

It feels like the world is on fire and I spent hours reading through a report that documents an Incredibly rare circumstance. If ["between 500,000 to 1 million . . . new titles are published through traditional publishers"](#) each year, then we are spending an inordinate amount of time on 27 cases (over the course of six years, I might add). We are talking about 0.0054% of all books, if we pretend that all 27 cases occurred over the course of one year. If this report argues that book withdrawals should be rare, well, they already are.

Yes, there are plenty of slippery slope arguments about the deterioration of free speech but this feels less like a slope than a miniscule incline. Are we worried that the number might increase by a full magnitude and affect 0.054% of books published? I feel like this is a case of "just asking questions" when the government is banning books at unprecedented rates and queer people are losing their rights in many states. I understand that PEN defends free speech above all else and of course I believe in that mission, but this feels like a very minor concern in the grand scheme.

I also think, because these cases are so rare, that creating general guidelines doesn't make much sense. Every single case is different. I bristle at the idea of corporate entities (as publishers of the vast majority of books now are) who are very much focused on the bottom line also being arbiters of the first amendment in the first place.

It's important to remember that book publishing is only beginning to change in the most shallow ways in the wake of Black Lives Matter and Me Too. One outcome of publishers just beginning to think about diversity is that people with "different points of view" are often entry level workers who are overworked and underpaid and don't have many avenues to express their opinions. So when employees learn that their employer is, for instance, platforming an author who places them or their loved ones in danger, they revolt. Yes, this report is right about how publishers should get more input from their staff *before* they acquire a book, but until they manage to do that, lower level employees have very few options. The workers are not the enemy of free speech.

So-called "Free speech absolutists" might just be the biggest enemy of free speech at the moment. Elon Musk et al appears to be fighting for the right for all kinds of hate to be platformed, but doesn't seem to care at all that the government is banning books at an alarming rate. "Free speech" has as much meaning in the current discourse as "fake news." It means nothing. Which means that PEN America has a branding problem. How to wrest the term back from the reactionaries?

There's also the matter of truth, or truthiness. If fact-checking is not always a part of the traditional publishing process, then we must consider how being published and platformed legitimizes bad faith arguments from bad actors. January 6th showed that some politicians will absolutely ignore all facts and present a made-up fantasy story as nonfiction. So the question becomes who are you hurting? Who is in power? Salman Rushdie is a hero because he spoke out against the Iranian government, but what happens when corporate entities enable authors

with quite a bit of power to harm others? I beg PEN to consider the marginalized people who are already suffering, who will be hurt even further if such a book is published.

Let me be self-important and leave you with a quote from [a newsletter I wrote](#), because I believe this strongly: “Major publishers have been selling hateful and morally repugnant books for centuries—some believing in what they sell—and when they’re called out for elevating bigots and liars, they rally around the primary importance of free speech. But what if the consequences of free speech result in death and fear and suffering and further disenfranchisement of marginalized people? What if there are values that are even more important?”