

Power and Controversy: Controversy surrounding Material Challenges at a Public Library

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ABSTRACT

This case study investigates material challenges in a public library system, a growing concern in the United States due to the politicization of topics like gender, sexuality, and race. Material challenges involve requests to remove or restrict library materials, with reported cases skyrocketing to 1,247 in 2023. These challenges not only create public controversy but also highlight disagreements within public library governance. In most cases, governance involves librarians, a board of trustees, and community members, but little research has explored disagreements among these actors.

This study examines a specific public library system experiencing controversy around material challenges, focusing on the distribution and exercise of power among different actors. Data was collected through interviews, recordings, and documents, and analyzed using thematic coding, a meta-network framework, and a chronology of disagreement events. The study identifies legal authority, rights, and networks as the main resources mobilized in the controversy. Legal authority shapes the issues of disagreement, while rights and networks are used to counter this authority and influence the controversy's continuation.

A model of resource mobilization in public governance controversy is proposed, highlighting the unequal distribution of legal authority due to a governance schema based on majoritarianism. Actors without legal authority use other resources to challenge this, which eventually continues the controversy. The study suggests that leveling legal authority could mitigate public controversy and contributes to understanding public library governance during disputes. It offers insights for library practitioners and community members on resolving such controversies effectively.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Censorship; Community and civic organizations; Public libraries.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Material challenges; public library governance.

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