

## Libraries and Power: Uncovering Political Interventions within Public Information Institutions

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### Abstract

**Background:** Libraries are often perceived as neutral institutions that provide access to information, support literacy, and preserve cultural heritage. However, recent cases of censorship, book banning, leadership intervention, and professional self-censorship show that libraries are frequently shaped by political and ideological pressures. Previous studies have largely examined censorship as isolated cases, leaving limited attention to the broader power relations that structure library governance, collection policies, and public access to knowledge.

**Objective:** This study aims to analyze how political interventions occur within library institutions, examine their impacts on intellectual freedom and public access, and apply the political economy of information perspective to understand the power relations embedded in library governance and knowledge control.

**Methods:** This study employs a critical qualitative approach with a multiple case study design. Data were collected through document analysis and literature review, including policy documents, academic studies, media reports, advocacy reports, and library-related archives. The analysis was conducted using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), supported by source triangulation, audit trails, and reflexive reading to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness.

**Results:** The findings show that libraries are not neutral spaces, but contested arenas where political, ideological, economic, and professional interests shape access to knowledge. The dismissal of Carla Hayden as Librarian of Congress, the banning of leftist literature in Indonesia, and practices of censorship and self-censorship among librarians demonstrate that political intervention operates through leadership control, collection restriction, professional gatekeeping, and access management. These interventions reduce knowledge diversity, weaken professional autonomy, and reproduce dominant ideologies through library practices.

**Conclusion:** This study argues that libraries function both as democratic institutions for public access and as potential instruments of ideological control. By applying the political economy of information, it shows that libraries are contested sites where knowledge is produced, regulated, and distributed through power relations. The findings highlight the need for critical librarianship, transparent collection policies, protection of professional autonomy, and stronger collaboration among libraries, policymakers, academics, and civil society to resist censorship and promote inclusive access to knowledge.

**Keywords:** Libraries; censorship; political economy; knowledge and power

## INTRODUCTION

Libraries have long been perceived as neutral spaces, places where the public can access information free from ideological bias or political interests. In various official discourses, libraries are positioned as public institutions that support literacy, education, intellectual freedom, and the democratization of knowledge. However, the assumption of

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library neutrality needs to be critically examined. Libraries never truly exist in a vacuum; rather, they operate within constantly shifting political, economic, social, and ideological dynamics. Under certain conditions, libraries may become arenas of competing interests among the state, communities, ideological groups, the market, and other social actors seeking to determine what information is considered worthy of being collected, circulated, read, or excluded from public access.

The practice of book censorship demonstrates that the control of knowledge is often justified through appeals to morality, child protection, social stability, or the public interest. Historically, book censorship has not only been concerned with banning reading materials deemed politically dangerous, but also with regulating public morality. For instance, the Comstock Act of 1873 in the United States prohibited the distribution of reading materials considered “obscene” or inappropriate (Zeigler, 2015; Brisman, 2024). In contemporary contexts, similar patterns remain visible in the banning or removal of books addressing LGBTQ themes, racial diversity, sexuality, and historical narratives that challenge dominant versions of the past (Goncalves et al., 2024; Pinsky & Brenner, 2025). Thus, book censorship is not merely an administrative act concerning collections, but a political and cultural mechanism for restricting certain forms of knowledge from circulating widely.

In recent years, the rise of book censorship has become increasingly visible, particularly in the United States. The American Library Association (ALA) reported that in 2024, 4,240 book titles were targeted for removal or restricted access, representing a 65% increase compared to the previous year. The books targeted were commonly related to LGBTQ issues, racism, diverse identities, and colonial history, which were perceived as disrupting dominant narratives. Several studies have also shown that books written by authors from minority groups, or those featuring characters from diverse racial and identity backgrounds, are more frequently subjected to banning (Gierhart et al., 2024). In this context, book banning should not be understood merely as an effort to limit access to reading materials, but also as a symbolic political act aimed at mobilizing support from particular groups, especially in areas experiencing demographic change and political tension (Laats & Meehan, 2024).

The impact of book censorship does not end with the loss of access to particular reading materials; it also touches on broader issues of human rights, education, and democracy. Book restrictions may hinder the rights of children and the public to access information, develop critical thinking, and understand diverse social experiences (Vissing & Juchniewicz, 2023). The removal of books such as *Maus* from school curricula, for example, illustrates how censorship can limit young people’s access to important historical memory and the experiences of oppressed groups (Laats & Meehan, 2024). In the long term, such censorship may narrow democratic dialogue, weaken tolerance, and push students or the wider public to seek information in unregulated digital spaces, thereby increasing the risk of misinformation (Hicks, 2026).

At the same time, libraries occupy a complex position. On the one hand, libraries are expected to uphold intellectual freedom and inclusive access to information. On the other hand, libraries face pressure from governments, community groups, educational institutions,

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conservative groups, and political actors seeking to influence collection policies and information services (Steele, 2018; Jones, 2025). These pressures show that libraries are not merely technical institutions that provide reading materials, but public institutions situated within relations of power. Decisions about which books are made available, which collections are concealed, and which information is deemed dangerous reflect processes of selection, negotiation, and even political intervention in the management of public knowledge.

A similar condition can also be observed in Indonesia. The practice of book banning has deep historical roots, particularly in relation to state ideology, communism, and political memory of the past. Books discussing the September 30th Movement, leftist thought, or figures such as Tan Malaka, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Soe Hok Gie have frequently been subjected to restriction, withdrawal, or prohibition. Historically, book banning during the New Order period was carried out systematically against works considered contrary to state ideology. Ferdinal (2013) notes that during Indonesia's New Order era, the government banned over 200 titles suspected of promoting leftist ideology, many of which were systematically removed from schools and public libraries. Mayasari (2023) further explains that the ideological struggles of the Indonesian state during and after the Cold War resulted in long-term censorship of leftist materials through formal institutions such as education and libraries. Moreover, the 2023 SAFEnet annual report documents increasing incidents of public discussion shutdowns and the criminalization of librarians and literacy activists. Although the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia ruled in 2010 that book banning without due process of law was contrary to the 1945 Constitution, restrictions on reading materials remain a significant issue in relation to freedom of information in Indonesia (Aji et al., 2018; Sakhiyya, 2026). This indicates that interventions into books and libraries do not occur only through formal regulation, but also through political, moral, security-based, and ideological pressures.

Beyond book banning, control over information in Indonesia is also evident in restrictions on press freedom, criminalization, violence against journalists, and political-economic pressures on the media (Wiratraman, 2025). In the digital era, such interventions have expanded through internet shutdowns, social media censorship, and practices of digital authoritarianism. Internet restrictions in Papua, for instance, illustrate how the state may use arguments of security, the prevention of hoaxes, and public order to restrict the flow of information (Zakaria & Dwicahyo, 2022)]. However, such restrictions have often been criticized for failing to fully align with the principles of legality, proportionality, and respect for the right to information as recognized in national and international law (Satriawan et al., 2023). Therefore, discussions of libraries and censorship need to be situated within a broader landscape, namely how public information institutions operate within power structures that regulate the production, distribution, and access to knowledge.

These various forms of intervention demonstrate that libraries and public information institutions can no longer be understood merely as neutral spaces of service provision. Instead, libraries should be seen as politically contested spaces in which different forces seek to determine the boundaries of what information may be accessed by the public. In this context, the political economy of information becomes a crucial analytical approach. Although this perspective has been widely applied in media and technology studies, its use in library studies

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remains relatively limited. Key contributions by Mosco (2009), Christian (2017), and Freedman (2021) offer valuable perspectives for understanding information institutions as complex sites of power, ideology, and control. Applied to the library context, the political economy of information enables this study to examine censorship, book banning, collection restrictions, and pressures on libraries not as isolated events, but as part of broader relations of power. Through this perspective, libraries can be understood not merely as public service institutions, but as arenas in which the state, the market, ideological groups, and communities interact, negotiate, and contest the production, regulation, and distribution of knowledge.

Previous studies on book banning and information censorship have made important contributions to understanding various forms of restriction on access to knowledge. Cauley (2020), for instance, examines book banning in U.S. prisons through the development of a digital data repository as an effort to challenge arbitrary censorship. Steele (2018) analyzes censorship of library collections through gatekeeping theory by emphasizing the role of decision-makers, such as library boards, library directors, and public officials. Meanwhile, Goncalves et al. (2024) show that book banning in U.S. schools is closely related to partisan political contexts and functions as a form of symbolic political action. Brisman (2024) expands the discussion by viewing book banning as a threat to freedom of expression, democracy, and the future of young writers and readers. In the Indonesian context, Aji et al. (2018a) emphasize that state-imposed book banning without due process of law contradicts the principles of the rule of law and freedom of thought. Nevertheless, most of these studies still tend to focus on specific cases, actors, or contexts, and have not comprehensively explained how libraries as public information institutions operate within broader political power relations. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing various forms of political intervention within library institutions, their impacts on freedom of information and public access, and how the political economy of information approach can be used to understand libraries not merely as neutral spaces of public service, but as arenas of power struggle in the production, control, and distribution of knowledge.

Based on these observations, this study aims to uncover the relationship between libraries and power by analyzing various forms of political intervention in information freedom. It seeks to address three central questions: (1) How do political interventions manifest within library institutions? (2) What are the impacts on information freedom and public access? (3) How can the political economy of information approach be applied to examine power relations in the library domain?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Libraries are generally understood as neutral institutions that provide access to information and preserve cultural heritage. However, as libraries' roles in society have evolved, debates have emerged over whether they can truly be considered politically neutral. Clark Hunt & Creel (2023) found that some librarians reported experiencing pressure to remove or restrict access to certain collections deemed controversial by authorities or community groups. This has significantly influenced collection development, particularly regarding LGBT+ literature. Cooke & Harris (2023) further highlight that while libraries are often portrayed as neutral, in

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practice they may function as mechanisms of institutional bias. When librarians adopt a stance of neutrality in collection selection, they may inadvertently engage in subtle forms of censorship avoiding controversial books, especially those representing marginalized groups. Such practices lead to imbalanced information representation and reduce opportunities for diversity within library collections.

The political economy of media, as developed by Mosco (2009), provides a useful framework for understanding media and information institutions as arenas of economic and political conflict. Mosco identifies three key concepts: commodification, spatialization, and structuration. Applied to libraries, these concepts can be observed in several ways. First, commodification occurs when library information is controlled as an ideological commodity, such as through the banning of leftist literature or critical historical works. Second, spatialization reflects the uneven distribution of information, which depends on institutional and geographic contexts. Third, structuration emphasizes that libraries are not neutral institutions but are shaped by broader networks of power. Jaeger et al (2023) argue that libraries cannot maintain neutrality when confronting misinformation and political dynamics that directly affect public access to information. Accordingly, libraries must actively educate users on navigating political information and current events. This reinforces Mosco's theory that libraries are also sites where power is reproduced.

Beyond political economy, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony offers insight into how power operates not only through coercion but also through consent and cultural dominance. In the library context, hegemony is visible in collection curation practices that privilege dominant narratives while excluding alternative histories or oppositional voices. For instance, the systematic removal of books on communist movements from public library shelves reflects hegemonic processes in defining national history. Davidson (2023) analyzed book censorship in the United States through ALA reports, which documented 1,269 censorship requests in 2022. He attributed this trend to the influence of legal frameworks and political policies on access to library materials. A comparable situation exists in Indonesia, where unofficial bans on leftist literature remain prevalent.

Similarly, Michel Foucault argues that knowledge cannot be separated from power, those who wield power determine what is accepted as truth. In libraries, this relationship is evident in collection selection, information classification, and access regulations. Libraries are not purely democratic spaces but are embedded in systems of social control. For example, digitization projects are often conducted without transparency, and metadata practices frequently reflect institutional biases. Harahap & Husna (2018) demonstrated that cataloging and classification practices in Indonesian libraries often align with bureaucratic interests rather than community needs.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multi-dimensional framework for analyzing the power structures underpinning library institutions. Mosco's political economy highlights structural and economic forces; Gramsci emphasizes ideological domination within cultural spaces; and Foucault underscores how knowledge distribution is inherently tied to

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power relations. By combining these approaches, this study seeks to expose the dynamics of power and control that operate within and through libraries.

## METHODS

This study employs a critical qualitative approach with a multiple case study design to examine how power relations, ideology, and political interventions operate within public information institutions such as libraries. As Denzin & Lincoln (2018) note, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to gain an in depth understanding of complex and contextualized social realities. This approach is appropriate because qualitative inquiry allows complex social phenomena to be understood within their historical, political, and institutional contexts. The units of analysis consist of three major cases: the dismissal of Carla Hayden as Librarian of Congress, the banning of leftist literature in Indonesia, and censorship or self-censorship practices within library collections. These cases were selected purposively because they represent different but interrelated forms of intervention in information governance: institutional leadership control, ideological regulation of historical and political knowledge, and professional pressure in collection management.

Data were collected through document analysis and literature review. Following Bowen (2009), document analysis was used to find, select, appraise, and synthesize data contained in relevant documents. The analyzed documents included policy documents, legal materials, official statements, academic publications, media reports, advocacy organization reports, and library-related archives. In total, this study analyzed 78 documents, consisting of academic works, media reports, institutional or advocacy reports, and archival or library-related documents. Documents were included if they were directly related to political intervention, censorship, book banning, collection restriction, intellectual freedom, public access to information, libraries, librarians, or information governance. Documents were excluded if they were unrelated to libraries or information institutions, lacked identifiable sources, contained only general commentary, or duplicated information already available in more authoritative sources.

Data analysis was conducted using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which enables texts to be examined as arenas where power, ideology, and social relations are produced and contested Paton (1999). The analysis involved three levels: textual analysis to identify key terms, narratives, metaphors, and representations of libraries, censorship, neutrality, security, morality, and public interest; discursive practice analysis to examine how documents were produced, circulated, and legitimized by different actors; and sociopolitical analysis to interpret how these discourses were connected to broader structures such as state ideology, political authority, professional autonomy, and the political economy of information. The coding process was conducted through repeated reading, initial coding, categorization, and cross-case analysis. Initial codes included "political intervention," "ideological control," "collection restriction," "book banning," "institutional leadership," "professional autonomy," "self-censorship," "intellectual freedom," and "public access." To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, this study employed source triangulation, maintained an audit trail of document

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selection and coding, and applied reflexive reading to keep the interpretation grounded in the documents rather than unsupported assumptions.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### Libraries as Political Arenas: From Neutrality to Contestation

Libraries have traditionally been understood as neutral public institutions whose primary functions are to provide access to information, support literacy, and preserve cultural memory. This view positions libraries as democratic spaces that stand outside political and ideological conflict. However, such an assumption becomes problematic when libraries are examined through a critical perspective. Neutrality is not merely a professional value, but also a discourse that can conceal the power relations embedded in library practices. Decisions concerning what materials are acquired, classified, displayed, restricted, or removed are never entirely technical. They are shaped by institutional priorities, dominant moral values, state ideology, community pressure, and professional judgment. In this sense, libraries are not passive containers of knowledge, but active institutions involved in the selection, organization, and regulation of public knowledge.

Buschman (2012) argues that libraries must be understood in relation to democracy, public discourse, and the political conditions under which information institutions operate. From this perspective, library practices cannot be separated from broader struggles over whose knowledge is made visible and whose knowledge is marginalized. This critique is further developed in critical librarianship, which challenges the assumption that libraries can remain neutral in contexts marked by inequality, censorship, and ideological conflict. Farkas (2017) argues that neutrality is not only difficult to achieve, but may also prevent librarians from confronting injustice within technological and institutional systems. Similarly, Gibson et al. (2017) emphasize that libraries are often positioned on the frontlines of social justice struggles, where claims of neutrality may limit their ability to respond critically to exclusion, discrimination, and censorship.

The findings of this study support these critiques of neutrality. Political intervention in libraries does not always appear in direct or explicit forms. It may take the form of leadership dismissal, collection censorship, book banning, institutional pressure, or professional self-censorship. The dismissal of Carla Hayden illustrates how political power may intervene at the level of institutional leadership, shaping the direction and symbolic authority of a national knowledge institution (Reuters, 2025). Meanwhile, the banning of leftist literature in Indonesia demonstrates how the state and dominant ideology can influence the boundaries of acceptable historical and political knowledge (Aji et al., 2018). At the professional level, self-censorship among librarians shows how power can operate indirectly through fear, institutional anxiety, and anticipatory compliance.

These cases also show that censorship should not be understood only as the formal removal of books from library shelves. The American Library Association (2024) defines censorship as the limiting or removal of access to words, images, or ideas, while a book ban refers specifically to the removal of materials from a library based on objections from a person

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or group. E. J. M. Knox (2020) similarly argues that censorship is often defined narrowly by those who challenge books, even though restrictions on access may occur through subtler mechanisms. Therefore, censorship in libraries may operate through explicit bans, hidden restrictions, delayed acquisitions, selective classification, or the avoidance of controversial materials. This broader understanding is important because political intervention frequently works not only through prohibition, but also through the normalization of silence.

The myth of neutrality is also reinforced by what Ettarh (2018) calls “vocational awe,” namely the belief that libraries and librarianship are inherently good, sacred, and therefore beyond critique. Within this framework, librarians may be expected to serve institutional demands without questioning the ideological structures that shape their work. Such a belief can obscure the fact that libraries may reproduce dominant power relations through everyday practices of selection, classification, and access control. Jaeger-McEnroe (2025) further argues that neutrality in librarianship was neither inevitable nor apolitical; rather, it developed historically in response to political pressures and has often limited the profession’s ability to engage with social responsibility and justice.

From the perspective of intellectual freedom, these dynamics are deeply problematic. CILIP defines intellectual freedom as the right to access and share information, to engage in intellectual and creative activity, and to participate in expression and debate. When libraries restrict certain materials because they are politically sensitive, morally contested, or ideologically inconvenient, they do not merely remove books; they limit the public’s ability to encounter diverse perspectives and form independent judgments. This is also an issue of informational justice. Mathiesen (2022) defines informational justice as the just treatment of persons as seekers, sources, and subjects of information. In this sense, censorship harms users not only because it denies access to information, but also because it determines whose experiences, histories, and identities are recognized as legitimate within public knowledge institutions.

The political economy of information provides a useful framework for understanding these processes. It shifts the analysis from individual acts of censorship to the broader structures that make censorship possible. Through this lens, libraries can be understood as institutions embedded in political, economic, and ideological relations. Collection policies, leadership decisions, and access regulations are not isolated professional matters; they are part of the wider struggle over the production, control, and distribution of knowledge. Therefore, libraries should be understood not merely as neutral spaces of public service, but as contested arenas where state power, professional ethics, market forces, community pressure, and ideological interests interact.

This reframing has important implications for librarianship and library services. It requires librarians to move beyond the assumption that professional neutrality is sufficient to protect intellectual freedom. Instead, librarianship must be understood as an ethical and political practice that involves responsibility toward knowledge diversity, public access, and informational justice. Libraries must develop collection policies and service practices that are transparent, reflective, and resistant to ideological exclusion. In this way, libraries can better

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fulfill their democratic role, not by claiming to be outside politics, but by actively defending the public's right to encounter diverse, critical, and contested forms of knowledge.

## **Modes of Political Intervention in Library Institutions**

Political intervention in library institutions does not operate through a single mechanism. It may appear through leadership control, funding decisions, policy mandates, collection censorship, professional self-censorship, access restriction, or technological regulation. These forms of intervention show that libraries are not merely technical institutions that manage information resources, but public information institutions embedded in broader relations of power. In this study, political intervention refers to any external or internal pressure that shapes what knowledge is collected, preserved, classified, accessed, restricted, or removed within library institutions.

The first mode is intervention through institutional leadership and governance. The dismissal of Carla Hayden as Librarian of Congress illustrates how political power can intervene at the level of institutional authority, not only at the level of collections. Leadership positions in libraries carry symbolic and ideological significance because they influence institutional priorities, public memory, and the direction of knowledge governance. Hayden's dismissal can therefore be read as an attempt to reshape the ideological orientation of a major public information institution (Reuters, 2025; (POLITICO, 2025).. More broadly, libraries are shaped by policy and governance structures that define their roles in literacy, education, cultural access, social integration, and inequality reduction (Sánchez-García & Yubero, 2016). Academic libraries also have to navigate campus politics in order to secure recognition, influence, and resources (Cox, 2026). Thus, governance is a key site through which political authority shapes library missions, priorities, and professional practices.

The second mode is intervention through funding and resource allocation. Public libraries depend significantly on public funding, making them vulnerable to political decisions about budgets, institutional recognition, and public accountability (Jaeger, Gorham, et al., 2013). Funding determines what services can be maintained, what collections can be developed, and which communities can be prioritized. Public libraries often face political contestation over funding, requiring advocacy to defend their public value and institutional sustainability (Sutherland, 2025). From the perspective of the political economy of information, budgetary control can become a form of political control. When funding is reduced, redirected, or made conditional upon certain political priorities, the autonomy of libraries in providing inclusive and diverse information services may be weakened.

The third mode is intervention through collection censorship and access restriction. Collection development is often presented as a professional and technical process, yet decisions about what is acquired, displayed, restricted, or removed are closely tied to ideological boundaries. The American Library Association distinguishes selection from censorship by emphasizing that selection follows a collection development policy, while censorship occurs when materials are avoided or removed because of personal beliefs, external pressure, or fear of controversy (ALA, 2024). The banning of leftist literature in Indonesia illustrates how collection intervention can function as ideological control. Books related to the 1965 tragedy,

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communism, leftist thought, or politically stigmatized figures have frequently been treated as threats to public order and national ideology (Yulius 2016). Such practices show that censorship is not only about removing books from shelves, but also about regulating historical memory and determining which narratives may circulate in public knowledge spaces.

Political intervention may also operate through access management rather than outright prohibition. Materials can be relocated, placed in restricted sections, made available only with permission, excluded from displays, or classified in ways that reduce visibility. E. J. M. Knox (2020) argues that censorship is often defined narrowly as total removal, even though restrictions on access may also limit intellectual freedom. This broader understanding is crucial because libraries can appear to preserve materials while simultaneously making them difficult to find, access, or use. In this sense, censorship works not only through banning, but also through the management of visibility and accessibility.

The fourth mode is professional intervention through self-censorship and gatekeeping. Unlike direct banning, self-censorship often works silently. Librarians may avoid acquiring, displaying, or recommending controversial materials because they anticipate complaints from authorities, parents, community groups, institutional leaders, or funding bodies. Rickman (2010) shows that censorship may come from governmental or legal pressures, individuals or groups, and librarians themselves through self-censorship. Steele's gatekeeping theory further explains that library boards, directors, public officials, and librarians play crucial roles in determining whether certain materials remain accessible or become restricted (Steele, 2018). In this sense, power operates through fear, uncertainty, institutional anxiety, and anticipatory compliance. Librarians may become gatekeepers who regulate access not only through professional judgment, but also through the internalization of dominant norms.

The fifth mode is intervention through the political framing of libraries as democratic commons, advocacy institutions, and technological information systems. Public libraries are often understood as spaces for dialogue, citizenship, social justice, and democratic participation (Ferraz, 2014; Budd, 2019). However, this role can expose libraries to political contestation when their commitment to inclusion conflicts with dominant moral, ideological, or governmental expectations. Libraries also engage in advocacy and partnerships to influence policy decisions affecting funding, collections, and services (Jaeger, Bertot, et al., 2013), but such collaboration may create dependency on political will, funding sustainability, and institutional agendas (Rankin, 2016). In the digital environment, censorship can also be embedded in information technologies through filtering, database access, search visibility, digital collections, and platform governance. Buschman's discussion of librarians, self-censorship, and information technologies is useful for understanding how technological systems may organize, filter, and regulate what users can access (Buschman, 2012) Therefore, political intervention in libraries should not be limited to printed books or physical collections, but must also include digital infrastructures and institutional partnerships that shape access to knowledge.

Taken together, these modes of intervention show that political power operates at multiple levels within library institutions. It works structurally through state authority, governance, funding, and policy mandates; institutionally through leadership, partnerships, and

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academic politics; professionally through gatekeeping and self-censorship; and materially through collections, classification, access rules, and digital systems. Therefore, political intervention in libraries should not be reduced to visible acts of book banning. It must be understood as a broader process through which power shapes the production, circulation, visibility, and legitimacy of public knowledge.

This analysis has important implications for understanding libraries within the political economy of information. Libraries are part of the wider system through which knowledge is produced, organized, distributed, funded, and controlled. When political actors intervene in leadership, budgets, policies, collections, professional decisions, technological systems, or access mechanisms, they also intervene in the public's ability to know, remember, question, and interpret social reality. In this sense, political intervention in libraries is not merely an institutional problem; it is a democratic problem. It affects intellectual freedom, informational justice, and the public's right to encounter diverse and contested forms of knowledge.

### **Censorship, Autocensorship, and the Erosion of Intellectual Freedom**

Censorship and autocensorship are central mechanisms through which political intervention weakens intellectual freedom in library institutions. Intellectual freedom refers to the right of individuals to seek, receive, access, and exchange information from diverse perspectives without restriction. In the library context, this principle is not merely an abstract professional value, but a democratic condition that enables users to encounter different ideas, interpret social realities, and participate critically in public life. When censorship occurs, the problem is not only that certain books or materials are removed; more fundamentally, censorship narrows the range of knowledge that can be accessed, discussed, remembered, and contested.

Censorship may operate in both direct and indirect forms. Direct censorship appears through book banning, removal of collections, legal prohibition, or formal institutional restriction, while indirect censorship works through access limitation, selective classification, delayed acquisition, administrative pressure, or the quiet disappearance of controversial materials from public visibility. The American Library Association distinguishes censorship from legitimate selection by emphasizing that censorship involves the removal or avoidance of materials because of personal belief, external pressure, or fear of controversy. Knox (2014) further shows that censorship is often defined too narrowly as complete removal, even though restrictions on access may also undermine intellectual freedom. Therefore, censorship should be understood not only as prohibition, but also as the management of visibility, accessibility, and legitimacy.

In the cases examined in this study, censorship is closely tied to political and ideological power. The banning of leftist literature in Indonesia illustrates how censorship functions as a mechanism for controlling historical memory and regulating political knowledge. Works related to the 1965 tragedy, communism, leftist thought, or politically stigmatized figures are often treated as threats to public order and national ideology. Such practices do not merely restrict access to specific books; they shape what forms of history can be remembered and what political ideas can be discussed in public knowledge spaces. From the perspective of

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intellectual freedom, this represents a serious limitation on the public's right to encounter alternative interpretations of history and politics.

Censorship also affects marginalized identities and contested social issues. Studies on recent book bans in the United States show that books written by authors of color or featuring diverse racial and identity backgrounds are disproportionately targeted (Goncalves et al., 2024). Similarly, debates over LGBTQ+ materials in libraries show how moral and political pressure can limit access to materials that represent minority experiences (Kerrigan et al., 2025). In this sense, censorship is not a neutral response to controversial content, but a selective mechanism that determines which identities, histories, and experiences are considered legitimate within public knowledge institutions.

Autocensorship, or self-censorship, is more difficult to identify because it often occurs before any formal challenge is made. Librarians may avoid acquiring, displaying, recommending, or promoting certain materials because they anticipate complaints from parents, community groups, institutional leaders, government authorities, or funding bodies. (Rickman, 2010) shows that school librarians may experience censorship from legal, governmental, social, and professional pressures, including pressure that becomes internalized as self-censorship. This condition produces a chilling effect, in which fear of legal, social, economic, or professional consequences discourages individuals and institutions from expressing, collecting, or circulating controversial ideas (Murunga, 2026). McNicol (2016) further argues that institutional self-censorship can weaken the credibility of libraries and restrict access for users.

The erosion of intellectual freedom occurs at several levels. At the institutional level, censorship transforms libraries from spaces of open inquiry into spaces governed by caution, fear, and ideological conformity. At the professional level, it weakens librarians' autonomy by shifting their role from defenders of access to managers of controversy. At the collection level, it reduces the diversity of available knowledge and privileges materials that are considered politically safe or socially acceptable. At the user level, it limits the ability of the public to make independent judgments based on multiple perspectives. Thus, censorship restructures the entire ecology of library services: what librarians select, what users can access, what histories are preserved, and what ideas are recognized as legitimate.

The impact of censorship is closely related to informational justice. If intellectual freedom concerns the right to access and exchange ideas, informational justice concerns whether different individuals and communities are fairly represented as seekers, sources, and subjects of information. Censorship violates informational justice because it does not affect all groups equally. Materials concerning marginalized communities, minority identities, controversial histories, or dissenting political views are often more vulnerable to restriction. In the digital environment, this problem becomes more complex because censorship may occur through filtering systems, platform moderation, surveillance, database restrictions, or algorithmic visibility, often justified through claims of national security, public order, or protection from harmful content (Zafarullah & Nughat, 2026).

These dynamics show that censorship and autocensorship are not isolated professional problems, but structural problems rooted in power relations among the state, institutions,

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communities, markets, and professional actors. From the perspective of the political economy of information, censorship regulates the circulation of knowledge by determining what can be produced, distributed, accessed, and legitimized. Therefore, defending intellectual freedom requires more than opposing individual acts of book banning. It requires libraries to develop transparent collection policies, protect librarians from political pressure, document censorship practices, strengthen professional ethics, and collaborate with academics and civil society to defend public access to diverse knowledge. If libraries are to function as democratic information institutions, they must actively resist both direct censorship and the quieter forms of self-censorship that normalize exclusion.

### **Political Economy of Information: Libraries as Sites of Knowledge Control and Professional Responsibility**

The political economy of information provides a critical framework for understanding libraries not merely as service institutions, but as sites where knowledge is produced, organized, distributed, commodified, and controlled. From this perspective, libraries are embedded in wider relations of political authority, economic interests, technological infrastructures, and ideological power. Mosco's political economy of communication is particularly useful because it highlights how communication and information systems are shaped by commodification, spatialization, and structuration. Applied to libraries, this means that collection policies, licensing systems, digital platforms, professional labor, and access mechanisms are not neutral arrangements, but are part of broader struggles over who controls knowledge and under what conditions it becomes accessible to the public.

One of the clearest implications of this framework is that knowledge increasingly operates as a commodity. In the knowledge economy, information is often abstracted from its social and historical context and transformed into an object of exchange with economic value. For libraries, this creates a tension between their democratic mission to provide equitable access and the market logic that treats information as a controlled and monetized resource. Digital licensing intensifies this tension. While printed materials can usually be owned, preserved, and circulated by libraries, digital resources are frequently governed by licensing agreements that restrict use, sharing, preservation, and long-term access (Afori, 2013). This shift means that libraries do not always "own" the knowledge they provide; instead, they often rent conditional access from commercial providers.

This condition has important consequences for intellectual freedom and informational justice. When access to knowledge depends on licensing terms, subscription costs, platform restrictions, or intellectual property regimes, the public's right to information becomes mediated by market power. Intellectual property rights can protect authors and publishers, but they can also prioritize control and profit over accessibility when applied too restrictively (May, 2006). From the perspective of political economy, this is a form of knowledge control: access is not only limited by political censorship, but also by economic and legal infrastructures. Thus, censorship should not be understood only as the removal of books or the banning of controversial materials. It can also take the form of paywalls, restrictive licenses, algorithmic visibility, database exclusions, and unequal access to digital infrastructures.

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The cases discussed in this study show that libraries operate at the intersection of political intervention and economic control. The dismissal of Carla Hayden demonstrates how political authority can intervene in the leadership of a national knowledge institution, while the banning of leftist literature in Indonesia illustrates how state ideology can regulate historical memory and public access to political knowledge. These cases can be read through Gramsci's concept of hegemony: dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion, but also by shaping common sense, cultural memory, and legitimate knowledge. In this sense, libraries are not only repositories of information; they are institutions through which dominant ideologies may be reproduced, contested, or resisted.

Fuchs and Freedman further help explain why libraries must be understood within larger systems of power. Fuchs' critical approach to digital capitalism shows that digital information systems are deeply entangled with economic exploitation, surveillance, platform control, and ideological struggle. Freedman's analysis of media power similarly emphasizes that power is negotiated and resisted through political, technological, and economic structures. Applied to libraries, these perspectives reveal that information access is shaped not only by professional ethics, but also by market concentration, platform dependency, public policy, and institutional governance. Therefore, library services in the digital era cannot be separated from questions of ownership, infrastructure, funding, and control.

These dynamics produce significant implications for librarianship. First, librarians must develop stronger competencies in digital resource management, data analytics, text mining, licensing, and knowledge management (Khoeni et al., 2025). Such skills are not merely technical; they are necessary for understanding how digital systems shape access, visibility, and exclusion. Without these competencies, libraries risk becoming dependent on external platforms and vendors, while librarians may lose their ability to critically evaluate the political and economic conditions of information access. In this sense, professional development becomes part of the struggle for intellectual freedom.

Second, librarianship must confront the rise of managerialism and capitalist logics within library institutions. In higher education and research environments, libraries are increasingly evaluated through measurable outputs, cost efficiency, usage statistics, rankings, and performance indicators (Metcalf, 2007). While accountability is important, excessive managerialism can narrow the social mission of libraries by prioritizing measurable impact over democratic access, critical literacy, and community needs. This may lead libraries to privilege resources that are visible, profitable, or institutionally strategic, while marginalizing materials that are politically sensitive, locally relevant, or socially transformative.

Third, libraries must address cybersecurity and digital transformation as part of their democratic responsibility. As library services become increasingly digitized, risks to confidentiality, privacy, and service continuity also increase (Khoeni et al., 2025; Ugli et al., 2026). Cybersecurity is therefore not only a technical concern, but also an intellectual freedom issue. If users cannot search, borrow, read, or access sensitive materials without fear of surveillance, then the democratic function of libraries is weakened. Protecting user privacy, digital collections, and service continuity is part of protecting the public's right to knowledge.

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These implications show that libraries must adopt a more critical and proactive model of professional practice. They need transparent and participatory collection policies, fair licensing advocacy, ethical digital governance, staff training, censorship documentation, and stronger collaboration with academics, civil society, and professional associations. Libraries also need to defend their role as spaces for political discourse and civic learning, especially in academic and public contexts where access to knowledge shapes democratic participation (Mehra & Winberry, 2021). In this sense, resisting censorship requires more than opposing book bans. It also requires challenging the political, economic, legal, and technological systems that restrict the circulation of knowledge.

Ultimately, the political economy of information reframes libraries as contested sites of knowledge control and professional responsibility. Libraries are not outside power; they are located within the very structures that determine what knowledge is funded, licensed, preserved, circulated, restricted, or legitimized. However, this does not mean that libraries are merely instruments of domination. They can also become sites of resistance by defending intellectual freedom, promoting informational justice, and challenging the commodification and politicization of knowledge. For libraries to fulfill their democratic role, librarianship must move beyond passive neutrality and embrace a critical commitment to equitable access, professional autonomy, and the public's right to diverse and contested knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that libraries and public information institutions cannot be understood merely as neutral spaces of information service. They are contested arenas shaped by political, ideological, economic, and technological power. The cases of Carla Hayden's dismissal, the banning of leftist literature in Indonesia, and censorship or self-censorship among librarians show that political intervention appears in multiple forms, including leadership control, governance, funding, professional gatekeeping, access restriction, and digital infrastructures.

These interventions weaken intellectual freedom by narrowing the range of knowledge available to the public. Censorship does not only remove books or materials; it also shapes what histories are preserved, what identities are represented, and what ideas are considered legitimate. In this sense, censorship also undermines informational justice, especially when materials related to marginalized communities, contested histories, and dissenting political views become more vulnerable to restriction.

Theoretically, this study contributes to library and information studies by applying the political economy of information to understand libraries as sites of knowledge control. This perspective shows that libraries may reproduce dominant ideologies, but they can also become democratic spaces where such power is questioned and resisted. Thus, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of censorship by linking library practices to broader structures of power, hegemony, and knowledge governance.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for transparent collection policies,

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protection of librarians' professional autonomy, documentation of censorship practices, and ethical digital governance. Policymakers should provide legal and institutional safeguards to protect libraries from arbitrary political intervention. Future research should examine how librarians and users experience censorship, and how digital platforms, licensing systems, and algorithmic infrastructures reshape access to knowledge.

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