homophobic books

Over the past few years, Italian booksellers have been shaken by a surge of hatred and intolerance spreading through the country. This was ultimately demonstrated by the fact that *Il mondo al contrario* (The World Upside Down), the self-published pamphlet against immigrants, homosexuals and minorities, written by General Roberto Vannaci, became the bestselling book on Italian Amazon in 2023.⁵³

This has sparked a heated public and political debate on issues such as freedom of expression, censorship and incitement to hatred. While the left has strongly criticised and opposed the pamphlet, right-wing politicians, including the Italian government under far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, have remained divided⁵⁴

Many Italian booksellers have participated in the debate by speaking up and refusing to sell Vannaci's book. Some, like the Le Torri

bookshop in Rome, also protest by refusing to sell Prime Minister Meloni's first book, which describes Nigerians as '*members of the mafia, and cannibals,*' among other things.⁵⁵

Do note that it is not for this paper to determine whether the above is or is not an example of censorship, as this is a continued discussion within the book community. Booksellers, as private business owners, have the right and freedom to decide which books they stock and sell in their own shop. Just because one bookshop chooses not to sell a title does not necessarily mean it is being censored, as it will still be available in other outlets. It is, however, necessary to mention and shed light on examples such as this, as they do occur and need to be discussed in order to provide a fuller picture of the challenges that booksellers are facing today.

Testimonies from Canadian independent booksellers

The Canadian Independent Booksellers Association (CIBA) reports that conservative protesters have been a challenge for bookstores in Canada with some incidents of protests against drag story time events, for example.

Booksellers also face challenges to freedom of expression from within their own communities. These typically come from historically progressive customers, who take issue with the shop's book curation, its decision to stock certain titles or feature them on social media. These objections may arise due to the author or book content being seen as problematic in the views of the customer. As a result, booksellers struggle with the decision to speak publicly on current affairs, either risking criticism for staying silent or, on the contrary, facing online harassment if they do take a stand. This has been particularly challenging in the past year in relation to books about Palestine and Israel.

Perspectives of a US bookseller

In the USA, we asked Grace Hagen, former bookseller at the Novel Neighbor Bookstore in St Louis, Missouri, now Operations Manager at the Midwest Independent Booksellers Association, how she, as a bookseller, approached diversity and inclusion, social justice movements and cancel culture.

The Novel Neighbor is an independent bookshop and community space, whose management is dedicated to making the bookshop into *"a [welcoming] place where people from all backgrounds come together to celebrate their love of books and community."* At the Novel Neighbor Bookstore, Hagen was Director of Operations and Inclusion, responsible for designing and executing strategies and practices to create a culture of inclusion and belonging for employees and customers, including accessibility auditing, staff training, community programming, educational displays, and much more.

With her extensive experience in working for diversity and inclusion, Hagen ponders how this work is perpetually imperfect – it is an ideal you can strive towards, but it can never fully be achieved. This is because, as human beings, we all have biases and we all make mistakes. However, if we are attentive, expect respect from each other and hold each other accountable,



we might learn and improve. Hagens believes that an inclusive space is also a forgiving space, forgiving of others' mistakes, for when they err even if they have the best intentions. Noting that:

“

Making people expendable is dehumanising [...]. It's not the same thing as not having accountability. If we don't [make the distinction] and show that repair is possible, then people will continue to be quiet and try and be safe and risk-free, at the expense of the goals of equity and safety. [...] This is imperfect. The willingness to learn from our mistakes is more important than being perfect. If you let the fear of not being perfect stop you from trying, you will be passive and silent. Silence is a loud message to people that need to hear where you stand



GRACE HAGEN

Operations Manager at the Midwest Independent Booksellers Association

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Moreover, Hagen reflects on how this version of working towards diversity and inclusion is incompatible with the 'race for perfection' and cancel culture that is often present in social justice movements [like the Black Lives Matter and the Climate Movement, to mention a few - author's note]. This race, which often goes hand in hand with the denigration of others for not performing as well as you do, is essentially harmful. The practice of over-policing others' behaviours creates more division and gives the social justice movement a bad reputation. "Collaboration, not competition, is one of the values of inclusion and belonging," Hagen elaborates.





Bookshops on the receiving end of vandalism and aggressive behaviour

Over the past years, EIBF and the RISE Network have, through its members, been made aware of several instances of vandalism, protests and targeted attacks against bookshops. This section will record some of these instances, with the aim of giving a representative picture of the extent of the vandalism and violence many booksellers unfortunately experience in their profession. In this sense, this section will serve to meet the needs of the bookselling community to map out the current climate for freedom of expression, access to books and the right to read.

In the following pages, you will find examples from France, Ireland, the UK, Spain, the USA and Italy. Do note, however, that this list is not exhaustive and that these are just some of the incidents that have been brought to our attention. All these examples showcase the increasing violence and number of threats that many booksellers have had to face in the past few years.

France

Over the course of 2022 and 2023, several reports of bookshops being vandalised reached the French press. Michèle Firk and La Brèche, two feminist bookshops in Parisian suburbs were both vandalised by right-wing groups.⁵⁸ Moreover, the façades of the Mollat bookshop in Bordeaux were tagged with feminist slogans during the night leading up to a visit by controversial writer Frederic Beigbeder.⁵⁹

In Nice, Les Parleuses bookshop had a sinister experience with the French police force in relation to the Interior Minister's visit to the city at the inauguration of a new police headquarters.⁶⁰ (The same Minister who acted out the censorship against Manu Causse's *Bien trop petit*, which is explained in detail previously in this paper.)

Les Parleuses, which is situated just opposite to where a press conference with the Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin, was to be held, had (legally) put up feminist signs in their window in critique of the Minister. The signs said, "He who sows impunity reaps wrath", and "Sophie, on

te croit" (Sophie, we believe you), in reference to Sophie Patterson-Spatz, who had lodged a complaint against the Interior Minister for rape - a case in which the courts dismissed the charges. Before the press conference took place, however, a division of the general reserve of the French National Police covered the bookshop windows in a large black piece of fabric.⁶¹ Bookshop owners, Anouck Aubert and Maud Pouyé, were outraged by the event, which they called an act of censorship.⁶²

Moreover, in June 2024, as France awaited the split national elections with suspense and apprehension, another bookshop was vandalised, ostensibly for its anti-far-right window display. The team of Petit Pantagruel, a children's bookshop in Marseille, had put up signs saying "I want to live in an anti-racist and anti-fascist France" in the bookshop window, only to discover on the morning of June 17th that the window had been smashed. The imprint on the glass suggests a Pétanque ball had been thrown at the window.⁶³

Spain

Feminist independent bookshop Mujeres & Compañía in Madrid, Spain, was targeted by far-right activists in 2021. The bookshop was vandalised, when those in charge decided to remove Carmen Mola's novels from their shelves after learning that three men were hiding under that pseudonym. On social media they were called 'feminazis', 'morality police', 'censors' and received all kinds of insults and hate messages.^{64 65}



Ireland and the United Kingdom

The Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland (BA) have received an increasing number of worrying reports from their membership about abuse and attacks from customers and members of the public against booksellers. Often these acts of violence are linked to a customer's or passersby's negative reactions to a bookshop's window display. Booksellers have reported instances where such attacks have been racially motivated, for example, in response to a window display highlighting Black History Month or the Black Lives Matter movement.⁶⁶

Representatives from the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland (BA) noted that recent events have shown that a section of society is very angry, and in their anger, they often target libraries and bookshops. In these cases, there is a kind of impunity for such behaviour, as the police has been largely non-responsive, often citing that people "have a right to protest". What is worrying is that these are not isolated events, but part of a larger pattern.

Furthermore, the BA highlighted that in Ireland, primarily, there is a growing contingent of people targeting bookshops and libraries under a politically motivated anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-environmental sustainability agenda. These people are right-wing activists, often with links to far-right political parties, and they target bookshops and libraries in cities all over the country.

John Breen, bookseller at Waterstones in Cork, Ireland, has personally experienced these protests, when his bookshop was targeted in 2023. Breen explains that these protesters often follow the same structure: they pick a specific book by/about or for the LGBTQI+ community (for example, their first target was *This Book Is Gay*, by June Dawson) and they film themselves going into bookshops, approaching booksellers to tell them they want to make a complaint. They proceed to say that the bookshop is committing a crime under the Children First Act 2015 by displaying this book

in the children's section. When this happened in Breen's bookshop, the staff also filmed the event and managed to catch on camera the moment when the protesters stopped their recording and started becoming abusive. This video could later be shown to the police.

Following these incidents, as the Gardaí, i.e. the Irish police, have been contacted, they have confirmed that booksellers are entitled to sell any book which has not been censored by the Censorship of Publications Board, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, the BA has been advising its bookshop members to refer to the censorship authority if they are ever targeted by a group of protesters and to inform them that the only way to get a book removed from the shelves is to report it to the Censorship of Publications Board.

Another example of a bookshop that has been directly targeted under fascist, anti-LGBTQI+ agenda is Tertulia, in Westport, Ireland. Tertulia profiles itself as an inclusive and welcoming space for all and has hosted several popular Drag Queen story time sessions for children, as part of the Mayo Pride Festival.

Because of these events, however, the bookshop unfortunately became a target for far-right activists. This group of people harassed and abused the bookshop staff and owners online, called the shop and left hateful voice messages and finally showed up at the bookshop to photograph customers and intimidate the staff. Co-owners Brid Conroy and Neil Paul explain how most of the protestors were not from the local community, but had, in fact, travelled to Westport for the mere purpose of protesting.⁶⁷ Luckily, members of the local community came together in support of the bookshop in response to this unwelcomed attention from far-right activists⁶⁸



USA

On the 29th of May 2020, legendary bookstores among the community of science fiction, fantasy, and mystery readers, Uncle Hugo's and Uncle Edgar's, were burnt to the ground by arsonists in Minneapolis, United States. The event was the culmination of a period of civil unrest following the incidents of police brutality that unjustly targeted black people and minorities and led to the murder of George Floyd.⁶⁹

During this period, many US bookshops rallied under the social justice movement, taking a stand against racism, showing support for the protests over police violence against black people, and other minorities and at-risk groups.

Some bookshops provided first aid, promoted reading lists on antiracism books, and donated a portion of sales to organisations fighting mass incarceration.⁷⁰

Italy

In 2019, a Rome-based anti-fascist bookshop, Pecora Elettrica, became the target of arsonists. On two separate occasions, in April and in November, the bookshop was broken into and lit on fire. While the bookshop could not seek justice as no perpetrators were caught, Pecora Elettrica managed to collect enough money from crowdfunding to rebuild the bookshop after the first attack. The second attack, however, became the killing blow and the bookshop has since closed. The then incumbent Minister for Cultural Heritage, Dario Franceschini, lamented the attack, saying it was 'A terrible event'.⁷¹

More recently, as mentioned earlier in this paper, because many booksellers chose not to sell Roberto Vannaci's homophobic and racist pamphlet, *Il mondo al contrario* (The World Upside Down), some were targeted by supporters of Vannaci. For instance, Clara Abatangelo, a 61-year-old bookseller and owner of Ubik bookshop in Castelfranco Veneto was threatened by a customer, accusing her of censorship for her decision not to sell the book.⁷² The incident was deeply upsetting for Abatangelo, who is determined to take legal action and seek justice against the perpetrator so as to not feel afraid that it might happen again.⁷³



Resources available for booksellers to stand up against censorship and protect themselves against aggressors

The final section of this paper aims to collate a list of resources and initiatives that are available to help booksellers stand up against censorship, as well as deal with difficult or aggressive customers.

The fact that booksellers are stronger as a collective is especially true when it comes to infringements on free expression or politically motivated attacks on their shops. Whether it be fighting against censorship, speaking up against discriminatory behaviour or ensuring the bookshop staff feels safe at work, the services and resources booksellers associations offer are instrumental to booksellers on the ground. Below you will find a list of examples of said resources.

Woche der Meinungsfreiheit - Germany

Every year, starting on the International Press Freedom Day, May 3rd and ending on Book Burning Day, May 10th, the German Publishers and Booksellers Association (BoeV), organises a nationwide action week of events, campaigns and projects together with partners to raise awareness on the intrinsic value of freedom of expression. More information can be found on the freedom of expression week's [website](#).⁷⁴

Guidance for dealing with difficult customers – UK and Ireland

For years, the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland (BA) has supported the bookshops in its membership in dealing with difficult customers. With time, they have been able to put together a solid library of resources, such as toolkits for organising events with potentially controversial authors, dealing with racially-motivated abuse in a bookshop as well as email harassment, and a guide on how to stay safe at work. All resources are available for download on a [dedicated page](#) on the BA's website.⁷⁵

The ABA Right to Read Toolkit – USA

The American Booksellers Association (ABA) has produced the "Right to Read Toolkit: How booksellers and readers can resist book bans", which is a toolkit full of How-Tos, resources and case studies to help booksellers deal with book bans and censorship and the challenges in their daily work. Read the toolkit on ABA's [website](#).⁷⁶



The ABA de-escalation skills training – USA

During the 2024 edition of its annual conference, the Winter Institute, the ABA organised a training session for booksellers to develop de-escalation skills and strategies to handle difficult customer interactions. A recording of the session is available as a resource for ABA members through a [dedicated page](#) on the ABA website.⁷⁷

The ABA Right to Read Handbook: Fighting Book Bans and Why It Matters – USA

On September 16 2024, the ABA will release a book aiming to help freedom to read advocates stand up against censorship and book bans. This valuable resource is written by Philomena Polefrone, the ABA’s advocacy associate manager and point person for the American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE) and all profits will support ABFE’s efforts against book bans. You can read more about the handbook on the [ABA’s website](#).⁷⁸

Banned Books Week - USA

Launched in 1982 as a response to a surge in the number of challenges to books in libraries, bookshops and schools, Banned Books Week brings together the entire book community and is typically held each year during the last week of September.⁷⁸

The annual event highlights the value of free and open access to information and focuses on efforts across the country to remove or restrict access to books. Its aim is to draw national attention to the harms of censorship.

Through the ABA, bookshops have access to physical and online toolkits consisting of posters, bookmarks and buttons and other resources for creating eye-catching window displays to highlight the event.⁸⁰

Banned Books Week – Sweden

In October 2023, PEN Sweden and the Dawit Isaak library coordinated the launch of a Swedish chapter of the Banned Books Week, inspired by the US initiative. The event received a lot of attention and engagement, paving the way for making Banned Books Week a yearly event in Sweden. The next edition will take place on the 7th-13th of October 2024. Read more about Banned Books Week in Sweden on [PEN Sweden’s website](#).⁸⁰



Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen many different examples of censorship and attempts to limit free speech, through legislative action by local and national authorities, as well as through violence and intimidation by members of the public. We have also seen how bookshops, in their role as open spaces giving access to books, are affected by such legislation and targeted by groups who wish to restrict access to certain kinds of books. Moreover, as champions of reading, literacy and keen partisans of social justice movements, booksellers are not just being challenged economically when censorship is imposed, but also existentially, as their *raison d'être* is being put to the test.

It is clear that these times of increased political and ideological polarisation have brought on an onset of cultural censorship, not only visible through book bans in the USA, but also through legislative actions and nascent movements for content-based restrictions in Europe. In this paper, we have endeavoured to provide a snapshot of the current situation,

as it is experienced by those who are on the frontline: booksellers. We have seen that many booksellers, mainly in the US, but also in some places in Europe, are facing a climate that is increasingly hostile to the right to read.

It is a core belief of EIBF and the RISE Network that bookshops are cornerstones of healthy democracies. By being open, welcoming spaces providing access to books and allowing people to meet, debate and discover new ideas, bookshops are crucial to foster the tolerance of others that is necessary for democracies to function. By shedding light on all the ways that bookshops are targeted for the work that they do, this paper has demonstrated why, now more than ever, we need to protect booksellers and their bookshops. Booksellers should not be harmed or at risk for doing their job, and bookshops are essential for society as vectors of free speech. For these reasons, protecting freedom of expression is a top priority for the book sector now and in the years to come.

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American Booksellers Association (ABA)



The Booksellers Association of the UK & Ireland



Book People



Canadian Independent Booksellers Association (CIBA)



Syndicat de la librairie française (SLF)

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