Busting Myths About Banning Books with Emily J. Knox

Christiane Wisehart, producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

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Christiane: It's Banned Books week, which means that when you hear this episode, there's a good chance you've already encountered some stories about censorship and challenging books. On today's show, we're looking at some of the unquestioned assumptions that tend to go hand-in-hand with the idea of banned books. A lot of people assume that book challengers are just a bunch of ignorant prudes, or that banning books really isn't a problem--it's just a marketing ploy trumped up by the American Library Association. However, after talking to Emily J. Knox, a professor of information science and an expert on censorship and information ethics, I realized this issue is a lot more complicated than it looks on the surface.

Emily J. Knox: When you hear the transcripts of people clamoring for books to be removed, they get off of the subject of the book very quickly. I've heard people crying. I have heard people screaming about things that have nothing to do with the book, but are really about a sense of loss of control or uncertainty about where we are going as a society.

Christiane: Emily helped me make sense of all the complicated issues surrounding the ethics of banned books by correcting some of the most common misconceptions. Stay tuned for all of that and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics!

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Kurt Vonnegut clip: Anyway, there's this list of bad books thanks to the xerox machine, which is passed around by patriotic organizations, and it apparently originated in Cincinnati about 1972, but this same list appears again and again and again, are these books rotting your kids' minds in high school, is this why your daughter's pregnant. [laughter] And so the same old books keep getting pulled off the shelves by people who don't read much at all. In the Soviet Union, where I'm very popular for obvious reasons, [laughter] they have heard that all my books have been burned and aren't available in this country any more, and so I got a lot of letters of sympathy from them, and I reply to them that this censorship is purely a local problem in rural areas where they've had very little experience with law of any sort. [laughter] And that my books are available in any civilized area of the country...**[fade]**

Christiane: That's Kurt Vonnegut, an American novelist and anti-censorship advocate. He was a staple on my dad's bookshelves, and I spent a good portion of my reading as a teenager swallowing his books whole. If you know anything about Kurt Vonnegut, you know that he's kind of an eccentric, and definitely an anti-conformist. But in the speech I just played for you, he's

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expressing an opinion about people who ban or challenge books that's actually pretty common. He shares a pervasive idea that book banners are ignorant, and don't care about reading or literature. As we'll hear from our guest Emily J. Knox, a lot of the assumptions we have about banning books--including this one--are just wrong.

Let's start with another assumption about banned books: that the type of books getting challenged are all kind of like Kurt Vonnegut's work--full of profanity and wild ideas. Emily told me that actually, some of the first books to be banned were religious texts.

Emily Knox: For example, during the reformation lots of books were banned because they were translated into the vernacular, right? People banned the bible because that was not the status quo and that's not the way it should be. If you look across history, so I mean all of human history, you would see that texts are banned usually in response to some sort of crisis or change in society. In our time, what we see are responses essentially to the culture war. The easiest time to start it is in the 1980's. You see books that were upsetting to the religious right being banned. At the moments, books about LGBTQIA identity really show up very high on being banned a lot. So it's really often a response to changing mores, changing norms, changes in society because it's a very reactionary practice. Something is happening out there, and you see that it's happening, and one way you can control whatever is happening is by saying I don't want this information in my community, and especially my very local community. My public library, my school.

It's really about something else. Something that is frightening that is happening in the wider world, and the book becomes a focus. If we can take this away, then that is one way of controlling whatever the wider fear is out there. When you hear the transcripts of people clamoring for books to be removed, they get off of the subject of the book very quickly. I've heard people crying. I have heard people screaming about things that have nothing to do with the book, but are really about a sense of loss of control or uncertainty about where we are going as a society.

Christiane: Despite these well-publicized and dramatic challenges, books are actually rarely banned these days.

Emily Knox: Sometimes the books are removed, but usually I would say in many cases they are not, but different parameters are placed on the book. Or, nothing happens to the book. It's just returned to curriculum or the collection.

Christiane: And of course just because a book gets challenged in one area doesn't mean it's suddenly unavailable everywhere. Ruth Graham, a writer for *Slate* magazine, claims that even if a book is banned from a public library, it's usually still available for sale online. She argues, "Banned Books Week ... traffics in fear-mongering over censorship, when in fact the truth is much sunnier: There is basically no such thing as a "banned book" in the United States…" She ends her article by saying we should all stop our "hand-wringing" over censorship. Emily disagrees.

Emily Knox: It might not make a big difference to Ruth Graham's kids or my kids, you know, as an upper middle class person, that a book is banned from my local public library, but it makes a big difference for people who are poor, who don't have as much access to information as I do. What that argument does is essentially forget about those people. And also, it doesn't really take into account what people who challenge books are trying to do, which is change the make up of what is considered acceptable in their local community. When people dismiss the idea of banning books, they aren't really looking necessarily at the complete picture. In Canada, they have a Freedom to Read Week instead of Banned Books Week, which would probably be a better title and we would not have these arguments anymore, but Banned Books Week is catchy.

Christiane: Even though books rarely get banned these days, Emily told me that books can still be *restricted*. Emily explained that when librarians talk about banning books, they're actually talking about a whole constellation of practices around the restriction of books and information.

Emily Knox: Banning books is actually used a catchall. It's a way of talking about people censoring information or people restricting access to information in some way. To actually ban a book, usually that means removal of a book from circulation of some sort. There are different ways of interpreting that. You can say that it's removed from the circulation of an entire nation, or from circulation of a certain locale. In my work, I really try to look at this in a more nuanced fashion, so I talk about practices of censorship, which sometimes includes banning, which I call removal but also include redaction, restriction and relocation.

Christiane: So here's what typically happens when a book is challenged at a public school or public library. First, someone brings a complaint, or "challenge" to a library or school system. It then goes through a process of review.

Emily Knox: Usually, this goes to the director or the principal, or a committee, and they discuss it and they make some sort of resolution. So in my field, we always hope that the resolution is to leave the book wherever it is, but sometimes the resolution is to relocate the book from say young adult to adult. Redaction usually takes place in a different way. Usually, that's someone going through and just marking through the book something that they don't like. The library usually buys another copy, but that's resources that are lost.

Restriction, this can happen in a couple different ways. There's active restriction where the book is essentially placed behind the librarian or the teacher's desk and you have to bring in a permission slip to read it. What this is is a violation of privacy in many ways. So something like Madonna's *Sex* was kept behind the desk. Now, how many people actually went up and asked to read Madonna's *Sex*? Probably not that many. A few would, but that means that the local librarian knows that you're reading this book. These are things that you might not want that person to know about. So I guess that in some ways have chilling effects that you don't actually see as easily if you have something like removal of the book.

Relocation is passive. That's what a lot of people would like to happen. A book shows up in the juvenile section, and it's moved to the adult section. This happens to usually sexuality manuals, things like *It's Perfectly Normal*, which is a book about sexuality and puberty for children. Someone will read it, they'll get upset and they'll be like 'this should be in the adult section.' That's a way of restricting access because you're afraid that kids will stumble on it and get ideas.

Christiane: When I first heard about the relocation of certain books, I thought, eh, what's the big deal? It's still in the library--a kid could still go into the adult section and read it. But according to Emily, relocation can potentially have similar effects to banning or removal.

Emily Knox: The walls in libraries, the sections, are really seen as being impenetrable, so in fact the kid could just walk to the adult section and get the book, but that doesn't really happen. People don't really do that. Kids stay in their own section to get their books, and it's a big deal when you move from the YA section to the adult section. So you don't do that until a certain time so you might never encounter that book. We don't actually know what is lost because the negative effects are very difficult to see.

Christiane: These sections in the library are important, because certain books aren't written for children. And Emily explained that calling some books inappropriate for children doesn't necessarily equal censorship. For example, saying that *Fight Club* is inappropriate for six year olds is not censoring that book, because the book wasn't written for children in the first place. However, the issue of what exactly is appropriate for a certain age group is highly contested. Emily told me that one of the most frequently challenged books in recent years has been *I Am Jazz*. It's a children's picture book about a transgender girl named Jazz Jennings.

Emily Knox: What people say is that this book is inappropriate for whatever age group. So the way I look at it is that it's really a case of censorship. It's a censorship practice when it's considered inappropriate for the age group for which it is intended. For a book like *I am Jazz*, that's written for kids. Adults will say 'this is inappropriate for kids. It should be taken away from them.' And that is the censorship. Now, sometimes books are put in the wrong place and there really are books that can be inappropriate for a particular age group for various reasons, but you really are engaging in censorship practices when you're thinking about the book not being given to its intended age group. The one thing that also happens with that is parents will say 'I don't want my kids to read this,' and therefore, no kids can read it. And different parents have different ideas about what is appropriate for their kids, and different things are appropriate for kids at different ages. So that can often cause a lot of tension actually on the shelf as to what is appropriate for each of these groups of kids. What the library profession says is that it's really the job of the parents to engage with their kids on what is appropriate for them. It's not the job of the library, or the school even, to say that your child shouldn't read this. That really should be something that the parent does with their child, and definitely not to say that other children shouldn't read this.

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Christiane: So far, Emily's helped us understand what typically happens when a book is challenged, and all of the different ways books and information can be restricted in a place like a public or school library. When I spoke with her about book banning, I asked how *librarians* feel about challenging or restricting books. She said that while librarians don't have a lot of rules in general, they do have a code of ethics put out by the American Library Association that features a strong stance against censorship. The ALA also has "Freedom to Read" and "Freedom to View" statements.

Emily Knox: Library information professionals take a principled stand against censorship. Sometimes that principled stand can actually contradict your own personal values. When I teach my students, I talk about professional versus personal values. Those won't always mesh together, but it's your duty and what you have signed up for as a professional librarian to take a principled stand against censorship in all forms. And you might not always...That might not always be the most comfortable thing for you to do.

Christiane: Standing against censorship is a crucial part of intellectual freedom, a core value that librarians try to uphold. Emily's been thinking about intellectual freedom since she was a child.

Emily Knox: I've always loved thinking about banned books. My mom was a high school librarian and we always celebrated Banned Books Week and I was a voracious reader when I was little. And so books that I really, really like would often show up on those lists, and I did not understand. I was like, 'I think I'm a good person, and I read these books. I don't see why it's a problem.' That's really how I got interested in this, just really thinking about what does it mean to ban a book? Why do people try to ban books? It's really, as I talk about my work, a symbolic act. There's no removing ideas, really.

Christiane: This symbolic act is emotionally loaded for *everyone* involved. The people defending a given book are obviously going to be passionate about books. However, most often the people challenging a book are challenging it not because they're ignorant and they hate literature. They're challenging it because they fervently believe in the power of books and words. For them, books are like sacred carriers of information, and thus can be truly transformative, but also truly dangerous.

Emily Knox: That is what they think, that the circulation of this idea will destroy the community, the state, the nation, the world. It really goes out that way. This is the downfall of western civilization as we know it because this book is available, which I wasn't expecting when I started that research but that is how people discuss it. I would never say that it's a coherent argument. It has a lot of passion that's from the way we understand texts and books in our culture.

What I tell my students, when we talk about books, I say to them, “Now, I know that many of you don’t break the backs on your book. Why? Why do you feel this attachment to this object?” I was like, “Now, imagine if I drop my book and I start stepping on it.” I get gasps. This is just something you should not do. It’s because have...we actually think about books as really being more powerful objects than what their material makeup would seem like they would be. What challengers actually tell me is that books are so important because they reify the information within them. If you’re going to take the time to write a book, and the publisher is going to take the time to publish it, it should be good information. It should be correct information. It should be true with a capital T.

Christiane: Because the people who challenge books see them as such powerful objects, they’re heavily invested in making sure that the books available on a library or school shelf reflect the values they deem to be worthy of publication. Emily explained that in western cultures, the importance of the book historically stems from religious reading.

Emily Knox: In my work, I look through history and I start with religious reading and thinking about the importance of the Bible, the people of the book, and also ideas that came through the reformation that each person was a priesthood unto themselves, so the interpretation of this text that you had this one on one relationship, essentially with God, through this object that you really wrestled with. In fact, this informs our entire idea about what it means to have books and texts, and why people challenge books: because books contain the most important information that we could ever have. Now, this is of course not quite true. There are all sorts of books. There are lots of books out there, but what I encourage my students to do is think about their own libraries and how they think about their books, and why do they have these ideas about books. In fact, this is what they share with people who try to ban books. I really think this is part of our shared culture, that words are important. People look at you different when you’ve written a book and it’s been published. It’s something that people think is unattainable. It puts you in a different level. Books have outsized influence on our culture.

Christiane: Emily was careful to point out that just because much of our shared passion for texts and books stems from religious reading, we shouldn’t assume that it’s only religious people who challenge books.

Emily Knox: We all have values that we hold dear, and there are books that are against those values, so because of that, we can all find ourselves on the other side. I give a couple of different anecdotes about this. One of my big ones, which is timely, is Laura Ingalls Wilder. I tell my students the story of how in *Little Town on Prairie*, Pa dresses up for the minstrel show and Laura is not in the least bit upset about this. And I remember being so hurt by that, and I really... I don’t have children, but I’d really have to think about, would I want my child to read that? I’d probably say something to them before reading that particular book. Before reading the series, I would say, ‘I don’t mind you reading this book, but it’s really important that you read something that shows the Native American point of view about this time.’ We have no guarantee that everybody’s going to do that, and that's why people try to censor books.

So that's one from my point of view, but you can easily flip it and see it from any point of view. We want the generation after us to share our values, and one of the ways we transmit those values is through books. If we don't give them books that we agree with then they might not share our values. In the library profession, we of course say things like there's information literacy, critical thinking skills, media literacy to really help people gain skills to be able to read texts with care, but we just don't really trust our fellow human beings to always do that.

Essentially, what you have to say is, 'If I give you this to read, I am going to trust that you have the critical thinking skills to be able to get through this and come out with the right ideas.' And it's understandable that people don't feel that way.

Christiane: It's hard when you see a book on a public library shelf and disagree with the ideas in it. It's hard when you know that a child, maybe even your child, could pick it up and read it. I asked Emily for her point of view on how to ethically raise a concern about a book.

Emily Knox: If I am concerned about a book, I turn it inward and say, "What is it that makes this book a problem for me?" Turn it inwards and ask yourself a series of questions. Does this reflect my own bias? Does this reflect my own upbringing that might be different from other kids around here? Why am I having this reaction to this?

Then, I would have a conversation with the person at the desk, whatever desk it is. It's perfectly fine to ask them why the book is on the shelf, if they think it's appropriate. Do they know anything about the book? Do they have any reviews? If this happens to you as a teacher, you should be aware of why you're assigning all of the books on your syllabus and you should be able in your plan to say this is why this book is important and why I think my students need to be exposed to this material. But there's no reason why, as a parent, you shouldn't call the teacher. The thing is not to be accusatory, to really think through "I'm just getting more information about this book."

Also, if you're dealing with a kid, maybe it's time for you to read the book with your child and talk through with them, so you can tell them what your own feelings are about the book, why you have problems with it, what they could learn from it. Are there other books that they could supplement with it? I think of it as a time for engagement, both personal engagement, engagement with your community through your librarian and your teacher, and also engagement with your family to really think about, what are our values? How do we want to share that with the people around us?

Christiane: Emily also gave us some guidelines for what to do when we want to defend a book that's being challenged.

Emily Knox: Join your school board. There are committees for reconsideration. Get on those committees. If there is a hearing for the book, go to the hearing and say why you think the book

is important. It's just true political engagement, right? Write the board, write your letter to the editor. What I tell the actual professionals, so librarians and teachers: you're not in this alone. Call the American Library Association. Call the National Coalition against Censorship. There are people out there who will provide support for you.

It can be really difficult. I'm not saying it's not. These issues actually tear communities apart. I've had people call me and say, "Our community is not the same after it's been through this book challenge." I'm like I know. People that you thought were on one side are not because book challenging is really a political process.

Christiane: Banning books is a topic that's a lot more complicated than it initially looks, and talking with Emily helped me correct some assumptions I had about censorship. She also convinced me why it's important to support and defend intellectual freedom.

Emily Knox: Access to information is one of the most important things we can do for ourselves as human beings. I was going to say for our democracy, but actually I think it's more than just for our democracy. Engaging with ideas and wrestling with them, being critical of them and inwardly digesting them really helps us become who we are as people. Keeping that information away is actually a way of curtailing people's development as people. Being a full person in society and in your community really means that you have the whole of human ideas and the record of human endeavor in front of you, and that you pull from various things and you think, "Is this how I want my society to be? Is this how I want my community to be? Is this how I want to be as a person?" Censorship does not allow us to do that. It really limits you --because it's not just that society is limited, it's really that the people themselves become shells when they don't have all the information available to them that they can work with. But supporting intellectual freedom and people's access to information, I think, is just one of the most important things we can do as a society.

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Christiane: If you want to know more about Emily J. Knox and her work on banned books, intellectual freedom and censorship, we'll have links to everything we talked about today on our shownotes page at examiningethics.org.

Eleanor Price, producer: Hi, I'm Eleanor Price, the other Examining Ethics producer. At the end of our last episode, we invited you to speak up, and respond to the issues we discussed. And, hey, you did it! In that episode, the philosopher Adam Moore defended intellectual property rights. We had a couple of really great responses to his ideas. Naomi left us this thoughtful message:

Naomi: Hello this is Naomi, and I am calling from New Haven, Connecticut, where I am a graduate student in political theory. I am calling regarding the most recent episode on intellectual property, in which Adam Moore offers a utilitarian position in favor of patent protection as a necessary incentive to innovate and thus ultimately instrumental in human

progress. However, intellectual property protection also has a way of stifling innovation by creating a steep cost of entering the competitive market. And the race to patent isolates rather than brings together innovative thinkers and designers, barring the potential for robust teamwork that is often a necessary element of discovery. Professor Moore refers to this kind of concern as a free speech argument, where an individual's avenues for expression are stifled, but it's also an argument located in the language of utilitarian progress: For often innovations require a wealth of knowledge and a diversity of skills wrought by collaboration rather than separation. So for example, scientists and engineers who work to develop medical technology must operate within a system that encourages the first, but not necessarily the best, innovation that then creates a market that caters to the wealthy due to the high cost of the initial projects. Myriad Genetics' patent for detecting the most common breast cancer mutations, BRCA 1 and 2, enabled the company to charge inordinately high prices initially. Thus all other companies had to pay a substantial cost to continue innovating the diagnostic tool in order to subsidize it for patients of lower socio-economic standing. One of the current concerns with the recent explosion of research on CRISPR CAS 9, the most efficient, accurate, and cost-effective gene-editing method to date, is that the recent patent battle will result in furthering the socio-economic disparities that drive some health outcomes. But as usual with a policy and legal question that engages the world of ethics, it's not either "do we have patents or not," but rather the question is "what is the role of patents in increasing or decreasing progress and flourishing?"

Eleanor: Let us know what you think of today's show. Did we help shift the way you think about banning books? Have you ever challenged or defended a library book? Record a voice memo on your phone and email it to us at examiningethics@gmail.com. Be sure to include your first name and where you're from. Or, if you're shy about recording your voice, send us an email with your thoughts and we'll read it.

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