"TWEET OF THE TOWN:" SYNTHESIZING LOCAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE
ON BOOK BANS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the intersection of local and social media discourse during a book ban to understand how communities respond when a book ban takes place. At present, scholarship on book bans covers the subject within the context of local tensions that can arise when a book ban takes place. This study addresses this research gap by exploring the role social media discourse can play in community responses to book bans and the long-term effects book bans can have on communities. In 2022, the community of McMinn County, Tennessee, experienced a book ban when their district's school board voted 10-0 to ban Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir, *Maus*, from the district's eighth-grade curriculum. News of the ban traveled online and within a day of the school board's meeting minutes becoming public, people across the world were engaging in conversations online about the ban. This project explores how social media discourse grew following news of the ban and the role it played in shaping community responses in McMinn County. Through a combination of tweets collected on Twitter (X) about the ban and semi-structured interviews with residents who lived in McMinn County during the ban, this study provides insights into how local and social media discourse can become entangled during a book ban. As interviews and tweets showed, there was significant opposition to the school board's decision that led many outsiders to come into the discourse in McMinn County wanting to push back against the school board through actions such as critiquing school board members online and sending copies of Spiegelman's graphic memoir to residents. This illustrated a disconnect in community needs in McMinn against perceived needs by outsiders, where many residents felt that outsider intervention was not always helpful in advocating to get *Maus* reinstated. This dissertation provides a framework for understanding how social media discourse can intersect

with local discourse through the concept of Localized Social Media Intervention, a concept that builds upon Danielle Allen's discourse flow model. Localized Social Media Intervention suggests that outsiders, through social media, have the ability to influence local discourse and affect change in ways beyond the digital world.

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For Mom and Dad

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

In early 2022, the McMinn County School Board (MCSB), located in Tennessee, voted 10-0 to remove Art Spiegelman's *Maus* from its eighth-grade curriculum, citing inappropriate content (2022, 18). Transcripts from the meeting show members pushing for the title's removal on the grounds that the language and imagery used by Spiegelman were inappropriate for the district's eighth-grade curriculum. "The internet is an amazing thing," Scott Bennett, an attorney for the board, said in reference to a potential response from Spiegelman if they were to request permission to white out content from the book (2022). Bennett's remark encapsulates what followed as word spread that the school board had voted to remove *Maus*, as news outlets across the country picked up on the story and dozens upon dozens of users on social media spoke out about their decision. Roughly a month later, a packed meeting room saw the school board addressing a crowd demanding answers following pushback against their decision. By this time, discourse had grown well beyond what the board members anticipated from public response, with the school district's Twitter account receiving hundreds of tweets from users expressing disapproval toward their decision. Beyond this was social media discourse critical of the board members themselves and the community of McMinn County. What had begun as a local issue in McMinn County had grown into a much broader conversation about book bans that involved people from across the world now interested in engaging with a community many had never heard of before news of the ban broke.

Book challenges have become an increasingly prevalent issue in libraries and schools, with the American Library Association (ALA) reporting that challenges had nearly doubled in 2022 (Garcia 2023). Free speech laws in the United States allow for the protection of books at these sites, but challenges to titles with content deemed inappropriate can lead to their removal in

some cases. These challenges occur at the local level, meaning that the removal of these texts is typically limited to the sites where the texts were challenged. This does not limit discourse around challenges, however, as press coverage of these cases often begins at the local level and reaches national attention before long. These cases have the potential to bring a large volume of attention from outside the community where a book ban has taken place. Well-intentioned outsiders seeking to support the fight against book bans may come to these communities seeking to help, but may not take into account the communities and discourse they are attempting to become a part of.

While school board meetings are responsible for addressing book challenges at the local level, online commentators from outside the community can play a role in influencing the decision-making process. With book challenges becoming an increasingly political issue and how quickly news of a ban can spread from a community and into the online world suggests the need to understand the relationship between these spaces during a book ban. Most libraries and schools maintain some form of social media presence and school board members are publicly identifiable, making it easy for those outside the local community to engage with them to either support or dispute a book challenge. This can often lead to problems, as the social channels for these sites are typically unprepared to address the volume of online interactions from outside commentators (Pekoll, 2019).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the intersection of local and social media discourse during book bans. Discourse is defined as communication between people that is done either verbally or through text. When a book ban takes place, people in the affected community can respond in a number of ways, for example supporting the ban or organizing others in the

community to support a title's reinstatement. In online spaces, news of a book ban can lead to discourse around book bans and ways in which users might support communities affected by them. The intersection of this social media and local discourse can vary depending on the site at which a ban has taken place but across all locations, the intersection of discourse is understood to be that in which outsiders from a community engage with residents of a community. I define local discourse as communications between residents in McMinn County, with one's physical presence within McMinn County placing them within the local space. Social media discourse I define as communication between people using social media platforms online. A term I will return to throughout this project that ties closely to social media discourse is the concept of outsiders. An outsider refers to someone who is not part of a community, in this case McMinn County. Social media discourse, therefore, refers to communications involving outsiders. This intersection can produce a wide range of responses, but the common denominator at these intersections is outsiders coming into a local community's discourse.

Through a combination of discourse analysis with tweets from Twitter and interviews with residents in a community where a book ban has taken place, this study explores the intersection of online and local discourse to understand how outsiders engage with residents during a book ban. Social media discourse involves communication between people on social media platforms during a book ban, while local discourse refers to written and verbal communications between residents within McMinn County. By synthesizing data from these two sources, the researcher identifies ways in which online and local spaces might influence one another during a book ban.

This study contributes to the field of intellectual freedom by exploring the relationship between online and local discourse during a book ban and providing deeper insight into how the

communities experiencing book bans and those wishing to fight book bans might better engage with one another. Additionally, this study provides an examination of the long-term effects of book bans on communities and how book bans can motivate community organizing at the local level. This study also contributes to the broader field of communications in relation to social media discourse by examining the effects of book bans beyond initial reporting on the topic.

Justification

Social media has had a profound effect on book ban discourse, particularly in relation to the broader public understanding of what a book ban is in recent years. The spread of news of book bans through social media means that one can learn of bans happening in communities well outside of their own geographically. One result of this can be an increased interest from people in supporting communities affected by book bans. Support can look like a number of different things, but the basic concept of it is important because it implies support for a community that one may not be a part of. While people may approach support for communities experiencing book bans with good intentions, they are often coming into these communities based on information gathered through social media and press coverage. This can cause issues when there is a disconnect between the perceived needs of outsiders and the actual needs of the community. Beyond this, book bans that gain coverage through the press or social media place the sites where they take place under a microscope for the public. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, it can be an overwhelming and sometimes emotionally complicated experience to be a part of a community involved in a book ban. Social media discourse in particular can prove to be overwhelming, as smaller local communities are often unprepared to engage with large volumes of social media discourse during a book ban.

Scholarship on book ban discourse often focuses on book bans broadly or exploring their impact on community relations. The rise of social media presents a landscape for book ban discourse in which outsider influence must now be considered when discussing book bans. A person living in a community outside of where a book ban has taken place can now engage in the discourse through social media to communicate directly with those living in the community. This can be anything from providing commentary or a response to the ban online, to more direct efforts such as offering to provide monetary support to communities experiencing book bans. At present, there is limited scholarship on book ban discourse in relation to social media and the long-term effects book bans can have on communities. This study applies a theoretical framework around discourse flow to better understand how local and social media discourse occur during book bans and the influence outsiders can have on communities experiencing book bans.

Research Objectives

Primary Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the intersection of local and online discourse during a book ban. Through discourse and thematic analysis of tweets and interviews with local residents, this study explores the relationship between these online and local discourses.

Secondary Research Objectives

1. Examine how discourse flows into the conversation from both local and social media sources
    a. How these two spaces inform one another
2. How residents in local communities respond to a book ban.
. Understand what issues arise when outsiders attempt to provide support

3. Understand the role of youth voices in book ban discourse.

    . Barriers to entry for young people.

Context and Background

Maus

Maus is a graphic memoir by Art Spiegelman that depicts a conversation with his father, Vladek, about his experiences during the Holocaust. Nancy Pedri defines graphic memoirs as autobiographical writing in comics form (2022, 44). Spiegelman's work is divided into two volumes but is available as a complete edition as well. *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* consists of six chapters detailing Spiegelman's conversation with Vladek interspersed with flashbacks to his father's experiences. This frame narrative continues in the five chapters of *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*.

Spiegelman's novel carries a significant amount of prestige in the literary world, with Spiegelman receiving a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, making *Maus* the first graphic novel to receive the award. In her introduction to the collection of essays on Spiegelman's graphic memoir, *Maus Now*, Hillary Chute (2022) writes that "It is hard to overstate *Maus*'s effect on post-war American culture, and on the collective sense of what art and literature can accomplish" (xiii). Chute points to the novel's importance as a resource for Holocaust education, citing its appearances in high school, college and graduate-level curricula. Hans Kruschwitz writes that much of why *Maus* has stood as an exemplar in Holocaust literature is because of Spiegelman's ability to synthesize words and images in his narrative (2022,327). It is this same renown that brought Spiegelman's work to the curriculum of the McMinn County School District.

Despite its initial inclusion in the eighth-grade curriculum, Maus was ultimately removed after MCSB members took issue with the language and imagery used. The offending words and

images identified by the MCSB during their meeting on January 10, 2022, are spread throughout the two volumes and are described as scenes of nudity and vulgarity. For example, the word "bastards" is used in a scene in which Vladek and other prisoners of war are yelled at by a German soldier (Spiegelman 1986, 52). "Shit" and "God damn" are used in the final scene of the first volume between Vladek and Spiegelman (159). Nudity appears primarily in the second volume, though the meeting minutes from the school board do not mention specific pages in the graphic memoir. A scene depicting the treatment of Jews in Auschwitz shows them being stripped of their clothes and shaved (Spiegelman 1991, 25-26). It is important to highlight the context of these images and words because, as discussed later, context is often removed by book challengers or reframed to suit the challenge.

McMinn County sits just between Knoxville and Chattanooga, Tennessee with a population of approximately 55,000 residents based on the 2023 U.S. census. McMinn County Schools oversees seven elementary schools and two high schools, with the elementary schools serving kindergarten through eighth graders and the high school serving ninth through twelfth grade students. McMinn County's county seat is Athens, and also is where the McMinn County School Board conducts its meetings. School board meetings are held near the beginning of every month and are open to the public. Minutes and agendas from school board meetings are posted to the McMinn County Schools website.

Additional context on McMinn County's libraries

In my research on McMinn County and the Maus case, I learned that the county's school curriculum was not the only place where conflict had occurred over intellectual freedom. E.G. Fisher Public Library is the public library for Athens and was the site of controversy in 2023 over a book display. Press coverage of the story indicates that a complaint was filed against then-

library director Peyton Eastman over the presence of a Pride Month display in June that year. According to news coverage and information obtained from interviewees, the display was away from the site's children's section but a complaint was filed within a day of its placement. The petition, which was filed on June 30 that year, demands that Eastman resign for allowing the display to be present in the library and that the books in it "appear to target minor children are inappropriate and contain explicit and graphic language regarding sexual acts" (2023). Pushback from community members as covered by the press shows that there was concern over the complaint issued by Athens mayor Steve Sherlin. Critics of Sherlin and vice mayor Larry Eaton argued that the two violated policy by issuing the complaint, given their standing as city leaders. Sherlin's response to these claims was that he did so as a private citizen rather than as the mayor of Athens. Meeting minutes for the Fisher Library board meeting on August 15 of that year show that Eastman ultimately resigned from her position as library director following the complaint, with an interim director appointed shortly after. In an interview with the local paper on the appointment, library board chairmen Tyler Forrest remarked that in choosing an interim director, they were seeking a person who "[had] not necessarily taken a passionate side on either side of the issue we've dealt with the past month" (Morgan, 2023). This emphasis on neutrality is echoed in the hiring of a permanent replacement for Eastman, where the board in an article discussing the selection noted that the library was viewed as a "neutral place of thought" separated from social or political agendas (Morgan 2023).

While the removal of the pride display at E.G. Fisher is a separate event from the McMinn County School Board's decision, it merits mention in this chapter as it provides additional context to the area's relationship with intellectual freedom. In both cases, public backlash came from not only the act of removing the display and book but also the perception

that leadership was violating its own policies. The E.G. Fisher Library case is relevant because, as shown in press coverage and interviews with residents, it is another part of understanding the context of challenged reading material in McMinn County.

"An arbiter of community standards"

The McMinn County Schools school board is composed of ten members from five districts, with two members representing each district. According to the McMinn County Schools policy on the role of the school board, its function is "serving residents within the boundaries of the school system and non-residents under conditions specified by state law and the Board." The policy goes on to state that the board may only exercise authority over the school district through voting during official board meetings. At the time of writing, three of the ten board members who voted during the January 10 meeting are no longer on the board.

Regular board meetings are held on the second Thursday of each month. In the case of the January 10th meeting to discuss *Maus*, the meeting was considered a "called meeting" rather than a regular one, with the regular session meeting taking place a few days later on the 13th. It should be noted that under the minutes for the January 13th meeting, *Maus* was not brought up and, as discussed later, was not addressed until the following month, once the public learned of the board's decision. Based on policy identified in the Board of Education Policy Manual, notification of special meetings is typically given within 48 hours of such meetings taking place. However, the policy also states that:

> "The only exception permitted is in the case of an emergency, defined for this policy as a sudden, generally unexpected occurrence or set of circumstances demanding immediate action. In such exceptions, notice shall be given to all appropriate parties as is practical" (McMinn County Schools).

Based on comments from the board's attorney, Scott Bennett, found in minutes from the February 10th meeting, it appears that the meeting was considered an emergency meeting due to board member concerns that school would be resuming shortly and that a solution to the curriculum concerns was needed immediately (McMinn County Schools 2022, p. 4). According to the district's policy on meeting attendance from the public:

> "Every meeting of the Board shall be open to the public, except for those meetings in which the law allows closed sessions. Open meetings will be physically accessible to all students, employees, and interested citizens" (McMinn County Schools).

People who wish to address the board during regular board meetings are permitted to do so provided they complete a request to address the board regarding an item that is on the agenda. Requests for topics not on the agenda must go through a longer process for approval. When addressing the board, the district handbook states that "The person addressing the Board must state their name, address, and subject," after which they are given five minutes to speak at the meeting. The policy's requirement that speakers must state their address in addressing the board is an important note to make, particularly when thinking about the concept of local communities. The policy page "Appeals to and Appearances Before the Board" indicates that it was issued October 5, 2023, roughly a year after the board's decision on *Maus.* At this time, it is unknown if previous versions of this policy had a requirement for speakers to provide their address when speaking to at board meetings. As later discussion shows, school board leadership and others in the community used language that centered discourse around the local community of McMinn County.

School Board Decision

Spiegelman's book was originally part of the eighth-grade reading curriculum in McMinn County but was removed over concerns that its language and imagery were inappropriate (Corn 2022). Per the school board policy outlined previously, a special meeting was called by the board on January 10, 2022, to discuss the book's presence in the curriculum. Discussion later in this chapter shows that the board's decision to hold a special meeting caused significant pushback from many in the community who argued that the board violated their own policy by holding the meeting without prior notice to the public. A transcript of the meeting's minutes (2022) reveals several key details necessary to understand the context surrounding the graphic memoir's removal. The meeting was attended by all ten MCSB members, along with several other community members. This meeting was also attended by Scott Bennett, an attorney for the school district, who was present to provide guidance on potential legal issues that might come from the Board's decision. The meeting begins with an outline of why Spiegelman's book had been called into question, namely that "There is some rough, objectionable language in this book" (1). It should also be noted that classes in the district were set to resume soon, a fact several board members emphasized in wanting to make a decision on the book. Board members discussed the possibility of substituting *Maus* with another text but were told by instructional supervisors present that this was not possible.

One of the board members, Tony Allman, referred to a proposed solution to the complaints that involved whiting out offensive words and images but is told by Bennett that copyright law may prevent this from happening. It is later shown that this solution was proposed by the instructional supervisors as a way to keep the graphic memoir in the curriculum. The proposed solution to white out or redact the offending content is worth noting as it constitutes another form of censorship though in a different form from a full removal from the curriculum.

Allman objects to maintaining Spiegelman's book in the curriculum, arguing that it should be outright removed because "*it shows people hanging, it shows them killing kids, why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff, it is not wise or healthy*" (2). Some board members' concerns go beyond just *Maus*, with Mike Cochran remarking that:

> "*It looks like the entire curriculum is developed to normalize sexuality, normalize nudity and normalize vulgar language. If I was trying to indoctrinate somebody's kids, this is how I would do it. You put this stuff just enough on the edges, so the parents don't catch it but the kids, they soak it in. I think we need to relook at the entire curriculum*" (12).

Following Cochran's statement, the board returns to discussing *Maus*'s place in the eighth-grade curriculum. After consulting with their attorney, the board determines that whiting out the offending content in Spiegelman's book would potentially create a copyright issue because doing so might alter the meaning of the text. At this point, Cochran returns to the broader English curriculum, arguing that there are a multitude of issues with it and the board addressing *Maus* would be a step toward improvement. Following some additional discussion, board member Jonathan Pierce moves for a vote to remove *Maus* from the curriculum, with the board voting 10-0 to remove it (18). Word of the MCSB's decision did not reach the public and news media until a few weeks after the meeting took place due to the transcript of minutes taken not being immediately available.

When discussing the potential legal ramifications of censoring specific words and images in Maus, school board member Rob Shamblin remarked that "*I don't think that there is really any retribution that we would face for removing eight words in full and a graphic or two*

*in ful*l" (17). While Shamblin's comment was in reference to potential legal responses, it does foreshadow the volume of attention the school board received once word of the ban spread.

Responses

Reports of the ban began to appear on January 26th, 2022, following the publication of the school board's meeting minutes, beginning with local press such as the *Tennessee Holler*. Attention quickly traveled beyond McMinn County as a combination of social media and press coverage drove discourse around censorship and its place in schools. Press reached national news media and Spiegelman himself, who expressed disbelief at the Board's decision. Following the initial wave of attention, the MCSB issued a statement defending their choice, justifying the ban of Spiegelman's book from the school curriculum "because of its unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide." Coverage of the ban continued into February, with one effect being a massive spike in sales of the book nationwide, with sales of Spiegelman's work increasing by over 70% following the ban (Kaplan 2022). Discourse continued online as users discussed the ban on *Maus* and the current state of the country in relation to censorship. At the local level, residents voiced their concern with the Board's decision, with a group of locals organizing and issuing a statement that called for the book's reinstatement. On February 10, the McMinn County school board held another meeting to discuss their decision. In contrast to the first meeting on *Maus*, which, based on notes from meeting minutes was attended only by the school board and a few educators from the community, the February 10 meeting saw a nearly packed room. Parents and other members of the community showed up to voice their concerns over the book's removal, giving testimonials and arguments as to why the Board should reverse its decision. Ultimately, the Board upheld its decision, keeping Spiegelman's book out of the curriculum. The Board argued that the decision

was not based on anti-Holocaust beliefs but rather issues with the language and nudity shown in the novel, reaffirming their critiques identified in minutes from the previous meeting (Kreps 2022).
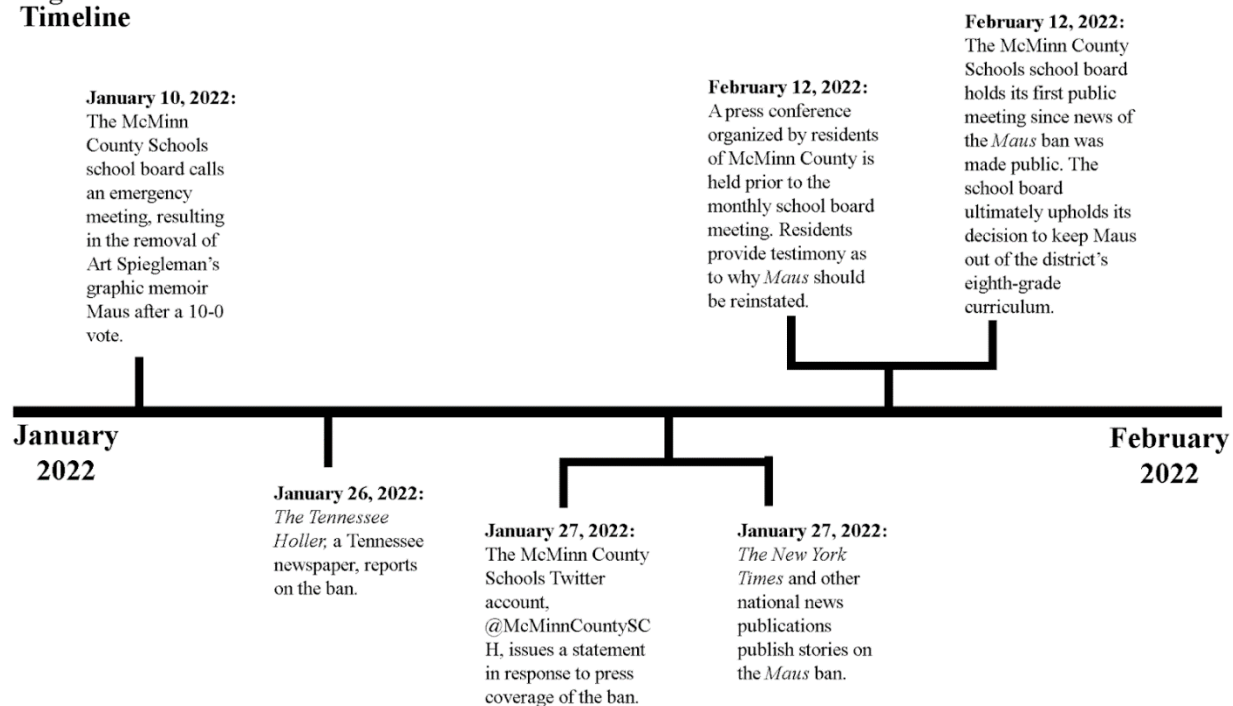
Meeting minutes from the February 10th meeting show that four community members, Kathryn Brady, James Cockrum, Sara Denny, and Kailee Isham, spoke before the board at the meeting in response to the removal of *Maus*. Per school board policy, each speaker was given five minutes to address the board. The first speaker, Kathryn Brady, centered her remarks around the Board's mission statement, believing that their decision around Maus did not align with it. Brady went on to discuss the importance of educating children to be successful globally, with the minutes stating that Brady spoke about how "children need to be educated in a way that allows them to be part of a national and international community, not just citizens of their county and state" (McMinn County Schools, p.2). This was followed by remarks from McMinn resident James Cockrum, whose address to the board was centered around protesting its removal. Near the end of the meeting during the "Praises and Compliments" section, Mike Cochran mentions the ongoing discourse around *Maus* and a meeting he had with local rabbi over the graphic memoir. The minutes do not detail the specifics of this conversation but Cochran says that the rabbi was supportive of the board's decision and that he himself would not have the book in his synagogue's library. As the minutes of the meeting show "*Mr. Cochran said he wants everyone to understand that removing this book had nothing to do with The Holocaust*" (2022, p. 10).

While the second school board meeting did not result in the Board reversing course on its decision, the community responses at the local and online levels merit further investigation. *Maus* was certainly not the only book that was banned in 2022, but its removal in McMinn County and the response that followed illustrate the ways in which word of a ban can spread

beyond the local community and into online spaces. Sales of the title spiking and the discussions that took place in other communities are indicative of the impact the ban had beyond McMinn County. Shamblin's remark that there would not be any ramifications for censorship proved to be incorrect as the Board's decision ultimately grew beyond what any of the members might have expected.

Below is a timeline outlining the events that took place over the course of when the McMinn County school board voted to remove *Maus*:

Figure 1
Timeline

January 10, 2022: The McMinn County Schools school board calls an emergency meeting, resulting in the removal of Art Spiegleman's graphic memoir Maus after a 10-0 vote.

February 12, 2022: A press conference organized by residents of McMinn County is held prior to the monthly school board meeting. Residents provide testimony as to why *Maus* should be reinstated.

February 12, 2022: The McMinn County Schools school board holds its first public meeting since news of the *Maus* ban was made public. The school board ultimately upholds its decision to keep Maus out of the district's eighth-grade curriculum.

January 2022

February 2022

January 26, 2022: *The Tennessee Holler*, a Tennessee newspaper, reports on the ban.

January 27, 2022: The McMinn County Schools Twitter account, @McMinnCountySCH, issues a statement in response to press coverage of the ban.

January 27, 2022: *The New York Times* and other national news publications publish stories on the *Maus* ban.

Working Definitions

Censorship

Censorship is defined by the ALA as "a decision made by a governing authority or its representative(s) to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library

resource based on a person or group's disapproval of its content or its author or creator" (2021, 295). While the ALA applies this definition to library settings, I use it within the context of schools. In the *Maus* case, a quick survey of social media discourse and popular press shows the term used to describe the MCSB's decision. As noted previously, the current understanding of censorship is derived from cases in the 19th century, particularly with Anthony Comstock and the anti-vice movements of the time.

Given the rhetoric used by MCSB members during the meeting to remove *Maus*, I would classify their decision as an act of censorship under the ALA's definition. The MCSB serves as the governing authority in this case, ultimately voting to exclude the title from the curriculum at the meeting. It should also be noted that had the book not been outright removed, the MCSB also entertained the idea of whiting out specific words and images from Spiegelman's text, pointing to another form of censorship. As Evelyn Geller writes (1984) in her book on libraries and censorship, "In its broadest sense, censorship implies the definition of boundary lines in book selection," and *Maus* ultimately crossed these boundary lines in the eyes of MCSB members (xviii)

Working Definitions

Book Challenge

A book challenge (or as I have referred to simply as a challenge in previous sections) is a complaint issued by someone to a school or library that a title in the curriculum or circulation should be removed or altered in some way. The ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (2021) notes that "The Supreme Court has held that the Constitution requires a procedure designed to critically examine all challenged expression before it can be suppressed," (90) meaning that there is a formal review process schools and libraries must go through before changes can be made.

This is echoed by Schimmel et al. in their text on legal policies in schools, noting that books cannot be removed from curriculum without constitutional process from a governing body (2011, 136). In the case of McMinn County, for example, the school board met and voted on removing Spiegelman's book from the district curriculum.

An aspect of book challenges that should be mentioned in defining the term is the emotional impact a book challenge can have. A book challenge is, as the name suggests, a challenge to librarians or educators that a title they have chosen or endorsed is inappropriate. This can be an emotionally charged event and many in the education and library fields are often unprepared for how difficult this can be. Sandra Parks in her chapter from *Intellectual Freedom Stories from a Shifting Landscape* (2020) describes her experience with book challenges. A theme that emerges from Parks' chapter is the stress that came from these challenges, a point that sometimes goes unnoticed in coverage of book bans and is something I aim to cover as part of this study.

Social media

Social media can be a difficult term to define given how broad it is as a concept. Anabel Quan-Haase and Luke Sloan (2022) note that social media is a constantly evolving technology with new platforms arriving every few years, meaning that the definition for social media of one type might not be applicable to another. Citing Nau et. al, Quan-Haase and Sloan define social media as:

> Web-based and mobile services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with content (user- or not-generated).

For the purposes of this study, Nau et. al's (2022) definition provides a suitable description of social media and its ability to develop community and connections among users.

Teens

Age ranges for teens can range from 13 to 19 years of age. Given the eighth-grade curriculum level for *Maus* in McMinn County, I will primarily be focusing on working with teens who are roughly 13 years old or a few months younger. Teens are frequently left out of the research process in scholarship, as Amy Best notes in her monograph on youth studies, making their inclusion in this study important given their proximity to *Maus* in the school curriculum. As Best writes, young people being framed as inferior or unworthy of being part of the research process has been a consistent issue in research and adds to the sense of voicelessness they can feel (2007, 14). I believe it is important to outline the age range of teens I intend to work with while acknowledging the history of youth studies and the importance of involving them in the research process, which I intend to accomplish through interviews.

Local

The term "local" can refer to a variety of spaces depending on context and one's relationship to those spaces. For some, local might refer to their neighborhood while others might view it as their town. In the case of teens, local might refer to the area surrounding their school. Regardless, it can be difficult to frame what is "local" given the broad range of locations people associate with the term. I define local within this study to be the community of McMinn County and the schools that fall under the McMinn County school board's jurisdiction.

Local Discourse

Local discourse refers to written and verbal communication between people within a local community. Within this study, this will frequently be used to refer to local discourse within

McMinn County during the *Maus* ban. Social media can sometimes be used in local contexts to communicate with those within a local community. For example, a resident may use Facebook to message others within their community. This is understood as local discourse in this study because discourse is between residents rather than those outside the community. A resident using Twitter about the *Maus* ban, however, would constitute social media discourse because their audience is no longer confined to strictly residents in McMinn County.

This chapter has addressed the research objective for the study and outlined primary and secondary objectives for the project. A history of the *Maus* ban in McMinn County was covered with a timeline illustrating major events in the community. In the next chapter, I outline scholarship surrounding censorship, social media, and youth voices. I cover a brief history of censorship and how book bans operate in the present day, social media research and the history of Twitter, and scholarship on youth voices in relation to social issues.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Book Bans and Censorship

Early Censorship

The concept of censorship in its contemporary use can be traced back to the 19th century. As Emily Knox (2015) writes, the term comes from "the Roman office *censor* or 'one who monitors morality,'" illustrated with the circulation of information in the 19th century(5). What remains consistent across time periods is the idea that there is information concerned parties perceive to be dangerous. Mary Douglas's writings on the concept of dirt in society provides a useful perspective on how censored materials are viewed by their challengers. "Where there is dirt, there is system," writes Douglas, framing dirt as something that is out of place in society (1966, 44). In censorship, a challenged text is one that is viewed as unclean and, as discussed below, unfit for consumption by youth. As Knox writes, reading practices during the early modern period were noteworthy for the prevalence of unmediated reading (37). During this period, reading became an activity in which one could engage with a text free from the influence of annotations or other forms of interpretation seen in earlier periods, which proved to be a point of anxiety for those who feared that reading in this way could produce the incorrect interpretations (36-37). These fears are not unlike those seen in present day book challenges, as individuals or groups proclaim that reading these titles can give readers the wrong perspectives.

"Corruption" and Anti-vice Movements of the 20th Century

Censorship during the 19th century was notable in how censors justified their crusades against problem books by focusing on the preservation of social status among families. Nicola Beisel's (1997) assessment of 19th-century censorship notes that fear of "moral corruption" was at the heart of censorship rhetoric. Reproduction, Beisel says, refers to the creation of a new

generation that emulates the values of the parents, allowing the family line to either maintain their social class or ascend up the social hierarchy (6). For the moral crusaders of the time, children corrupted by negative influences ran the risk of being unable to find work or marriage, thus lowering their social status. As Beisel argues, this was not an issue exclusive to the upper class, as many in the middle class shared similar concerns, showing that moral reform of the time was not an issue strictly limited to the upper class. Beyond addressing the class issues at play in moral reform, Beisel notes that many of the issues addressed by censors of the time, "pornography, abortion, the availability of contraceptives, corruption of children by libidinous and pervasive popular culture, and indecency in art and literature," are not unfamiliar topics for censors in the present time (4). Beisel's text is several decades removed from present day discourse on censorship, but a look at some of the titles covered in Pat Scales' book (2015) on challenged titles in the 21st century shows many challenges grounded in the same concerns expressed by censors in the 20th century, most frequently books containing content deemed too sexual for children. The framing of these topics as corrupting influences on children is important to note, particularly in discussing how censorship rhetoric has shifted in recent years.

One such instance of this is Anthony Comstock and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), which used rhetoric centered around the idea of protecting children from corruption during the 20th century. Beisel constructs an image of moral reform movements as built from the upper middle class in an effort to maintain social status. As one of the most prominent members of the anti-vice movement, Comstock's campaign focused on the protection of children from literature deemed obscene using rhetoric emphasizing the corrupting influence of obscene material. Family reproduction was at the heart of concerns for members of the anti-vice movement Comstock's rhetoric played upon these anxieties. As Comstock argued, a

child who read obscene material ran the risk of engaging in masturbation, which in turn would lead to acts such as prostitution. Comstock's slippery slope rhetoric is important to note in discussing contemporary book challengers where reading material deemed inappropriate is framed as a gateway to more dangerous behavior.

While the members of the anti-vice movements were predominantly upper middle-class, Comstock framed his campaign against obscene material as beneficial to all. Discussing Comstock's audience, Beisel write that "While the elite was urged to support the anti-vice society to protect their children from moral degradation, and their economic interests from thieving and corrupt employees, Comstock also argued that bad books in their various guises threatened the reproduction of society as a whole" (68). Comstock's role as a single person behind the censorship of materials is of significance in its illustration of contemporary censorship. In discussing the evolution of censorship, Knox cites Comstock as a notable example of the shift away from institutional censorship and toward the power of individual influence (2015, 6). As Knox writes, "Challengers wield their power using the tools of the state, but their actions are often the work of either an individual or a small group of individuals" (6).

The Language of Book Challenges in a Post-2016 World

What should be noted in considering censorship in the past in relation to book challenges today is the language used to discuss controversial books. Much like the campaigns by Comstock and anti-vice movements of the 20th century, the rhetoric of book challengers in the 21st century plays on fears that exposure to certain books will encourage undesirable behavior. The connecting thread between these two periods is the notion that a reader's behavior will be altered by engaging with an inappropriate book. Differences arise when looking at the specific language used by challengers in the 21st century, particularly post-2016. In the years following Donald

Trump being elected president of the United States, political discourse has grown increasingly

divided. For book ban cases, this has resulted in an increase in titles challenged on the grounds

that they are too socially progressive. This concern is not unlike the rhetoric of the 19th century

anti-vice movement in that challengers frame problem titles as gateways to behavior they believe

to be dangerous for the future of society. Where challengers of the present day differ from those

of the past is in their use of a particular term in their rhetoric: indoctrination.

"Indoctrination" and Othering

A closer examination of the language used by challengers is important in understanding

how the landscape of censorship has shifted over the years and the use of the term

"indoctrination" in recent years is evidence of this. Whereas censors of the past frequently

referred to the books they targeted as corrupting influences on the youth, rhetoric in recent years

makes frequent use of "indoctrination" as one of the leading reasons to ban offending titles. In an

article on a case in Arizona that saw seven books removed from school curriculum, Emily Knox

(2022) addresses a term increasingly used by book challengers that has gained prevalence in

recent years: "indoctrination." Knox writes that "books that discuss oppression or that are critical

of dominant culture are automatically described as indoctrination," and this assessment of the

term is important in understanding the shift in rhetoric from book challengers (20). Marjorie

Heins's text (2001) on censorship in the early to mid-20th century shows consistent use of

"corruption," much like Comstock's rhetoric of the 19th century, in reference to children

engaging in inappropriate material suggesting that the term's usage within the context of book

censorship is relatively new. As Knox argues, indoctrination connects back to fears of a singular,

"monosemic," interpretation of a work that ultimately results in readers taking on undesirable

values by reading an offending text. Context is important when considering why censors have

moved toward using indoctrination in their arguments. As Knox argues, indoctrination is deployed to suggest that teachers are presenting students with these texts with the intention of forcing a specific worldview on them. By framing the teaching of offending texts as indoctrination, book challengers invoke rhetoric not unlike Comstock in the 19th century, but with the added dimension of othering the educators who choose these titles in their curriculum. This othering is an important detail in noting the shift in language used by challengers because it leans into the increasingly heated political climate today and plays on fears that educators might turn parents' children against them by teaching literature deemed too progressive. While one could argue that "corruption" and "indoctrination" are one and the same, this ignores the shifting political contexts and emphasis on diverse books taking place in the world today.

The deployment of indoctrination by challengers draws from a number of anxieties, most notably pushes for diversity in children's literature. The #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement, as described on their website (2023), began as a hashtag in 2014 during an exchange discussing the lack of diverse books for children. Within the movement, diverse books are understood as titles written by or for marginalized groups. In their introduction to *Diversity in Youth Literature*, Jamie Campbell Naidoo and Sarah Park Dahlen (2013) discuss the importance of having diverse books and the doors to cultural competencies that can open by reading them. For some, the push for diverse books is construed as a threat to social status quos. This in turn leads to book challenges where the underlying concern for the challenger is the potential shift away from a literary canon made up of predominantly white, heterosexual authors. Jonathan Zimmerman notes that as history textbooks began to include more information on racial and ethnic groups, so too did pushback against diving deeper into the more problematic aspects of US history, illustrating some of the larger issues in addressing diversity and inclusivity (2002, 31).

"We don't need this stuff to teach kids history"

Within the context of the *Maus* case, indoctrination was invoked during the school board meeting as one of the primary reasons for concern by board members. Addressing the school district's broader curriculum (having discussed a scene depicting nudity in *Maus* earlier), Mike Cochran (2022) makes the claim that the curriculum in its present state normalized nudity and sexual content. "*If I was trying to indoctrinate somebody's kids, this is how I would do it,*" Cochran concludes in his remarks, asserting that the curriculum provides inappropriate material that students will internalize by reading. Here, Cochran invokes rhetoric not uncommon among challengers in the present day by suggesting that *Maus* and other works used in the curriculum are a threat to students because of their potential to instill attitudes toward sexual content that run counter to his own. This in effect "others" these works by framing them as material only those on an opposing side would endorse. By framing *Maus* as an article for indoctrination, Cochran implies that children are under threat and support for the graphic memoir would put them at risk of falling under the sway of those opposite his own values.

Book Challengers and How a Book Gets Challenged

Knox defines book challenges as "Requests by members of the public to remove, relocate, or restrict books from or within institutions" (3). Book challengers cannot be grouped under a single set of characteristics but a common feature among those who aim to censor books is a desire to keep information out of the hands of children. This harkens back to the 19th century where adults who wished to elevate their family's social status or maintain it would look to their children to instill values that would help to achieve this (Knox, 2015). As Knox describes the context of book bans in the 21st century, this idea persists through the belief in preserving one's values by ensuring that children are either instilled with one's ideals or kept from learning more progressive ones (2015).

Book challenges in the United States are guided by a number of motivations, though all of them recognize the importance of education in society and see this venue as one that must be protected to ensure the passing on of values adults deem "correct" (Reichman, 2001). This leads to efforts to challenge book titles that contain material that the challenger feels goes against the values they believe should be taught to children. A common term used in discourse from challengers is "indoctrinate," which implies that children who engage with books containing inappropriate material are susceptible to adopting immoral ideas or values through their reading. As such, educational sites must contend with challenges to titles from community members concerned with the messages children might receive from their reading.

Policy design plays heavily into a site's ability to respond to challenges and staff can often run into problems when a community member issues a complaint (Pekoll and Adams, 2021). Typically, library policies will include some form of complaint process that patrons can go through if they are concerned with the content of a title. School districts follow a similar process, with administrators often tasked with responding to concerns (Reichman, 2001). However, there are different protections for material under the First Amendment between schools and libraries (Chmara, 2010). These differences are primarily a result of past court cases, with the key difference between library and school institutions being the presence of required curriculum in the latter. The threat of challenges or public outcry is something both schools and libraries are conscious of when developing curricula and collections and can sometimes result in self-censorship that comes from anxiety over potential backlash (Schrader, 2008).

Schools and libraries are subject to different processes when it comes to book challenges. It is important to note that one of the key differences between library and book challenges comes from the context challenged titles occupy in these spaces. Whereas reconsideration forms in

libraries come in response to the availability of a book to patrons, school book challenges are frequently in response to a book that is a part of the school's assigned curriculum. School curriculum differs significantly from library material in how it is consumed. Catherine Ross (2015) observes that school curriculum involves a "captive audience" as students "are required to attend school for the precise purpose of receiving the important messages the state delivers in the curriculum" (42). To remove a book from school curriculum, legal authority must come from either the district's school board or superintendent. Each district may have its own process but this must involve some form of constitutional process (Schimmel et, al. 2011, 137). School book bans also differ from libraries in that appeals must go through the same institutional authority that removed the title in the first place. As Schimmel et al. (2011) write, "When teachers and school boards have a legitimate disagreement about what texts to use, the boards have the ultimate authority to make these decisions in elective as well as in required courses" (136).

An additional distinction should be made between school and public libraries, particularly due to the populations served. While both venues contain youth-oriented materials, the school library is specifically designed for use by young people, making the selection process a slightly different affair. This difference primarily comes down to administration and the processes that follow in regard to book challenges. As Pat Scales writes, the school board oversees selection in the school library much like they do with curriculum (2009, 8). As such, due process is required for the removal of titles and reconsideration ultimately falls under the discretion of the school board.

The sequence a book goes through when it is challenged and reinstated differs from case to case but the general pathway many challenged titles travel begins with a challenge from a community member. Book challengers often frame their argument for a book's removal around

the idea that there is a singular way to read a title, or a monosemic interpretation, ignoring the possibility of multiple interpretations of a work (Knox, 2015). After a complaint is filed, depending on the policy set up by the site, a vote is often taken by administrators to determine what will happen to the title. If the title is removed from shelves, other community members can attempt to appeal the removal, resulting in further deliberation with either the original committee or one at a higher level (2015). After hearing statements from community members, the board will then hold another vote to determine whether or not the book will be reinstated. While people outside of the community cannot directly influence the vote, board members are subject to influence from outside parties, sometimes changing their vote due to public pressure (2015). Policy reassessment frequently takes place after a board decides to reinstate a title, oftentimes to address gaps in the site's policy when addressing book challenges. A key factor for reinstatement, regardless of the hearing's result, is the influence that can be exerted on board members during a book challenge.

An aspect that is sometimes ignored when looking at book ban cases is the tensions a challenge can cause in a community. Knox's book begins with a brief anecdote about her experience attending a school board hearing that discussed the ban of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. As Knox (2015) details the proceedings of the meeting, she notes a moment of confrontation between a few audience members who are on opposite sides of the book challenge. "Everyone is learning things about their neighbors and local institutions that they previously didn't know," Knox writes, highlighting the tensions book bans can create in communities (3). In a post-2016 world, these tensions are increased by the rhetoric of challengers today. As previously discussed, "indoctrination" has become an increasingly common term in rhetoric from book challengers and is unique in othering those who

support the challenged titles. The hearing Knox attended occurred prior to the 2016 presidential elections at which censorship appears to have become an increasingly politicized topic. What was already an undoubtedly tense discourse in local communities is likely exacerbated by the political rhetoric post-2016 and even further by the rise of social media as a vehicle for communication.

Despite the increasingly tense discourse around book challenges, the issue is not a binary one for many people. While many attendees at school board meetings for book bans might have strong opinions about a title being removed or reinstated, stances on book bans can vary greatly. Thinking of censorship as a concept, there are those who might feel strongly about the censorship of one work but less so about another. Similarly, there are also those who might be neutral on the issue. This is important to acknowledge because it can be easy to assume that in discussing book bans one must land on one side or the other. While I approach this study with the intention of engaging with individuals who were in favor of or against the removal of *Maus*, I recognize the nuance of perspectives around censorship.

Book challenges have undergone some degree of change with the rise of social media, particularly in making the process somewhat more informal than in the past. Pekoll notes that while formal channels for book challenges persist through written complaints and forms, social media has given rise to more informal challenges. Whereas formal challenges will typically look like a reconsideration form or some other document, Pekoll writes that the growing popularity of social media has led to more challenges appearing online on platforms such as Twitter (89-90). Pekoll contends that even if one is to call these challenges informal, they still constitute a challenge and merit support from institutions such as the ALA. A term that Pekoll uses that is of particular interest within the context of this study is the idea of a book challenge issued through a

"Twitter storm." Pekoll does not define this term in using it but I interpret it (within the context of book challenges) to refer to a mass of twitter users tweeting at a library or school in opposition to a particular book. Twitter storms are not the only source of informal challenges, as Pekoll says, but speaks to social media's impact on book challenges. As I outline in later sections, social media is not the sole cause of book challenges, but its use as a tool for organizing impacts libraries and schools by providing another avenue for discourse in book challenges.

Social Media Scholarly Discourse

At present, minimal scholarship in intellectual freedom has examined the relationship between book bans and online communities but discourse over the formation and impact of these groups has grown in recent years. Twitter has been described as a "pseudo-public sphere" in its ability to produce a discourse that eliminates geographical barriers and allows users to communicate across the world (Fuchs 2021). With book bans, online communities play a potentially significant role for both sides of the issue, with intellectual freedom organizations such as the ALA using Twitter to communicate bans that have happened to other members of the library community. Conversely, groups have assembled through channels such as Facebook as the discourse around the perceived threat of liberal values to children and their education has led to the formation of conservative groups such as Moms For Liberty. Groups such as Moms for Liberty have developed in the past decade around the idea of protecting students, but often are grounded in efforts to ban books from schools (Williams 2022). For both sides, social media presents an opportunity to spread messaging but also channels to engage with local leadership when a book ban takes place. Moms For Liberty's advocacy for a stricter curriculum in schools that avoids discussion of LGBTQ issues and critical race theory came in the form of letters sent out to various school boards across the country in a movement organized through their Facebook

group (Lagrone, 2021). As discussed later on in this chapter, social media under Danielle Allen's discourse flow model provides a means for understanding how book banning discourse can travel from local spaces into online spaces and back into local communities.

The following section addresses the history of Twitter along with discourse surrounding social media as a tool for social movements to organize. The presence of youth on social media is also discussed, particularly in understanding the role this technology has played in helping young people engage in activism and political discourse. Tying all of this together is Danielle Allen's discourse flow model, which is the one of the guiding concepts of this project and illustrates what I aim to address in book banning discourse through her discussion of how information flows between spaces.

What is Twitter/X?

Twitter is a social media platform created in 2006 that has undergone significant changes in the past decade but is commonly known as a platform for discourse utilizing a limited number of characters. As Richard Rogers outlines in the forward of *Twitter and Society*, early Twitter in its earliest stages was understood as a sort of messaging system in which users could receive short updates from peers. Rogers frames this early version of Twitter as rooted in shortform communications technologies and "was conceived as a part of a long lion of squawk media, dispatch, short messaging, as well as citizen communications services" (x). Twitter as we know it today, while still carrying the perception as a short form text social media platform, has changed significantly in what content users are creating. Early Twitter discourse reflects this as many of the tweets pre-2009 reflect a focus on users providing status updates on their lives. In my own recollection of Twitter at that time, the platform was defined by status updates that were unique to the user and only relevant to those who might know them directly. This is reflective of

how one of Twitter's creator John (Jack) Dorsey described tweets and the rationale behind their naming as a reference to bird calls that can be understood by birds and not humans. As Dorsey states in an interview on the subject, "a lot of messages can be seen as completely useless and meaningless, but it's entirely dependent on the recipient" (Sarno, 2009). Dorsey's quote is illustrative of the Twitter landscape during its early days before content shifted away from user status updates. As Rogers notes, 2009 signified a shift in discourse as users moved away from these types of tweets and toward one that emphasized the sharing of information and news. Rogers frames this shift through a shift in Twitter's tagline, writing that "in November 2009, Twitter's tagline changed. The question Twitter users were asked had previously been 'What are you doing?' It became 'What's happening?'" (2014). The changed tagline is demonstrative of the shift the social media platform sought from users in moving away from status updates from users and toward commentary on current events. Much of Twitter's core concept remains in the short form text design of the platform but what users are tweeting about has changed significantly.

As Twitter experienced more users arriving at the platform, it also became the site of discourse around political figures. This is most evident with U.S president Donald Trump, whose twitter account @realDonaldTrump amassed a large number of followers and allowed him to post inflammatory rhetoric during the 2016 presidential election as well as after he was elected. As Christian Fuchs writes in his book *Digital demagogue: authoritarian capitalism in the age of Trump and Twitter*, the rhetoric of Trump and his personality made Twitter the perfect social media platform for him. Fuchs observes that Twitter's appealed to Trump because of its short form and also feed into his narcissism through its emphasis on accumulating followers and responses from other users (2018). As Fuchs wrote, "Trump uses Twitter's brevity of 140 characters for a politics that does not rely on arguments, but on negative emotions that he tries to

stir among his followers" (176). While Trump is present on a number of other platforms (and

was even banned on Twitter at one point), his tweets have often been cited as a direct examples

of the rhetoric he spread and point toward the reach politicians can have on social media beyond

traditional means of communication.

Like many other social media platforms, Twitter provides user interaction through its

Reply function, allowing users to directly reply to a tweet. This is supported by the Retweet and

Quote Tweet features of the platform which allow users the ability to repost tweets from other

users. What makes Twitter unique and is of particular importance in discussing the presence of

Donald Trump and other political figures on the platform is the Mention function. By using the

@ sign, users can tag others in their tweets, with recipients getting a notification of the mention

on their account. While tagging other users is not unique to Twitter, the ability to search

mentions of a user on the platform provides the ability to see what is being said about particular

users. This is particularly relevant in the case of Trump, whose account was frequently

mentioned by other users (and as later discussed in the youth section of this chapter, facilitated

greater participation online by young people). The combination of the Mention and Reply

functions of Twitter positions it as a platform for connecting directly with political figures whose

presence on the platform grew in the 2010s. A user might directly engage with Trump's Twitter

by mentioning him in their own tweet or replying to one of his. In the McMinn County case

study of this dissertation, mentions and replies were utilized by users as a way of engaging

directly with the school board.

Mentions are one part of communication on Twitter but the use of the Reply feature is

also notable. Users are able to reply to the tweets of other users. The Direct Messaging (DM)

function offered on the platform is another form of directly communicating with other users.

Direct messages allow users the ability to privately message others on the platform rather than engaging in a more public part of the site. It's important to make the distinction between mentions and direct messages because while both serve as a means to directly communicate with other users, the public nature of Mentions eliminates the privacy of DMs and allows other users to see a conversation between the user and mentioned publicly. By using the mention feature, users are able to make discourse between them and the mentioned user public effectively presenting a public DM for others on the platform to observe and comment on. In the case of public figures such as Trump, the distinction between DMing and mentioning an account is important as DMs offer an almost performative way to engage with other accounts to receive likes and other responses from users. A DM is between you and the user you are messaging, meaning that your conversation remains behind closed doors while the mention function enables a form of engagement that invites others to take part or affirm your message.

Social Media Activism

Social media and its connection to activism is a topic scholars have discussed and debated in considering the extent of its impact. While social media has removed many of the physical barriers imposed by more traditional communications, some argue that there are still limitations in what it can accomplish in terms of actual change. Manuel Castells describes social media as a positive technology for social movements because they create lines of communication beyond physical barriers. For many social movements, geography can be a limiting factor in growth as participants may be unable to travel to assemble or even organize. The Occupy movement of 2011 is one such movement Castells and others discuss in describing social media's influence on movements. Using social media, the movement was able to gain traction and organize, culminating in protests facilitated by these networks. As Anastasia Kavada writes

in describing the movement, "social media helps to blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the movement in a manner that fits its inclusive character and its claims that it speaks for the 99% (884)". The concept of boundaries in social media is important in considering its relationship to the physical world in that social movements face different types of boundaries in each domain. Joan Donovan's writings on scale and scope in social movements on social media are of particular interest in understanding these differences between organizing in physical and digital spaces. In discussing the Occupy movement and its growth online, Donovan writes that "the structure of communication channels provided online strengthens the participants' capacities to act independently of one another," asserting that organizing in physical spaces is often limited by factors that require coordination between participants (487). Much of the scholarship around social media and collective action has centered around social movements and while it may be difficult to frame book banning discourse in the same manner as some of the social movements examined by scholars in this chapter, it is nonetheless a useful exercise in understanding how discourse can travel between online and physical spaces.

While it may be easy to proclaim social media as a revolutionary tool for activism, many scholars are quick to temper these claims. As Christian Fuchs writes on the Occupy movement "One important dimension of social movements' knowledge structures is how activists communicate with each other," pointing to the multiple avenues of communication used by Occupy organizers (2021, 211-212). Mention of multiple forms of social media as communication channels is an important distinction to make in discussing social media as it reflects the variety of social media platforms and the continually changing landscape of platforms. This is also important to note in that, as discussed later, different age groups utilize different social media platforms. Despite using the Occupy movement as an example of

organizing via social media, Fuchs cautions against positioning social media as the sole

facilitator for social movements, noting that with the Occupy movement, multiple forms of

communication (text messaging and email, for example) were used by participants to organize.

This tempering of social media as a revolutionary communication tool is important to note

because it can be easy to assume that social media is the primary driver behind many social

movements if one is to look purely at engagement online. One might point to the prevalence of

the Occupy movement on social media at the time as evidence of the reach online platforms can

accomplish but as Fuchs shows, social media can often give the illusion of tangible action.

Manuel Castells (2015) frames social media similarly, writing that "while these movements

usually start on the Internet, they become a movement by occupying the urban space" (250). A

lack of tangible change appears to be a consistent point made by social media scholars in

addressing the technology's connection between social media and movements. Castells' point

reinforces that of Fuchs and emphasizes the importance of moving online action into physical

spaces to accomplish real change. Within the context of book challenges, this can take a number

of different forms. As Pekoll observed in her assessment of book challenges, online challenges

are appearing more and more as libraries face "Twitter storms" and other forms of engagement

via social media in opposition to a particular book. Post-challenge, these online spaces can be

used by both sides to organize both online and at the site of the challenge.

Another critique against social media's impact comes from the idea the digital space it

creates does not translate into tangible change. Discourse, scholars argue, is what social media is

most successful in creating but many of the geographical barriers to social activism can remain.

The Occupy movement resulted in a number of organized protests in multiple spaces but

participation was limited by physical locations. While hundreds of people might retweet a

hashtag or respond to a tweet calling for action, the number of people who gather in person for a movement will frequently be far lower than what social media engagement depicts. This falls in line with Fuchs's assertion that social media maintains many of the barriers to change found in previous communication technologies. As Zeynep Tufekci writes in her book *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest (2017*, the rise of social media has not altered the fact that people will still behave under the same social mechanism of the past, rather that "Digital technologies have, however, drastically altered the conditions under which these mechanisms operate on social movements" (268). Tufekci's understanding of social media is echoed by Paolo Gerbaudo, whose book *Tweets and the Streets* examines several social movements of the 21st century and their relationship with social media. In discussing the Occupy movement, Gerbaudo points out that social media alone cannot drive a movement, observing that "social media only acquired a importance during the phase of sustainment of the movement" (2012, 103). It becomes clear that social media, for as much as it creates opportunities for organizing, is not the sole driver of movements as some might believe. In other words, to understand social media's relationship with social movements and organizing is to recognize that it, as others have noted, simultaneously creates new possibilities for organizing while maintaining many of the characteristics of communication in the physical world.

Social Media as an Assembly Space

An important distinction to make about online spaces is their function as "new spaces" for assembly. Castells (2015) discusses the role social media brings in creating these spaces, arguing that social media creates a space for social movements that does not require traditional frameworks or leadership to sustain (4). Discussion of spatiality in relation to social media usually involves the invocation of Jurgen Habermas and his theory of the public sphere.

According to Habermas, the public sphere is understood as a space open to all discourse and accessible by all citizens (Fuchs 2021, 209). This is not to say that social media can be considered true public spheres, however, as several scholars argue that a number of factors disqualify them from this. As my discussion of Danielle Allen's discourse-flow model below shows, both Allen and Fuchs are critical of applying Habermas's model to social media as it is both too rigid and fails to create the type of public discourse the public sphere model conceptualizes. This is not to say that the new spaces enabled by social media are ineffective though. As Castells writes, social movements are augmented by social media, beginning in the online spaces they create and eventually moving into physical spaces (2015, 250). While the public sphere Habermas envisions remains predominantly in physical spaces, there is merit to considering social media's ability to foster social movements as a physically borderless space for assembly.

Beyond social media, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped local politics through the emergence of virtual meeting spaces. With social distancing becoming a necessity during the pandemic, in-person school board meetings had to shift online, opening up potential participation from non-community members (Gorski, 2020). This creates situations where online interest groups can potentially organize and influence local politics during online meetings. While locals have always had an influence on the direction school board hearings can go, social media's ability to bring together like-minded people for the purpose of advocacy is an important factor in examining book challenges. The impact of the *Maus* ban in McMinn County was far-reaching in both discourse and tangible actions. Sales of Spiegelman's graphic memoir spiked as word spread and many bookstores and libraries across the country responded at their own sites in support of the book (Francis 2022). In McMinn County, discourse among residents through the

Friends of McMinn County organization online resulted in a large volume of attendees at the

school board meeting held following public backlash. Within the context of book bans, social

media offers a means for discourse around bans to travel beyond the sites where titles are

removed. As the *Maus* case demonstrates, word of the ban traveled quickly once people took to

social media to discuss the MCSB's decision.

"The kids are alright": Social Media and Youth Advocacy

In considering the role of social media as a form of democratic participation in society,

one must look at some of these platforms' largest userbase: young people. Social media

scholarship on movements tend to focus on adult users and their experiences organizing,

ignoring the importance these platforms play in young people's participation in social

movements. A study from the Pew Research Center finds that teens are among the leading

population in social media use (2024). In considering the large presence of young people on

social media, how they use it in relation to politics and social issues is an important thing to note

as scholars have observed in understanding how young people choose to involve themselves with

politics. Emily Weinstein's and Carrie James's text on young people's use of social media

includes discussion on the role it plays in political participation. Here, the two lean more toward

Castells in their attitude toward organizing through social media, as they present several cases of

young people engaging in "participatory politics" on social media to enact change. Kahne et al.

define participatory politics as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and

groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern," which is of particular

relevance when considering young people and their relationship to politics and social media

(2016). Discussing young people and the 2008 US presidential election, S. Craig Watkins notes

that young people led the way in the move online for political discourse through their use of

social media (2009, 205). Much of what has been said by other scholars on social media can be applied to teen users but what Weinstein and James argue for in their chapter on the subject is that teens are uniquely expected to take a stance on issues through social media, a pressure unique to their age group. Using interviews with teens about their social media usage, James and Weinstein highlight the expectations teens feel to take a stance on social issues or face pressure from their peers. If one is to understand social media as researchers frame it as enabling increased participation in social movements, then it is essential to synthesize the teen perspective on social media as it shows that they carry a different potential set of expectations in how to behave and engage in initiatives online.

While much of the research on social media in relation to activism is concentrated on adults, an exploration of the pathways the technology opens for organizing is nonetheless useful and many of the theories presented are readily applicable to young people. In his assessment of social media as a tool for organizing, Gerbaudo observes that the technology exemplifies the "participatory culture" now found in modern society in which "people are no longer positioned at the receiving end of processes of communication" (2012, 22). Teens are just as active in this culture as adults are, with some scholars arguing that they are even more engaged than their adult peers. As Weinstein and James write, there is significant tension among teens when it comes to discussing politics and expectations that one must involve themselves in the discourse. Weinstein and James refer to "participatory politics" with teens, echoing Gerbaudo's term, to describe the opportunities social media provides for young people to engage in social activism through social media. Citing Greta Thunberg as the most famous instance of young people using social media for activism, James and Weinstein argue that "digital media lowers barriers to the public sphere, offering interactive and creative entry points for participation," echoing much of what Fuchs and

other social media researchers have said about social media as a tool for activism (119). For young people, participatory politics in online spaces provides them with agency in politics when they are unable to vote or attend in-person events such as rallies. The latter echoes the writings of Fuchs and Gerbaudo on social media allowing for assembly beyond physical boundaries, something particularly important for young people. Whereas adults have the means to travel to rallies or organize in physical spaces, young people often have limited access to transportation and other resources available to adults, making it more difficult to attend in-person events. This can be compounded by their families, who in some cases might not hold the same political views and may prevent them from attending. As scholars make the case for social media as a means for marginalized groups to have a voice, it becomes clear that young people are able to do much of the same thing through participatory politics by claiming their own space in the digital world.

For young people, social media provides potential for increased social activism in many of the same ways outlined by Fuchs (2021) and Castells (2015) but with the added benefit of circumventing many of the limitations imposed on their population specifically. As Anita Harris writes, "political institutions are created by adults to serve an adult agenda and are not structured around young people's interests or designed to engage them" (2009, 302). This puts young people in a position where even if they might be interested in political discourse, they have no seat at the table. The most immediate limitation for young people in the United States is the voting age, which at 18 prevents young people from voicing their concern through voting. This also creates a perception that young people should not be allowed to have an opinion or space to talk about social issues because they are not at an age where they can vote. This creates, Harris argues, a perception that young people are not interested in politics despite associations with liberal politics and activism (2009, 303). With the advent of social media and participatory

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politics, young people are given an avenue for agency in speaking up about social issues. As Weinstein and James write in discussing how social media enables participation, "Informal avenues are especially relevant to youth who are not yet of voting age and whose voices may be sidelined in institutional politics and policymaking" (2022, 119). For young people, this is especially important as it allows them the ability to organize and make tangible change in the physical world, as several cases presented by Weinstein and James show. The two begin their chapter on social media and politics by discussing a campaign rally for Donald Trump in 2020 where TikTok users pranked the campaign organizers by registering for tickets only to not show up, resulting in a poorly attended rally for the then-President (115). Weinstein and James point out that many of the participants were young people, showing the power social media affords teens to organize and take action on social issues. Youth participatory politics online are further exemplified with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which made frequent use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and involved significant youth participation. A Yale study covering adolescent involvement in the movement noted that youth were highly engaged across a wide range of media (2021). As Gayle Kimball writes on ageism, young people are often perceived as unfit to participate in discussing politics due to their age. With the advent of social media, young people are provided with a means to engage and organize in ways that were previously not possible.

The context of a post-Trump world is also important to consider when thinking about the role of social media in young people's use of social media for activism. Joel Penney's (2019) study with young people examined their social media usage online in the years following the 2016 presidential election. As Penney writes, a recurring theme in the focus groups he worked with was the sense from young people that they had a "duty" to engage in political discourse

online after Donald Trump became president. As the teens discussed in their focus groups, many felt a need to combat the misinformation spread by Trump on social media following his election and "a sense of duty to use their voice on social media platforms to fight back against perceived political threats" (325). Beyond social media to counter the spread of misinformation, Penney observes another theme found among the focus groups was that in the process of countering the spread of misinformation from Trump, many young people found themselves fact-checking information online and posting about it (327). In one case, a teen participant describes an experience in which they were posting information and had to delete two stories they had posted online after fact-checking the stories further, illustrating how young people curated information online in a post-Trump world. This fact-checking functions as a means of political engagement for young people to some degree as the act of verifying information, particularly within a political context, shows an awareness of the importance curated information can have among populations. While the young people of Penney's study are not representative of the entire youth population in the United States, their sense of duty to engage in discourse online around politics is important to note particularly in thinking about the role of social media as a means of political involvement for an age group who are not old enough to vote.

In examining the responses from Penney's study, it should also be noted that social media is a tool for communication among young people across the political spectrum. For one teen, Donald Trump's social media post emboldened him to make his own posts online that echoed the President's rhetoric. As Penney writes on the teen's responses, "his comments underscored how some pro-Trump youth may be taking cues from the President in terms of viewing social media as an opportunity to unreservedly spread controversial, far-right, messages and ideas" (327). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the prevalence and perpetuation of

far-right ideals on social media, it is nonetheless important to note the role social media has played across the political spectrum in emboldening users to post about their beliefs. Within the context of young people, the teen in Penney's study felt emboldened to post online because of Trump as it serves as a reminder that the use of social media is not limited to just one side of an argument.

Another aspect of Penney's study that speaks broadly to social media's relationship to politics is the concept of access to politicians social media platforms afford. As noted previously, social media platforms such as Twitter present a sort of direct form of engagement with public figures through the Mention feature. As Penney observes from the teens in his study, many found a sense of fulfillment in engaging with political figures on social media as a form of participatory politics. Penney sees this engagement as a form of political identity development for teens as their actions online help to define how they see the political world and their own place within it. In Penney's study, one teen reflects on trolling Donald Trump's Twitter account and seeing discourse from other users who felt a sense of pride in the possibility of being blocked by the former president's account (329). This comment circles back to one of the core ideas in thinking about young people's place on social media: agency. Engaging with political figures on social media is something young people in Penney's study found important and much of this is derived from the sense of agency in a political discourse that often leaves them out of the conversation. Even if a public figure's social media account doesn't reply back, one can still feel heard in seeing their tweet go out into the digital world where other users are able to see and engage with it. In considering the role of social media as a means of enabling youth agency in politics, one might consider the physical spaces where these political figures might appear and the limitations these can create for young people to engage in discourse. Political rallies or other spaces where

public figures may be in attendance and accessible to the public are typically seen as more adult-oriented spaces where a young person may have a hard time engaging with others or even have the opportunity to speak. The spaces afforded by social media are not completely analogous to these physical spaces but the responses from the teens in Penney's study show the value online spaces can provide to young people in providing political agency and identity formation at an age where they traditionally are kept out of participatory politics.

This is not to say that social media is a perfect tool for young people, however. Issues of access for adults are just as prevalent with young people as the digital divide limits many from access to social media, and by extension participatory politics. Lisa Servon describes the digital divide as a multifaceted issue, characterized by issues of not only access but also familiarity with technologies and content that matches one's identity and interests (2002, 7-8). For young people, the digital divide is of particular significance for those without access to the Internet and social media, effectively taking away a means for political participation. As Servon observes, marginalized groups are often the most at risk in relation to the digital divide due to income disparities and other issues of access (43). While it is easy to frame young people as the most in tune with social media, issues of internet access gate many from the spaces for discourse social media enables.

In addition to issues of access through the digital divide, moral panics have played a role in the past in preventing youth access to social media. In her article on moral panics around contemporary technologies, Alice Marwick describes the moral panic around MySpace in the mid-2000s over fears that child predators could be lurking on the social media platform. Discussing the moral panic that arose around MySpace, Marwick describes pushes to prevent youth from accessing social media, arguing that this was not a remedy to the problem and that

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young people should instead be encouraged to develop skills navigating the technology. While MySpace has since been overtaken by newer social media platforms, Marwick's coverage of the moral panic around social media merits attention as it points to another issue of access for young people. The fears stoked by the moral panic around MySpace call back to anxieties around youth participation in politics, specifically around youth agency. Despite the volume of teen users on social media platforms, Lenhart and Owens in their study on youth presence on social media find that these platforms are often not designed with youth in mind, adding to the idea that social media is an imperfect sphere for them (2021, 49). Young people's relationship with social media is a complicated one. While the technology provides a degree of agency to a population that is traditionally looked down upon by adults, there remain many issues in providing access.

"Be like water:" Danielle Allen's Flow Dynamics Model

In conceptualizing social media, particularly as it relates to this project's examination of interactions between online and physical spaces, Danille Allen's Flow Dynamics Model of discourse. Allen's model is based on a critique of Jurgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere. Habermas (1973) describes the public sphere as a space that is unregulated by institutions and allows for open discourse by citizens. Habermas is used by a number of social media scholars within the context of understanding social networks as public spheres. The public sphere is described as a space that enables the formation of public opinion, is accessible to all citizens, and allows for unrestricted assembly (Fuchs 2021, 209). The key characteristic of the public sphere is the idea that it is free from institutional control, giving citizens a space for unfiltered discourse. Habermas's theory came well before the advent of social media but many scholars have made connections between it and social media by pointing to the idea of social networks as unregulated spaces. For Fuchs however, the concept of social media as a public sphere falls apart

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for two reasons (229). The first is that social media platforms (in Fuchs's example, Twitter) are operated by companies, meaning that there will always be institutions that can exert control over what content is allowed on the platform, effectively controlling who can participate. This factors into the second issue, which Fuchs identifies as social media platforms being used by companies to commodify users for the purposes of advertising.

The model Allen (2015) proposes is built on the concept of "flow," which Allen derives from fluid dynamics models. Like Fuchs, Allen is critical of Habermas's public sphere model, arguing that it is too rigid because it does not account for spaces that might develop discourse and action despite not being truly public (181). What Allen proposes is a model that "Emphasizes 'flows' first, and 'spaces' only secondarily," pointing to the rigidity that Habermas's understanding of public spheres is limited by and proposing a more dynamic model (183). The emphasis on information flowing is important when considering the role of social media as a means for information to travel, as social media is not a linear means of communication and messages are often translated and interpreted by a multitude of users as they travel across the Internet. Recalling earlier discussion on the history of Twitter, the shift in the platform's view that users should use it to comment and talk about current events is particularly relevant in thinking of discourse on the platform as traveling in flows. Allen's description of discourse as traveling in a "flow" rather than in spaces is of particular significance for this project as in the case of *Maus* in McMinn County, information began at the local level before traveling outward and later inward as people outside the community online became aware of the ban.

Allen identifies two types of discourse that make up the flow dynamics model, influential discourse and expressive discourse. Influential discourse is described by Allen as discourse that

inspires change, which Allen says can take place through four different levers (184). One type of change Allen identifies in influential discourse is cultural change, which she says can "Be understood as wide-scale change at the level of individual choices people are making" (184). With social media, this can be understood as using platforms to influence users to change their perspectives or take action. With expressive discourse, the flow that occurs through various kinds of communities, which Allen says can be broken down into formal and informal communities such as familial, ethnic, and social networks (184). Within the context of the *Maus* ban in McMinn County, mention of social networks is important in understanding how information on its ban traveled outside the local community of McMinn County where it spread to numerous informal online communities.

Allen applies this model to case studies pre- and post-Internet, using them to highlight the model's viability in both time periods. This is of particular significance to this project, as I argue that social media has altered the way people engage and talk about book bans, and Allen's discourse-flow model offers a way to understand how information circulates between local and online spaces. Allen utilizes a case study examining the 2008 US presidential election and the "Who is Barack Obama" email that circulated in the years leading up to the election. As Allen argues using the discourse-flow model, the email facilitated discourse around Obama's religious beliefs and spread misinformation that shaped public opinion once mainstream media became aware of the email (200-201). What Allen points to in this case study is the idea that what began discourse can influence tangible change beyond shaping people's opinions on Obama, aligning with her discourse-flow model's understanding of how discourse travels. The use of a case study in the era of the Internet is important as it provides a framework for exploring the flow of information between online and local spaces. As Thérèse Tierney writes, "Social media is not

outside the physical world; on the contrary, it is designed by, and entangled in, physical world social practices" (2013).

As Fuchs and others have suggested, social media presents a communication platform that frameworks such as Habermas's are not entirely compatible. Allen's discourse-flow dynamics model provides a more flexible understanding of public spheres by framing them as flows rather than spaces, affirming that social media requires new frameworks to be understood. Understanding how these flows operate, particularly as information travels between local and online spheres. Allen frames her model as an answer to the need for new theories to analyze new media environments and new media necessitates the application of novel theories.

Outsiders and the Local Public

When discussing the discourse flow within the context of McMinn County and the *Maus* ban, attention should be paid to the concept of insiders and outsiders in communities. As people outside of McMinn learned about the ban, efforts were made to engage with those in McMinn. The relationship between residents and outsiders will be discussed more fully in later chapters of this project, but it is important to consider the broader context of public discourse and what makes someone an "outsider." As Michael Warner writes on the subject, a public can be hard to understand because it is difficult to measure empirically, but one aspect that defines a public is that "A public is a relation among strangers" (2022, 55). Warner frames strangers as those unfamiliar with a speaker in discourse and within the context of the *Maus* ban, those living outside of McMinn County and its school district could be considered strangers. As news of the ban spread outside of McMinn County, more "strangers" learned about what had happened during the January 10th meeting. While the public within McMinn County could be defined as those living within the community, the spread of the meeting minutes and press coverage online

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brought on additional attention that seemingly extended the public beyond the initial bounds of the school district. It should be noted that in Warner's exploration of publics, he observes that a public is one in which discourse is able to continually circulate (82). As later discussion shows, some school board members framed opposition to their decision as coming from outside the community, and that this was an issue to be discussed only by those in the community. Under Warner's understanding of public discourse, the nature of the school board being a public-facing entity means that discourse about the ban traveling outside is a natural part of how public discourse functions.

As discourse travels outward, outsiders might seek to engage in discourse in the community or influence what is happening in the community. Complications can arise when outsiders attempt to engage with communities they are not a part of for a number of reasons, with issues of performativity being one of the most prominent ones in relation to social media. As A. Freya Thimsen explains:

"Performative activism is typified by reposting movement memes and slogans on social media platforms while doing little or nothing to promote those same social justice causes in other ways. Performative activism talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk." (2022)

Performative activism can be understood to be closely tied to social media in its use of digital communications media to discuss social issues. Where performative activism falls apart, as Thimsen observes, is in achieving tangible change. This aligns with earlier discussion of social media and the writings of Fuchs in regard to social media's limitations in achieving meaningful change within the context of activism.

This chapter has addressed scholarship across censorship, social media, and youth voices. It has also identified potential considerations for research which I address in the following

chapters as part of this study. In the next chapter, I outline the study design of this project and

methodologies used for data collection.

This chapter outlines the methods used to answer this study's research objective t**o**

explore the intersection of local and social media discourse during a book ban. To address

this research objective, data collection was conducted through two avenues. The first was

collection of social media discourse, focusing on tweets from Twitter about the *Maus* ban. The

second was collection about local discourse and perceptions through semi-structured interviews

with residents who lived in McMinn County during the ban. Following data collection, analysis

was conducted using discourse analysis on the tweets and reflexive thematic analysis with the

interview data. In this chapter I discuss my positionality to the study, introduce the study design,

discuss data collection and participants, and detail analysis approaches.

Positionality

In conducting qualitative research, it is important to recognize one's positionality and the

influence it might have on their research. J.C. Greene (2007) writes that separating one's

experiences and identity from their research should be acknowledged as part of what has shaped

them as a researcher. With this in mind, I recognize that my identity as a researcher is heavily

influenced by the world around me. My research with censorship is grounded in my own

experiences with the subject as a high school English teacher. Much like the teachers in McMinn

County, I saw two novels in my curriculum, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Luis Rodriguez's

Always Running removed from the curriculum due to parent complaints. As a first-year teacher

at the time, I did not want to upset administration and never questioned their decision. This did

not stop parents and students over the school year asking me why they could not read the copies

of *Beloved* that sat in neat rows on my bookshelves or why they were not allowed to bring their

summer reading in *Always Running* to school. In the years since leaving teaching and as I have

delved further into my research, I have wondered what would have happened if someone had spoken up, be it myself, students, or others in the community, and what impact that might have had.

In reflecting on my own biases and their influence on this study, I recognize the importance of acknowledging my stance on censorship and intellectual freedom. While I approached this project from a neutral perspective, I am aware that my views on intellectual freedom are in line with the ALA's in defending intellectual freedom from challengers. However, as Greene notes, recognizing one's positionality and reflecting on it throughout the research process is essential to minimizing impact on results and I was conscious of this during the project. As I went through the research process, I spent time reflecting on my values and their relationship with the work I do. This was particularly relevant during recruitment of residents.

I was unable to interview school board members during the course of my research, a result that may have come because of my positionality to my research.. I am aware of my positionality to my research topic and the complications that can create in trying to reach out to those who were in favor of the removal of *Maus*. Emily Knox's monograph on book bans contains discussion of an interview she conducted with a school board member after attending a meeting to discuss the removal of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Knox discusses her efforts to try and meet with school board members during this time, with only one member being willing to participate (59). Knox's interviews took place in 2011 and in the time since, the landscape of research in book bans has changed significantly. The subject has become increasingly tense and politically charged, making it difficult for researchers to engage with challengers or officials in favor of removing books. In my case, a quick Google search would make it quite clear where I land on the debate over book bans. As such, I understand that there would be a degree of

skepticism on the side of school board members if I were to reach out and request an interview with them. There are a myriad of concerns I can imagine school board members might have in being approached to be interviewed. For one, at the time of writing, it has been three years since the Maus case took place in McMinn County and school board members may be reluctant to talk about the event again out of hesitation of bringing further attention to it. Additionally and as discussed earlier, there is a degree of skepticism in having an outsider (myself) come in, but also more practical elements such as the fact that school board serve and are funded by constituents within their district, not outsiders. This is all to preface further discussion of the perception of school board members because with the information I have from research and conversations with McMinn County residents, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the ideologies and beliefs that motivated them to vote to remove Maus from school curriculum.

Data Collection Procedure

This study involved data collection through two avenues. The first involved conducting interviews with residents of McMinn County who were involved in discourse around the ban of *Maus* in 2022. The second entails the collection and analysis of tweets surrounding the discourse around the *Maus* ban. These two areas of data collection are separated into studies of what I refer to as "local" and "online" spaces. While Allen notes in her discourse-flow model that discourse travels between communities rather than remaining within specific spaces, I find it necessary to distinguish between the online and local worlds.

I understand the local space to be the physical world in one's town or community. For example, a resident in the town of Champaign, Illinois, is a part of that local space. The people they engage with are those who live in the community with them. In other words, physical

boundaries dictate which local community one is a part of. As such, McMinn County residents are considered the population through which local discourse took place.

A population that merits further discussion in their inclusion for this study were teens. As discussed earlier, teens are typically left out of the conversation during a book ban. Despite being the subject of concerned adults when a book challenge takes place, students have limited opportunities to take part in reconsideration processes, usually only through testimonials at school board meetings or through other avenues of communication in their communities. Including them in the interview process would provide valuable insight into how a ban affects the teen population of the community and how they perceive their own agency as teens. In addition, their familiarity and use of social media gives them a unique perspective in discussing how news of the ban traveled online. As noted previously, social media provides teens with a space to reclaim agency in discussing social issues by giving them a venue to voice their concerns and speak on topics that matter to them. Within the context of book bans, taking to social media offers the potential for them to influence the reconsideration process and take part in a discussion that they are frequently left out of.

Conversely, I understand the online space to be the sphere one occupies when using social media and more broadly the Internet. If one uses Twitter, for example, they are engaging with users across the world rather than those within their immediate physical vicinity. As Allen observes, there is significant fluidity in communities and social media is especially indicative of this as one can travel to multiple communities and subcommunities when online. Local and online spaces intersect, as this research intends to demonstrate, and I believe that to illustrate this it is necessary to separate and explore these spaces in order to better understand their intersections.

The table below outlines the data collection methods used for each type of discourse and their connection to the project's research objective.

Data Collection	Data types	Connection to research objectives	Analysis technique
Local space: Interviews with residents of McMinn County during the removal of *Maus*. Participants will be asked to take part in a 60-minute semi-structured interview where they will be asked to talk about their experiences with Spiegelman's graphic memoir.	Audio recordings transcribed into text.	• **SRO 1**: Identify residents' use of social media in relation to their experiences in the community • **SRO 2**: Explore how residents engaged with the school board and others in their community. • **SRO 3**: Identify the role of youth voices in book ban discourse	Discourse analysis
Online space: Tweets will be gathered using Twitter API and identify discourse that took place around the *Maus* ban in January 2022.	Textual data	• **SRO 1**: Identify how social media discourse might have had impact on things happening in McMinn County. • **SRO 2**: Explore what effect, if any, social media had on the local responses to the ban.	Discourse analysis, thematic analysis

Study Design

Social Media Discourse

Data collection for this study was divided into two parts based on the type of discourse.

Data for social media discourse was collected through Twitter using a set of search parameters to

identify tweets discussing the banning of *Maus*. To collect data on local discourse, semi-

structured interviews were conducted with residents who had lived in McMinn County when the ban took place. This section outlines the rationale for selecting these methods.

Online responses were a large part of the discourse around the *Maus* ban and understanding their relationship to discourse in the local community was a large part of this study. While social media research is typically associated with quantitative methods, scholars argue that many of the concepts studied with qualitative methods are suitable for work with social media. As Janet Salmons (2022) writes:

> "Qualitative methods allow us to see broad trends and themes in social media activities. But qualitative research, with roots in narratives, dialogue, and visual communication, is a natural fit for social media-oriented studies (p. 112)."

Salmons' mention of dialogue is important for this study in its use of discourse analysis to understand social media intervention with book ban. Using discourse from Twitter I sought to analyze tweets from users that involve mention of the *Maus* ban to explore how users online responded to the ban and what role the online space might have played in shaping dialogue in McMinn County. I was also interested in considering what real-world impact social media discourse could have in communities outside of McMinn County. As discussed in the social media portion of the literature review, social media activism is limited by the geographic locations of participants, but that does not stop the potential for action in users' own communities.

Twitter was the chosen social media platform for this study for three reasons. The first reason for its use was the volume of responses available online. The statement the McMinn County School District put out on Twitter received hundreds of responses and quote tweets alone, illustrating the volumeof discourse on the platform. Beyond this, an initial survey of terms

such as "Maus" and "McMinn County" showed a substantial number of users engaging with the topic. The second reason for using Twitter was that the platform's text-based format and search tools provided the most efficient means for collecting data. In addition to its text format, the structure for discourse on Twitter allows for the exploration of specific tweets and responses to them. For example, the aforementioned statement from the @McMinnCountySCH account on Twitter contains a multitude of responses through direct responses and quote tweets commenting on the statement. Lastly, the platform's relatively public nature as a social media platform meant that culling for responses could produce a large volume of data compared to other social media platforms.

Local Discourse

Interviews were chosen as the method to collect local discourse due to the potential for in depth participant responses. As outlined in the *SAGE Handbook of Interview Research*, "In today's 'interview society' we frequently learn about lives, feelings, and experiences by way of interviews (Gubrium et. al, 2012, 1)". My research objectives focus on understanding the relationship between online and local discourses and for research pertaining to local communities, interviews allow exploration of this relationship with individuals in the community. Furthermore, as Anabel Quan-Haase and Luke Sloan (2022,7) note, social media is ingrained into the daily lives of many people so there aren't clear boundaries set in doing research. As such, it's often important to have other forms of data collection like interviews, focus groups, and observations. The guiding principle of this study is the idea that local and online communities are interconnected during a book ban and as Quan-Haase and Sloan (observe, it was essential to use additional forms of data collection when working with social media.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the format for interviews in this study. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility with interviewees and the interview protocol utilizes questions that give interviewees space to elaborate with follow-up questions. For example, discussing the Maus ban can result in recall from the participant that might necessitate follow-up questions for clarification or additional information. Participants had the option to abstain from answering specific questions and were told at the beginning of their interview that they had the option to do so at any time.

Data Collection

Local

Participants were recruited via email and later through snowball sampling at the conclusion of their interviews. I identified the school board and community members who attended the February school board meeting as the most directly tied to local discourse around the *Maus* ban and sought out publicly available contact information to make contact. To recruit participants, I would send out an initial introductory email detailing the study and requesting participation in an interview. Participants were then asked to reply if they were interested or knew anyone else who might be interested in participating. Participants would then be sent a consent form, followed by a short demographics survey to be completed prior to their interview. Participants would then schedule an interview time, which they were informed would last approximately one hour. As part of recruiting, I reached out to several community organizations in McMinn County to inquire if there were any members who might be interested in participating. One group, who I have assigned the pseudonym McMinn Community Advocates, will be mentioned here and in other sections using this name. Consent documents were approved by the IRB and can be found in the Appendix of this dissertation.

Visiting McMinn

I made the decision to visit McMinn County as part of my recruiting to familiarize myself with the area but also in recognition of my positionality to the topic of book bans and its effect on school board members. It is very clear if you search my name online what my position is on book bans and for school board members, particularly in the case of McMinn where the perception of outsiders was likely negative, it felt necessary to try and recruit in person. The McMinn County Schools website lists dates for school board meetings, and I checked my schedule to find a month that would allow me to travel down to a meeting. I drove down to McMinn in April 2024 for their monthly meeting. The school district policy does not include any policy that prohibits outside members of the community from attending the meeting, but I also visited the building where meetings take place beforehand to inquire as to whether or not I would be allowed to attend. I identified myself as a doctoral student doing research on the *Maus* case in McMinn and asked if I would be allowed to sit in on the board meeting happening later that evening. I was told that it would be fine, which is in line with district documents, which only appear to restrict participation for public comment at meetings. This policy, 1.404, requires those wishing to speak to complete a form detailing their reasoning for speaking before the board. The policy also requires speakers to provide their address, potentially to deter outsiders from speaking.

The school board meeting I attended was approximately a half hour in length and was primarily dedicated to the board voting on district-specific issues, such as a policy relating to the hiring of a security guard. The meeting was relatively well-attended, with a few in the crowd sporting McMinn Community Advocates buttons. At the conclusion of the meeting, I spoke with one of the board members about potentially participating in an interview and provided them with

my business card. The board member ultimately did not reach out to me, though I did contact

each board member individually online using the school district's communication form for board

members. Ultimately, the school board meeting did not produce any participants, but did provide

important context around the community and insight into the school board in the present day.

This is particularly useful, as will be discussed later, when considering the long-term effects of

book bans in communities.

Local recruiting, continued

Following my visit to McMinn, I reached out to community organizations identified in press

coverage of the *Maus* ban, inquiring if they knew any members or others in the community who

would be interested in speaking with me about their experiences during the ban. I sought out

organizations based on press coverage of the *Maus* ban that mentioned organizations that were

involved in community discourse. This produced several participants, who I then asked, per

snowball sampling, if they knew anyone else in the community who might be interested in

speaking with me. This allowed me to contact additional people in the community to inquire if

they would be interested in speaking with me. This recruitment yielded 12 participants.

Participants were asked during recruitment to complete a short demographics survey

prior to their interview. The survey asked questions to provide their age, gender, ethnicity, how

long they had lived in McMinn County, their average time spent on social media each week, and

how familiar they felt they were about censorship. Participants were then asked to schedule time

for a one-hour interview over Zoom.

Demographics of Participants

As part of the study, participants were asked to complete an intake survey before their interview. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for transcription and will be referred to by those during analysis. Pseudonyms were generated using a random name generator.

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Years lived in McMinn
Jules	32	Female	White	6
Sutton	46	Female	White	6.5
Oakley	26	Female	White	12
Gray	33	Female	White	3
Kirby	32	Female	White	8
Emerson	42	Female	White	8
Reagan	20	Female	White	20
Maddox	43	Male	White	1
Noel	32	Male	White	32
Camryn	40	Female	White	30+
Elliott	35	Male	White	3+
Parker	65	Female	Black	30

Interview Questions

I developed sets of questions for specific populations in the community: school board members, parents and teachers, students, and community members. While there were questions shared across groups, I did this in order to include questions specific to those groups that may not be relevant for other participants. Ultimately, my participants were made up entirely of

community members and as such, discussion of interview questions will be focused on that group of participants. Interview questions were divided into three sections for community members: Experiences with social media, Understanding of censorship, and Experiences with *Maus*

One aspect I sought to cover during these interviews was what residents' experiences with social media were like following the ban. Social media is often thought to occupy a space independent from the real world, but social media scholars argue that this is not the case. Quan-Haase and Sloan observe that "interactions and engagement on social media are often directly linked to, or even result from, events taking place outside of social media," with the discourse around *Maus* being the latter (2022, 4). A look at the school district's tweet announcing the decision to remove Spiegelman's work from the curriculum shows several replies from users identifying themselves as residents of McMinn County. I asked interviewees to discuss their experiences online following the ban and what their motivations were for going to social media platforms. Locals taking to social media was a natural response to an event like the Maus ban, particularly if they were seeking out others who share their perspective or are looking for support in how to advocate for change. While this study was concentrated on Twitter, I believe it is important to ask locals to identify any and all social media platforms they chose to engage in discourse on.

I also asked participants to reflect on censorship and their understanding of it following the *Maus* ban. I understood that censorship could have a number of interpretations and as part of my semi-structured questions, I also asked participants to consider how they might define the term. Participants were also asked to discuss how they understood school/library policies in relation to censorship and the role parents and teachers play in the process. I was careful to

clarify for participants that there were differences between selection processes for libraries and school curriculum and that it was okay if they had different answers for each space. These questions about censorship allowed for participants to speak to their perceptions of censorship and how events with the *Maus* ban may have influenced their perspective on how books were chosen for school curriculum and in libraries.

For questions about the *Maus* ban, I wanted participants to be able to walk me through their experience with book ban from when they first heard about and onward. I began this section of the interview by asking participants if they were familiar with Maus or had read it before they'd heard about the ban on it. This helped provide context for later questions in which I asked participants to talk about their experiences with the book after it was banned. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me the ability to inquire further if residents mentioned specific events or things outside the range of my initial questions about *Maus*. A major event during the *Maus* ban was the first public school board meeting held since the ban in February 2022, and I included discussion of it as one of my questions as it represented what I viewed as the culmination of local and social media discourse in the community.

Social Media Discourse Data Collection

Social media discourse was taken from Twitter using tweets made by users from the beginning of 2022 to the end of 2022 about the *Maus* ban. Search parameters were created to identify tweets that fell within the social media discourse of that time period and were recorded in a spreadsheet. Search terms focused on terms specifically relating to the ban in McMinn County and also included any mention of the @McMinnCountySCH Twitter account. As

outlined in the following section, several decisions had to be made regarding data collection

following the platform's purchase by Elon Musk and in how to present Twitter data ethically.

An initial hurdle in collecting data on Twitter was the purchase of the platform by Elon

Musk in 2022. The takeover of Twitter by Musk was marked by a number of changes to the

platform that influenced data collection for this project and required some alterations to how it

was approached. The first issue that presented itself early on when discourse around the potential

new ownership for the platform was over users choosing to leave the platform (Silverman 2022).

The rise of Musk in recent years and negative perception around him led a number of users to

proclaim that they would leave the platform if he were to take it over (Vállez et al, 2024). While

users left Twitter en masse in 2024 following the United States presidential election and

numerous changes to the platform in the years following Musk's takeover, the large contingency

of users who left around 2022 presented potential issues in tweets about the *Maus* ban being lost

when users deleted their accounts.

In addition to the mass exodus of Twitter users following Musk's purchase of the

platform, data collection was also affected by changes to the API policy around Twitter data.

Under previous Twitter policies, API data collection of tweets was free to users provided they

completed a form requesting access to the API. With Musk's changes to the platform, users are

now required to pay for API access under a tiered access system (Willingham 2023). Under this

new system, users were limited in the number of tweets they could access depending on what tier

account they possessed. With the volume of tweets I anticipated working, the API access I

required was outside the funding and resources I had access to.

To address this limitation in access and potential for missing tweets, I developed a

backup of tweets using screen recording software to scroll through tweets that fell under the

search parameters I set. This backup was made in November 2022 and consisted of three recordings based on the search criteria I decided upon. Over the spring of 2024, I viewed these recordings and transcribed them on a spreadsheet. I made note of the tweet's author, date, and contents of their tweet in this spreadsheet. This information allowed for the ability to view tweets in chronological order and identify trends in discourse in relation to events relating to the *Maus* ban, such as the February 12th school board meeting where residents gather for the first time since news of the ban was made public.

Twitter data was collected by selecting specific terms and filtering through tweets made during key dates in the timeline of *Maus*'s ban in McMinn County. This falls under the extant typology of online qualities, which Salmons defines as data collection in which the researcher has no direct content with participants and "involves downloading, scraping, or reviewing posts of text, images, media, or other content" (2022, 116) I began by looking at the earliest point in time when news of the book's ban spread to the national level. Spiegelman's book was removed from the district curriculum in early January 2022 but national press coverage didn't begin until later in the month, meaning that Twitter discourse around the ban didn't begin until the latter event took place (Mangan, 2022). As such, I examined tweets made from January 2022 to roughly April 2022 to ensure that discourse (particularly in the case of tweets specifically mentioning Maus or Spiegelman) is within the context of the McMinn County case. Another date of significance in the case is January 26th, 2022, as this is when minutes from the school board meeting began to circulate among the press and public.

I began my search for relevant tweets by searching with terms that I felt would be most commonly used in reference to the ban. As Zappavigna writes, "Internet data can be highly 'noisy' in the sense that methods for automating text collection will retrieve results that were not

intended by the [researcher]" (2012, 22). While tweets were not collected through an automated program, it was still important to set search parameters to ensure that only relevant tweets were collected. Neither Spiegelman nor the school board possess Twitter accounts (authors and public organizations will sometimes have an account to engage with the public), meaning that I could not find tweets directed specifically toward either party, necessitating the use of terms rather than tweets directed at specific accounts. More broadly, however, @McMinnCountySch is a Twitter account for the district dedicated to correspondence with parents and others in the county and will be used as one of the search terms. In the past year, the account has provided updates on events happening within the district such as school closures or programming happening in the community. While the account is not directly run by the school board, many Twitter users directed their tweets toward the account as a way of most directly addressing the board, either by replying to tweets from the account or utilizing the @ function on Twitter to direct their tweets at the account.

Tweets were recorded in a spreadsheet with separate workbooks for each set of search criteria before being combined together. As such, three sets of tweets were created from those collected:

- "Tweets mentioning @McMinnCountySCH"
- "Tweets containing 'Maus' and 'ban'"
- "Tweets containing 'Maus' and 'McMinn'

As tweets were collected, the author, date the tweet was written, and tweet were recorded in the spreadsheet. The inclusion of the author and date was done in order to account for things such as tweets made by the same author and tweets made in reference to events happening over the course of the ban. For example, Holocaust Remembrance Day occurs on January 27th every

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year, and this was a point made by many of the tweets on that day. One feature from Twitter that should be noted in discussing data collection on the platform is the ability for users to share websites and news articles on the platform as tweets. In this instance, some users shared news publications about the *Maus* ban from their Twitter accounts. While these do technically qualify as desirable tweets for the project because they fall within the search criteria, I chose to exclude them from analysis because their written content did not provide any commentary from the user regarding the topic. At the conclusion of data collection, tweets from the three sets were merged together for analysis.

Tweets were analyzed using critical discourse analysis, which Stephanie Taylor defines broadly as a process in which researchers examine language in use to identify patterns (2001, 6). This methodology is particularly effective within the context of collecting tweets as it allows for an examination of what users were saying about a topic over a period of time. As Siegried Jager writes, "discourse analysis encompasses the respective spectrum of what can be said in its qualitative range and its accumulation and/or all utterances which in a certain society at a certain time are said or can be said" (2001, 36). Using discourse analysis, tweets were analyzed to identify common phrases and words. As James Paul Gee writes, performing discourse analysis is an iterative and reflective process for the researcher in which one can begin by identifying words or phrases in the data and consider the situated meanings of them (1999, 125). For this data set, the search criteria discussed earlier was used to look at tweets and identify trends in surrounding words and phrases.

Ethical Considerations for Tweets

One must also be aware of the ethical considerations when conducting data collection using social media. There is considerable discourse around using tweets for research and the

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sense that social media research should be conducted under the same ethical considerations as human subjects research. This means having an understanding that social media research should entail a degree of protecting users' privacy when conducting research. One of the primary recommendations from research on the ethics of using Twitter data is to be aware of context when using tweets for research, particularly with respect to topics considered sensitive (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018). As discussed in earlier sections, talking about book bans can be a sensitive subject for some as it reveals to others where one stands on what has become a tense issue. While the tweets collected come from accounts that have been allowed to be public, it is important to ensure that measures are taken to protect the identity of users. As Williams et. al write, "A principal ethical consideration in most learned society guidelines for social research is to ensure the maximum benefit from findings while minimising the risk of actual or potential harm during data collection, analysis and publication" (2017, 1160). As such, ethical fabrication was used, defined by Annette Markham as a method for protecting information when using data from the internet, to alter tweets so that one cannot identify the original tweet's author (2012, 335).

In presenting the tweets collected as example tweets, I examined the language used by Twitter users to describe their responses to the *Maus* ban. Given the search criteria used for collecting tweets, there were a number of expected commonalities shared among tweets, such as "Maus" and "ban" appearing in many of the tweets. As such, tweets I created for the findings section made use of these along with other phrases and terms used repeatedly by users. It was important in designing example tweets to ensure that users were not identifiable through reverse searches of the tweets and so in many cases I would take a word from one user's tweet and use phrasing from another tweet with similar sentiments. This allowed for the creation of tweets that

could capture the sentiments of social media discourse without revealing the specific authors of tweets. For example, sample Tweets found in the following chapter will contain some variation of "@McMinnCountySCH", "Maus," "ban," or McMinn" (the search criteria for tweets) along with phrases and words used by actual tweets to capture the sentiment of users. While there may be merit to presenting direct tweets for this study, the ethical considerations around social media as human subjects research necessitate the creation of fabricated tweets in order to protect the identity of Twitter users.

Coding

Interviews were coded using Dedoose and a combination of inductive and deductive coding. This hybrid approach allowed for the use of an initial set of codes based on the project's research objective and theoretical framework while allowing for flexibility in developing additional codes as coding progressed (Proudfoot 2023). A code book was developed over the course of analysis, first using the theoretical framework and research objectives as the basis for codes. This was followed by an initial round of coding in which notes were made of themes or potential codes that could be used in a second round of coding. This allowed for flexibility in the coding process and was useful in identifying themes beyond the scope of the initial codebook. The initial set of codes focused on local and social media discourse, understanding of censorship, and the perceptions of different topics, such as the school board. Through inductive coding, several codes emerged in the process, notably codes relating to youth voices and an expansion of codes dealing with participant perceptions. The latter was particularly important because the addition of negative and positive codes for perception codes allowed for greater differentiation when coding. A resident might discuss outsiders in their interview, for example, in ways that were positive in some instances but negative in others. At the conclusion of coding, my code

book had grown to include codes that more accurately accounted for themes that emerged in interviews while aligning with initial codes developed using deductive coding.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used as the primary means of analysis for interviews with residents. Braun and Clark define reflexive thematic analysis as an approach to thematic analysis that is critically reflective of the processes in conducting research and analysis (2022, 5). Central to using reflexive thematic analysis is the idea of flexibility and a framework through which one can conduct analysis of qualitative data. This fit well with my research because of the need for flexibility in understanding resident responses as well as the value of adjusting things such as code and emerging themes as analysis progressed. Furthermore, thematic analysis's emphasis on researcher reflection was valuable throughout the process of analysis. While I came into the project with a research objective and secondary objectives, new ideas and emerging themes that developed during data collection necessitated an analysis technique that was flexible enough to account for changes in understanding of the project and broader research approaches.

<u>Conclusion</u>

As this section has outlined, this project consisted of two forms of data collection in which tweets about the *Maus* ban on Twitter were gathered and interviews with residents in McMinn County were conducted. This data collection methodology was chosen to best respond to the project's research objective. In the following chapter, the results of this data collection will be discussed.

CHAPTER 4: Analysis

This chapter covers thematic analysis of tweets collected and interviews conducted with residents of McMinn County. The Localized Social Media Intervention model is presented here, with the *Maus* ban McMinn County used to demonstrate how discourse travels using the model. As discussed in the previous chapter, tweets were created using ethical fabrication to capture the general sentiments of Twitter users while protecting their identities. In addition, organizations mentioned by residents have been assigned pseudonyms as well to protect the anonymity of members.

Thematic Analysis of Tweets and Interviews

The following section provides analysis of tweets collected and interviews with residents living in McMinn County when the *Maus* ban took place. This thematic analysis section begins with an overview of themes found in tweets and then interviews with residents. Discussion of how discourse in these spaces intersected is addressed throughout.

Social Media Discourse: Driven by good intentions

Three themes emerged across the 2,000 tweets collected addressing the *Maus* ban:

- The School Board as a Reflection of Community

- Perceptions of Communities through Biased Lenses

- Outsider Action: Promoting Reading and Access

Each of these themes will be discussed throughout this chapter but across many of the tweets was opposition to the ban. In many tweets users expressed anger at the school board for their decision to remove Spiegelman's graphic memoir from school curriculum, specifically pointing out the importance of Holocaust education in schools. Tweets mentioning the Holocaust frequently brought up its significance in history and the whitewashing that could take place if

students weren't allowed to read about it. "*Sanitizing the Holocaust is not okay*" is an example of this, with other users emphasizing the importance of teaching history to students to ensure that society does not repeat it. Across many of the tweets analyzed were sarcastic responses to the board that jokingly downplayed the impact of the Holocaust while mockingly praising the school board's decision.

Sarcastic praise of the school board, such as "*@McMinnCountySCH great job making your students smarter!*", segues into critiques of the school board, which made up a significant part of social media discourse in the tweets collected. As discussed earlier, tweets were filtered using search criteria that included any mention of the @McMinnCountySCH Twitter account. These tweets used Twitter's @ feature, which allows users to directly refer to another account on the platform using their online username, and reflected tweets either made in reply to tweets from the @McMinnCountySCH Twitter account (such as their statement in response to backlash over the ban) or tweets that were directed toward the school board account using Twitter's @ feature. It should also be noted that the @ feature on Twitter notifies the tagged user that they have been mentioned, a feature that empowered Twitter users to engage with the @McMinnCountySCH account. As a result, these tweets are understood to be directed specifically at the school district rather than a user's general thoughts tweeted out on the platform. While the @McMinnCountySCH twitter account is representative of the broader school district and not just the school board, for the purposes of this dissertation, I understand tweets made using @McMinnCountySCH to be in reference to the school board given the context of when these tweets were made and their content. As such, references to tweets critical of the school board are in reference to those that included the @McMinnCountySCH twitter account or replies to tweets from them. In addition, criticism aimed at the McMinn County

Schools Twitter account is interpreted as being directed toward the board rather than the general school district unless specifically mentioned in the tweet. Tweets that specifically use the @McMinnCountySCH account can be interpreted as the real world equivalent of a person speaking at a school board meeting to address board members. This feature is significant to the *Maus* ban as it is representative of the many voices that emerged online that were critical of the school board and can be understood to be an outsiders' way of engaging with the board despite the geographical barriers to address them. A user in California, for example, might not be able to drive to a school board meeting in McMinn County to address the board, but the use of the @ feature on Twitter gives them a degree of proximity to the board by allowing them to "speak" to the board in an online space.

Criticism of the school board on Twitter centered around a few specific areas of anger from users online. Generally, users spoke to their disappointment that the school board removed what they saw as an important piece of history for students to learn, with many also pointing to the school board members' ideologies along with those in the community as reasons for the ban. The first of these was general disbelief that the school board would be willing to ban a piece of Holocaust literature. The publication of the January meeting minutes meant that the public were able to see what was discussed during the emergency board meeting and reception toward the board's reasoning for removing Maus was negative, with many users critiquing the board's discomfort with having students read the graphic memoir: "*Unbelievable that @McMinnCountySCH is afraid of a few naked mice*." In some tweets, users drew comparisons to the content of the Bible, claiming hypocrisy from the board that they were willing to ban *Maus* for elements they deemed inappropriate while ignoring similar content in the Bible. This claim connects to later discussion of perceptions of McMinn County and the South but also show

people online maintaining the perception that McMinn County is an entirely conservative community, such as tweets like "*The south censoring Maus isn't surprising when you see who they're voting for*," illustrating this . As discussed earlier, the importance of the Holocaust as a historical event to be taught to students was something many users discussed in their tweets directed at the school board. In many tweets, users mentioned the death toll in the Holocaust or referenced their connection to the event through relatives, friends, or their own experiences, and the importance of teaching the Holocaust. This was a sentiment shared by many of the McMinn County residents I spoke to and highlights one of the aspects of the ban that both people in and outside of the community agreed on. In his remarks to the school board during the February 10th meeting, James Cockrum spoke to the importance of Holocaust education and the negative effects removing *Maus* would have on students in the community, echoing sentiments from those online (McMinn County Schools 2025).

It should also be noted that the language used in Tweets about the ban was predominantly negative in attitudes toward the school board. One word that appeared frequently among tweets was "shame," often directed specifically at school board members. This was echoed by tweets that said board members should feel "embarrassed." Tweets such as these assert that the school board should know better than to ban books and that board members should feel regret that they voted to allow it to happen. These tweets were also in line with those that mentioned the impact the ban would have on students in the community. As one tweet author said, "*You're making sure your students will remain stupid and uneducated.*" While this tweet ties to later discussion of generalizations of the McMinn County community, it also points to concern among those in the social media discourse that students would be significantly impacted by being denied the opportunity to learn about important historical events. These tweets are in line with those

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asserting that school board members should feel embarrassed or ashamed by their decision as they present a negative outcome as a result of the ban and attribute it to the school board's actions. These types of tweets frequently used the @ function on Twitter to address the school board directly, emphasizing that attribution.

In examining criticism of the school board's decision, it should be noted that several users questioned what text would replace *Maus* in the eighth grade curriculum following its removal. The transcript from the emergency meeting in January does not discuss what book was used in place of *Maus* and in my conversations with McMinn County residents I was unable to identify a replacement text. Tweets questioning the board on an alternative text to *Maus* are important because they reinforce the accountability people both locally and online wanted to hold the board to following their decision. Cockrum's remarks at the February 10th school board meeting mention his dissatisfaction with the Board's alternative for *Maus*, reflecting the sense among the Board's critics that it was not just the decision to remove Spiegelman's graphic memoir that was problematic, it was their unwillingness to provide an alternative text that allowed students the ability to learn about the Holocaust. It is beyond the scope of this project to fully discuss the potential alternative texts that could have replaced *Maus* in the curriculum but criticism online and locally points to the Board wanting a text that avoids the imagery and content found in Maus. Among a number of tweets discussing the ban were sarcastic remarks about the school board discussing their avoidance of such content. As later discussion with residents also shows, this along with the belief among community members in McMinn that the Board had violated district policy with their decision proved to be inciting factors for local organizing.

The School Board as Reflection of Community"

In discussing the online response to the removal of *Maus*, tweets directed toward the school board and broader McMinn County Community once news of the ban traveled online should be examined. While a significant number of tweets were critical of the board based on their decision to remove Spiegelman's graphic memoir, a number were also critical of the school board members themselves, with many users tweeting out that the school board members were "*nazis*" or "*uneducated*" because of their decision. In some cases, these tweets addressed not only the school board but also the community of McMinn County and in other instances the South in the United States at large. As will be discussed later, these tweets in particular proved to be a large motivation behind residents rallying to speak out against the ban.

In addition to critiques that the Board were attempting to whitewash the Holocaust by removing *Maus* were claims that school board members were antisemitic because of their decision. Tweets such as "*@McMinnCountySCH you're a bunch of uneducated nazis* 😀" are emblematic of the wave of criticism online directed toward board members. Tweets such as the one above assert that because they chose to remove *Maus* from the district's eighth-grade curriculum, the school board members were therefore antisemitic and beyond that, nazis. In the case of tweets such as these, the content of the message directed at the board members is different from others critiquing their decision. In previous tweets I have discussed, the sentiment from Twitter users was that the school board members were wrong in taking *Maus* out of the school curriculum, and to some extent, the same could be said for tweets calling the board members nazis. While many of these tweets are slightly different than those tweets discussed earlier that were critical of the board, the sentiment remains that the tweet authors were opposed to the school board's decision. The distinction lies in how users go about critiquing the board in response to the removal. Tweets calling the board nazis or antisemitic differ in that they are

criticisms of the board members themselves rather than of the decision they made, suggesting that there were antisemitic beliefs held by the school members that were the primary motivation for removing the books rather than discomfort with the book's content.

In my conversations with residents, the predominant sense among them was that the school board themselves may not have held antisemitic beliefs, but their ideologies were such that they were uncomfortable allowing *Maus* to be taught in their district's eighth-grade curriculum. As Elliott stated in his interview:

> "*It felt like it was less even an issue of any sort of blatant racism or even necessarily school board members that were like trying to obscure the history of the Holocaust, and it was more that a parent (or) particular school board member with pretty significant right wing political perspectives just bypassed school policy and the school board went along with it without going through the proper channels to actually review the book*."

As earlier discussion of the school board minutes during their emergency meeting in January show, the most vocal school board members were concerned with the language and imagery found in *Maus*, with no school board member outwardly saying that they had an issue with it because it was a piece of Holocaust literature. Discussing the perception of the school board as nazis by outsiders is important because of how this discourse influenced board members and community members once the story traveled outside McMinn County.

For board members, to be on the receiving end of vitriol from outsiders raises the potential for a number of complications in efforts to get *Maus* reinstated in the school curriculum. While I do not have direct responses from school board members, it would be reasonable to assume that they did not appreciate seeing tweets portraying them as nazis or

antisemitic. A tweet from the @McMinnCountySCH account from January 24, 2022, was posted for the District's School Board Appreciation Week and replies to it in the wake of the *Maus* ban are indicative of the reception board members had from people on social media. Many replies to this tweet were reflective of the negative discourse discussed previously, comparing the board members to nazis or proclaiming that the people pictured were "*bigots*." It is unknown if board members were aware of what was being said about them online, but the volume of negative discourse online directed toward them specifically may have played a role in their decision to reaffirm on their decision and maintain the ban in subsequent discussion. In conversations with McMinn County residents, this was a thought shared by locals who felt that social media discourse calling school board members names did little to improve the situation in McMinn County. Describing the negative social media discourse and her response to it, Sutton said:

> *"I have all of my progressive friends and family outside of McMinn and outside of Tennessee talking about how stupid, how ignorant the people of McMinn are. And like, yeah, I get it, especially from their perspective. But also like, I have to exist and live within this community. And if anything is ever going to get better, it's not going to get better if I call people stupid. It's not going to get better if I call people names."*

It was this discourse that many residents found to be unhelpful in shifting school board members' opinions on *Maus* as they believed it obscured efforts to show the value of the graphic memoir. Regardless of what board members' ideologies actually were, ad hominem attacks on them exacerbated negative perceptions of outsiders and limited efforts by residents to get *Maus* reinstated in the school curriculum.

Social Media Discourse: Stereotyping and Outsider Judgments

In addition to comments directed toward the school board members claiming that their decision reflected antisemitic and bigoted beliefs, social media discourse contained tweets critical of McMinn County and the broader American South. For example, one tweet that "*The Maus ban shows just how uneducated and stupid the South is*" reflects the attitude from several users on Twitter in which criticism of the school board is extended onto the broader community. For these users, the school board's decision was a reflection of the community's values, placing responsibility on the community for the removal of *Maus*. Users making judgments of McMinn County as a result of the school board's decision place the blame on residents for allowing the school board to act as they did with the ban on *Maus*. This takes discourse around the school board members discussed earlier and projects those same judgments onto the broader community, asserting that the school board were antisemitic or bigoted for banning *Maus*, and that was a reflection of the community that they were a part of. As comments from residents living in McMinn County show, however, this was not the case. Tweets like this proved to be significant in moving those in McMinn opposed to the ban to organize in an effort to change the broader narrative online about their community. Tweets critical of the school board but also the community they represented in McMinn are important to understanding the effect social media discourse had on local organizing during the ban, but these were not the only types of tweets cited by residents as problematic in organizing to encourage the school board to reverse their decision.

Perceptions of Communities through Biased Lenses

Tweets made about McMinn County were frequently critical of the school board and community they were a part of. When people tweeted about McMinn County, it was often done in broad

terms that framed the entire community of McMinn County as ideologically monolithic. Tweets such as "*With a state as conservative as Tennessee, it's no surprise they banned Maus*" are indicative of discourse that portrayed McMinn County as solely made up of conservative residents. Twitter users in some cases saw the *Maus* ban as in line with their perception of the area and narratives around the political ideologies of those living in that region. This speaks to narratives beyond the *Maus* ban that informed perceptions of users online, such as the idea that communities in the Southern part of the United States all hold conservative beliefs. The perception of Southern communities as ideologically monolithic is not an issue exclusive to the *Maus* ban, but speaks to narratives around communities in the South that have persisted among outsiders and inform many of the tweets critical of the McMinn County community. Much like discussion of tweets that characterized McMinn County residents as bigoted because of the school board's decision, tweets informed by narratives of the South are rooted in opposition to the *Maus* ban but attribute fault to the broader community rather than members of the school board.

Negative discourse around the McMinn County community is an attempt to make sense of not just the banning of *Maus*, but book bans at large. While book ban discourse has been ongoing in library spaces for some years, the public's understanding of it is ongoing and in many cases informed by their experiences and perceptions of the areas where book bans are taking place. In the case of the *Maus* ban, which became a high-profile case through press coverage and social media discourse, users tweeting about the ban operate off the knowledge they have of the ban and the community it took place in. In the case of the latter, and as discussed by many residents I spoke to, this led many to tweet about the ban and attribute it to perceived ideologies of the South. As my analysis shows, this had the effect of motivating many residents in McMinn

County to organize in response in an effort to shift perceptions of their community by those online. To some extent, tweets dismissive of the McMinn County community or the South in general are less about the banning of *Maus* and more an indictment of the region. In these cases, tweet authors are expressing concern over the ban that took place, but distancing themselves from the communities where it happened. In tweet authors' eyes, it may be easier to understand book bans as taking place outside of their own communities and instead in those where ideologies are perceived to be opposite their own.

Dissenting voices

Among the tweets collected on the *Maus* ban discourse, there were a few dissenting voices who weren't opposed to the ban. In many of these tweets, users compared the ban with calls to remove podcaster Joe Rogan from streaming platforms in 2022. At the time of the Maus ban, discourse around Joe Rogan, whose comments on his podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience* were deemed problematic, had resulted in calls to have his podcast taken down. Tweets mentioning Joe Rogan compared calls for his removal and the *Maus* ban, criticizing those opposed to the ban by claiming that it was hypocritical to oppose book bans while being in favor of cancel culture. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully discuss censorship as it relates to cancel culture, the comparison between the *Maus* ban and efforts to deplatform Joe Rogan is noteworthy in highlighting some of the discourse around critics of the *Maus* ban.

Outsider Action: Promoting Reading and Access

Amongst social media discourse was also tangible action on the part of users through efforts to enact change in McMinn County or in their own communities. An online petition emerged to push McMinn County school board members to reverse their decision on *Maus*, with

211 tweets referring to the petition. The petition outlines the importance of Holocaust education in schools and pushes back on the ban and other efforts to remove diversity-related teaching in schools, as shown in this text from the petition:

> *"As parents, grandparents, students, and advocates for teaching tolerance and peace we urge the McMinn County Board of Education to lift the ban on Maus and discourage school boards nationwide from future efforts to hide important, age-appropriate educational materials from our children" (ParentsTogether).*

As the closing paragraph shows, signers were not limited to McMinn County residents. The petition amassed over 85,000 signatures (Aldrich 2022) and illustrates how people outside of McMinn County attempted to influence the school board by demonstrating the volume of people upset by their decision.

Beyond the petition were efforts to engage with *Maus* as a result of the ban. This occurred most notably in two ways through people outside McMinn County reading the book themselves and attempts to provide copies of the graphic memoir to residents in McMinn County. "*@McMinnCountySCH Thanks for banning Maus, I just went out and bought a copy*," one user tweeted in response to the school board's statement, pointing toward the attention the graphic memoir received upon news of its ban going viral. This was supported by sales numbers for *Maus*, with booksellers reporting a sharp increase in sales following the ban (Andrew 2022). As one user described it, "*Maus is now a bestseller so you failed at banning it*." For those outside of McMinn, news of *Maus* being banned led to an increased interest in reading the book, leading many to seek it out at bookstores. This was supported by booksellers stocking more copies, which is in line with initiatives that booksellers outside of McMinn County started in response to

the ban. In several tweets, users referenced local book shops in their area stocking copies of *Maus* in response to the ban or fundraising to donate copies to people living in McMinn County. "*Glad to see a copy of Maus in my bookstore after the ban*" said one user, referencing the increased interest from the general public upon hearing from the ban and booksellers' providing copies to meet the demand.

Besides petitioning and reading the book, users on Twitter also discussed their willingness to provide copies of Spiegelman's graphic memoir to residents of McMinn County. "*If anyone is living in McMinn County and wants a copy of the book they banned there, send me a DM and I'll mail you a copy*" wrote one user, offering free copies of the book to residents in response to the ban. For users such as the one above, providing copies of *Maus* to McMinn County residents serves as a type of defiance toward the school board by giving access to a banned title to residents. Other tweets are indicative of this, with some users suggesting that one way to counteract the ban would be to provide a large quantity of books to residents. The means through which copies were provided to residents varied between tweets, with some users telling residents to reach out to them directly for a copy, while others spoke of ordering copies through their local bookstore to be donated to the community. However, sending copies of *Maus* to residents proved to be a point of contention for McMinn County residents concerned with accomplishing tangible change within the community. Sending copies of *Maus* to McMinn County was a large part of the disconnect between people online and those in McMinn County because, while done with the intention of pushing back against the school board's decision, this response did not consider some of the larger context of the case. Social media discourse can influence local discourse and in the case of the *Maus* ban, efforts to send copies of *Maus* to McMinn County played influenced local organizing against the ban.

Looking at efforts from those online in support of McMinn County residents, it is clear that some Twitter users sought to support efforts to reinstate Maus beyond tweeting about the ban or at the school board. This took the form of petitions, offers to send books to the community, and fundraisers for books, but as interviews with residents later demonstrate, there was a degree of disconnect between what residents believed they needed and their needs as perceived by those on social media.

Local and Social Media Discourse at Odds

In this section, interviews with residents in McMinn County will be discussed. As the previous section on social media discourse showed, outsiders engaged with discourse around the Maus ban in a number of ways and as the following section shows, several themes emerged residents in relation to this:

- How Outsider Perceptions Inform Resident Responses
- Community Need vs. Perceived Need
- Youth Voices and Barriers to Entering Book Ban Discourse

The relationship between McMinn County and social media users is most apparent in examining the role social media played in mobilizing McMinn residents to take action against the ban. A number of tweets during the ban were critical of McMinn County and more broadly the South. Tweets such as "*The Maus ban shows just how uneducated and stupid the South is*" reflect the negative perception of the broader McMinn community from outsiders. While these tweets about McMinn County and the South are in line with others in their opposition to the *Maus* ban, their critique of the ban places responsibility on the culture of the South and those living in historically conservative regions. This negative discourse was an inciting moment for

residents to organize. A significant number of users attributed their response to the *Maus* ban to social media discourse. As one McMinn resident, Elliott, described it:

> *"I think there was a lot of well-meaning folks that jumped on this band- this totally unnuanced bandwagon of 'look at those podunk racist McMinn County school board members.' And I think one of like – very clear example of this that just pissed me off so much- I saw like a friend of mine had posted something, sharing this link that originated in- somewhere in California- of someone starting this petition where they had like, you know, folks- they wanted folks all across the country sending emails to our school board members, and basically like, you know, the content of the email was basically like, you know 'blah blah blah blah, you- you know- we're not going to let white supremacy- blah blah blah blah,' all this stuff. And it was like this- this campaign started by some group in California- who had never reached out to anybody in McMinn County, starting this petition and it- basically the call was like "Let's flood the email inboxes of these white supremacist school board members"- and a friend of mine shared this and I was just- I just had to respond and was like, 'You know, I think the intent is good, I appreciate like, you know, folks wanting to do something to help this, but that is not helping anything.' Because number one, it's for- just having that blanket message doesn't get in any way to the nuance of the situation. You're not actually helping- like it's not actually helping us the move school board member for them to get a- what it allows our school board members to do- the ones that- the school board members that are problematic- what it allows them to do is say 'Oh well we're just getting these emails and none of them are from our local community, it's just these folks on the West Coast that are trying to tell us what to do.' When in reality we had a lot of folks here locally that were pissed off about it and wanted to see some accountability, but when you have this flood of emails coming from, you know, folks in Burbank California, it obscures and it hides the organizing that our local community is actually trying to do."*

Here, Elliott discusses their perception of social media discourse when the *Maus* ban happened. An important thing to note in this excerpt is the concept of, as Elliott describes, "well-meaning folks," or those from outside the community who shared the sentiment of residents opposed to the *Maus* ban. As other residents discuss during their interviews, there was a degree of approval in seeing those from outside the community invested in the *Maus* ban tempered by social media discourse that either characterized the board members' decision as a community-endorsed choice or offered support that ignored actual community need. Where the disconnect occurs, and as is discussed later, concern from people outside McMinn manifested in ways that residents viewed as unproductive for persuading the school board to change their decision.

Actions by outsiders, such as sending copies of *Maus* to McMinn County and sending dismissive messages to school board members, were driven by opposition to the ban but failed to align with local residents' approaches. The "obscuring" that Elliot speaks of is important to understanding the relationship between the local community and outsiders because it points to the presence of discourse and actions that inhibited efforts to push back against the *Maus* ban. The notion of flooding school board members' email inboxes with emails critical of their decision, for example, serves as an act meant to sway or influence, but is at odds with what residents fighting against the ban thought would actually be productive. Elliott's perception of outsiders contacting school board members merits further examination as it shows he is not opposed to outsiders engaging with the school board. Rather, his critique comes from the lack of nuance in what outsiders were saying to school board members. Elliott gives an example of what these emails to board members contained, highlighting that outsiders described the school board as "white supremacist school board members," echoing Twitter discourse that used similar language to describe them. As discussed previously, it is difficult to ascertain the specific ideologies or beliefs held by school board members but Elliott's commentary suggests, the language used by people online with school board members seemingly did little to shift their opinions on the removal of *Maus*. The issue created by these emails from outsiders is the shifting of attention away from the banning of *Maus* to the board members. Regardless of what beliefs school board members actually held that may have motivated them to ban *Maus*, a flood of emails from outside the community accusing the board of being white supremacists may have the opposite effect on school board members, causing them to recommit to their decision. This case demonstrates that social media discourse has the ability to influence local discourse. Where

issues occur and as residents point out, ignoring local contexts can prevent effective communication from taking place.

Being Rural: How Outsider Perceptions Inform Resident Responses

Elliott's commentary on outside views of McMinn points toward longstanding views of the South in the United States. Returning to the Twitter discourse discussed above, Elliott's description of people in California talking about McMinn County and their attempts to engage with the school board are representative of a disconnect in discourse that ignores the local context of the community being discussed. Rather than research McMinn County and identify potential ways to support local organizing, outsiders instead developed their own approach to advocacy that ignored the local context and developed rhetoric steeped in stereotypes of the American South. As Hamilton observes in her dissertation on media representations of the American South and stereotyping, popular media has played a large part in shaping the view of the South for others in the United States and around the world (Hamilton). Oakley, reflecting on the narrative that developed around McMinn during the ban, said that:

> *"I think when those stories go out, I think it's important that we highlight them, it's also like people just give up on the South. 'That's just a bunch of red folk – you know-Republicans, Trumpers.' And then what happens is we get this supermajority hyper-conservative where the authoritarian right is taking over. And so I was just so upset and mad that like all these stereotypes had come true, and in a way that like I had no say in as someone who is represented by that school board. And it was just- I was just so frustrated [laughs] I was so frustrated. I was mad. I was sad. I was all those things."*

For Oakley, there was value in the Maus ban receiving coverage from beyond her community, but also a sense of discouragement in seeing many of the negative stereotypes about the region she lived in reflected in social media discourse. This was echoed by Camryn:

> *"There was [a] nuance to how people were coming to this conversation that was-simplified and overlooked and flattened by more national and global perspectives. It is convenient. It's very convenient to just say that whole swathes of people or whole zip codes believe this way or that way. It's convenient because it's easier and simpler- and it also gives you somebody to be angry about- to hold accountable."*

The mention of convenience in discussing the Maus ban is a direct critique of much of the discourse on social media, exemplified by tweets that condemned the broader McMinn County community. Among residents, there was a recurring sense when discussing their initial response to news of the ban that people were unsurprised to hear what the school board had done. As Gray discusses in reflecting on her response to the removal, she was unsurprised that a ban had happened in her community, but also reflected on her experiences living in a rural community:

> *"There's a sort of sense of removal from the rural, that it's like "that's not us, we live in a cultured city" [laughs] and then living in a rural county it also is just like, actually this is us, and "us" is more complicated- has been really transformative in my thinking about Southern culture and being a Tennessean and loving this place and like- I am now a rural person, and this is my life, and that doesn't mean that my beliefs and politics and cultural values fit into a specific tidy box. So, I think that the sense of like "oh brother here we go again, Tennessee" it's an embarrassing state to live in sometimes when I think about the perspectives of the whole world or the policies that get passed at state and local levels*

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that often feel like a sort...of values posturing that don't feel like a good faith effort- even

if it's from a different perspective or coming to different conclusions- if I thought that our

local leadership were actually in conversation [laughs] right, with teachers and parents

and librarians, and weren't trying to do this in an underhanded way that snuck it into an

unannounced meeting and let us all find out about it from the Washington Post, right?

I'm- I'd feel pretty different about it- but I was frustrated."

As discussed in the previous section, the narrative that developed online was in many

ways disconnected with what was happening in McMinn County at the time, resulting in action

from residents to shift outsider perception of the community after news of the ban broke. Elliott's

mention of outsider engagement with the McMinn County School Board is in line with many of

the tweets surrounding the *Maus* ban in their opposition to the Board's decision, but also in the

tone in which they addressed the board. This was most apparent in tweets that called the school

board nazis or bigots. While the motivations among users for addressing the board as they did

varied, Elliott's assessment of their impact points toward a disconnect between what was

happening locally in McMinn and what those online felt would change the minds of school board

members. For those online, tweeting at the @McMinnCountySCH account functions as a form of

engagement with the book ban, allowing them to voice their disagreement with the Board's

decision. This can be interpreted as social media discourse within the model attempting to shape

local discourse. At this point, online users and McMinn residents are aligned in their opposition

of the school board, as Elliott and other residents describe an understanding that discourse online

about the book ban was largely opposed to the ban. When social media discourse turned to ad

hominem attacks on the school board and the broader McMinn County community is where the

largest point of disconnect in discourse occurs, as the intentions of those online largely appears

to come from a place of support for those in McMinn fighting back against the book ban. However, as Elliott says, this comes at the cost of harming efforts at the local level in McMinn to persuade school board members to reverse their decision.

Elliott's other point in describing social media discourse during the ban that merits further examination is the notion of board members doubling down on their decision in response to criticism from people online. As Elliott explains, social media discourse, while coming from a place of support, largely ignored much of the local context within McMinn County and as a result, risked school board members framing criticism toward them as strictly from outsiders and not coming from both outside and among local residents. Board member Mike Cochran's Facebook page, used for campaigning during previous school board elections, issued a statement in the wake of the ban:

> *"If you are a member of our community, please feel free to reach out to me if I can answer any questions for you. If you are from Canada, New York, Michigan, or basically anywhere outside McMinn County, please feel free to institute policies in your own communities that best meet the needs of your students, and we will continue to do likewise for ours."*

Cochran begins his statement by noting that it is representative of his thoughts on the ban and not the broader school board, but does provide insight into a board member's perspective on social media discourse during the ban. This passage from Cochran's statement highlights the distinction between online and local discourse from Cochran's point of view. Cochran seemingly separates the views of local residents and those outside the community, allowing for dialogue with those in his community but telling those outside of it that this is a local issue and one that is informed by the community's standards. This distinction is significant as Cochran suggests that outside

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influence should not play a part in the decision-making process of the school board. Cochran issued the statement on January 31st 2022, just a few days after news of the ban broke, and the framing of the school board's decision as one that is of concern to only McMinn County residents suggests that negative social media discourse informed some of this statement. As Elliott suggests in discussing the negative impact outsiders can have on achieving change in his community, Cochran's statement is in line with his belief that outsiders tweeting at the school board account about how racist or antisemitic they were over the *Maus* ban gave board members further reason to remain committed to their decision.

The impact of outside voices on residents during the ban was a topic brought up by multiple participants, with many pointing to these voices as preventing meaningful change in the community. Sutton's comment on page 79 reflects the sentiment of others I spoke to in the community regarding outside voices. Rather than aiding in residents' efforts to persuade school board members to reinstate *Maus*, outside voices tweeting at the school board created an environment that allowed board members such as Cochran to adopt an attitude that dismissed calls for reinstatement from residents. This instead allowed them to frame any critique of the school board as purely from outside voices.

Community Responses

At the local level, community response to the *Maus* ban was organized around two key ideas: pushing back against the school board's decision and responding to online narratives about the McMinn County community. While there may have been other local initiatives that responded to the ban, residents I spoke to described McMinn Community Advocates as the most prominent organization that developed as a result of community opposition to the ban. Many residents described their initial responses to the ban as being embarrassed by what had happened

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and how their community was being portrayed by news outlets and social media discourse. Asked about his feelings upon hearing about the ban and the press coverage that followed, Noel said that:

"It was embarrassing and that day if you went to the Wikipedia page, there was a part where it was like 'Controversies of McMinn County' where it was added the day of. So I thought it was a little embarrassing that was our community, which is a pretty quiet community- we don't really get involved in a lot of stuff- for something like that to happen, and without us knowing or us having a say was was infuriating and embarrassing to have that happen, and to be public news, not just a local thing."

Noel's use of the word "*embarrassing*" is not unlike the discourse found in the tweets discussed earlier, and a sentiment shared by others who were interviewed. For residents, this sense of embarrassment moved many to take action to change the narrative around McMinn County. This was supported by Emerson, who remarked that:

"I felt a little embarrassed, honestly. Like 'Eugh, this is- this is problematic for a lot of reasons.' It really shines a light on sort of... I guess how backwards thinking our town is... but I was glad that it got national coverage. I was hoping that that would perhaps be a turning point-maybe a shift in perspective. I don't really feel like it accomplished that on the scale that I was hoping that it would but I did feel like it connected a lot of really amazing people who were willing to say 'we don't support this kind of censorship. This kind of banning'".

The ultimate result of the ban was the school board standing by its decision, but as Emerson points out, the ban facilitated a number of residents coming together and organizing long term within the community. This is echoed by Camryn, who discusses the development of

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local discourse and response to social media discourse as a catalyst for the formation of McMinn Community Advocates:

"Many conversations I was having with people, across the political spectrum, who were not okay with the way this went down. And then they showed up, several days later, in Zoom calls that were convened by several different people, to just talk about 'Okay what are the next steps?' 'How do we say?' 'What do we do about this?' And then I was just really inspired and amazed by the different pathways people went down to lift their voices. Including, you know, I think about [local church], I think about the Tennessee Citizens Assembly [a state organization]- really the genesis of the chapter that we have now in McMinn County, from within TCA, emerged through the Maus debacle."

Speaking about local organizing and the formation of McMinn Community Advocates, Elliott said that:

I think on the one hand for- for those of us who were trying to organize around it and were upset by what- what had happened and in some ways, we were wanting it to get attention- but then I think what we saw early on is there was this narrative- and just to be honest, I think part of this was like fueled by Art Spiegelman- and like Art Spiegelman was getting all these interviews, he was- you I'm sure are well aware- he was all over the news everywhere. And I think he had sort of fueled this narrative of like "Oh these kind of backwards hick racist Tennesseans" and sort of painting this blanket picture of our community and people in the South and people in Tennessee as sort of these backwards whatever whatever. And I think that- that's the part where it's- where it's like... at that point it was no longer just about McMinn County. This was about how do we create a... a more honest framing about our communities, both in McMinn County, but in Tennessee

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and in the South because I think this- this notion that like, you know, "everyone in

McMinn County is racist and blah blah blah" is just so far from accurate. And even like

the nuances of like the actual school board members were just like... totally obscured

because there was this sort of sexy narrative that it's easy to sort of simplify and reduce

the complexity and sort of create this sexy narrative that like, "Oh look at these podunk

folks in McMinn County who are, you know, doing X, Y, Z."

Elliott continues in describing motivations behind locals organizing, saying that:

"And so I think part of the, on our end, the effort was how do we make sure that there's

some representation from local voices from the community that can actually speak to the

nuances of the issue and speak to the... very honestly large number of people in our

community that didn't want this- that wasn't happy about the decision that the school

board made."

Elliott's description of local organizing speaks to the sense among residents that local

voices were needed in the broader discourse about the *Maus* ban that had developed online. This

segues into discussion in the following section about how residents gathered for the first school

board meeting since news of the *Maus* ban.

McMinn County Shows Up

The February 12 school board meeting marked the first time residents could formally

gather to address the school board and the meeting proved to be an important moment for

community organizing in McMinn. While the school board ultimately stood by their decision to

remove *Maus*, residents spoke positively about attendance at the meeting and the number of

people who showed up to push back against the ban. As Sutton described in recalling the

February 12 school board meeting:

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"It was the most well-attended school board meeting I've ever seen. And there was like overflow and they put most of the progressives in like the overflow, and they were projected in front of me, on like a screen. So like I was actually able to see like the school board members in front of me and behind them was like all of the people that I knew. And at the last minute, someone – [Elliott] I think- was like "'Hey you should say at the last minute, like 'hey all of these people asking- and like saying they need to follow their policies and they didn't.' So at the last minute, at the very end, I was like 'And all of these people, and you can't necessarily see them, but they're all behind you and they came here to tell you that you didn't follow your policies and that you should follow your policies,' and like they cheered and that was like I cannot lie, that was like "oh this is kind of like- fun!" [laughs] that I like to public speak –as you can probably tell, I like to talk. And... and so there was like this exhilaration like we had done – like we had had a press conference, we had had speakers, we had people turn out, and that was like, really neat."

For Sutton, the school board meeting provided not only a way for residents to communicate their disagreement with the school board's decision, but also showed how many members of the community were willing to show up to the meeting. The moment Sutton describes at the meeting of hearing all the people in attendance is illustrative of the public support residents were able to organize in response to the ban. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the organizing that occurred as a result of the ban facilitated more long-term organizing among residents in McMinn, spurred on by the sense of unity seen at the February 12 meeting.

This sense of pride in the community was echoed by others in the community:

"I think the other side of it, like for folks that did sort of organize, I think it was also, in talking with folks afterwards, it was also like a really empowering moment too. Because like, I think oftentimes [residents] haven't felt like their voices mattered or there wasn't really an avenue for their voice to be heard. And so I think something as simple as having some folks from, you know, TV channels from Chattanooga and Knoxville coming down and actually they wanted to hear what local people had to say I think was encouraging and sort of helped spur continued organizing."- Elliott

In this quote, Elliott speaks to the sense of powerlessness among some residents prior to the ban happening. While there were tensions in terms of outsider intervention, there was also a degree of validation from residents in seeing news outlets from outside the community coming in to hear what they had to say. The sense of empowerment fostered through organizing was echoed by Emerson, who said that:

"And I have to say for people that are definitely in the minority feeling a little more liberal-leaning in this town, it was refreshing to be like 'Oh there's not just, like three of us!' There's a community of people that don't support this these kind of actions."-

For Emerson, the sense of isolation as an individual with liberal values in the community was dispelled through community organizing around the ban. To see others at the school board meeting opposed to the ban proved to be a powerful moment for residents. As Oakley said in her reflections about the meeting:

"And then to go in and just see so many people there was like really amazing. I was proud in that. I was frustrated by the decision that was made ultimately but like the fact that the community showed up- and that a lot of them were on our side. You know, you don't think that a lot of people are on your side, and a lot of them were."

The school board upheld their decision at the February 12th meeting, but the sense among those who attended was seemingly one of hope for future organizing. As discussion in the following chapter shows, organzing with McMinn Community Advocates continued beyond the ban.

It should also be noted that in speaking to some residents about the rhetoric used to push back against the school board, several noted the importance of using the school district's policy to argue against the board. As Oakley saaid in discussing the topic:

So we started having these conversations about how we could respond. And really what we- when we started digging deeper- I think the national headline was like 'The school board antisemitic'- and all this other stuff. I don't- I don't deny that there's probably some like internalized like things going on there. The reason was a lot dumber than that [laughs]. It was about like nudity and using "goddamn" in the book. And so- and then they didn't follow their own policy, so we really tried to- when we were putting things on social media, when we were organizing- you know getting folks to attend things, we were really honing in on that policy. 'You didn't follow your own policy,' 'You didn't include the public in this decision.'

The emphasis on policy over the content of the book itself or the school board member's ideologies is important to note as it aligns with discourse in library science over best practices to respond to attempts at censorship. Having a strong collection development policy in a library is regarded as essential to respond to book challenges and here, the residents of McMinn County use a similar focus to point toward the board's decision being wrong (ALA 2021). It should also be noted that residents who discussed this focus on policy being violated observed that this

allowed them to attract support from across the political spectrum. Describing how she framed

discussion of the *Maus* ban with those in her community, Oakley said that:

> *"I think everyone I talked to within my friends, friend group was against it. And I know*
>
> *my broader family, who is more conservative- I think once we broke it down into like*
>
> *'they violated policy and didn't include people in that,' I was able to get people looped in*
>
> *a little bit more. Because, you know, as much as we do need to talk about those other*
>
> *issues, that was the piece that I think could open the door. So yeah, I know all of my like*
>
> *personal friends were upset. My colleagues, like my more conservative [coworkers] at*
>
> *the time I think were just mad about the national attention, 'It's not that big of a deal'*
>
> *because they also – you know- were upset about the things the school board was talking*
>
> *about. But I think that policy component was kind of the key to- key point when talking to*
>
> *folks."*

Intellectual freedom can be perceived as a strictly liberal issue to some, making it

difficult in some cases to generate support across the political spectrum. For Oakley, this meant

framing the issue as one around policy rather than the actual content of the book.

Outsiders and McMinn

In conversations with McMinn County residents, it becomes apparent that there needs to

be a way to describe people who were not part of the community but were commenting or

directing feedback toward those living there. People outside McMinn County can be considered

outsiders because of their physical distance to McMinn County but also because of their distance

in understanding the community. Michael Warner interrogates the concept of outsiders in his

chapter, "Publics and Counterpublics," writing that one's understanding of a public can be based

upon the audience they are addressing, such as a school board addressing their community at

meetings. Returning to Mike Cochran's comments on outsider criticism of the school board's

decision, Warner's discussion of the public is useful in understanding how Cochran frames

outsiders. As Warner observes, the public can be understood in a few different ways, with one

being that "A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in

visible space, as with a theatrical public(50)." Warner frames this understanding as one of

spatiality or context; in which the performer understands the size of the public they are

addressing (50). Cochran's statement affirming that the *Maus* ban was a McMinn County issue

and should only be discussed by residents shows that his understanding of public is that of the

community he serves as a school board member. For many of the residents interviewed, there

was a sense among them that McMinn County and other rural communities often viewed

themselves as different from larger, more progressive communities in the state and that those

coming from those spaces were regarded as outsiders.

     Interviews with residents spoke to the relationship between the community and outsiders

being one of skepticism that outsiders came into the conversation with a full picture of what was

actually happening in McMinn. As many tweets showed, users from outside the community

came into the discourse with concern about the book ban that had taken place, but without the

nuance of what McMinn County was actually like. A common refrain among interviewees was

that McMinn County occupies a different space geographically and politically from neighboring

cities such as Knoxville and Nashville. Discussing the volume of people who came to the school

board meeting following news of the ban, Oakley stated that

> *"Any time there's like a 'liberal' issue, it's like 'Oh that's just Nashville.' When you live*
>
> *in a small, rural town, those big cities and those outsiders just are a threat of*
>
> *gentrification of your town- gentrification of your values."*

Oakley's description of McMinn is important in framing it relative to the spaces many outsiders were speaking from because she acknowledges that "liberal" issues are often tied to geographically large cities or more urban spaces rather than communities like McMinn where the perception is that they are monolithically conservative. For Parker, McMinn County becoming the center of attention from outsiders was a positive because it provided a chance for residents to become more aware of the broader discourse around book bans:

> *"I thought it was a good thing because there's so many other socially, culturally, historically backwards things that go on here that for McMinn County to be thrust into the limelight, I thought, 'This is great' because these people- They don't seem to know what goes on outside of East Tennessee. So to have us thrust into the limelight I thought maybe this will help them grow socially- you know, and culturally. I thought that might be a good thing."*

Rather than view outsiders negatively as Mike Cochran did, Parker frames outside perspectives as potentially positive in exposing McMinn County to the larger discourse in which many online were opposed to the book ban. The organizing that took place in McMinn County with McMinn Community Advocates stands as another example of a willingness to engage with outsiders, as organizers for the group spoke to the need to bring in outsiders to hear the stories of residents living in McMinn who were against the ban. For these residents, there was a resistance to outsiders for developing narratives about McMinn County they disagreed with but also a sense that part of making change happen involved informing those outside the community of what was happening and what was needed.

Community Need vs. Perceived Need

The disconnect between McMinn County residents and online users in addressing the *Maus* ban is further exemplified by the numerous copies of Maus shipped to the community following the book ban. In several tweets, users expressed an interest in helping the community by sending copies of Maus to any residents interested in reading it. This action by online users manifested in several ways during my interviews with residents. One participant , Noel, mentioned messaging one such user to acquire a copy while another, Reagan, spoke to seeing Twitter users posting these offers after they had already purchased their own copy. Discussing the interest from outsiders in providing copies of *Maus*, Noel said that:

"I remember there was like a New York guy tweeted that he would send free copies to anybody in McMinn County who wanted one, so I responded to his tweet so I got a free copy from him- mailed to me and that was the first time I read it."

As a student in McMinn at the time, Reagan observed that while she already owned a copy of Maus at the time of the ban:

"I know almost all of my friends ended up with a free copy sent from people around the country- who just were sending in boxes and boxes of Maus to the school."

As Kirby said in discussing the role of outsiders responding to the ban:

"I did a lot of talking to the news, and a lot of talking to journalists, but I also talked a lot to community members. And family and friends. I mean we talked about it extensively. You know. I have so many people I know who bought copies it, either for their own kids or to give to somebody or to donate to the library or whatever, you know. I can't tell you the amount of people- I had people calling me from California who were like "Hey, I'll give you money to buy copies of Maus" and I'm like "We don't need them. We've already- all the copies have been bought and sent to McMinn County already" [laughs]

It's sold out on Amazon because they bought all the copies to send to us. And so it was

kind of one of those things you know where I was getting all this support from people

from outside of our community and you know- and some from within our community- but

it was moreso there were people from outside our community like- and my- I'm not from

here- my family's in Louisiana- and so I talked pretty extensively with my family and they

were- you know- shocked... they were- they couldn't believe it, but – you know it's

interesting to get the outside perspective as well as the interior perspective and kind of

see how that looks... different- you know depending on the context of... Athens culture,

McMinn County culture versus other places."

While the large volume of *Maus* copies provided by people on Twitter presented an

opportunity for access to Spiegelman's work in McMinn, many residents felt that it represented

the disconnect between what outsiders felt the community needed and what was actually needed.

The sentiment among many residents interviewed was that McMinn County's education system

needed to be fixed, and that the *Maus* ban was just one result of a more systemic issue. A tension

that arose from outsider intervention was the sense among some residents that no one in McMinn

County was actually trying to fix things in the community. As a community leader in McMinn

County, Gray was involved in a number of conversations with outsiders about ways to support

the community in the wake of the *Maus* ban. Reflecting on support from outsiders, Gray spoke to

complexity of support and the tensions:

"[There was] care and support and funding and books flowing in from all over the

country. But in a way that didn't always honor the community that is present. And I think

some of that is well-intentioned, missing it. And some of it was kind of patronizing. As if...

there's no one who cares about these things in this community here."

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The care described above is in line with earlier tweets and the volume of them that spoke in support of *Maus* being reinstated, but also relates to some of the tweets that spoke negatively about McMinn County at large. This is indicative of the tensions that can arise when outsiders engage with communities where book bans have taken place, or where one might see that a book ban has taken place in a community that is not their own and want to help. Issues arise when outsiders do not take into account the needs of the community or how they might be perceived by those living the community.

For Gray, who was sent dozens of copies of *Maus* by outsiders, what outsiders saw as a means of helping the people in McMinn was something many residents felt ignored the actual needs of the community. Gray talked about distributing the many copies of *Maus* to students and others in the community after people online reached out to see if they could send along copies of the graphic memoir, reflecting on the amazement at the idea of people from outside a community caring so much about an issue that they were willing to take action on behalf of those residents. At the same time, she spoke of the disconnect between what outsiders thought McMinn County needed and what residents actually wanted.

> *"It wasn't…we need more copies of this one book [laughs]. It was, you know, if you can draw attention- use your platform to draw attention to the problems in public education inequity, for gerrymandering, and the way that our Republican majority state legislature is handcuffing their constituency, that would be really great. Or, if you want to fund more diverse education in this rural Tennessee community, please give your money to these programs that support literacy in our community or to our public library."*

Gray's comments point to higher level issues in McMinn and more broadly in other rural communities. As Gray and others addressed in their interviews, the removal of *Maus* was the

result of systemic issues within the education system rather than just an isolated incident. Gray's examples are demonstrative of this and also serve to highlight issues that outsiders might not consider when responding to book bans. This care from outsiders shows the importance of understanding local contexts and needs in responding to book bans. The consequence of ignoring these contexts is a disconnect between these local and online spaces, most notably in negative reactions from residents. Among several residents was the observation that McMinn County as a rural community in the South is subject to stereotyping and preconceived perceptions from outsiders, even from larger neighboring cities such as Knoxville and Nashville. Social media discourse critical of the community in McMinn County provides a critique of the broader community but does little to change things within it.

Similarly, tangible action such as sending copies of a banned title to the community it was banned in serves as a form of intervention, but does not take into account the actual needs of the community. Discussing outsider response to the ban, Gray said that:

"Before you start shipping me copies of Maus, thank you for your heart. Can I give you maybe some better feedback, from this community, and what we know our kids need. My values and yours are aligned, but I need you to trust that people in our community know what we need."

Here, Gray reflects on the experience of receiving copies of *Maus* from outsiders when the story went viral. In my interview with her, Gray described people from outside McMinn who reached out to them to see if they could send over copies of the book, expressing surprise at what they called *"a really interesting blurring of the sense of community responsibility"* in seeing people who weren't from McMinn interested in providing support for a place they were not a part of. As Gray describes it, the "blurring" is Localized Social Media Intervention in action as

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social media attention from outsiders manifested in the volume of inquiries they received from people online asking if they could send copies of *Maus* over. This is significant because the act of sending copies of *Maus* demonstrates a sense of care from individuals that goes beyond the community they live in. This sense of care is beyond tweeting about the ban, as people who donated copies of Spiegelman's graphic memoir are doing so presumably out of a desire to enact change in the real world. It is here, however, that the disconnect in perceived needs takes place, where the actual needs of McMinn County were at odds with what outsiders thought might be useful. Gray brings attention to more systemic issues at play in the *Maus* ban on page 104, notably the political makeup of Tennessee and the consequences of gerrymandering in the state. In doing so, Gray presents a challenge for outsiders: Can one take the time during a book ban to look at the systemic issues that led to the ban and what is there to be done within one's means to help, given that information?

"Where did all the Maus go?: A Visit to McMinn County

When I traveled to McMinn in 2024, I took a trip to the E.G. Fisher Public Library as part of my efforts to recruit participants for the project. I made sure to view the graphic novels section and there were several copies of *Maus* on the shelf.

As Gray describes in recalling the number of donated copies of *Maus*, many teachers in the community did not want any of the donated copies sent from outsiders, having seen outside attention alongside scrutiny from the school board over the book. While I did not have the opportunity to speak with staff at E.G. Fisher when I visited in 2024, based on Gray's account, the copies pictured represent only a fraction of what was donated to the library as a result of outsider concern for book's banning. Gray's reflection on outsider concern poses a question: to what end? Providing copies of the graphic memoir to residents, while addressing issues of access for students or residents who may want to read the book, does not directly influence the school board's decision-making processes. Among local residents, there was also a sense that concern

was over the board violating their own policy in removing *Maus* more so than them removing the book itself. As Oakley observed:

> *"I don't think a ton of people in McMinn County were mad that they banned a book about the Holocaust. A lot of people were just mad that the school board did this without talking to anybody- without following their own policy."*

While there may have been residents who were concerned about Holocaust literature being removed from the school curriculum, the violation of school policy seemingly was an issue for residents that transcended political sides. This was also something outsiders may have missed in assessing how to best support residents opposed to the ban.

In discussing perceived need vs. actual need in communities experiencing book bans, it is worth exploring the long term effects on communities and outsiders' understandings of those impactsReturning to the donated copies of *Maus* observed at E.G. Fisher, the question of how outsider support impacted the community remains. Discussing a conversation between a reporter and herself during the ban, Camryn said that:

> *"I just kind of let them know that this is where we live, these are our people, these are our relationships. You get to come in, document, and then leave, and we'll still be here."*

Public understanding of book bans often misses that those living in communities where book bans take place must continue to live there, as Camryn points out. For outsiders that perceive communities where book bans have taken place as ineffective in pushing back against the ban, this is problematic in that it assumes that change is only possible if there is outsider influence or that local residents are not doing enough to oppose book bans. Additionally, Camryn's observation of outsider privilege is valuable in critiquing outsiders who might only show attention to a book ban site while it is in the news cycle. Within McMinn County, a

separate story around E.G. Fisher Public Library and the firing of its director in late 2023 is demonstrative of this. According to press coverage, the library became embroiled in its own controversy after city officials pushed to have the library's director fired over a book display set up during Pride Month (Dominique 2023). While it is outside the scope of this project to fully explore this story, as it involves the firing of the library's director over a Pride display at the site, the story is representative of the idea that book ban sites do not remain static following news of a ban. Rather, a book ban can galvanize others in the community to continue to challenge titles at other sites. This is not to say that outsiders must constantly be aware of what is happening around communities they are trying to support, but instead that there must be an awareness of the long term effects book bans can have on residents and their communities.

"The kids are alright": Youth Voices and Barriers to Entering Book Ban Discourse

Amidst the discourse online and locally over *Maus* was a population who often are overlooked in book ban discourse: young people. While my sample featured only one participant who was a student in McMinn County at the time, multiple adult residents I spoke to talked about the importance of youth voices in book ban discourse. Youth voices are historically limited in book ban discourse and this was similarly true during the *Maus* ban. Press photographs from the school board meeting in February 2022 show residents gathered during the first meeting after news of the ban went public, but young people were not identifiable in the audience. The perceived absence of young people is offset by the press conference organized by McMinn Community Advocates prior to the school board meeting in which two students provided statements speaking out against the ban, but the absence of young people at the meeting itself merits further discussion. Young people find their place can find their place in local discourse by participating in community events and forums, but social media discourse can prove to be the

most comfortable means for them to engage in public discourse when spaces are not accessible for them.

Returning to the students who spoke at the press conference before the school board meeting, several adult residents discussed their presence and the importance of elevating their voices during the ban. Kirby described the two students who spoke at the press conference:

"Two of the people who spoke out were two of our students- high school students at the time, college students now and they're spectacular. I mean they're both incredible women and they spoke out- just so articulately and with such passion. They were very frustrated by that happening in their school system-it offended them. They were offended and appalled. They couldn't believe that it had reached our town. This fervor that they weren't aware of- they're high school students, they don't know anything about books being banned, right? But this really fired them up."

Kirby's mention of the students being spectacular is of particular significance in understanding how young people are able to make their way into discourse around book bans, and more broadly public discourse. Several times, Kirby speaks to the exceptional nature of the two students who spoke, describing the interest they had in the ban and how much it mattered to them to speak up against it. For many young people, high school can be a time where one becomes more aware of social issues such as book bans and may want to get involved in discourse or organizing. The barriers to entry, however, present a myriad of factors that can prevent this from happening. Discussing the role young people played in McMinn County during the ban, Maddox stated:

"*It takes a really exceptional 16 or 17 year old to feel like they deserve the right to have an opinion when 'mom and dad' are fighting.*"

This mention of "mom and dad" isn't specifically referencing parents as a barrier for youth voices (although they can certainly play a part). Adultism is a significant barrier for young people wishing to enter discourse around social issues, particularly when it comes to spaces traditionally occupied by adults. The school board meeting is one example. While McMinn County and other communities may not have policies forbidding the presence of young people at meetings, these meetings are typically attended by adults. A young person may feel strongly about a particular issue in their community, such as a book ban, but attending a school board meeting can be an intimidating prospect. This is doubly difficult when considering how a young person might attempt to make public remarks at a meeting. While Reagan, a high school student at the time in McMinn County, was interested in attending the February school board meeting, she points to many of the barriers faced by young people:

> "*I would definitely have loved to have been on the premises the day it happened, but I can admit I don't know if I would have gone into the building. I probably would have done what the students did do where they came before it and would stand outside. I probably would have been involved in that and I would have gone in and listened if I'd had the chance in the meeting, but I don't know if I could have been comfortable saying it to their face, especially as a student -When I remember like, these are the people who are eventually going to be giving me my diploma, and just that anxiety of "I still want to graduate from this school system without being suspended*."

While Reagan was unable to attend the school board meeting due to a prior obligation, she was willing to participate if she had been able to. Reagan qualifies this, however, by remarking that she would have been interested in attending the press conference before and the school board meeting, but not speaking. This was in line with the students who participated in

the community-organized press conference before the meeting, as residents I spoke to who

helped organize the press conference mentioned that the students did not want to speak before

the board. As Reagan says, there is a degree of apprehension that can come from speaking in

spaces such as school board meetings, particularly when the subject is book bans. What Reagan

is speaking to when she talks about the anxiety around not being punished for speaking at the

meeting is the power differential young people are faced with in trying to participate in spaces

typically occupied by adults. From Reagan's perspective when she was a student, the risk of

punishment or retribution for speaking up at the school board meeting was too great to justify

making a public comment at the meeting.. As a student, school administrators can be

intimidating and beyond that, confronting them in a room where one may be the only young

person in attendance is even more difficult.

Maddox's comment on young people needing to be exceptional from page 110 merits

further discussion when considering barriers for youth voices. Many residents who spoke about

the students who participated in the press conference described them using similar language,

highlighting theidea that "exceptional" youth are those who are willing to enter the public

discourse despite the prevalence of adult voices. Discussing young people in McMinn County,

Parker said that:

> *"It's not the easiest thing to do to get a lot of young people here, so I talk about it all the*
>
> *time because I have grandchildren- and I see their friends and I realize they don't- these*
>
> *kids don't have a clue. They go to school, but when it comes to public engagement and*
>
> *stuff, it's like they do not know how to do that."*

Parker goes on to describe local organizations such as McMinn Community Advocates

encouraging youth voices through training workshops, but her comment on young people in the

community speaks to more general lack of knowledge among them in terms of public engagement. So when it comes to "exceptional" young people, these voices are often the ones interested in social issues in the community and willing to speak up about them. This in itself presents another barrier for youth voices in terms of access to knowledge and skills around public engagement. Young people who are not encouraged to keep up with current events or are not drawn to things such as public speaking in school may not be as inclined as their peers to participate in public engagement. This can lead to situations where youth in communities can become apathetic to social issues and points toward the importance of education and engagement from adults to provide access for young people. Discussing youth voices in McMinn County and reactions to news of the *Maus* ban, Sutton said that:

> *"There is one paper in McMinn County, the Athens Daily- or the Daily Post Athenian that comes out like 2-3 days a week and is kind of expensive, and [young people are] not reading that. We just don't have any local media, and so they're not seeing it if it doesn't come on their TikTok or their social media... they're not seeing it. It is a really challenging environment to help young people see what's going on, and then like connect it to their own lives."*

Sutton continued this comment by talking more about political apathy amongst young people and her point on young people being able to make connections with their lives and current events connects to Parker's earlier mention of efforts by local organizations to try and develop community engagement among young people in McMinn County. When Maddox says "exceptional", it may refer to the idea of exceptionally gifted students or those with an interest in public speaking, but what he also points to is the importance of elevating youth voices in spaces

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such as book ban discourse. Many adults are certainly aware of the barriers faced by young people, as Maddox says in talking about youth voices in the community during the ban:

> *"No one was asking them (students), so of course you're not going to hear from them because it's going to require them to like, elbow some grandpa or uncle out of the way and take the microphone- and you know, that's not going to happen. I think that there weren't really obvious avenues for them do it, other than these couple of students who were really interested in and like really fired up about it."*

Here, Maddox speaks to some of what Reagan described as a high school student regarding barriers for youth voices during the book ban. While Maddox is not literally referring to the idea that young people must physically push adults aside to speak, he speaks to the notion that a youth voice added to discourse comes at the expense of an adult voice. Indeed, the lineup of speakers for the February school board meeting, all four speakers were adults. In my interviews with residents, I learned that there were additional residents who completed the request for public comment form to speak at the meeting, but only four were accepted. A young person could certainly have submitted the form to speak, and residents I spoke to mentioned that the two who spoke at the press conference were asked if they would like to speak at the school board meeting but they declined. As Maddox references in the idea of pushing adults out of the way, a young person faces the prospect of taking the microphone away from an adult, something many young people may find difficult to do. This aligns with Reagan's comments on the school board meeting. Anxiety around speaking before the school board was already a barrier to entry, and the difficulty of trying to bring one's own voice into the conversation as a young person is another limit on youth voices.

Maddox's other comment that there were not obvious avenues for youth voices speaks to the importance of developing and providing space for youth voices in public discourse. Elliott had a similar reflection:

> *"I think oftentimes, it's easy to just assume 'Well students- they don't know what's best for themselves.' And I think it's easy to fall into that, but I think if you actually ask students and actually take the time to listen to them, they have a lot to say. They have thoughts on these issues, and I think it's our responsibility as adults to do as best we can to create a space for those students to be able to share those thoughts and to lift those thoughts up."*

Here, Elliott describes negative perceptions of young people (ironically often created by barriers created by adults) but also pushes back on them. There were young people who were aware of what was happening in McMinn County and interested in engaging with the discourse in the community. What Elliott points out, however, is that adults are often unwilling to stop and listen to what young people have to say. While there may have been a sense of lack of knowledge among young people in McMinn County with regard to public engagement, the *Maus* ban demonstrated that there were youth voices interested in learning more about the ban and engaging with others in the community about it. This was clear in speaking with Reagan, who described her experiences hearing about the *Maus* ban:

> *"I pretty much read every article that I could about it because I was super fascinated from the beginning. I've always been against book banning just as a lover of literature and English, so I was automatically fascinated in reading the articles. I remember seeing the statement where... McMinn County- we were called a bunch of nazis- in lighter terms by the author, and that kind of spread out to a lot of the United States that we were being*

called a town of nazis. That was disturbing for me because I felt like the school board

was getting to speak for all of our county when most of the people I actively interacted

with were like "No, I do not agree with this." And I think that was being - interacting

with young people - we were really the ones who hated this decision and hated seeing

people support it just because a few people in charge of a school board said that's what

they thought."

Here, Reagan's thoughts echo those from other residentsabout reception of the ban and the

criticism from outsiders that followed. Much like the adults I spoke to, Reagan shared their

displeasure with the community of McMinn County being perceived negatively because of the

school board. As Elliott's comment suggests, Reagan's thoughts on the ban demonstrate that

young people have valuable insight to add to discourse if given the proper platforms to speak in.

Social media as a democratizing technology for young people

Community organizations provide one avenue for youth voices to speak in, as the

McMinn Community Advocates-organized press conference at the February school board

meeting shows, but social media serves as another means for young people to enter the public

discourse. As previous discussion of social media has shown, there is significant scholarship

around the role social media can have in enabling youth voices in discourse around social issues.

In her interview, Reagan described her use of social media as frequent, and she noted that she

used it significantly after the *Maus* ban to talk about what was happening. Discussing her initial

reaction to the ban on social media:

"I did not waste much time, I know I made a post on like my Instagram story that was

sharing the news and condemning the school board literally the day that I heard the news

break because I was... very upset and I was kind of taking it from the perspective of

saying like 'As a young person, we don't agree with this. This is what the school board said but as young people, nobody that I am surrounded by that is under under 18 actually agrees with this.' We got all very fired up about it, so I saw all of us- not all of us- but a ton of my friends, we were doing that, we were posting the Maus image, like of the book on our stories and were saying like 'I stan banned' or like, 'Read banned books' just kind of, letting our friends and families know where we all lie with the situation."

Reagan's response and her actions online aligned with much of the discourse observed on Twitter following news of the graphic memoir's ban. While Reagan's preferred platform for discussing the ban was Instagram rather than Twitter, her sharing of images and information about the ban on her story, a feature on Instagram that allows users to post an image on their page for 24-hours for their followers to view, is demonstrative of the type of information sharing and commentary found in social media discourse following the ban. The last part of Reagan's quote is significant in considering how and why young people use social media to discuss social issues. As Reagan says, it was important to make her friends and family aware of what was happening with the ban and her opposition to it, a sentiment shared by her peers as well. For young people, social media has become a regular part of their communication networks and in the case of the *Maus* ban, social media provided the most immediate avenue for entering the discourse. Using social media, young people are able to quickly react to and provide their own response to current events. This is not a phenomenon exclusive to young people, as many of the adults I interviewed spoke to their use of social media during the *Maus* ban, but young people are positioned differently from their older peers in terms of willingness to engage with social media, particularly when considering barriers for public discourse.

For Reagan, news of the ban came in the middle of class from one of her classmates who had read about it online:

"I was in class when the news specifically broke and a student had been online on Facebook when she saw the whole article and announced it to the whole class. We actually didn't have class that day [laughs] in my literature class- we just had an open conversation about how we were feeling about it. And I think when I realized that it was a BIG deal was I had a foreign exchange student in my class from Tunisia and her parents called her, while we were in there and said 'your school system was just on the news for a book banning' - like, they lived in Tunisia and they heard the news about it. And it was kind of that moment when I was like 'Oh my gosh.' Like, my little sleepy town that nobody's ever heard of just- bam, is in international news even more than just national news."

Here, Reagan describes the conversations between her and her classmates following news of the ban. Her mention of her classmate's call with her parents is particularly illustrative of how discourse traveled online and back into the community. Reagan's surprise at her town making world news and her response to posting on social media about the ban is an example of social media's impact in shaping local discourse. As Reagan mentions in the above quote and in discussing her frustration with the school board earlier, there was a sense among residents that social media discourse painted her community in a negative light, leading her to post online about it. Reagan did not attend the school board meeting, but her activity online and conversations among peers in her community are indicative of discourse impacted by social media discourse.

Young people can experience significant barriers to entering public discourse. These can be anything from conflicting views with their parents who might be unwilling to drive them to a

school board meeting to power dynamics with adults. These can be counteracted to some extent by social media and its ability to personalize communication for users. Social media is designed in such a way that users are able to shape their experiences by choosing what kind of content they are receiving but also who can see the content they are posting. This is especially relevant for young people because it means that there can be a layer of protection when engaging in discourse. While it might be a nerve-wracking proposition for a young person to speak in front of a school board, posting online about the topic can be less stressful while still allowing the sense of engaging in a larger conversation. For Reagan, this was the case in how she approached social media and her presence online, describing her social media profile as one in which:

> *"I have made it a safe place where I just tell people- I'm like 'Well that's my page, if you*
> *don't like it, just get off' - I'm very much one of those 'If you don't want to hear what I*
> *have to say, don't go to my social media to see what I have to say'."*

Here, Reagan frames her social media profiles as ones that are specific to her and her interests. By following her, users understand that what she is posting is tied to what she believes and that they should not follow her if their beliefs do not align with what she is posting. On the flip side, Reagan is afforded the sense of safety in setting up her social media profiles so she is able to post what she wants without fearing that others may disagree with what she has to say. Her mention of her social media pages as a "safe place" is not unique to young people, as many of the adults interviewed spoke to similar perceptions of social media affording curated experiences that allowed them to control what content they saw and who saw their content. What makes this distinct for young people within the context of book ban discourse is their positionality to adults. Besides providing a platform where young people are able to curate their

experiences to align with their beliefs and preferences, social media can be seen as an environment where they do not have to worry about adult intervention in discourse.

Another aspect of social media's value for young people comes from the physical protection it can provide in discourse. It can be difficult for a young person to not only feel empowered to speak up in a public forum like a school board meeting, but even more so when the anxiety of addressing people who may be in positions of power or are politically dissimilar from oneself. While this can be understood within the context of the book ban as talking at the school board meeting, as Reagan mentioned in her interview, it can also be understood as anxieties around discussing the topic with friends or family who may not have shared the same views as oneself regarding the ban. With social media, one is able to limit who can see their posts through a number of means depending on the social media platform. Reagan detailed this saying:

> *"There were a lot of things that I said online that I would not have actively said in person just because that face-to-face conversation of reaching a controversial topic can be very uncomfortable for me, and as it can for most people I think. So online, I kind of felt like I could hide behind that "screen" a little bit, and even though they knew it was me, I was like if they directly address me in person about what I said I'll own my words. But online, I felt much more comfortable to share kind of whatever I thought."*

Here, Reagan discusses the safety afforded by social media that allows her to discuss things she might not normally be comfortable talking about to people in person. This is especially important for young people because at their age they may be just entering discourse around social issues and it can be uncomfortable wanting to speak up in spaces that are traditionally limited for young people. As Reagan describes it, social media can offer young

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people (and also adults) a space where they can enter discourse that may be uncomfortable to have in-person. Reagan still qualified her social media postings by mentioning that if someone wants to directly confront her, she's prepared to do so, but the safety afforded by social media allows young people like herself to take the first steps into entering discourse around social issues, potentially developing the confidence to engage in other ways outside of social media.

The role of social media is especially important in understanding how young people in McMinn County responded to the ban. While much of the organizing locally in response to the ban and social media discourse demonstrates the influence of social media on local responses, the value of social media for young people as a democratizing form of technology allowed them the ability to be a part of the discourse without engaging in more direct ways like attending school board meetings.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

As outlined in Chapter 1, **the primary objective of this study is to explore the intersection of local and online discourse during a book ban**. In this section, I will discuss several takeaways from the data analysis section in Chapter 4 as well as address potential areas for future work. I examined discourse in McMinn County and on social media through Twitter around the Maus ban that took place in McMinn to understand how these discourses might intersect. This allowed me to identify and develop a flow model of discourse that took place during the ban, which characterized how residents responded to the ban through coordinated organizing. In addition, this study also identified barriers for young people when it came to engaging in discourse around the book ban.

"Localized Social Media Intervention"

The influence of social media on the real world is not a new phenomenon. As discussed previously, social media can be used as a tool for activism and other movements by providing a communication channel for users. Several terms have arisen to describe different ways in which social media can have real real-world impact, with astroturfing being one such term. Astroturfing, defined by Keller et. al (2019) as "a centrally coordinated disinformation campaign in which participants pretend to be ordinary citizens acting independently," is a term that illustrates some of what I aim to use social media intervention to describe. Astroturfing is a concept not unfamiliar in the landscape of censorship as several movements have made use of the tactic to issue book challenges at dozens of library and school sites, showing one of the issues for librarians and educators in addressing book challenges. Astroturfing organized through social media is a concept seen in book bans but does not adequately describe the role social media can play in censorship discourse.

I argue that new terminology is necessary to describe what happens when word of a book ban spreads online because at present, a term to describe the relationship between local and online communities does not currently exist. As this study intends to explore, the interactions online and offline during a book ban have the potential to create change and discourse in local communities. I am tentatively referring to this phenomenon as "social media intervention", or the idea that school board meetings and other administrative deliberations on book challenges at the local level can be shaped by online discussion. Social media intervention is primarily framed within the context of the community where a book is banned but I also believe it or another term should be used to characterize responses in other real-world communities following a book ban. The responses from booksellers and libraries in other communities after the *Maus* ban, for example, would fall under this.

I use the word "intervention" in this term to refer to the concept of external influence. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "intervention" carries multiple meanings, carrying positive and negative connotations. The idea that intervention can be positive or negative is an important consideration in proposing a new term as I believe that social media intervention can be used across perspectives on censorship. Those opposed to a challenge can take to social media to try and influence the board's decision to keep a book banned just as those opposed to it can speak out to reinstate it. This is not to say that localized social media intervention is a neutral concept, however, as I would argue that regardless of position, one's use of social media to discuss a book ban inherently carries a desire to see the book in question removed or reinstated.

Localized Social Media Intervention: A model for book ban discourse

To better understand the discourse that took place in McMinn County when the *Maus* ban took place, I present a model for Localized Social Media Intervention that captures the flow of discourse as outlined by Allen (2015, 185) in her writings on discourse flow. Allen's model presents discourse as something that is fluid and capable of flowing between spaces, and my model applies that philosophy, adapting it to local and social media discourse around the *Maus* ban.
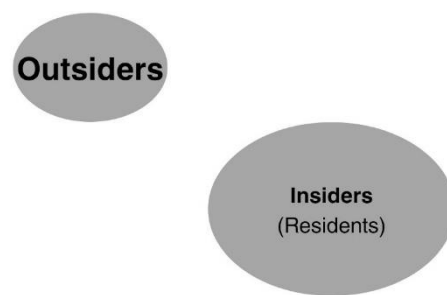
Outsiders

Social Media Discourse

Insiders (Residents)
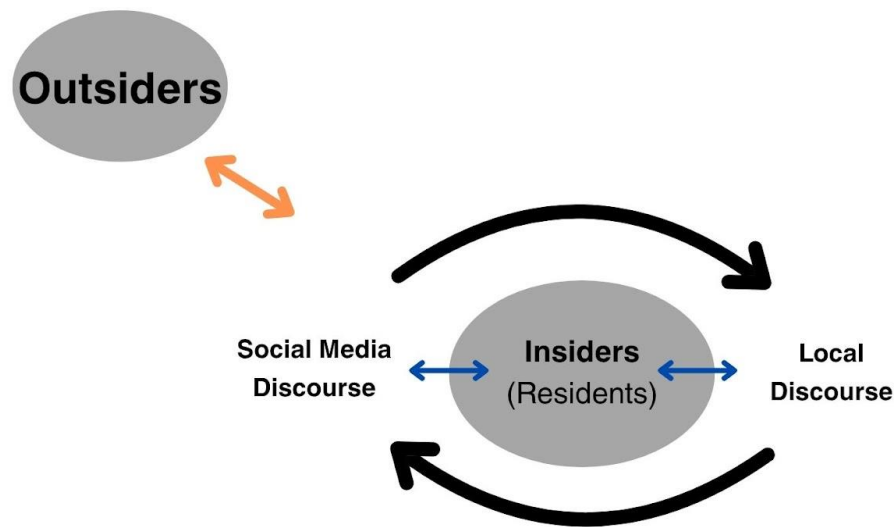
Local Discourse

Figure 2. Online and local discourse as two distinct spaces.

This model functions as a modified version of what Allen discusses with discourse flow, focusing on online and local discourse. Under my model, I present online and local discourse as two distinct spaces shown in Figure XYZ. Local discourse is that which takes place at the local level in a community while social media discourse is any discourse conducted online through platforms such as social media. In this model, discourse can begin either locally or online, where it influences discourse in the other space, which then in turn influences the original space. For

example, discourse may begin online, influencing local discourse, which then influences social media discourse which influences local discourse, and so on. For outsiders, it should be noted that one can enter and exit the local or social media discourse at any point. As I will discuss below, the *Maus* ban operates as a case study in using this model to demonstrate the effects of discourse in online and local spaces and the effect each had on one another.

It should be noted that in this model, outsiders and insiders are two distinct groups:

Figure 3. Outsiders and Insiders.

Insiders refer to those living within McMinn County, otherwise known as residents. Outsiders are those outside of McMinn County who engaged with the community during the book ban through social media. In this work, I classify local discourse as any discourse taking place within McMinn County, as defined in Chapter 1, and social media discourse as any discourse that took place on social media during the *Maus* ban. One thing to note in this model is that discourse, much like it is understood by Allen in her discourse flow model, does not stay in one space or the other. A person can engage in local discourse in one moment and pull out their phone to post on social media about the same topic a moment later, and this was the case in McMinn County for many residents. Therefore, it should be understood that the Localized Social

Media Intervention model operates based on the passage of time but is informed by the understanding that discourse can take place online and locally at the same time. In the following section, I apply the Localized Social Media Intervention model to McMinn County, identifying three stages of discourse that took place within the community: local discourse (origin), social media discourse, and local discourse (return).

Applying Localized Social Media Intervention to McMinn County

Under this model, discourse that began in McMinn County following the school board meeting minutes becoming public can be considered the origin point for discourse around the ban. At this point in the cycle, local discourse was based on the limited press coverage in the area and local gossip about what the school board had done. It should be noted that in interviews with residents, the local paper did not cover the ban and many found out about it through *The Tennessee Holler* or on social media. Local discourse within McMinn County can be understood as any conversation or discourse between residents within the community during the time of the ban. As will be discussed later, this manifested in a multitude of ways, from residents seeking out others to talk about the ban to discourse in the community that had already been taking place among groups. Within the context of the Maus ban, I refer to this discourse as the origin point of discourse around the ban, or local discourse (origin), shown in Figure XZY2.:
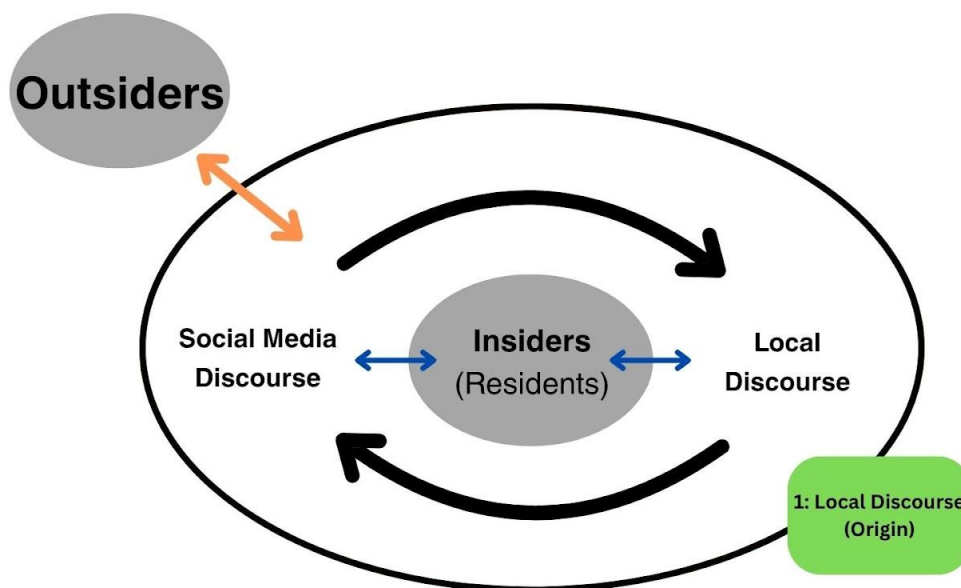
Figure 4. The origin point of discourse around the ban.

I use the term "origin" for two reasons. The first is to differentiate this local discourse from the local discourse that took place later after news of the ban went viral. The second is to show the starting point for when discourse began within the community. Given the timeline of events for the *Maus* ban, the origin point can be identified as roughly around the end of January 2022 when the meeting minutes for the emergency school board meeting were made public and publications like *The Tennessee Holler* began reporting on the ban. The origin point for the Localized Social Media Intervention model may not begin locally for every scenario but the circumstances around the removal and interviews with residents point toward local discourse originating for this case. Looking at the ban itself, the conversations between school board members during the January meeting to determine if *Maus* needed to be removed from the school district's curriculum can also be considered local discourse.

Social media discourse, which broadly refers to any discourse that took place on social media, is the next stage in the Localized Social Media model. This discourse can be broadly understood to be that which took place online from people living outside of McMinn County. Within this study, discourse consisted of tweets by users about the *Maus* ban and those directed toward the McMinn County school board's social media accounts.
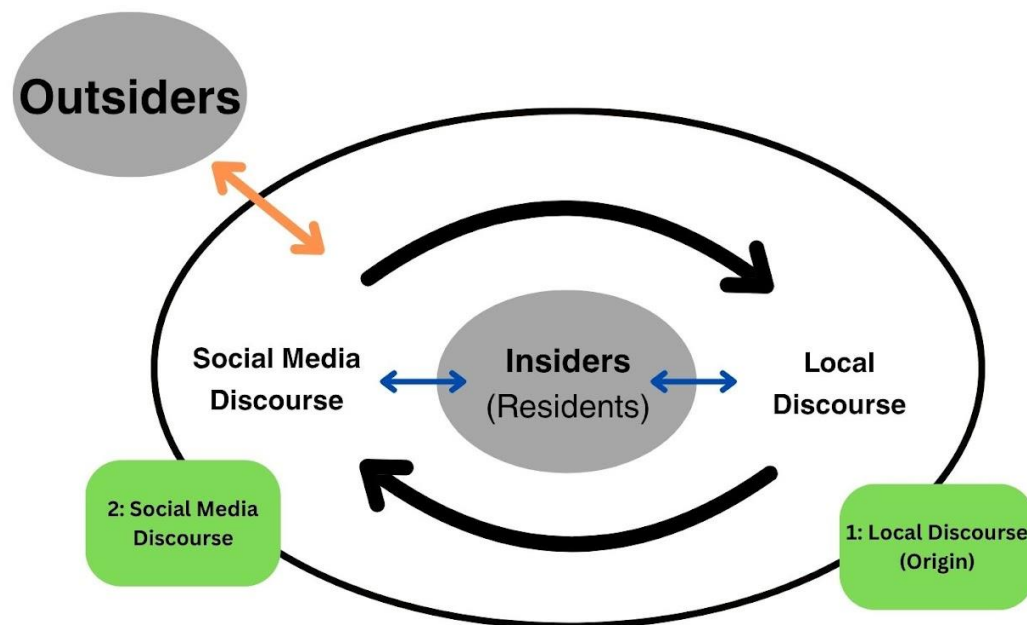
Figure 5. Social media discourse

As the model demonstrates, word of the ban traveled online from McMinn County, where people on social media discussed the ban and its implications. This resulted in a number of different responses, as discussed later, with the majority being negative reception toward the school board and their decision to remove Spiegelman's graphic memoir from their school curriculum. Tweets such as those calling the school board members nazis or the broader community of McMinn County bigoted are demonstrative of the negative discourse that developed as a result of the ban. Additionally, social media discourse that saw people online

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attempting to send copies of *Maus* to McMinn or sign petitions demanding the board reinstate Spiegelman's graphic memoir are instances of outsiders attempting to affect change in McMinn County. Across all of these examples of social media discourse are actions motivated by seeing what had happened in McMinn County after news of the *Maus* ban traveled online. In social media discourse it can be somewhat more difficult to pinpoint specific events representative of discourse taking place, but the statement from the school board in response to online criticism of the ban is a key moment. The tweet, written on January 27th, 2022, provides a response from the school board and outlines their reasoning for the ban. The tweet received significant attention from Twitter users, generating over 1000 replies. It is representative of the discourse on the ban that took place online.The speed, or velocity as Allen calls it in her discussion of discourse flow, at which discourse developed around the ban should also be noted. The *Tennessee Holler* story was published on the 26th of January, with the school board issuing a statement a day later on the 27th.

The final stage of the Localized Social Media Intervention model documented in this project is the return to local discourse, shown in Figure XYZ4. At this point in the timeline of events, it has been a few weeks since people online learned of the ban, and residents in McMinn County have had time to talk with each other and also see what is being said about the ban and their community online. This culminated in the first school board meeting since the ban and is representative of the local response to the school board's decision. The February 12th meeting took place just a few weeks after news of the ban went viral and saw a large volume of attendance from members of the community. Press coverage of the meeting and accounts from McMinn County residents paint the picture of most people ever to attend a school board meeting in the community, with a second overflow room being necessary to accommodate the number of

people who were in attendance. While the event itself is representative of local discourse, the

conversations that took place around the meeting were just as important. The most notable

examples of gatherings beyond the school board meeting McMinn County were the press

conference organized by McMinn Community Advocates before the school board meeting and a

discussion session hosted by the community's local episcopal church. Both of these events were

brought on by the ban on *Maus*, but also partly in response to social media discourse about the

ban and McMinn County.
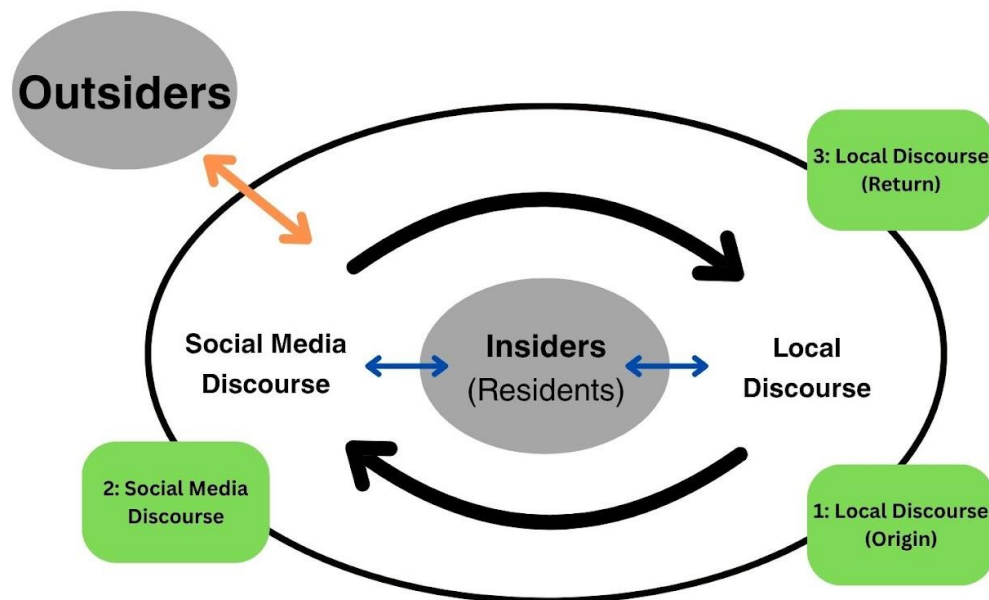
Figure 6. Local discourse informed by social media discourse; final stage of the Localized

Social Media Intervention model.

At this point in the model, discourse has returned back to the local community, now

informed by social media discourse. When discussing the ban and school board meeting that

followed, residents made note of the sense of the community that developed as a result of efforts

to push back against the ban and larger narratives that had developed online.

While it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss the long term effects of book bans on communities, this model presents a framework for better understanding how communities engage with discourse around book bans in the initial stages of online and local discourse. While it can be easy to assume that discourse ends once a school or library board makes a final decision on a book, there are long term effects on communities as a result of book bans. In McMinn County, Twitter users continued in discourse around book bans after the February 12th meeting while residents in McMinn County organized around other issues in the school district, citing the Maus ban as an inciting incident for organizing. These examples illustrate the ongoing discourse that can take place during book bans. As discussed previously, discourse is something individuals can enter and exit whenever they choose. As such, the Localized Social Media Intervention model as seen in the case of McMinn County represents the main points of discourse that took place in the community and online after the *Maus* ban. The model can be applied to discourse that took place in the years that followed after the ban and also to understand factors that influenced discourse leading up to the ban.

Limitations of the model

While this model is one which can be applied to the Maus ban and shows how discourse traveled over time following the ban, there are limitations to it. For one, online and local discourse are both fluid and subject to blend together in some instances, as touched upon in earlier discussion of the model. This can make it difficult to chart specific instances of discourse as strictly online or local, but also falls in line with Allen's discourse flow model. In some conversations with residents about the *Maus* ban, for example, an individual might engage in local discourse while also posting online about the ban. This can make it difficult to chart specifically where discourse is happening in the model, but also reflects the complexity of local-

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social media discourse and the notion that discourse cannot stay in strictly one space Regardless, the model in its present form can be used to understand how discourse between online and local spaces can broadly travel and the effect these spaces have on one another.

Discussion

Discussion, Implications, and Future Work

The banning of *Maus* in McMinn County is just one of many book bans that have taken place in the past five years. Examining the ban in relation to Localized Social Media Intervention demonstrates the importance of further work in understanding the impact of book bans on community discourse. The following section discusses the findings of this work, its implications, and ways in which I intend to continue with this research. I focus on the importance of Aligning outsiders with community needs, uses for Localized Social Media Intervention beyond book bans, social media as an alternative to local news media, book ban discourse on other social media platforms, and the role of youth voice in book ban discourse, and the life cycle of book bans.

Aligning Outsiders with Community Needs

A common refrain among residents interviewed for this project was the sense that outsiders failed to consider the needs and contexts of residents living in McMinn County when news of the *Maus* ban went viral. While the ban produced a large volume of outsider concern opposed to the school board's decision, this sometimes resulted in Localized Social Media Intervention that was not aligned with what residents felt was needed. Tweets calling the school board bigots or those offering to send copies of *Maus* to McMinn exemplify the disconnect highlighted by residents in discussing issues with outsider intervention following the ban. Localized Social Media Intervention offers the potential for change in communities where book

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bans have taken place, but the *Maus* ban in McMinn County exemplifies the importance of outsiders taking the time to learn about the communities that they wish to engage with. As some residents pointed out, it was not a bad thing that outsiders were concerned about the book ban and wanted to help people in McMinn County. Rather, it became problematic when outsiders attempted to engage in Localized Social Media Intervention with the assumption that they knew what was needed in the community.

Beyond the general public, this project provides a deeper understanding for scholars and information sciences practitioners by providing a case study on intellectual freedom in the age of social media. As discussed in Chapter 2, scholarship on book bans in the past has explored book bans in a time when social media was not as prevalent in book ban discourse. This project provides insight into the effects social media has had on how the general public has become familiar with book ban discourse and some of the tensions that can arise from joining that discourse. Additionally, this study provides a foundation for researchers interested in engaging in work with communities that have experienced a book ban. In Chapter 3, I discussed some of the barriers that arose from recruiting, highlighting some of the considerations researchers must take when conducting this research. This was especially apparent in recruiting school board members, and raises questions beyond this study as far as how researchers might recruit individuals who have challenged books or local government officials who supported book bans. For information sciences practitioners, this study offers insight into the value of community engagement within the context of book bans. The efforts of residents to organize through McMinn Community Advocates speaks to the power local organizing can have. For library professionals, this case study can serve as an example of positive community support and demonstrates the importance of developing community support.

Future work around Localized Social Media Intervention could involve the exploration of other instances of Localized Social Media Intervention in which outsiders worked in collaboration with residents rather than independently. The McMinn County case demonstrates that outsiders can show empathy or concern for communities they do not live in and that there is potential for meaningful change assisted by outsiders. Further exploration of this would necessitate exploring additional book ban sites to better understand how residents in these communities might seek out outsider assistance and what that might look for outsiders. Beyond this, Localized Social Media Intervention in McMinn County shows why it is important for outsiders to understand the contexts they are entering if they are to engage in Localized Social Media Intervention and one possible avenue for further examination in this is in developing ways for outsiders to better engage and connect with communities in need during book bans. In McMinn County, the dozens of copies of *Maus* sent from outsiders exemplify what happens when outsiders do not inquire with residents as to how to best support them in the wake of a book ban. Resources and programming could be developed to better educate outsiders and connect them with communities that need support. Developing a network of support for communities experiencing book bans is particularly important in considering present-day discourse around book bans. The *Maus* ban showed how many outsiders were interested and talking about fighting back against book bans and identifying ways in which support could be more easily communicated and conducted with communities experiencing book bans would be a valuable contribution to the field.

Localized Social Media Intervention: A use beyond book bans?

In discussing Localized Social Media Intervention as a concept, it should be noted that there is significant potential for its application in areas beyond book bans. While the events in

McMinn County were centered around the banning of Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir, one could also argue that the discourse and attention from outsiders found in McMinn could be applicable to any number of scenarios not relating to book bans. Broadly, responses to the *Maus* ban could be understood as local residents in a community disagreeing with a decision made by their local government. Localized Social Media Intervention, therefore, was the result of outsiders hearing about a local issue outside of their own communities and responding to it. This suggests that Localized Social Media Intervention has applications beyond the context of book bans and contributes more broadly to understanding how social media has reshaped understandings of community discourse between insiders and outsiders.

As the *Maus* ban showed, the outsider intervention can facilitate any number of responses and actions from residents and it may be productive to see how the Localized Social Media Intervention model might be applied to other scenarios outside of book bans. Social media creates pathways for discourse beyond geographical bounds and offers the potential for any number of seemingly local issues to become part of global discourse, as the *Maus* ban demonstrates. Applying the model to contexts outside of book bans offers the potential for a deeper understanding of social media and its effects on communities outside the confines of the digital world. Within the context of the library and information science, Localized Social Media Intervention has applications beyond book bans in other issues relating to intellectual freedom in libraries, such as controversies at library sites over meeting room reservations and community programming. As Christian Fuchs describes in research on social media, has altered the way political organizing occurs in the 21st century (2021) and the rapidly changing landscape of social media means that people are continually finding new ways to use social media discourse as a means of achieving social change. This is not to say that Localized Social Media

Intervention provides a definitive answer to understanding the extent to which social media is able to affect tangible change, but it does offer another avenue for exploration. The rise of social media presents a multitude of possibilities for intervention on social issues, but as the *Maus* ban demonstrates, outsiders must exercise reflexivity when engaging with affected communities.

Local News and Social Media as an Slternative for Information Dissemination

Continuing the discussion of social media, this project touches on the role social media can play in rural communities as a substitute for local news media and raises questions about how social media provides channels for discourse in these communities. Interviews with residents in McMinn County revealed that for many living in the community, news of the ban did not reach residents through traditional media channels, but rather through social media. Conversations with some residents revealed that the local paper in McMinn County had reduced its rate of publication significantly in recent years and as a result, many residents got their news from social media or more national sources. Facebook groups and pages served similar functions that the local newspaper previously had, such as classified pages and news about community events. A social media page might serve the same function as a newspaper, for example, by providing consistent coverage of community events happening week to week in the community. While the local newspaper might have previously served this purpose, infrequent publishing and the broader decline of local news publications may have contributed to the greater reliance on social media for residents. This is especially important when considering the limited options for local news in rural communities, which in some cases may only have one local publication like McMinn County. As such, social media can serve an important function in rural communities as a replacement for local news.

It is beyond the scope of this project to fully explore this idea, but the *Maus* ban in McMinn County provides insight into the role social media might play in rural communities when it comes to the dissemination of information. For several residents, when asked about their social media consumption, keeping up with community events was cited as one use they had for the technology. This extended to discourse around the *Maus* ban, as many cited social media as their source for first hearing about the ban. While the speed at which news travels online could be one reason why residents found out about the ban over social media rather than through their local news, the more limited options in rural communities could point to why social media plays such a large role in the dissemination of information in these spaces. As Christopher Ali points out, however, social media in rural communities is limited by the digital divide and limitations that often prevent widespread internet access to residents in these places(2021). Therefore, the McMinn County *Maus* ban may not be representative of information dissemination in rural communities, but offers an example of how social media presents an alternative to local news media. It should also be noted that residents who spoke about the local newspaper cited its infrequent publication rate and unwillingness to report on certain political topics as potential reasons for the ban reaching them online rather than locally. While this project has focused on the *Maus* ban in relation to Localized Social Media Intervention, the dissemination of information within McMinn County about the ban raises important questions around how rural communities utilize social media as a replacement for local news media.

Book Ban Discourse on Other Social Media Platforms

In examining Localized Social Media Intervention, it should be noted that social media discourse can take place across a number of platforms. Twitter discourse made up only part of social media discourse around the *Maus* ban and the inclusion of discourse found on other social

media platforms would provide greater insight into broader social media discourse as well as differences in discourse among platforms. Platforms such as Facebook and TikTok contain their own unique populations of users, meaning that data collection from these sources may yield different types of discourse from what was found on Twitter. TikTok, for example, tends to be more popular among young people compared to adults, meaning that the discourse found may be more centered around the youth experience and perspective. Interviews with McMinn County residents included questions relating to social media usage and many expressed that they used a number of different platforms based on who their audience was, a further testament to the importance of examining more than Twitter discourse. One's online presence can be influenced by a number of factors and their preferred social media platform for discourse might vary depending on the context of the discourse.

Further research into Localized Social Media Intervention must integrate discourse from additional platforms in order to better understand the broader field of social media discourse. It should also be noted that social media discourse has the potential to travel between platforms depending on the audience users are seeking to connect with. For example, a person engaging in discourse on Twitter may take to Facebook to connect with friends and family members to talk about a book ban. Much of this is enabled by the structure of social media platforms and anonymity afforded by some platforms over others. Twitter discourse is unique in that users have the option of not using their real name on their profiles. This combined with the option to maintain a public account where one's tweets are viewable by every user on the platform make Twitter a platform one that might encourage more emboldened discourse from a user. Conversely, Facebook is a platform where one may choose to be more private in their discourse because profiles are typically tied to one's real name and friends list. Further study of Localized

Social Media Intervention may involve an investigation of how people use different social media platforms to talk about book bans and what differences there might be between social media platforms.

The Role of Youth Voices in Book Ban Discourse

As findings in the previous chapter showed, young people are uniquely positioned within book ban discourse. Adultism was discussed as one of the biggest barriers to entry in discourse for young people, as the spaces in which discourse takes place in-person are often oriented toward adults and not inclusive of young people. This creates a situation where young people, who are interested in book ban discourse and are the ones most affected by book bans, might feel as though there is not a space for them to enter the conversation. This is problematic because it effectively prevents young people from entering a conversation that they are ostensibly a part of because they are the intended audience for books that are challenged. This raises the question of where young people fit into book ban discourse. There are a number of potential avenues for entry.

One option, which ties to earlier discussion of Localized Social Media Intervention is providing platforms for young people during book bans to have a voice. The *Maus* ban demonstrated one avenue for discourse in which adults provide space for young people to be a part of the discourse. While it is possible for young people to organize independently and create room for themselves in the discourse, this still has the potential to place them outside the primary spaces for discourse in a community, such as school board meetings. Adults empowering young people by creating spaces that are inclusive for them or providing guidance in how to navigate these spaces can be integral to allowing young people to enter discourse. Future work in this area might involve an increased focus on the role of young people in book ban discourse, specifically

in finding instances of book bans in which young people played a significant role in the discourse. The *Maus* ban in McMinn County serves as an effective example of one way in which young people might become involved in this discourse, as their presence at the press conference before the February 12 school board meeting demonstrates inclusivity from organizers of the press conference and an awareness of why youth voices are important to have in these spaces. As book ban discourse continues in the public consciousness, the potential for youth voices to enter the discourse grows. It is important to consider the barriers they face in entering and ways to empower their voices. For scholars, discussion of youth voices in Chapter 4 points toward the importance of additional research on youth voices in book ban discourse. In the case of practitioners, there is significant value in seeking out or developing resources to help elevate youth voices in social issues.

As findings in the previous chapter show, social media may function as one way to empower youth voices in book ban discourse. Social media provides a space for young people to engage in discourse around a number of social issues, including book bans. The online nature of these platforms and their affordances can create opportunities for young people to feel safe engaging in discourse without the risk of experiencing adultism in contexts such as local school board meetings.

Beyond *Maus*: The Life Cycle of a Book Ban (and what happens after the board meeting)

As conversations with residents in McMinn County continued, it became clear that the effects of the *Maus* ban had long-term impacts on residents that show the importance of examining book bans after school or library board meetings. Oftentimes when book bans take place, awareness of them outside of the community (and in some cases within it) is limited to headlines covering the ban or data points in lists from the American Library Association. While

discourse around book bans has grown in recent years, informed partly by increased coverage of them by news media and on social media, there is a need to examine the long-term effects of book bans on affected communities.

As mentioned in previous chapters, I traveled to McMinn County in April 2024 to begin recruiting residents for this study. While the visit did not yield much success in the way of recruiting school board members, it provided a great deal of insight into what the community was like post-*Maus* Ban. The most apparent observation was in my difficulties in recruiting at E.G. Fisher Public Library. I was informed by a resident that the library had fired its director over a Pride display just a few months previously, which I was unaware of. This significantly complicated my efforts to recruit while in McMinn, as I did not want to put current library staff at risk by advertising a study that involved discussion of censorship just a few months after their director had been fired over that very issue. As a result, my recruiting was limited to my attendance of the school board meeting, but the news about E.G. Fisher added another layer to my exploration of book ban discourse, showcasing how communities are not static following a book ban. When I inquired about the events at E.G. Fisher with others in McMinn, they spoke to the tension it generated, with some speculating that the *Maus* ban may have indirectly emboldened those who pushed for the library director's dismissal. The dismissal of the E.G. Fisher director shows that book bans do not happen in isolation, rather that such events are part of a larger context that can include other bans or actions in the communities where they take place.

Another aspect from my visit to McMinn in 2024 that speaks to the long-term effects of the *Maus* ban was my observations from attending the school board meeting. While there, I observed several people seated in the crowd wearing shirts bearing what I later learned was the

McMinn Community Advocates logo. This was over two years after *Maus* had been banned and McMinn Community Advocates had been formed, and yet the organization still had members attending meetings. I was informed by residents involved with the group that McMinn Community Advocates now sends at least two members to every school board meeting in order to ensure that school board members are aware that they are being held accountable.

In many ways, McMinn Community Advocates represents a development in the community facilitated by book ban discourse. Residents involved and close to the organization spoke to the sense of isolation experienced as a progressive living in the community before the *Maus* ban. As residents began to organize and McMinn Community Advocates took form, there was a sense among those I spoke to of being proud that such organizing was taking place in their community. As discussed in the previous chapter, residents lamented the school board's decision to stand by keeping *Maus* out of the school district curriculum, but felt a sense of hope in seeing how many people in their community were willing to show up to the meeting and also in efforts to organize under McMinn Community Advocates. In the time since the ban, McMinn Community Advocates became a part of the Tennessee Citizens Association, an organization in Tennessee centered around local, state, and national issues related to residents of Tennessee. This meant that McMinn Community Advocates was able to advocate for a number of issues within the community in the years that followed. In conversations with residents, this included funding for special education teachers, speaking out against changes to standardized testing in the state, and opposing school vouchers to privatize education within the state. As these examples demonstrate, the topics covered by McMinn Community Advocates in the years that followed are not directly tied to book bannings, but they are indicative of an organized interest in public education within the community. Many residents who spoke against the *Maus* ban argued that

the school board was violating their own policy in banning the graphic memoir, demonstrating that much of the advocacy from McMinn Community Advocates has continued the community emphasis on education policy. This is not to suggest that no political organizing or activism was already happening in McMinn County, but the emergence of McMinn Community Advocates and the work members have done in the years that followed speaks to the impact the ban had in galvanizing community interest in civic engagement.

Across the events at E.G. Fisher Public Library and the formation of McMinn Community Advocates, it is clear that the banning of *Maus* was not an event that existed in isolation within the community, indicating book bans can be inciting incidents for change in communities. As Camryn mentioned in her interview, outsiders are able to engage with book ban sites but can exit the discourse whenever they choose to, a luxury not available to those living in these communities. This shows the long-term impacts book bans can have on communities, whether positive or negative, and the importance of examining these experiences beyond the ban itself. The banning of *Maus* in McMinn County is evidence of this, as the Localized Social Media Intervention model shows that outsider engagement with McMinn County occurred in a number of forms but often provided short-term actions that failed to address more systemic issues at play. An examination of social discourse on the ban demonstrates user interest waning once the school board stood by their decision during the February 12th meeting in 2022, despite the events around E.G. Fisher and organizing with McMinn Community Advocates that followed. This is not to suggest that outsiders needed to continually monitor McMinn County after news of the February 12th school board meeting, but rather, outsiders may wish to consider the long-term impacts book bans can have on communities. Scholars and practitioners can apply

Localized Social Media Intervention to better understand and more effectively serve communities.

Further research on this topic is necessary to better understand these long-term community impacts as a result of book bans. While the McMinn County case demonstrates the potential of examining how communities respond to book bans long term, it is also one of dozens upon dozens of sites where a book ban has taken place and additional data is needed. Exploration of other communities in which book bans have taken place will provide further insight into the the potential complexities book bans can create in communities. One aspect of particular interest is the role press and social media coverage can have in mobilizing community change. In the case of McMinn County, Localized Social Media Intervention occurred at what might be an abnormal volume because of the widespread coverage of the ban. Not every book ban receives the same degree of outsider attention, and it would also be productive to examine a number of different communities to understand what factors facilitate community organizing like McMinn Community Advocates.

Similarly, examining the long-term effects of book bans on communities would be valuable in expanding understandings of book bans beyond their resolution at school or library board meetings. As exemplified by the events at E.G. Fisher Library, book bans do not exist in a vacuum and their effects on communities can have impact beyond a title being removed from curriculum or libraries. Studying additional book ban sites could elucidate the kinds of tensions that can remain within communities following a book ban. For example, the reinstatement of a challenged title may correspond to a scenario where it may be less likely for books to be challenged or libraries to be under threat. This could provide value in efforts to protect libraries from challengers by adding storytelling insight into discourse around book bans. The American

Library Association's data on book bans published every year is frequently cited in efforts to protect intellectual freedom, and stories that delve deeper into this data could potentially generate additional support for public libraries by showing the long-term impacts these bans can have (2025). From an outsider engagement standpoint, this segues into the next point on future work in identifying ways to better align community needs with outsider intervention.

Conclusion

This study explores the intersection of local and social media discourse by using the banning of *Maus* in McMinn County as a case study to understand how outsiders might influence discourse at the local level at the site of a book ban. As this study has found, social media provides a unique environment for discourse and engagement in which outsiders might learn about book bans that have taken place and choose to engage in Localized Social Media Intervention in an attempt to affect change in the community. As this study shows, however, outsiders can come into these spaces with good intentions but engage in such a way that is not aligned with what community members believe is actually helpful in pushing back against a book ban. The nature of social media is such that people can tweet negative things at school board members without considering the potential harm that might do in efforts to get a book reinstated. Similarly, well-intentioned actions such as sending copies of a banned book to a community might come from a place of care but ignore the actual needs of residents.

Further research is needed to fully understand the role of Localized Social Media Intervention in book ban discourse. Exploration of additional book ban sites and social media platforms are the most immediate next steps for research. Examining additional book ban sites would provide valuable insight into differences in community responses across sites and a deeper understanding of what factors might influence community engagement and organizing against

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book bans that take place. Social media platforms are distinct from one another and exploring discourse across other social media platforms in addition to Twitter would provide a clearer picture of social media discourse as it relates to book bans.

<u>Personal Reflection</u>

In the process of completing this project, it became clear that insights beyond the initial research objectives of this study had emerged. The first of these was in understanding the importance of storytelling in book ban discourse. Reiterating a statement from Camryn when discussing her experiences giving an interview with a journalist:

This is where we live, these are our people, these are our relationships. You get to come in, document, and then leave, and we'll still be here"

It can be very easy to talk about book bans without considering the stories attached to the places where they occur. In conducting interviews, it was important to understand that participants were sharing their stories and experiences with book bans, and to present with the understanding that this work should serve the community rather than be extractive. Camryn's statement is also relevant when considering the effects of outsiders engaging in book ban discourse and Localized Social Media Intervention. In my role as a researcher in intellectual freedom, I sometimes am asked what can be done in response to the rising numbers of book challenges every year. A few years ago I would have answered that people should simply read banned books and engage with challenged materials but this project has provided greater insight into the importance of outsider support when book bans take place. At the same time, Camryn's words should function as a reminder that outside support should honor and take into account positionality to the communities being supported.

Lastly was the larger conversations around the South in the United States and how perceptions of communities in this region influence book ban discourse. As it was discussed in the previous chapter, a sentiment shared by many residents interviewed was that many outsiders drew conclusions about McMinn County and its residents based on their region. As researchers, there is lots of room to explore the role of geography in book ban discourse and how biases might affect discourse about these sites. For librarians and teachers, educating patrons and students about banned books is just as important as education on biases and how to avoid them. If one is to support efforts to push back against book bans, one must also interrogate biases they might have against the sites where they take place.

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    Press.

APPENDIX

The following section contains material used for recruiting and conducting semi-structured

interviews with residents.

Interview Protocol

Questions for Board Members

Experiences with Social Media

1. Can you talk about your experiences with social media? What do you typically use it for?

2. What sort of social media presence does the school district have?

3. What was your experience with social media after Maus was removed from the school

   curriculum?

Experiences with *Maus*

1. What was your experience with Maus before the first school board meeting?

2. What do you think made the board ultimately decide to keep *Maus* out of the curriculum?

3. Has your perspective on *Maus* changed in the year since the decision was announced?

Community Response

1. What role do community members play in shaping school board decisions?

2. Who is allowed to attend school board meetings? Are people allowed to attend these

   meetings virtually?

3. With the amount of discussion that happened online, was there any concern that people

   outside of the community might try and take part in the school board meeting?

4. What kind of responses did you expect to receive from members of the community once

   the Board's decision became public?

5. What sorts of responses did you see from people in the community? Online?

6. Did public responses have any influence on your decision at the second meeting about

    Maus?

Questions for Parents and Teachers

Experiences with Social Media

1. How do you use social media? What do you typically use it for?

2. What do you think about discussing politics on social media?

3. Did you use social media at all to talk about *Maus* when you heard about the school

    board's decision?

Understanding of Censorship

1. Censorship can be defined in a lot of ways but let's say that it's about restricting access.

    Do you agree with this definition? How would you yourself define censorship?

2. What role do you think that parents/teachers should have in deciding what titles are

    appropriate for school curriculum or libraries?

    3. How do you think that books should be chosen for students? Is there a difference

    between schools or libraries?

Experiences with *Maus*

1. What can you tell me about *Maus*?

    2. Where did you hear about it being removed from the school curriculum? How did you

    feel when you heard that it had been removed from the school curriculum?

    3. What was your response to the School Board's decision to keep Maus of the school

    curriculum in February?

4.   Did you talk about the removal of *Maus* with any of your friends or family?

5.   There was a school board meeting on February 10 last year following the School Board's statement on social media about *Maus*. Did you attend this meeting or hear anything about it?

Questions for Students

Experiences with Social Media

1. How do you use social media? What do you typically use it for?

2. What do you think about discussing politics on social media?

3. Did you use social media at all to talk about *Maus* when you heard about the school board's decision?

4. Sometimes it can feel tough talking in spaces that have lots of adults in them, do you think social media helps at all in giving you a space to talk?

Understanding of Censorship

1. Censorship can be defined in a lot of ways but let's say that it's about restricting access. Do you agree with this definition? How would you yourself define censorship?

2.   What role do you think that parents/teachers should have in deciding what titles are appropriate for school curriculum or libraries?

3. How do you think that books should be chosen for students? Is there a difference between schools or libraries?

Experiences with *Maus*

1. What can you tell me about *Maus*?

2. Where did you hear about it being removed from the school curriculum? How did you feel when you heard that it had been removed from your school curriculum?

3. What was your response to the School Board's decision?

4. Did you talk about the removal of *Maus* with any of your friends or family?

5. There was a school board meeting on February 10 last year following the School Board's statement on social media about *Maus*. Did you attend this meeting or hear anything about it?

Questions for Community Members

Experiences with Social Media

1. How do you use social media? What do you typically use it for?

2. What do you think about discussing politics on social media?

3. Did you use social media at all to talk about *Maus* when you heard about the school board's decision?

Understanding of Censorship

1. Censorship can be defined in a lot of ways but let's say that it's about restricting access. Do you agree with this definition? How would you yourself define censorship?

2. What role do you think that parents/teachers should have in deciding what titles are appropriate for school curriculum or libraries?

3. How do you think that books should be chosen for students? Is there a difference between schools or libraries?

Experiences with Maus

1. What can you tell me about *Maus*?

2. Where did you hear about it being removed from the school curriculum? How did you feel when you heard that it had been removed from the school curriculum?

3. What was your response to the School Board's decision to keep Maus out of the school curriculum in February?

4. Did you talk about the removal of *Maus* with any of your friends or family?

5. There was a school board meeting on February 10 last year following the School Board's statement on social media about *Maus*. Did you attend this meeting or hear anything about it?

Intake Survey Questions

Name:
Age:
How long have you been living in McMinn County?:

Gender:
Race/Ethnicity:

How many hours a week do you estimate you spend on social media (Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, etc.):
- None
- 1-5
- 6-12
- 13-24
- More than 24

How familiar are you with the topic of censorship? (Rated 1-5):

Recruiting Scripts

Email Script

Hello,

My name is Andrew Zalot and I am a doctoral candidate at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am conducting a study as part of my dissertation about how residents of a community respond to a book ban. In 2022, the McMinn County School Board voted to remove Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* from the eighth grade curriculum. This decision made national news and I'm interested in hearing from residents about what they thought about the board's decision and what kinds of discussion took place in the town. If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to complete a survey and interview in which you will talk about your experiences and understanding of the school board's decision. The survey will take roughly ten minutes to complete and the interview no more than an hour. You will receive a $25 Amazon eCode for your participation. If you are interested in participating, please reach out to me at via email at azalot2@illinois.edu

Script for library sites

Dear [Library site director]

My name is Andrew Zalot and I am a doctoral candidate at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am conducting a study as part of my dissertation about how residents of a community respond to a book ban. In 2022, the McMinn County School Board voted to remove Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* from the eighth grade curriculum. This decision made national news and I'm interested in hearing from residents about what they thought about the board's decision and what kinds of discussion took place in the town. With your permission, I would like to advertise this study to your patrons to solicit potential participants. I believe that this case offers valuable insight into how people talk about book bans and hearing from McMinn County residents about their thoughts the school board's decision would be incredibly important for my research. If you are interested, I have attached recruiting materials to be given to patrons along with an email message that could also be sent out. I can also be reached at azalot2@illinois.edu if you have any questions! Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Recruiting Flyer

IRB Documents

Consent Document
[This form will be completed online via REDCap]

Principal Investigator Name and Title: Dr. Rachel Magee
Research Assistant Name: Andrew Zalot
Department and Institution: School of Information Sciences – University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Primary Contact Information: azalot2@illinois.edu

BACKGROUND

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you want to volunteer to take part in this study.

The purpose of the study is to understand how local communities respond to book bans and how residents of these communities talk with each other about the subject. This study hopes to learn more about the role community members play in book bans and also what kind of influence social media can have on local conversations.

STUDY PROCEDURE

It will take you approximately 50 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes to complete this study. As part of this study you will be asked to complete a short survey and take part in an interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed as part of the study but your personal information will be kept confidential. You will be asked about your understanding of book bans and experiences within McMinn County when Art Spiegelman's Maus was removed from the school district's eighth-grade curriculum. The survey will take approximately five to 15 minutes to compete and the interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. You may choose to not answer any questions on the survey or during the interview and may stop at any time as well. There will be approximately 25 participants in this study and we are looking to hear all perspectives on book banning.

RISKS

The risks of this study are minimal. You may feel upset thinking about or talking about personal information related to book bans or your experiences in McMinn County. These risks are similar to those you experience when discussing personal information with others. We also recognize that you may be recognized based on your responses during the interview and as such we will keep your personal information confidential in this study in order to protect your identity.

IRB Number: IRB24-0080

IRB Approval Date: 02/27/2024

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits for taking part in this study. However, we hope the information we get from this study may help develop a greater understanding of book bans along with the relationship between local and online communities in the future.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHERS PROTECT MY INFORMATION?

In order to protect your identity, your personal information will be kept confidential. We will also be using pseudonyms when writing about this study to protect your identity. The identity key and transcripts will be stored in an encrypted folder and recordings will be destroyed following transcription.

WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE INFORMATION COLLECTED DURING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy.

There are reasons why information about you may be used or seen by other people beyond the research team during or after this study. Examples include:

- University officials, government officials, study funders, auditors, and the Institutional Review Board may need access to the study information to make sure the study is done in a safe and appropriate manner.

HOW MIGHT THE INFORMATION COLLECTED IN THIS STUDY BE SHARED IN THE FUTURE?

We will keep the information we collect about you during this research study for study recordkeeping and for potential use in future research projects. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be stored securely and separately from the rest of the research information we collect from you. You will be allowed to choose a pseudonym (or fake name) to be used in place of your own before the start of the interview in order to protect your identity.

Deidentified data from this study may be shared with the research community and with journals in which study results are published. We will remove or code any personal information that could directly identify you before the study data are shared. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your personal data.

PERSON TO CONTACT

If you have questions, complaints or concerns about this study, you can contact Andrew Zalot at 956-537-0777 or Dr. Rachel Magee at 217-265-6592. If you feel you have been harmed as a result of participation, please call Andrew Zalot at 956-537-0777 who may be reached from 10am to 4pm central time Mondays to Fridays.

Dr. Rachel Magee
Understanding Local and Online Responses to Book Bans

Institutional Review Board: If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at irb@illinois.edu. If you would like to complete a brief survey to provide OPRS feedback about your experiences as a research participant, please follow the link here or through a link on the OPRS website: https://oprs.research.illinois.edu/. You will have the option to provide feedback or concerns anonymously or you may provide your name and contact information for follow-up purposes.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Research studies include only people who choose to take part. You can tell us that you don't want to be in this study. You can start the study and then choose to stop the study later. This will not affect your relationship with the investigator or the University of Illinois.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS

As a thank you for your participation, you will receive a $25 Amazon eCode via email within 24 hours of completing the interview.

CONSENT

_____
First and Last Name of Participant

_____
Signature (use mouse or finger)

Please print this consent form after clicking the "Next Page" if you would like to retain a copy for your records.

I have read and understand the above consent form. By clicking "Next Page" and then clicking the "Submit" button to send this form, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this study.

OPRS Form version D1323

Parental Permission Document

[This form will be completed online via REDCap]

Principal Investigator Name and Title: Dr. Rachel Magee
Research Assistant Name: Andrew Zalot
Department and Institution: School of Information Sciences – University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Primary Contact Information: azalot2@illinois.edu

BACKGROUND

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you will allow your child to take part in this study.
The purpose of the study is to understand how local communities respond to book bans and how residents of these communities talk with each other about the subject. This study hopes to learn more about the role community members play in book bans and what kind of influence social media can have on local conversations.

STUDY PROCEDURE

It will take your child approximately 50 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes to complete this study. As part of this study they will be asked to complete a short survey and take part in an interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed as part of the study but their personal information will be kept confidential. They will be asked about their understanding of book banning and experiences within McMinn County when Art Spiegelman's Maus was removed from the school district's eighth-grade curriculum. The survey will take approximately five to 15 minutes to compete and the interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Your child may choose to not answer any questions on the survey or during the interview and may stop at any time as well. There will be approximately 25 participants in this study and we are looking to hear all perspectives on book banning.

RISKS

The risks of this study are minimal. Your child may feel upset thinking about or talking about personal information related to book bans or their experiences in McMinn County. These risks are similar to those experienced when discussing personal information with others. We also recognize that your child may be recognized based on their responses during the interview and as such we will keep their identity confidential in this study in order to protect their identity.

BENEFITS

Dr. Rachel Magee
Understanding Local and Online Responses to Book Bans

There are no direct benefits for taking part in this study. However, we hope the information we get from this study may help develop a greater understanding of book bans along with the relationship between local and online communities in the future.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHERS PROTECT MY INFORMATION?

In order to protect your child's information, their personal information will be kept confidential. We will also be using pseudonyms when writing about this study in order to protect their identity. The identity key and transcripts will be stored in an encrypted folder and recordings will be destroyed following transcription.

WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE INFORMATION COLLECTED DURING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your child's personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy.

There are reasons why information about your child may be used or seen by other people beyond the research team during or after this study. Examples include:
- University officials, government officials, study funders, auditors, and the Institutional Review Board may need access to the study information to make sure the study is done in a safe and appropriate manner.

HOW MIGHT THE INFORMATION COLLECTED IN THIS STUDY BE SHARED IN THE FUTURE?

We will keep the information we collect about your child during this research study for study recordkeeping and for potential use in future research projects. Your child's name and other information that can directly identify them will be stored securely and separately from the rest of the research information we collect from them.

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community and with journals in which study results are published. We will remove or code any personal information that could directly identify you before the study data are shared. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your child's personal data.

PERSON TO CONTACT

If you have questions, complaints or concerns about this study, you can contact Andrew Zalot at 956-537-0777 or Dr. Rachel Magee at 217-265-6592. If you feel you have been harmed as a result of participation, please call Andrew Zalot at 956-537-0777 who may be reached from 10am to 4pm central time Monday to Friday.

Institutional Review Board: If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at irb@illinois.edu. If you would like to complete a brief survey

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to provide OPRS feedback about your experiences as a research participant, please follow the link here or through a link on the OPRS website: https://oprs.research.illinois.edu/. You will have the option to provide feedback or concerns anonymously or you may provide your name and contact information for follow-up purposes.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Research studies include only people who choose to take part. You can tell us that you don't want your child to be in this study. Your child can start the study and then choose to stop the study later. This will not affect your relationship with the investigator or the University of Illinois.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS

As a thank you for your child's participation, they will receive a $25 Amazon eCode via email within 24 hours of completing the interview.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to let my child, named below, to be in the research study described above.

_____
Child's Name (First and Last)

_____
Parent/Guardian Name (First and Last)

_____
Signature (use mouse or finger)

Please print this consent form after clicking the "Next Page" if you would like to retain a copy for your records.

I have read and understand the above consent form. By clicking "Next Page" and then clicking the "Submit" button to send this form, I indicate my willingness to allow my child to voluntarilyh take part in this study.

Assent to Participate in a Research Study

[This form will be completed online via REDCap]

Who are we and what are we doing?

We are from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. We would like to ask if you would be interested in participating in a research study. A research study is a way to find out new information about something. This is the way we try to find out how people feel about book bans and social media. We're particularly interested in hearing about the book *Maus*, which was removed from classes in your school district in 2022. We want to learn more about what people were saying when this book was removed from the school curriculum and how young people like you reacted.

Why are we asking you to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because we want to learn more about book bans and the role social media can play in how we talk about them. We want you to be in this study because you are a student in McMinn County and we'd love to hear what you have to say about *Maus* and when it was removed from the school curriculum in 2022. We also believe that young people like you often get left out of the conversation when it comes to talking about book bans and your perspective provides some really important insight into this.

What happens in the research study?

If you decide to be in this research study and parent or guardian agree, you will complete a short survey and interview in which you'll talk about your understanding of book bans and also your experiences with Maus as a student in McMinn County. Questions will ask you to think about book bans and how you might discuss them with people. It will take you approximately 50 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes to complete this the survey and interview. As part of this study, the interview will be recorded and transcribed (written down), but we will be destroying the recording once it has been transcribed. We will also be using pseudonyms (fake names) to protect each participant from being identified.

Will any part of the research study hurt you?

There is a chance that during this research study you could feel afraid, uncomfortable, or hurt. You can stop at any time if you want to or skip any question you don't feel comfortable answering.

Will the research study help you or anyone else?

We do not know for sure if being in this research study will help you. It is possible that we could learn more about book bans and how people talk about them with each other and online through social media.

Who will see the information about you?

Only the researchers or others who are doing their jobs will be able to see the information about you from this research study. There is a chance that other people may be able to identify you based on your

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answers but we will be working to ensure that your identity is protected. You will be allowed to choose a pseudonym (or fake name) to be used in place of your own before the start of the interview in order to protect your identity.

What if you have any questions about the research study?

It is okay to ask questions. If you don't understand something, you can ask us. We want you to ask questions now and anytime you think of them. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call Andrew at 956-537-0777, email him at azalot2@illinois.edu or ask us the next time we see you.

Do you have to be in the research study?

You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to. Being in this study is up to you. No one will be upset if you don't want to do it. Even if you say yes now, you can change your mind later and tell us you want to stop. You will also be able to skip any questions during the survey or interview if you don't want to answer them.
You can take your time to decide. You can talk to your parent or guardian before you decide. We will also ask your parent or guardian to give their permission for you to be in this study. But even if your parent or guardian say "yes" you can still decide not to be in the research study.

Agreeing to be in the study

_____
First and Last Name of Participant

_____
Signature (use mouse or finger)

Please print this consent form after clicking the "Next Page" if you or your parent would like a copy of this form.

I have read and understand the above consent form. By clicking "Next Page" and then clicking the "Submit" button to send this form, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this study.