

# **Power and Controversy: A Study of Material Challenges in the U.S. Public Libraries**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Librarians and a small group of community representatives are responsible for public library governance in the U.S. Librarians and a board of trustees appointed by a local government collaborate to make key decisions for public libraries, while other members of the community have less influence over the governance of public libraries with limited methods, such as letters and public comments in board meetings. However, what should community members and library staff do if there are conflicting opinions about public library services within their community? Sometimes these kinds of dissents initiate a public controversy that involves a series of disagreement events among actors in public spaces. Each actor, such as boards of trustees, library staff, local government officials, community members, and patrons, participates in a controversy with asymmetrical power, which eventually affects the development and end of controversy. This case study investigates material challenges, which have been the most controversial issue in current U.S. public library history, in order to examine public library governance through controversies in which various actors exercise their power. A series of material challenges in the public library system in Louisiana are being examined based on their board minutes, local council minutes, news articles, social media posts, along with interviews with key actors. This study contributes to the understanding of public library governance and material controversies embedded in communities that shape public libraries.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Public libraries; community and civic organizations; community engagement; intellectual freedom; critical librarianship

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Library governance; controversy; library board; material challenges; power

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2023.1361>