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The Importance of Intellectual Freedom

National Library Week falls in April every year, providing an opportunity for librarians and educators to unite their communities around a love of reading and knowledge. However, this year's celebrations were marred by the news that the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School Board in Alaska had voted to remove five works of literature from the district English curriculum, including F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Maxouris). This is far from being the first restriction of literature and intellectual freedom in America's public schools, and it is unlikely to be the last. The American Library Association defines intellectual freedom as "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored," and also "encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas" ("Intellectual Freedom Q & A"). The ability to freely receive and process information serves essential purposes on the individual, communal, and societal level, and yet intellectual freedom is targeted by powerful forces both in the United States and abroad.

Perhaps the best example of a modern society which severely limits intellectual freedom is China. Censorship of the internet in China has risen significantly under President Xi Jinping. The government frequently blocks access to international news websites and takes down posts deemed contrary to government-approved public opinion. Citizens cannot freely access anti-

communist ideas, nor do they have the ability to share thoughts that counter government narratives (Economy). The result of this oppression can be bleak. For instance, millions of ethnic Uyghur Muslims in China have been detained in internment camps as the government limits their ability to freely express their religion, an extreme example of what limited intellectual freedom can lead to (Watson and Westcott). Equally concerning, China's limitations on intellectual freedom have spread to other countries, including the United States. The influence China wields over the movie industry in the United States is momentous. Hollywood blockbusters change elements of their plot to appease Chinese interests – for instance, the Marvel Studios film *Doctor Strange* changed the ethnicity of the Ancient One from Tibetan to Celtic, in order to maximize Chinese market profits (Qin and Carlsen). This restriction of potentially anti-Chinese themes has made its way to the United States in the vehicle of the movie industry, thus impacting the intellectual freedom of Americans in a subtle but significant way.

Though one may consider the United States to be extremely protective of free speech and free thought, the status of intellectual freedom has fluctuated throughout American history. The Framers of the Constitution included a Bill of Rights which prioritized the freedom of spoken and written expression, indicating their high regard for intellectual freedom, influenced by the tyranny and oppression they had experienced. Several decades later, in *Schenck v. United States* (1919), the Supreme Court ruled that distributing anti-draft pamphlets was not protected under the first amendment, limiting this freedom of expression. One of the darkest periods for intellectual freedom in American history was ushered in with the Red Scare of the 1950's, during which the federal government implemented loyalty tests for employees and the House Un-American Activities Committee sought to uncover communists in the government, academia, and movie industry (History.com editors). Dissenting ideas were considered communist and

revolutionary, discouraging free thought and expression. Prospects improved in 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* highlighted the importance of the right to privacy, which is essential to intellectual freedom, as outlined in the ALA resolution concerning the USA PATRIOT act (Fiels).

The USA PATRIOT act is the most significant contemporary development concerning American intellectual freedom. Passed six weeks after September 11th, 2001, it expands the government's power to conduct searches, the materials which can be collected, and the people who can be searched. Section 215 of the act is known as the "library records" section because it permits the government to force entities (including bookshops and libraries) to turn over records, books, or papers on their customers. Civil rights groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union consider this an infringement upon the right to privacy, a right that is absolutely essential to intellectual freedom ("Surveillance Under the USA/PATRIOT Act). If people are able to access media or ideas freely, but records of that access can be turned over to other entities, they do not truly have intellectual freedom, due to the fear of repercussions based on the information they consume.

In George Orwell's chilling novel *1984*, the protagonist, reflecting on the totalitarian, oppressive society in which he lives, writes that "The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command." Modern Americans live in a time in which more people have more access to more information through more means than ever before, and yet intellectual freedom is still under attack. The rise of "fake news" accusations and distrust of mainstream media is a phenomenon which has widespread ramifications for intellectual freedom; ALA's State of the Library 2020 Report cites a case in which Citrus County commissioners denied libraries funding for a New York Times subscription, calling the newspaper fake news. Despite these concerning trends, intellectual freedom continues to be

protected through the efforts of librarians and educators throughout the country. Policies requiring book challengers to read the entire novel, digital subscriptions to reliable news outlets, and resources for combatting censorship provided by the ALA are all valuable tools which protect equal access to sources of information and ideas. Community involvement also has an immense impact on intellectual freedom, as shown by the instant backlash to the Mat-Su Board's book ban, in which residents have banded together to provide free copies of the prohibited material to teenagers. Through the continued collaboration of libraries and community members, intellectual freedom can be protected in the United States, to the benefit of all.

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