

Committee: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Issue: Combating Book Censorship and Promoting literary freedom of expression

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Introduction

Books and literature have influenced political thought, challenged authority, and advanced social progress, and continues to do so in the present as well. From George Orwell's 1984, which remains one of the most widely banned novels for its critique of totalitarianism, to The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, whose themes of state-controlled reproduction continue to provoke censorship debates today, literature has historically been treated by governments as both a mirror and a threat. Karl Marx's The Communist Manifesto was suppressed across Europe throughout the 19th century, and more recently, authors like Salman Rushdie have faced state-sanctioned violence in response to their writing.

Book censorship refers to the suppression, removal, or restriction of written works by governments, institutions, or other authorities based on their content. This practice can take on many forms: outright bans, removal from educational curricula, author imprisonment, digital content filtering, and of course, the more deceptive mechanism of self-censorship driven by fear of legal or personal repercussions. While censorship is often justified under the guise of national security, public morality, or the protection of cultural values, it frequently serves as a tool to silence political dissent, marginalize minority voices, and limit access to knowledge.

UNESCO, as the United Nations body mandated to protect cultural expression and education, is uniquely positioned to lead international efforts against literary censorship. The freedom to write, publish, and read without fear of persecution is not merely a matter of artistic liberty but is inseparable from the broader principles of democracy, human dignity, and the right to education. This committee will examine the root causes of book censorship, evaluate existing international legal frameworks, and work toward strengthening global protections for authors and readers alike.

Definition of Key Terms

Book Censorship

The suppression, prohibition, or restriction of written or published works by a government, institution, or other authority, based on the content being deemed politically subversive, morally objectionable, religiously inappropriate, or socially dangerous. Censorship can take the form of outright bans, removal from library shelves or school curricula, seizure of printed copies, or criminalization of possession.

Literary Freedom of Expression

The right of authors, publishers, and readers to create, distribute, and access written works without fear of government interference, legal prosecution, or persecution. Grounded in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this freedom is considered foundational to democratic societies and the open exchange of ideas.

Index Librorum Prohibitorum

Historically, a list of books prohibited by the Catholic Church; used in modern discourse as a reference point for institutionalized censorship. The term more broadly represents any formal or official catalogue of banned or restricted works.

Self-Censorship

The practice by which authors, journalists, or publishers voluntarily suppress or alter their own work out of fear of legal consequences, social backlash, or personal harm. Often considered a secondary effect of direct censorship, self-censorship can be equally damaging to the free flow of ideas.

Banned Book

A literary work that has been formally prohibited from publication, sale, or distribution by a governmental or institutional authority within a specific jurisdiction. Reasons for banning can range from political content and religious criticism to explicit material or perceived threats to social order.

Intellectual Freedom

The right of every individual to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas without restriction. In the context of literary access, intellectual freedom encompasses the ability to read and engage with a diverse range of perspectives, including those that may be controversial or unpopular.

PEN International

A global association of writers founded in 1921 that campaigns for freedom of expression and advocates on behalf of imprisoned or persecuted authors. PEN International serves as a key non-state actor in the international fight against book censorship.

Index on Censorship

A UK-based organization that monitors and documents cases of censorship and threats to freedom of expression worldwide, publishing reports used by policymakers and international bodies to track trends in literary suppression, and is a non-state actor.

History

Early History and Institutionalized Censorship

The suppression of literary works predates the printing press. In ancient China, Emperor Qin Shi Huang ordered the burning of books and burial of scholars in 213 BCE to consolidate ideological control. In Europe, the Roman Catholic Church established its Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1559, formally cataloguing texts deemed heretical (a list that remained active until 1966). These early examples of institutionalized censorship established the blueprint that many modern authoritarian regimes continue to follow: control over information is treated as a tool of political and moral governance.

The invention of the printing press in the 15th century accelerated both the spread of ideas and the urgency of censorship efforts. Governments across Europe introduced licensing systems to regulate publication, and works challenging religious doctrine or royal authority were routinely confiscated and destroyed. Authors like Galileo Galilei faced personal persecution for publishing scientific and philosophical works that contradicted church teaching, illustrating the extent to which literary censorship has historically been used to preserve existing power structures.

20th Century: Political Censorship and the Rise of International Norms

The 20th century saw censorship weaponized on an unprecedented scale. Nazi Germany's book burnings of 1933 targeted works by Jewish authors, political opponents, and intellectuals whose ideas were deemed incompatible with fascist ideology. The Soviet Union developed an extensive state apparatus for controlling literary output, banning authors like Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose works were smuggled out of the country and published abroad as samizdat literature. These events

galvanized the international community to enshrine freedom of expression as a fundamental right, culminating in Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Despite the establishment of these international norms, censorship persisted throughout the Cold War era and beyond. In many newly independent states, post-colonial governments used censorship to suppress political opposition and define national identity on narrow terms. The banning of Chinua Achebe's works in some African countries, and the targeting of Latin American authors associated with the magical realism literary movement for their political allegories, demonstrate that book censorship cannot be reduced to any single political ideology; it is a recurring tool used by governments across the political spectrum.

Contemporary Landscape: Digital Censorship and Renewed Challenges

The digital age has fundamentally transformed both the possibilities for literary expression and the methods of censorship. Governments now employ internet filtering, e-book platform restrictions, and algorithmic suppression to limit access to literary content at scale. China's Great Firewall restricts access to a wide range of foreign literary works, and domestic authors who publish content critical of the government face criminal prosecution. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by sweeping censorship of works that reference Ukrainian national identity or critique Russian state narratives. Meanwhile, a significant and unexpected wave of book banning has emerged in Western democracies, particularly in the United States, where over 2,500 titles were challenged or removed from school libraries in 2022 alone- frequently targeting books authored by or written about LGBTQ+ individuals and people of color.

Key Issues

State-Sanctioned Censorship and Author Persecution

The most severe form of literary censorship occurs when states move beyond banning books to directly targeting the authors themselves. In countries such as Iran, Turkey, China, and Eritrea, writers face imprisonment, exile, and in some cases death for publishing works that challenge official narratives or touch on politically sensitive subjects. Turkey currently holds one of the highest numbers of imprisoned journalists and authors in the world, with prosecutions frequently brought under broadly defined anti-terrorism statutes. These laws create an environment where the act of writing itself becomes a legal risk, producing a chilling effect that extends far beyond those directly prosecuted. The conflation of literature with political subversion represents one of the most direct threats to literary freedom globally.

School and Library Book Bans in Democratic States

While authoritarian censorship draws significant international attention, the rise of organized book-banning campaigns within democratic states presents an equally pressing concern. In the United States, coordinated advocacy groups have successfully pressured school districts to remove books dealing with race, sexuality, gender identity, and historical trauma from library shelves. This trend is not limited to the US: similar campaigns have been documented in parts of Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and Hungary, where government-aligned groups have targeted educational materials that include LGBTQ+ content or representations of Jewish history that conflict with nationalist narratives. The use of democratic processes (parental complaints, school board votes) to achieve censorship outcomes complicates the international community's ability to respond, as these removals are often framed as exercises of local governance rather than violations of literary freedom.

Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Suppression

The shift toward digital publishing and distribution has introduced new vectors for censorship that existing international frameworks were not designed to address. E-book platforms and digital storefronts are increasingly subject to pressure from host governments to delist or restrict specific titles. China's control over domestic app stores and digital marketplaces effectively prevents access to foreign literary works at scale, while also placing pressure on international publishers who wish to maintain market access in the country. Social media platforms, which have become important spaces for literary communities and author-reader interaction, are also sites of content moderation that can effectively suppress literary voices. The lack of transparency in algorithmic content curation means that works may be demoted or rendered invisible without any formal censorship declaration, making accountability difficult to establish.

Self-Censorship and the Erosion of Literary Culture

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to measure and address is the phenomenon of self-censorship. When authors, editors, and publishers operate in environments where the consequences of expression are unpredictable or severe, many choose to modify or suppress their own work before any formal censorship mechanism is triggered. This is particularly prevalent in contexts where laws against defamation, blasphemy, or national security are vaguely defined and selectively enforced. Self-censorship is especially damaging to minority and marginalized voices, who already face structural barriers to publication and may perceive the personal risk of expression as too high. The cumulative effect on literary culture is a

narrowing of the range of perspectives available to readers, and an impoverishment of the public discourse that literature is uniquely suited to enrich.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

State Actors

People's Republic of China

China maintains one of the world's most extensive censorship apparatuses, operating through the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) to regulate all domestic publishing. Foreign literary works are subject to approval before distribution, and domestic authors whose content is deemed politically sensitive (particularly works addressing Xinjiang, Tibet, the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, or criticism of the Communist Party) face severe consequences, including prosecution. China consistently frames its censorship policies as exercises of sovereignty and cultural self-determination, arguing that its regulatory approach reflects its own social values and development stage. At the international level, China has opposed UNESCO resolutions that it views as imposing Western liberal standards on cultural governance.

Republic of Turkey

Turkey presents a complex case as a state that is formally secular, a member of NATO, and an EU candidate country, yet holds one of the highest rates of literary and journalistic censorship globally. Turkish courts have routinely prosecuted authors under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes 'insulting Turkishness,' as well as under broad anti-terrorism statutes. Author Ahmet Altan and Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk have both faced legal proceedings in connection with their writing. Turkey's position in UNESCO debates tends to emphasize national security and social harmony as legitimate grounds for content restriction, while opposing external monitoring of domestic censorship practices.

Kingdom of Norway

Norway is internationally recognized as a leading defender of press freedom and literary expression, consistently ranking at the top of global freedom indices. The Norwegian government provides substantial public funding to support domestic literary production, translation of foreign works, and the preservation of literary heritage. Norway has been an active advocate within UNESCO for

strengthening international frameworks to protect authors at risk, and supports the work of PEN International and similar organizations. Norwegian publishers have taken principled stands against self-censorship in response to threats, most notably in the aftermath of the Salman Rushdie fatwa, when Norwegian publisher William Nygaard was shot in an assassination attempt in 1993.

Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran operates one of the world's most restrictive literary censorship systems, requiring all publications to receive prior approval from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Works that are deemed contrary to Islamic values, critical of the state, or supportive of political opposition are systematically banned. Iranian authors who publish abroad or engage with international literary communities face harassment, imprisonment, or forced exile. Iran's position at international forums frames literary censorship as a necessary protection of religious and cultural identity, resisting UNESCO frameworks that it views as vehicles for Western cultural imperialism.

Non-state Actors

PEN International

Founded in 1921, PEN International is the world's oldest and largest literary organization, with centers in over 100 countries. Its core mandate is the defense of freedom of expression for writers worldwide. PEN campaigns on behalf of imprisoned authors, monitors censorship developments globally, and provides legal and practical support to writers at risk. PEN's annual Freedom to Write index is widely referenced in international advocacy and policy discussions. The organization has consultative status with UNESCO and actively participates in the development of international standards for literary freedom.

Index on Censorship

Founded in 1972 in response to Soviet literary repression, the Index on Censorship is a UK-based organization that documents and publishes reports on censorship worldwide, covering books, journalism, art, and digital expression. Its reports are used by policymakers, UN bodies, and international NGOs to track trends and build the evidentiary base for advocacy. The Index provides a platform for censored writers to publish their work internationally and has historically played a key role in amplifying voices suppressed by authoritarian regimes.

International Publishers Association (IPA)

The IPA represents publishers in over 60 countries and is the global trade body for the publishing industry. It advocates for freedom to publish as a precondition for the book trade and works in coordination with UNESCO and national governments to resist censorship measures that restrict the international circulation of books. The IPA's annual Freedom to Publish Prize recognizes publishers who have demonstrated courage in resisting censorship, and the organization regularly files statements with UN Special Procedures in cases involving publisher persecution.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of Event
1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is adopted by the UN General Assembly, with Article 19 enshrining the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information through any media.
1966	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) enters the drafting process, formally codifying freedom of expression as a binding obligation under international law for signatory states.
1976	The ICCPR enters into force. Article 19 becomes a cornerstone international legal standard against arbitrary censorship, including of literary and journalistic works.
2001	UNESCO adopts the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, affirming that creative expression and the free flow of ideas are essential to cultural vitality and intercultural dialogue.
2005	UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions is adopted, recognizing literature and the arts as carriers of cultural identity deserving both protection and open circulation.
2013	The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression releases a landmark report addressing internet-based censorship, noting that digital restrictions on literary and journalistic content are increasing globally.
2017	Reporters Without Borders and PEN International jointly document a marked rise in state-sanctioned book bans and author imprisonment across authoritarian regimes, prompting UNESCO to strengthen its monitoring frameworks.
2021	UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy initiatives are expanded to include literary access as a dimension of informed citizenship, emphasizing the connection between reading culture and democratic participation.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The international community has developed a substantial body of legal and normative frameworks addressing book censorship, but implementation and enforcement remain deeply uneven. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the corresponding provisions of the International Covenant

on Civil and Political Rights establish freedom of expression (including literary expression) as a universal right. UNESCO's 2005 Convention on Cultural Diversity provides an additional layer of protection by affirming states' obligations to safeguard diverse cultural and literary expression. However, these instruments lack effective enforcement mechanisms, and states that systematically censor literature face limited international accountability beyond public condemnation.

At the organizational level, UNESCO's designations of Cities of Creative Literature under its Creative Cities Network have helped cultivate international communities committed to literary access and production. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has issued substantive reports on literary censorship and author persecution, providing advocacy tools for civil society organizations. PEN International's writer-in-residence programs and emergency funds have offered concrete protection to hundreds of authors at risk, demonstrating the impact of direct support mechanisms operating alongside broader normative frameworks.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain. The rise of digital censorship has outpaced the development of international norms addressing it, leaving major platforms and state-level internet governance outside the scope of existing treaty frameworks. The wave of school library book bans in democratic states has exposed the limitations of international pressure when censorship occurs through domestic political processes rather than top-down state decree. And in states with the most severe censorship regimes, the combination of sovereign non-interference norms and the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms means that international condemnation rarely translates into meaningful change for imprisoned authors or their families.

Possible Solutions

Addressing book censorship in a way that is both effective and respectful of diverse legal traditions requires a multi-pronged approach. The following directions offer a framework for committee discussion:

First, UNESCO may consider developing a more robust monitoring mechanism specifically dedicated to literary censorship, modeled on the periodic review processes used in other international human rights contexts. A structured reporting system, through which member states document their legal frameworks for publication, distribution, and library access, would create greater transparency and allow for comparative assessment without constituting an intrusive enforcement mechanism. This could be

coupled with a voluntary peer review process through which states share best practices for protecting literary freedom within their domestic legal systems.

Second, the committee may explore the feasibility of expanding the mandate and resources of UNESCO's existing emergency assistance mechanisms for authors at risk. Current programs are limited in scope and funding; a dedicated international fund (financed through voluntary member state contributions and private foundation partnerships) could provide legal support, relocation assistance, and publishing opportunities for writers facing persecution. Models such as the Scholar Rescue Fund operated by the Institute for International Education offer a template for how such a mechanism might function within the UN system.

Third, the growing threat of digital censorship needs dedicated attention. The committee should consider developing guidelines for digital platform governance that include protections for literary content, drawing on established human rights principles to set baseline standards for content moderation transparency and appeals processes. Engagement with major digital publishers and e-book platforms through a UNESCO-facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogue could produce voluntary commitments that, while not legally binding, establish normative expectations that can be referenced in bilateral and multilateral discussions.

Finally, the committee should recognize the particular vulnerability of marginalized voices within broader censorship debates. Indigenous language literature, LGBTQ+ authored works, and texts addressing minority historical experiences face disproportionate targeting both in authoritarian contexts and in the wave of democratic book banning currently underway. Resolutions that explicitly name the protection of diverse literary voices -not only literary freedom in the abstract. This will be more responsive to the full scope of the challenge the committee is tasked with addressing.

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