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Libraries in the Spotlight: First Amendment Auditors and Social Media Commentary

Abstract

Social media platforms have amplified public scrutiny of libraries, as First Amendment auditors (FAAs) record their interactions to test constitutional boundaries. These encounters spark debates over the balance between free speech and maintaining an inclusive, orderly environment. Through an analysis of 300 YouTube comments on FAA-library interactions, this study highlights polarized public reactions influenced by selective video editing and algorithm-driven echo chambers. While auditors bring attention to issues of transparency, their confrontational tactics often challenge the core mission of libraries. The findings emphasize the importance of clear policies, staff training, and strategies to address the complexities of digital accountability.

Introduction

Libraries have long served as pillars of democratic societies, symbolizing intellectual freedom, knowledge, and public access. They embody inclusivity and openness, offering spaces where individuals can explore ideas without fear of censorship. However, these principles are increasingly tested by the emergence of First Amendment auditors (FAAs) in the United States, self-described activists who record in publicly accessible spaces, including libraries, to assert their constitutional rights (Beavers, 2023; Leavy, 2022). While promoting transparency, their actions often challenge the balance between constitutional freedoms and operational order in libraries. Similar auditors also exist in other jurisdictions like the United Kingdom but reference other laws of free press for their region that are not the U.S.'s First Amendment (Harper, 2024).

First Amendment audits highlight the tension between libraries' roles as limited public forums and their responsibility to maintain a conducive environment for learning and patron privacy (Balzer, 2022). Libraries must navigate the legal and ethical complexities of upholding constitutional freedoms while protecting their mission (Caldwell-Stone, 2019). These audits, though rooted in principles of transparency and accountability, often bring an element of unpredictability that challenges traditional library operations (Beavers, 2023). Auditors frequently record interactions with staff and other patrons, framing their actions as exercises as a form of free press. However, these recordings can disrupt the library's quiet and inclusive atmosphere, creating friction between auditors and staff tasked with maintaining order.

The spread of such interactions on social media amplifies their impact, as videos highlighting contentious exchanges often go viral on video-based platforms like YouTube and TikTok (First Amendment Auditors, n.d.; Long Island Audit, n.d., Perez, 2022). This exposure can shape public perceptions, sometimes unfairly portraying library staff as antagonistic or uncooperative. Libraries, therefore, face increasing pressure to respond to these audits in a manner that respects constitutional rights while safeguarding their fundamental mission of service and accessibility.

This study explores these dynamics, examining how social media commentary reflects public sentiment towards these interactions.

Methodology

The study analyzed ten randomly selected YouTube videos of First Amendment audits conducted in public libraries, the search term was “Libraries AND First Amendment Auditors. A total of 300 comments were randomly selected, with 30 comments analyzed per video. Each comment was categorized into five sections: Pro-Auditor, Anti-Auditor, Pro-Library Worker, Anti-Library Worker, Not Applicable. Library workers were defined as anyone seemingly employed by the library, including librarians, library assistants, and security guards. Comments mentioning police or general public interactions, as well as unrelated discussions, were classified as “Not Applicable.” It is essential to acknowledge the biases in this type of approach, both in the type of commentator that may watch and comment on these videos, as well as in the author’s assessment of the comments.

Results

From the sample of 300 comments these were the results:

Category	Number of Comments
Pro-Auditor	97
Anti-Auditor	12
Pro-Library Worker	17
Anti-Library Worker	58
Not Applicable	132

The total number of categorizations was 316, which exceeded the expected 300 due to overlapping sentiments within individual comments. For example, some comments were Pro-Auditor and Anti-Library Worker, Anti-Auditor and Pro-Library Worker, and Pro-Both or Anti-Both. If expressing two sentiments, they were recorded separately so one comment could fill two spots. Excluding Not Applicable, Pro-Auditor comments dominated, while Anti-Library workers were also prominent. Pro-Library worker comments were the least common. Many of the Not Applicable comments were related to the police and their interaction with the auditor, but this can be explored in future studies.

Discussion

The prevalence of pro-auditor comments reflects the likely bias inherent in the selected audience. Subscribers to FAA channels or those influenced by algorithms promoting such content form an echo chamber that amplifies support for auditors (Brown et al., 2022; Grusauskaite et al., 2024; Lambrecht et al., 2021). This environment can also explain the significant anti-library worker sentiment. Auditors often present selectively edited videos emphasizing staff reactions while minimizing their own provocations, shaping public perceptions in their favor.

Social media plays a significant role in shaping the narrative around these encounters. Videos of library audits often include dramatic clickbait titles, captions, and commentary designed to engage viewers (Zannettou et al., 2018). While these elements can highlight legitimate concerns about government transparency, they may also misrepresent the intentions and actions of library staff.

Nevertheless, some positive trends emerge. Instances where library staff responded neutrally or positively to auditors generally resulted in fewer viral videos and a moderate level of pro-library worker comments. These interactions suggest that de-escalation and adherence to established policies, such as allowing photography or filming within reasonable guidelines, can mitigate potential conflicts. By maintaining composure and focusing on clear communication, staff can often defuse potentially disruptive situations.

Despite these observations, the confrontational nature of some audits poses significant challenges (Balzer, 2023). Library staff must balance their commitment to upholding constitutional rights with their responsibility to protect patron privacy and safety. Training on constitutional rights and de-escalation strategies is essential to equip staff with the tools to manage such encounters effectively. Transparent policies that balance First Amendment rights with the library's mission can also help foster an environment conducive to both accountability and public service.

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