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Sense or censorship: press freedom, high school journalism programs and democratic education

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Abstract:

Censorship, or the lack of press freedom, has been prevalent in high school journalism programs even before recent controversial discussions about COVID-19 policy, critical race theory and racial justice movements in schools. Research has established that scholastic journalism is a tool of democratic education, which aims to equip students with knowledge and skills to effectively engage in democratic society. When uncensored and able to cover controversial topics freely, students in high school journalism programs can ask tough questions freely and publish articles with authority on issues that are central to community structure, power, and life. This project explores the extent to which established, award-winning high school journalism programs in the United States can expect censorship, as well as how students and advisors in those programs discuss and cover controversial topics — divisive political and social issues including COVID policy, racism, mental health, and inappropriate faculty conduct. The study accomplishes its goals using textual analysis — of fall 2021 articles in newspapers on the National Scholastic Press Association’s list of top 100 publications all-time — and interviews with 11 high school journalists and their faculty advisors from those award-winning schools. Through this study, I find that the established scholastic journalism programs in my sample had high levels of press freedom and were rarely censored — largely because the programs were student-driven programs where students had access to key sources and power networks, confidence in their journalistic abilities, and conviction in the merits of press freedom.

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Table of Contents

Introduction, scope and research questions	3
Literature review	7
I. Scholastic journalism as a tool for democratic education	7
II. State of student press freedom	9
III. Reasons behind censorship of scholastic journalism	11
IV. Censorship as a detriment to democratic education	14
Methodology	21
A: Data analysis	21
B: Interviews	25
Findings	27
A: Data analysis of controversial articles across 28 award-winning newspapers	27
B: Interview analysis on how students and advisors maintain press freedom	33
Conclusion	54
Appendix	57
Acknowledgments	59
Bibliography	60

Introduction, scope, and research questions

In November 2021, the advisor for my former high school’s journalism program — one I was involved in for four years — pulled an op-ed from publication because it was “inflammatory.” For more than a month afterward, the paper’s editors discussed what to do about it and whether that advisor’s action was justified. These are the types of conversations on which I aim to shed light through this project — because, through research and personal experience, I’ve come to believe that high school journalism programs can do so much good for us as students.

As my interest in journalism — which has its roots in my time as a scholastic journalist and has stretched through college and, likely, postgraduate life — has grown over the years, so has my interest in politics, policy, and my civic duty. Immersing myself in student journalism roles has helped me embrace my role as a citizen who knows how to navigate democratic society, and I know I’m not alone: Journalism programs are nearly ubiquitous in United States high schools. A 2011 census of scholastic journalism,¹ the most recent available, found that 96 percent of the schools provided an opportunity for students to participate in some form of student media, and 64 percent of the schools had a student newspaper.

Alongside eventually becoming managing editor of my college paper, the Yale Daily News, one of the most rewarding journalistic experiences I’ve had involved leading workshops for high school journalism students. I’ve worked with both students in the established journalism programs mentioned throughout this prospectus and students who go to relatively underfunded schools, mostly in New Haven, Connecticut. Through this I’ve learned that the most valuable part of scholastic journalism — and its ties to democratic education — is the way it grants students, often with little expertise or experience, the ability to freely ask difficult questions about critical topics and publish articles on them.

Democratic education is a system of education that aims to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to “enjoy basic liberties and opportunities, including the ability to engage in the processes of democratic governance,” which is a tool of social and political power and mobility.² Journalism,

¹ Center for Scholastic Journalism, “The 2011 Scholastic Journalism Census: Student Media Presence Remains Strong in American Public High Schools,” 2.

² Gutman, *Democratic Education*, 2.

if uncensored, has the potential to teach a student how to ask questions on topics they may know nothing about — and then write about them with authority. It teaches students to question everything, hold those in power accountable and give voice to those whose voices are often silenced. And it teaches them to talk, listen, inquire, and engage with our community through conversations and with empathy. That’s a powerful tool for social change.

Yes, some scholars have made arguments in favor of censorship, namely for material that may do more harm than good when made public,³ such as content that may put a student in danger or incite violence. But that type of content is rare, and is no secret that overall, censorship is a detriment to intellectual freedom, and censorship — especially of coverage deemed “sensitive” by advisors or administrators, often involving race, gender, religion, administrative politics, and other matters — permeates high school, or scholastic, journalism programs. Discussion of censorship is especially pertinent in the current political climate, where legislation and debate⁴ on school-related policies, including statewide curricular bans⁵ on “controversial” topics like critical race theory, is prominent and has reflected in student journalists’ coverage.⁶ In the last year and a half, student journalists have reported on the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism, critical race theory — all topics that administrators often consider “controversial” and would potentially censor.

There is extensive research on student press freedom, the reasons behind general censorship of student newspapers, the effectiveness of scholastic journalism as a tool for democratic education, and censorship as a detriment to democratic education. However, there is little research bringing these topics together or looking at how press freedom varies among schools, especially in schools with longstanding and award-winning journalism programs and in a sociopolitical moment where coverage of potentially controversial topics is at a high. My capstone aims to do so by examining what elements of these established journalism programs contribute to different levels of student press freedom and, consequently, higher quality democratic education — which scholars have shown to be an effective way to fight educational inequity.

³ Rojas, Shah, and Faber, “For the Good of Others,” 185.

⁴ Barbaro et al., “The School Board Wars, Part 1.”

⁵ Gross, “From Slavery to Socialism, New Legislation Restricts What Teachers Can Discuss.”

⁶ Davis, interview.

Broadly, I am viewing press freedom as a way to help scholastic journalism contribute to quality democratic education. Thus, I am starting the project from the standpoint, established by research,⁷ that press freedom is a net positive. More specifically, I'm looking at the following research questions — framed by the context of the current political moment and as measured by interviews and discourse analysis of controversial topics in newspaper samples:

1. To what extent do “established” high school newspapers (longstanding newspaper programs that have won multiple awards from the National Scholastic Press Association) cover controversial topics during a time framed by COVID-19, racial justice protests, political polarization, and other issues?
2. How do teachers — journalism program advisors — and students navigate questions of press freedom and censorship in three high school programs?
3. How might elements of these established journalism programs shed light on scholastic journalism's potential to be a tool of democratic education through increased press freedom?

To answer these questions, I first draw on research about the current state of student press freedom, some common reasons for censorship in scholastic journalism programs, scholastic journalism as a tool for democratic education, and censorship as a detriment to democratic education. I outline these themes in my literature review. Then, in my study, I synthesize this research and apply it specifically to schools with long standing and award-winning journalism programs, in a moment where controversial content is ubiquitous in schools and school-related news using data analysis of 28 NSPA award-winning high school newspapers and through 11 interviews with students and advisors involved with those papers.

One scope-related question to consider: If the goal of this study is to advance democratic education by looking at journalism as a tool to open opportunities for participation in democratic society for all, why am I choosing to focus on established programs, those that tend to be more well-resourced and therefore already privileged? First, schools that are smaller, poorer, and have a large minority population are also less likely to have student media opportunities⁸ and less likely to have publicly available articles that are posted online.

⁷ Shoemaker and Reese, Cunningham, Lerner, Norris.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

Thus, focusing on established programs felt like an accessible way to narrow down a large sample space of high school journalism programs. Additionally, many of the more established programs had the resources, institutional backing, and bandwidth to keep publishing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic — and even before then published far more frequently for the same reasons. Further, they often have advisors with backgrounds in professional journalism who may be able to articulate questions of coverage ethics in a more nuanced way. Second, if the goal is to advance equity of some sort through the democratic education that these programs provide, looking at programs that have done well within our stratified education system could provide insight⁹ that may in the future help programs that have done less well.

Also scope wise, due to my project's small sample size and subjective nature, I cannot generalize any correlation I find, nor will I be able to make causal statements. Additionally, I cannot claim¹⁰ that this study is representative or generalizable, since it is difficult to distinguish all the factors at play in complex relationships between student journalists, their advisors, and school administrators from less than a dozen interviews. What I can say is that this study examines student press freedom through the lens of current events to shed light on how press freedom in scholastic journalism is impacted in a politically charged time where topics society sees as controversial are frequently discussed — an era that has happened before and is bound to happen again.

Through this project, I find that in my sample of established scholastic journalism programs, censorship was rare and largely happened due to student self-censorship or following group discussions where advisors, administrators and students were all present. These scholastic journalism programs had high levels of press freedom because they were student-driven programs with knowledge of legal press rights, access to key journalistic sources and networks of power, confidence that students in the program could cover sensitive topics well, and a strong conviction that their press freedom allowed them to do meaningful work.

⁹ It's worth noting that, of course, findings from my study's sample will not necessarily apply to less-privileged schools depending on those schools' respective contexts.

¹⁰ Small, "How Many Cases Do I Need?," 12.

Literature review

This capstone draws on research about scholastic journalism as a tool for democratic education, the history and current state of student press freedom, common reasons behind censorship in scholastic journalism programs, and censorship as a detriment to democratic education.

A. Why scholastic journalism is beneficial for democratic education

Democratic education¹¹ is defined as a system of education that aims to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to “enjoy basic liberties and opportunities, including the ability to engage in the processes of democratic governance,” which is a tool of social and political power and a central outcome of educational equity. It helps students gain cultural competence, social capital and, hopefully, social, and socioeconomic mobility. In *Democratic Education*, Amy Gutmann¹² makes the case that the “strongest public justification for a publicly funded system of primary and secondary education is to provide educational opportunity for all and to educate all to the skills and virtues of democratic citizenship.” The quote captures the essence of democratic education, a theory that embraces equal opportunity, public recognition, and mutual respect.

Scholastic journalism at its best teaches students these values because it allows students, regardless of prior expertise or experience in a field, to ask tough questions freely and publish articles with authority on issues that matter to the writer’s community. When reporting, students who participate in high school journalism programs have to critically engage with complex issues from multiple perspectives, which is in line with several key tenets of democratic education: critical thinking, contextual knowledge, appreciation of others’ perspectives, toleration, civic integrity, and

¹¹ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 1.

¹² Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 4.

public mindedness.¹³ In this, democratic education also includes a focus on “justice-oriented actions” that involve working with people who experience oppression and exploitation.¹⁴ A study titled “Journalism Kids Do Better” found that students who engage in this kind of journalism are more engaged and concerned citizens,¹⁵ especially when they write stories to uplift underrepresented voices and tell untold stories.

High school journalism programs can also function as tools of democratic education in that they help students gain social and political capital,¹⁶ thus giving them greater potential to “advance” in society. When students in these programs learn whom to source and how to interact with a wide range of people in their societal systems, whether a school, a city or a nation, they learn how to reach the people who have the power, influence and resources to help them accomplish their goals¹⁷ — something Preus calls “navigating systems.”¹⁸ In the context of scholastic journalism, these powerful people often include school administrators, local officials such as school board members and community leaders.

Taken together, democratic education through high school journalism programs contributes to two major student benefits. The first is “positive youth development,” through which Lerner¹⁹ emphasizes the two-way impact of an environment on the individual and vice versa. Positive youth development²⁰ encompasses competence, confidence, connection, character and caring/compassion, all traits inherent in some way both to successful high school journalism programs and to democratic education. The second benefit is similar but more application-based: giving students a

¹³ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 2.

¹⁴ Westheimer and Kahne, “What Kind of Citizen?” 241.

¹⁵ Dvorak, Lain, and Dickson, *Journalism Kids Do Better*, 300.

¹⁶ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 4.

¹⁷ Preus et al., “Listening to the Voices of Civically Engaged High School Students,” 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁹ Lerner, *Liberty*, 24.

²⁰ “Explore SEL.”

sense of political agency and direct participation in democratic society.²¹ These benefits encompass the extent of the relationship between scholastic journalism and democratic education — that there is significant overlap in what makes each successful.

B. From *Hazelwood*: legal context of student press freedom

As established in the previous section, the overlap between scholastic journalism is most meaningful when students have the freedom to ask tough questions freely. This ability is dependent on the extent to which high school journalists have student press freedom — a right that has been debated for more than 50 years.

In the 1969 case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” Yet the idealistic comment in *Tinker*’s ruling masks the nuances of student speech and press freedom. Student media outlets, which include school newspapers, primarily feature student-written content but can be interpreted as an official voice of the school since they bear the school’s name and are circulated publicly.

The question then becomes: To what extent should administrators have control over student media? In 1988, *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, a Supreme Court case on censorship of articles about divorce and teen pregnancy in the student newspaper of Hazelwood East High School in St. Louis County, Missouri, set the first legal precedent for censorship of student media. The *Hazelwood* ruling²² stated that school administrators had editorial control over student publications as long as their objections were “reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.” Also per *Hazelwood*, more often than not and especially when the journalism program exists as a class, the content produced by high

²¹ Giroux, “When Schools Become Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 357.

²² “Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier.”

school newspapers can be legally classified²³ as “school-sponsored speech,” which adds to justification of administrative editorial control of scholastic journalism programs.

Interpretations of the phrase “editorial control” can vary, but it is generally defined as²⁴ the right to “review, formulate standards for, or to exercise a veto over the appearance, text, use or promotion” of, in this case, a newspaper — which in certain circumstances can fall under “censorship.” In the specific context of scholastic journalism, the Journalism Education Association — a national organization of teachers and advisors of journalism — defines²⁵ censorship as either prior review or prior restraint by an advisor or school administrator. Prior review means that “anyone in a position of authority outside of editorial staff demands to read, view or approve content before publication or distribution,” and prior restraint means when anyone not on student staff requires “pre-distribution changes to inhibit, ban or restrain content before release to the audience.”

Now, more than 30 years later, content published in high school newspapers is still subject to similar national scrutiny to that under the *Hazelwood* ruling, regardless of whether newspapers’ staff and advisors are aware of the court case and its implications. At the state level, however, professional news organizations²⁶ and other independent advocacy groups have worked to fight for student press freedom. For example, a grassroots effort led by the Student Press Law Center has led to “New Voices”²⁷ bills in 15 states. These bills work to “counteract” the impact of *Hazelwood* and state that “freedom of expression through school-sponsored media is a fundamental principle in our democratic society” that is “critical to the development of informed and civic-minded adults.”

However, school administrators have often resisted such legislation by reasoning that they need to

²³ “Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier.”

²⁴ “Editorial Control Definition.”

²⁵ Journalism Education Association Scholastic Press Rights Committee, “The Role of Student Media.”

²⁶ Proulx, “Should Schools Be Allowed to Censor Student Newspapers?”

²⁷ “SPLC Model Legislation to Protect Student Free Expression Rights.”

check students' power given their lack of maturity and protect students from harm caused by irresponsible journalism,²⁸ which is a pro-censorship argument that qualified advisors and adequate student training can address. Even when the New Voices bills pass, though, they are difficult to implement — because people do not always know about them — and can be difficult to enforce unless students have access to legal assistance.²⁹

Thus, administrative censorship in scholastic journalism programs has continued to be widespread, with school officials and advisors often, in addition to prior review and restraint, pulling students' articles from publication or their newspapers off the school stands or asking that articles already published online be taken down. A Student Press Law Center white paper³⁰ cited nearly 70 examples of censorship in scholastic journalism between February 2020 and February 2021, emphasizing the frequent coverage of hard-hitting topics. In conclusion, the status quo within scholastic journalism programs has reinforced the *Hazelwood* idea that the press freedoms of high school journalists are not on par with those of their professional counterparts.

C. The current state of censorship of scholastic journalism

Documentation and research of censorship of scholastic journalism also show that, as the previous section established, censorship is not new. Robust study of censorship in high school journalism programs began in 1974 with a national inquiry into the state of press freedom in high school journalism by Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Jack Nelson.³¹ His book, titled “Captive Voices: The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into High School Journalism,” found that censorship was prevalent in scholastic journalism programs and led to an increase in scholarship

²⁸ Davis, interview.

²⁹ Davis, interview.

³⁰ Student Press Law Center, “Censorship of Student Journalists Persists Despite Their Essential Role Reporting on COVID, Protests, Racial Justice and Elections, New White Paper Finds,” 5.

³¹ Nelson, *Captive Voices*.

about censorship in those programs. Despite the advocacy of scholars, nonprofits, and other groups for student press rights throughout the several decades since then, censorship has continued to be present in scholastic journalism programs — with a Student Press Law Center report³² saying that it has become even more present since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the period my study centers.

Data support the idea that censorship and relative lack of press freedom remain the norm in scholastic journalism programs and that censorship may even have increased. In a 2014 survey³³ conducted at a joint conference hosted by the Journalism Educators Association and the National Scholastic Press Association — prominent national organizations for professional and student journalists — 17 of the 51 advisor respondents said that someone other than a student editor had final authority over the content published in a high school newspaper, and seven said that a student staff member decided not to publish something for fear of administrative censorship. Out of the 366 student respondents, 116 said that a school official had told them not to publish a piece of content, and 244 said that someone other than a student editor had final authority over the content published in a high school newspaper. In a separate study done in 2017,³⁴ more than a third of the 174 student journalists who responded to the survey indicated that someone told them not to discuss some issue in their school media outlet. And in 2014, a study by Goodman, Blundell and Cogar³⁵ found that 31.9 percent of advisors and 32 percent of students said that someone other than a student staff member or an advisor reviews the papers' content before publication. According to the same study, more than 60 percent of students said someone other than the student editors had final say on the

³² Student Press Law Center, “Censorship of Student Journalists . . .,” 2.

³³ Journalism Education Association and National Scholastic Press Association, “Fall 2014 Convention Attendees Survey.”

³⁴ Bobkowski and Belmas, “Mixed Message Media.”

³⁵ “Quantifying control: Scholastic media, prior review and censorship,” as cited in Cogar, Gatekeeping in Scholastic Journalism: Examining Factors That Predict Student Content Decisions, 22.

content that goes into their student media publication, while around 40 percent of advisors said the same. That study, like many other relatively recent studies, frames advisors as largely on the students' side as proponents of press freedom. According to Hillary Davis,³⁶ advocacy and organizing director of the Student Press Law Center, depending on an advisor's level of experience and how much they fear losing their job, many advisors help their students push back against both administrative censorship and self-censorship.

Recent anecdotal evidence also shows that high school publications are still being censored. In 2019, the *New York Times* published an article³⁷ listing examples of scholastic journalism censorship. Censored articles included a special issue that focused on teenage relationships, coverage about a mysterious dismissal of a history teacher, and an opinion piece criticizing administrators for scheduling events during the National School Walkout protest. In 2020 at a school in the Wadsworth City School District in Ohio, the school superintendent took an issue of the student publication off the distribution stands and asked the student journalists to reprint the cover with their own advertising revenue due to a headline that read "Black History Month in a White School District." And in Arkansas³⁸ in August 2021, school administrators physically cut out two pages of a high school yearbook³⁹ before distributing the yearbooks. Those pages contained a timeline of significant events in the 2020-21 school year, including the 2020 election, death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, impact of COVID-19, and death of George Floyd.

The above examples suggest that certain types of content are deemed more "controversial" by those who have the power to censor the student press: typically, content that may offend

³⁶ Davis, interview.

³⁷ Proulx.

³⁸ Center, Student Press Law. "Censorship of Arkansas Yearbook Gets National Media Coverage: NPR, AP and Jerry Springer."

³⁹ Although a yearbook is not a school newspaper, it is a student publication and is also often subject to censorship, which I will discuss more fully in the scope section.

community members or suggest that the school and its constituents are flawed. Bobkowski's study⁴⁰ defined "controversial topics" as "divisive political and social issues" that included legalization of marijuana, LGBTQ+ issues and gay marriage, mental health and suicide, sex and pregnancy, dress code policies, and inappropriate conduct of teachers. Another study⁴¹ defined "controversial topics" similarly, but also included content about drug use, alcohol abuse and school budget issues in its list of "controversial topics."

Looking specifically at the current political moment, "controversial topics" often include coverage adults often think of as too "mature" for students, especially high school students, to cover, according to the Student Press Law Center⁴² white paper. The report noted that in 2020, stories about COVID health and safety, voting, racial justice, "youth-led social unrest," and other topics commonly considered controversial. These are topics administrators "sought to 'manage' in ways that would either avoid controversy or embarrassment, or simply shut down the story altogether."⁴³ In this way, in addition to explicit administrative censorship, students' inability to cover controversial topics and cover them freely — the ability to use whatever angle and sourcing they feel is necessary, no matter how dissenting, — is a central part of censorship of the student press.

D. Why school administrators censor student journalists

Understanding why school administrators and teachers censor students shows us that the main motivations of censorship are reputation protection, student protection and anticipating critique. Studies from Nelson's 1974 report to now have continued to find instances of advisor and

⁴⁰ Bobkowski and Belmas.

⁴¹ Cunningham, "Beyond The Perceptual Bias: The Third-Person Effect And Censorship Behavior In Scholastic Journalism."

⁴² Student Press Law Center, "Censorship of Student Journalists . . .," 2.

⁴³ Ibid, 2.

administrative censorship in scholastic journalism programs.⁴⁴ While both groups often censor via prior review or restraint,⁴⁵ advisors can also sometimes play a middle-person role in which they advocate for press freedom yet have a role in reviewing and approving content, and administrators are sometimes solely involved yet not always directly involved at all.

One principal reason for the ongoing censorship of scholastic journalists is censorship from school officials or faculty for the sake of the school's reputation. This type of censorship most frequently comes from administrators who have more to lose if a school's reputation were to suffer, as well-trained advisors frequently fight against censorship and for students' free press rights.⁴⁶ Often, this censorship is rooted in a mindset⁴⁷ that school newspapers should serve in public relations roles for the school, solely telling uplifting stories and disseminating positive information even if unrealistic or skewed. Thus, some school authorities conduct prior review or prior restraint to avoid content that they think may negatively influence students or community members.⁴⁸

Not all censorship is due to public relations interests, though. Many administrators also censor content because they genuinely want to protect students from unwarranted harm caused by negative content,⁴⁹ which is in line with a principle of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics:⁵⁰ "Minimize harm." Cunningham⁵¹ argues that this "protection" aim is sometimes exaggerated because people often believe the media has a stronger effect on others — such as a journalistic audience — than on themselves and therefore are more inclined to censor content even if it is not as harmful as they think it is. But another study⁵² argues that research backing the

⁴⁴ Cunningham, 31-32.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁴⁶ American Association of University Professors, "Threats to the Independence of Student Media," 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁹ Cunningham, 33; Paek et al., 1.

⁵⁰ Society of Professional Journalists, "SPJ Code of Ethics."

⁵¹ Cunningham, 26.

⁵² Paek et al., 3.

centrality of this perspective, known as “third person perspective,”⁵³ is inconsistent and unclear. What does become clear through this research, however, is that balancing the motive of student protection with the motive of school reputation often skews school officials toward censorship of student press.

Another main reason for the censorship of scholastic journalism involves the role of press law status and awareness. As previously discussed, the *Hazelwood* precedent maintains that it is sometimes legally permissible to censor content in student newspapers, given that school newspapers can be classified as non-public forums.⁵⁴ Public forums are publications⁵⁵ where student editors make all final decisions, in practice or in policy. The majority⁵⁶ of student newspapers are not considered public forums, but even for the newspapers that are considered public forums, some scholars⁵⁷ have suggested censorship is also in part caused by poor understanding of First Amendment freedoms and legal rights in schools. That is, students who do not understand that they have legal press rights may not be as willing to stand up to administrative censorship, and administrators who do not understand students’ legal press freedoms and the reasons for them may be more inclined to censor student publications.

A fourth central reason why high school journalism programs are censored and do not publish content on “controversial” topics as often is self-censorship, from either the student or their advisor. In some cases, this is due to perceived administrative censorship, either before it even happens or based on precedent. Previous studies correlated higher levels of self-censorship with a fear of administrative content sanctions.⁵⁸ In other cases, student journalists self-censor due to

⁵³ Salwen and Dupagne, “The Third-Person Effect,” 525.

⁵⁴ Student Press Law Center, “Guide to Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier,” 2.

⁵⁵ Cogar, Gatekeeping in Scholastic Journalism: Examining Factors That Predict Student Content Decisions, 16.

⁵⁶ Journalism Education Association and National Scholastic Press Association, “Fall 2014 Convention Attendees Survey.”

⁵⁷ Brauer, 5.

⁵⁸ Cunningham, 33.

perceived professional retribution, perceived community threats and the nature of those threats, and considerations of who is most likely to suffer if the threats or other consequences are carried out.⁵⁹ Further, levels of self-censorship are influenced by characteristics that give a student more power in the community, including demographics and a student's role and experience in their news organization.⁶⁰ These factors are outlined by a "Willingness to Self-Censor Scale" developed by Hayes⁶¹ in 2005. A 2008 study by Filak⁶² found the scale to be a predictor of how frequently high school journalism programs publish content on controversial topics: "sex, substance use, social issues, student misdeeds and administration issues." Self-censorship and explicit administrative censorship depend on similar factors, but the former is more difficult to notice and measure and thus may be an even more difficult form of censorship to fight against.

The reasons for censorship outlined in this section are deeply embedded in the structure and function of our secondary school systems: school reputation, administrators' perceived responsibility to care for their students, and the power differential between students and administrators. This embeddedness helps explain why high levels of censorship in high school journalism programs have perpetuated for so long — and if we want to lower those levels, we can start by understanding why they are high in the first place.

E. Effects of censorship of student press: a detriment to democratic education

The research outlined in the previous section examined the extent of censorship and which topics are likely to be flagged. This section examines research about censorship's effects on the main audiences of high school newspapers: student writers and the student community. Some scholars

⁵⁹ Farquhar and Carey, "Self-Censorship Among Student Journalists Based on Perceived Threats and Risks," 319.

⁶⁰ Cogar, 14.

⁶¹ Hayes, "Validating the Willingness to Self-Censor Scale," 444.

⁶² Filak and Miller, as cited in Farquhar and Carey, 320.

have argued that some censorship is positive, namely censorship of violent or libelous content⁶³ or censorship that brings even greater net attention to the issue at hand.⁶⁴ But research has shown that overall, censorship within scholastic journalism programs has a detrimental effect on democratic education.

One way to look at censorship in scholastic journalism programs is through the lens of gatekeeping. Because the press' purpose is to share "newsworthy" content to the public, the press inherently decides what information is shared with members of the public and influences, to a degree, how they see it. This is the essence of gatekeeping,⁶⁵ "the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day."

Censorship is a form of gatekeeping, specifically gatekeeping that involves suppression of public speech often on the basis that an authority considers the material offensive, objectionable or harmful, often simply "controversial" speech.⁶⁶ The gatekeeper, regardless of their varying duties within the media organization,⁶⁷ thus has a high level of social and political capital and is able to influence the flow of information disproportionately more than that of ordinary citizens, in this case student newspaper staff. According to Cunningham,⁶⁸ censorship of the student press is detrimental to the political socialization of young adults in that it maintains social order and discourages students from being active citizens and asking tough questions. In *Liberty*, Lerner⁶⁹ writes that censorship leads to a "double disempowerment:" a decrease in public participation and, therefore, less social and political capital. In this way, because someone in a position of power is doing the gatekeeping,

⁶³ Rojas, 185.

⁶⁴ Kidd, "Not Censorship but Selection," 208.

⁶⁵ Shoemaker and Vos, Gatekeeping Theory, 2.

⁶⁶ "What Is Censorship? | American Civil Liberties Union."

⁶⁷ Shoemaker and Reese, Mediating the Message in the 21st Century, 185.

⁶⁸ Cunningham, 180.

⁶⁹ Lerner, 116.

editorial censorship inherently goes against democratic education — silencing citizens and allowing those who are already atop our power structures to continue shaping public discourse.⁷⁰

Importantly, greater levels of intellectual freedom advance diverse perspectives, as the voices of marginalized and underrepresented students have historically borne the brunt of administrative censorship.⁷¹ And if we take censorship to be a form of student discipline, which is disproportionately common for minority and especially Black students,⁷² it becomes clear that intellectual freedom, diversity and democratic education often go hand in hand.⁷³ Thus, as scholastic journalism is a key educational avenue for these ideas, prior research has established that democratic education through journalism instills in students the values needed to sustain an equitable democracy, and that to accomplish that, student press and intellectual freedom are important to students' education and lives.

Still, almost all the existing scholarship on censorship in scholastic journalism programs is from before 2015 or from the immediate post-*Hazelwood* era. The more recent studies by Cogar and Cunningham do not specifically look at press freedom in a moment of cultural tension in schools, nor do they look specifically at a sample of award-winning journalism programs, employ interviews of the students, advisors and administrators involved, or look at the issue with a focus on democratic education. Those lenses are especially crucial in the current political moment, where culture wars, racial justice movements and heated debates over COVID-19 protocol have led to debates over and limitations on academic freedom,⁷⁴ among other issues. For example, some states passed laws this year banning the teaching of critical race theory — an academic theory that writers of those laws interpret as any curriculum that challenges institutional racism and existing approaches

⁷⁰ Norris, "Public Sentinel," 14.

⁷¹ Oltmann, "Creating Space at the Table," 415.

⁷² Rocque, "Office Discipline and Student Behavior," 574.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁷⁴ Hochman, "Critical Race Theory and Academic Freedom."

to racial justice.⁷⁵ It is also plausible that some of these laws limiting academic freedom will also impact student press freedom if we look at student press freedom as an extension of academic freedom, but there is not yet substantial research on this relationship.

Taken together, the above research shows that high school journalism programs with greater degrees of intellectual freedom have the potential to be useful tools of social change, but there seem to be gaps in research exploring how students and faculty in established programs address censorship, particularly in the current moment. Through this capstone I seek to provide insight into this question and see what we can learn from “established” journalism programs. Ultimately, how will we be able to learn from what’s working in these programs to advance democratic education and help students most successfully?

⁷⁵ “Spotlight on Critical Race Theory.”

Methodology

My capstone analyzes newspaper coverage in established journalism programs, specifically in high school journalism programs that were in the National Scholastic Press Association Pacemaker 100 list — the schools that have won the most Pacemaker awards over the years. The Pacemaker award, which is one of the most prominent scholastic journalism awards and has been given annually since 1993, provides a reliable sample of established journalism programs appraised by judges who are professional journalists across the country. Twenty-eight high school newspapers on the list of 100 had readily accessible websites; the remaining 60 are yearbooks or magazines, print-only newspapers or have publications that are now defunct. I should note that yearbooks and magazines are not less frequently censored than newspapers, but I am choosing to focus on newspapers because they publish more content more frequently and would therefore be easier to build a large and interpretable dataset.

This project has two parts: 1) a textual analysis and 2) interviews. Data from the first part is used to create a better understanding of program structure and the frequency with which respective programs cover “controversial” topics. The second part, which includes interviews with student publication leaders and program advisors, aims to look beyond surface-level textual analysis and examine the conversations around censorship/student press freedom and why a piece may or may not be censored.

A: Data analysis

For the survey-level part of my capstone, I built a dataset of the 28 newspapers in my sample. These newspapers span 15 states and are from 24 public schools and four private schools and have a median enrollment of approximately 1,800 students. All these schools had scholastic journalism programs that functioned as classes or series of classes, sometimes with an optional

extracurricular component. The dataset includes all articles published online in the News section during the fall 2021 semester. I chose this specific period because, at this time, schools were grappling with COVID-19 policy, student mental health, critical race theory and other curriculum debates, and other potentially controversial issues. I chose to focus on News sections because those sections contained the largest amount of content, were where most stories focused on controversial topics were located,⁷⁶ and had the most uniformity between schools, which allowed for better comparison.

To build the dataset, I wrote Python scripts, using BeautifulSoup⁷⁷ and Selenium⁷⁸ to web scrape articles from these publicly available sites. Then, I aggregated the files into two datasets, one organized by article and the other organized by school.

For the dataset organized by article, I coded the articles based on other studies⁷⁹ of news coverage in the past year or so — since the pandemic’s onset — and other guides.⁸⁰ I tagged each article first with **(1) Main topic**, a general tag for the broad topic of the article chosen from (a) reactions to broader politics and events, which tended to be articles on the state or national scope; (b) socio-political issues and school culture, which included politics, curriculum, student rights, religion, race, mental health and other issues; (c) threats to student safety, which were mainly one-time events that threatened safety such as school shootings; (d) community life, which mainly included spotlights; and (e) school policy and administration. Then, I added tags for **(2) number of student and faculty sources** in each article; **(3) scope**, which fell under school, local or

⁷⁶ Op-ed sections also tend to contain highly controversial content, but what the op-ed section looked like varied greatly from school to school, making comparison difficult.

⁷⁷ A Python library for parsing HTML/XML documents, more information at <https://www.crummy.com/software/BeautifulSoup/bs4/doc/>

⁷⁸ A framework I used to automate my web browser to scrape articles, more information at <https://www.selenium.dev/documentation/webdriver/>

⁷⁹ Zafri et al., “A Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic for Developing a Pandemic Management Framework”; Patterson et al., “Content Analysis of UK Newspaper and Online News Representations of Women’s and Men’s ‘Binge’ Drinking.”

⁸⁰ Stacy and Limon, “Analyzing Newspaper Content: A How-To Guide.”

state/national/world; **(4) word count**; **(5) dissenting voices**, which fell on a discrete scale with “3” meaning that everyone essentially agreed with each other, “2” meaning that there was some diversity in opinion but not sources in direct conflict with one another and “1” meaning that there was direct dissent in sourcing; **(6) primary purpose**, which identified stories based on their motivation for being written, such as accountability, spreading awareness or promoting discourse; **(7) controversial topics**, a binary yes/no categorization taking “controversial” to mean stories that would potentially be censored by advisors or administrators — often stories that portray the school in a negative light (bomb threat, student gets arrested, mental health struggles, behavioral issues), discuss topics that are sensitive in the context of the school’s identity (for example, abortion at a Catholic school), or criticize the administration.⁸¹ Finally, I added **(8) additional tags**, which were 3-5 key phrases or narrower topics in the articles that give a more specific idea of what the story is about and whether it was controversial. Controversial tags (sex, drugs, alcohol, critical pieces on the school administration, school finance, violence, social/political activism (including critical race theory), religion, COVID policy) were included in this field.

For the dataset organized by school, I included the attributes **(1) total articles**; **(2) percent of articles tagged as controversial**; **(3) percent of sources that are student sources**; **(4) average dissenting voices rating**; **(5) whether the school was public or private**; **(6) approximate enrollment size**; **(7) racial demographics**, which included the percentage of students who were white, Asian, Hispanic/Latino and Black⁸² and **(8) socioeconomic status**

⁸¹ An additional note: some of these stories mentioned controversial topics, but those topics were not the main topic of those stories. I only used the “controversial” tag when the topic was at least half of the story’s focus.

⁸² I sourced this data mostly from U.S. News, which pulled public school data from the respective state’s Department of Education. Some of this data was as old as the 2018-19 school year, but after a cross-check with DOE data, none of it had changed significantly.

indicator, which was the percentage of students who would have been eligible for free/reduced lunch.⁸³

Using this dataset, I used the R programming language to clean and analyze the data through data exploration, visualization, stepwise linear regression, and logistic regression. The main goal of the data analysis was to correlate the frequency of controversial content with the journalism program's various structural and demographic factors. Frequency of controversial content is often taken to be a measure for press freedom — for example, national organizations like the Journalism Education Association publish blog posts on how to increase press freedom by covering more controversial content and covering it well.⁸⁴ Still, that metric alone does not tell the whole story, as stories that cover controversial topics can also be censored within themselves if administrators limit the sourcing in the story or ask that certain pieces of information be taken out. To account for this, I am also looking at the breakdown of sources and dissenting voices in the articles to see whether controversial stories have a higher proportion of non-student sources — which could indicate that a story relies heavily on the administrative perspective and is some way “censored” by lacking dissenting student voice.

⁸³More information on the free/reduced lunch income threshold can be found [here](#). It varies from state to state, family to family and year to year, but it is often used as a proxy for financial status.

⁸⁴“Covering Controversy.”

B: Interviews

While the data analysis portion of the study gives a broad survey of these established journalism programs' content, explaining the data in the correct context is difficult without interviews — conversations that shed light on program structures and student-advisor relationships especially when discussing controversial content. For the second portion of my study, I conducted 11 interviews with seven student editors and four advisors representing four schools on the NSPA Pacemaker 100 list.

I recruited participants by emailing approximately 50 people using contact information I found online, and I scheduled interviews with the first dozen or so respondents. Although it is impossible to eliminate response bias when selecting subjects to interview, the main purpose of the interview-based portion is to look beyond surface-level textual analysis and examine the conversations around censorship/student press freedom and why a piece may or may not be censored or may or may not be published.

Three public schools — one in the South, one in the Midwest and one in the West — and one private religious school in the Midwest were represented by the interviewees. All four schools had between 1000 and 2000 students, newspaper programs that took place as classes, and newspaper staff sizes of between 40 and 70 students. Additionally, participants were overwhelmingly white and female-identifying, as seen in table 1. The racial breakdown of interviewees was reflective of the demographics at their respective schools.⁸⁵ The gender breakdown reflected both the demographic of the schools' newspapers, according to interviewees, and the fact that females are generally more willing to respond to survey requests.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ See Table 5.

⁸⁶ Mulder and de Bruijne, "Willingness of Online Respondents to Participate in Alternative Modes of Data Collection."

The interviews took place via Zoom in March 2022 and each lasted for 30 minutes to an hour. Questions were semi-structured around the negotiation process around particular stories — especially if they were pulled from publication or called into question in that way — and on the student-advisor relationship as it pertains to student press freedom. I recorded and transcribed the interviews, then coded them using NVivo to organize the conversations around key themes: journalism program structure and level of student control; student-advisor relationships; what counts as controversial content; and press freedom and its causes and effects.

Name ⁸⁷	Role	School	Pronouns	Race/Ethnicity
Joanne	Advisor	School A	she/her	White/Not Hispanic
Ryan	Student editor	School A	he/him	Asian
Alvin	Student editor	School A	he/him	Asian
Annie	Student editor	School B	she/her	White/Not Hispanic
Sophie	Student editor	School B	she/her	White/Not Hispanic
Ally	Student editor	School D	she/her	White/Hispanic
Eve	Student editor	School D	she/they	White/Not Hispanic
Gina	Advisor	School D	she/her	White/Not Hispanic
Mary	Student editor	School D	she/her	White/Not Hispanic
Terri	Advisor	School P	she/her	White/Not Hispanic
Kathleen	Advisor	School P	she/her	White/Not Hispanic

Table 1: Interviewee chart.

Taken together, this two-part methodology allows for some level of both breadth and depth when looking at the degree of press freedom in these established high school journalism programs.

⁸⁷ Per the IRB approval process, I assigned pseudonyms using a random name generator to protect interviewees from administrative, career or other retribution.

Findings

A: Controversial articles across 28 award winning school newspapers (data analysis)

Drawing on the idea that being able to cover controversial topics freely can be an indicator for press freedom, I examined data from 711 articles spanning 28 schools on the NPSA Pacemaker 100 list. My data analysis indicated that although my literature review established general widespread censorship and limited controversial content coverage within scholastic journalism programs, my sample of articles from award-winning schools contained large percentages of controversial content. More than one-third of articles in the sample cover content tagged as controversial — I tagged 186 of the articles as controversial, or approximately 36 percent of them.

Most of these controversial stories — 63 out of the 186, or 33.8 percent, were about COVID policy, with 22 of those specifically about masking or mask mandates. Other frequently covered controversial topics included mental health (15 stories), political disagreements (14 stories), violence (12 stories), student behavior (9 stories) and race or racism (8 stories).

Stories tagged as controversial were (1) frequently intended to serve as accountability journalism and tended to be about socio-political issues and school culture, (2) had more dissenting voices, (3) were longer in word count and (4) had more non-student sourcing. Also, there was no major difference in proportion controversial content when comparing the data month-to-month,⁸⁸ which may indicate that students did not become more willing to cover controversial topics even as the semester progressed, and they gained experience as journalists.

(1) Through my analysis of the “main topic” tag, the **greatest number of controversial stories were about socio-political issues and school culture**, although there was also a

⁸⁸ There were 185, 212, 158 and 155 articles per month in September, October, November, and December. Of those articles, 49, 56, 41 and 40 were tagged as controversial.

significant proportion of articles in that category that constituted “fluff” pieces about how new administrative initiatives were beneficial to the school or its students in some way. As expected, articles about reactions to broader politics and events (most commonly on heated school board discussions about critical race theory and mask mandates) and threats to student safety (often articles about school shootings or potential school shootings) were more likely to be categorized as controversial. Table 2 quantifies this difference — 78 and 76 percent of articles that were reactions to broader politics and events and about threats to student safety were tagged as controversial.⁸⁹

Main topic	Total articles	Not controversial	Controversial	Percentage
Community life	390	373	17	4.3%
School policy/admin	170	38	14	27%
Socio-political issues and school culture	78	92	78	46%
Reactions to broader politics/events	52	17	61	78%
Threats to student safety	21	5	16	76%

Table 2: Main topic of newspaper articles from 28 NSPA Pacemaker 100–winning schools, fall 2021.

(2) Articles that had **more dissenting voices** (i.e. the sources in the article disagreed with each other) **were more likely to be controversial**. Newspapers with well-established journalism programs are likely to consider coverage more as a tool of accountability and a way to promote

⁸⁹ It’s worth noting that this is not necessarily a statistically significant result, as there is a highly uneven spread between categories, with most of the articles falling under “community life.”

discourse, so it makes sense that higher proportions of controversial content corresponded to a higher percentage of articles with those purposes.

Dissent rating	Total articles	# Not controversial	# Controversial	% Controversial
1 (most dissent)	68	16	52	76%
2	131	51	80	61%
3 (no dissent)	511	456	54	11%

Table 3: Controversial articles vs. dissent rating from 28 NSPA Pacemaker 100–winning schools, fall 2021.

(3) Articles that fell **above the median word count were more likely to be tagged as controversial**, with 134 out of 355, or 38 percent of those articles tagged as controversial compared to 52 out of 355, or 15 percent of the articles that were below the median word count. This makes sense, since students would plausibly be more cautious and intentional when writing about sensitive issues and consequently interview more people or do more research, leading to a longer article.

(4) Overall, approximately equal numbers of students and non-students (faculty, administrators, politicians, parents, etc.) were sourced, with 1025 student sources and 957 non-student sources across all articles. However, the data show that **stories with more non-student sources were more likely to also contain controversial topics**. I will discuss this more in the interview analysis section of the study, but it seems that there are two possible explanations for this. The first is that administrators may want to provide sourcing for articles on controversial issues in an effort to dictate the angle of a story and prevent it from reflecting badly on the school or on its administration. The other possibility is that students who are self-censoring or afraid of repercussions from authority from a story will err on the side of caution by sourcing the people in power, which, in the school context, are administrators and faculty.

Source breakdown	Articles with controversial topics	Articles without controversial topics	% Articles with controversial topics
More student sources than non-student sources	235	55	19%
Equal number of student and non-student sources	145	32	18%
More non-student sources than student sources	145	99	41%

Table 4: Student vs. non-student sources from 28 NSPA Pacemaker 100–winning schools, fall 2021.

The second data set, the one organized by school where all articles for each of the 28 schools were combined into aggregate measures, did not, after stepwise linear regression, reveal many statistically significant predictors of the percentage of controversial content a given paper published. Most factors — total number of articles per school, proportion of student sources, percentage of white students, percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch, and whether the school was public or private — were not statistically significant predictors for proportion of controversial content per school. I state this with the caveat that the sample size is very small ($n = 28$) and that there was an uneven spread of numbers of articles across schools, with some schools publishing as few as five articles in this time period, while other schools published upwards of 100.

The one statistically significant predictor in this dataset was the dissenting voices rating ($p = 0.000345$, adjusted r -squared = 0.38, coefficient = -32.216^{90}), which makes sense because more controversial topics also tend to be more divisive, and divisive issues tend to draw more dissenting

⁹⁰ This number indicates a negative relationship between dissenting voices rating and controversial content, namely that a lower rating (more dissent) correlates with more controversial content.

voices. Still, given the aforementioned discussion about statistical significance, this relationship should not be used to generalize a relationship between dissenting voices and proportion of controversial content, and it did not explain much — less than 40 percent — of the variation in proportion of controversial content.

As part of this dataset, though, I pulled demographic data for each school.⁹¹ While race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status were not statistically significant predictors of controversial content in my model, these numbers do quantify the relatively high amount of privilege these award-winning programs have. When weighted by enrollment, the mean percentage of white students in the sample was 58.7 percent, compared to the national public-school average of 45.8 percent.⁹² The mean percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in the sample, when weighted by school enrollment, was 16.2 percent, which is far lower than the national public-school average of 52.3 percent.⁹³

Although, again, most attributes were not statistically significant predictors of the amount of controversial content, table 5, a school-level breakdown organized in descending order by percentage of controversial content, shows us useful additional trends. First, the table affirms our previously analyzed relationship between dissenting voices and controversial content. Second, we can notice that both the total number of articles and proportion of articles tagged as controversial ranged greatly, with the latter ranging from 0 to 64 percent, which makes analysis of statistically significant predictors difficult. Third, we can notice that the private schools among the sample are towards the bottom of the list, in positions 11, 16, 23 and 26, which indicate lower proportions of controversial content. This makes sense, as private schools do not have the same legal press

⁹¹ The full demographic breakdown for each school is available in the Appendix.

⁹² “Digest of Education Statistics, 2021.”

⁹³ “Digest of Education Statistics, 2017.”

protections as public schools and often have public relations or marketing departments that can thus monitor content published in student newspapers.

School	Total # of articles ⁹⁴	% Controversial	Dissenting voices rating	School type
A	14	64	2.07	Public
B	30	53	2.13	Public
C	18	50	2.39	Public
D	6	50	2.33	Public
E	18	50	2.11	Public
F	14	50	2.78	Public
G	10	50	1.8	Public
H	16	44	2.80	Public
I	10	40	2.9	Public
J	15	40	2	Public
K	42	40	2.52	Private
L	15	38	2.63	Public
N	15	33	1.93	Public
M	29	31	2.57	Public
O	24	29	2.58	Public
P	39	26	2.64	Private
Q	4	25	2.75	Public
R	37	24	2.56	Public
S	5	20	2.2	Public
T	27	19	2.56	Public
U	42	19	2.71	Public
V	59	17	2.85	Public
W	96	15	2.86	Private
X	15	13	2.8	Public

⁹⁴ Published on the newspaper's website between September and December 2021.

Y	20	10	2.65	Public
Z	73	8	2.89	Public
AA	10	0	3	Public
BB	7	0	3	Private

Table 5: School-level breakdown of controversial content, dissenting voices and public/private school status for 28 NSPA award-winning newspapers, fall 2021.

Taken together, these datasets contribute to an understanding that high school journalism programs in this sample cover controversial topics frequently and that doing so is more likely in public school scholastic journalism programs and with articles that have a diversity of opinion, hold the powerful accountable, are longer, and discuss socio-political issues and school culture — all indicators associated with a successful democratic education.

B. How students and advisors maintain press freedom (interview analysis)

The above data analysis indicated a low level of censorship in our sample of established journalism programs, which seems to contrast with the scholastic journalism. The interview portion of this study — which included seven student editors and four advisors across four schools — examines what structures, conversations, and relationships have allowed for the student press freedom largely present in these programs and, when censorship does happen, what leads to it.

Taken together, the conversations also indicated that overt censorship is not largely prevalent in these award-winning high school journalism programs, which cover controversial topics freely — this seems to differ from the general prevalence of censorship of the scholastic press as established in the literature review but agrees with the data analysis from the previous section. Censorship instead took the form of implicit administrative pressure to change content, discussions between students and advisors on whether to publish controversial pieces, and self-censorship — and attributed to the same general reasoning as established in the literature review. Still, interviewees

emphasized the importance of mentorship and of giving students the tools so that press freedom can empower all. They saw the ability to cover controversial topics as a key part of their student press freedom, since those were the topics that were most likely to be censored by an administrator or someone else.

In the following discussion, I refer to the schools and their newspapers with the letters A, B, D and P representing their labels from Table 5, the chart organized by decreasing proportion of controversial content. Additionally, as background, Newspaper B comes from a district that is socioeconomically close to the state's median, but their school is disproportionately white and politically left leaning. Newspaper A is at a school known for rigorous academics and extracurriculars, with a special focus on STEM education. Newspaper P is not only a private school but is also a religious school and is in somewhat close in proximity to Newspaper D.

Five key themes emerged from the interviews, themes that contribute to our understanding of what program structures allow for press freedom and how students and advisors navigate press freedom and coverage of controversial topics:

1. The newspapers represented are all largely **student-run** and with little prior review or other censorship. Also, both students and advisors generally said they were against censorship of the student press.
2. **Reasons for censorship**, in the relatively rare cases where it happened, mostly involved 1) relationships with administrators, 2) group discussions between advisors, administrators and students and 3) student self-censorship.
3. **Student-advisor relationships**: Advisors generally do exactly that — advise — with students initiating most conversations that took place between student and advisor.

4. **What allowed for press freedom?** The high degree of press freedom at these schools was made possible by 1) access to sources and networks of power, 2) knowledge of legal press rights and 3) confidence in students' and advisors' ability to cover hard topics well.
5. **Impacts of press freedom:** Press freedom empowered student journalists to write about what they care about and know that it matters, which is why everyone should have it — given that they have the tools and resources to do it “ethically” and “responsibly.”

1. Student-run program nature helps press freedom flourish

Although all four schools represented ran their newspapers through one or more classes during the school day, all eleven interviewees used phrases like “student-run,” “student-led” or “student-directed” when describing the program’s structure and commented that the program’s student-driven nature was a central attribute that allowed their newspapers to have press freedom.

An advisor at School P said the following: “It’s a student-run publication. That’s the first and foremost thing that we tell all students on the first day they walk into class: it’s a student-run publication, which means it’s my job to empower them to create the paper they want to create.” Another advisor, this one for School A’s paper, said that “the cool thing about the program is that it’s student-driven and student-run; the kids know what they need to do, and they’ll lead the class.”

The student interviewees expressed similar perspectives. “We really pride ourselves in the First Amendment and student voice, and we really don’t ever shut anything down because we’re obviously a student-run newspaper,” said one student editor, Mary from School B. Another student editor, Annie from School B, called their paper “completely student-run” and that it has continued to grow more independent from its advisor in the three years she has been on staff.

In all four schools, student editors ran pitch meetings and did much of the early vetting of pitches, even though the advisors were usually present. At these meetings, editors would ask for

itches and discuss them with their staff writers. Together, they would choose content for each news cycle, which usually spanned a couple days to a few weeks.

“We ask, okay, is this a reasonable pitch? . . . And our staff advisor only steps in if we feel [that] we're in a lack of pitches or if there's a pitch we're afraid of,” said a student editor at School A, Ryan. Similarly, at Mary's school, the student editors both vetted pitches and helped assign content to the students who wanted to report on each topic. Sophie said her advisor's job was to “not do anything unless we ask,” a sentiment that other student editors shared.

All interviewees also said the pitches that were most commonly shut down were not hard-hitting or controversial pieces, but rather the lighthearted pieces. A representative quote: “Like, no, we don't need to review turtles. Turtles are an animal.” Multiple student editors expressed that their advisor would help equip them with the tools to cover the hard-hitting and controversial stories well, rather than telling them not to pursue the story.

On that note, none of the public schools' newspapers had administrative prior review — where administrators read and approve content before it is published — as part of their publication process. Still, advisors at all three of the schools generally read all content to “check it over” before it was posted online or before it went to print. At both School B and School A, for example, advisors' edits functioned as a “final edit,” where they were the last person to look over stories before they were published, even though advisors' edits were largely cosmetic, according to both the advisors and the students.

Private schools do not have the same legal level of press freedom as public schools, which contributed to a lower degree of student control in School P, the private school represented in the interviews. An advisor for School P, Kathleen, said the principal often visits the journalism class at the beginning of the year and says, “I'm the owner of the newspaper,” even while emphasizing the “real” nature of the students' coverage. Still, Terri, another advisor at School P, said their current

principal “generally” lets the newspaper publish “whatever” they want. Kathleen cited an example of a story about construction at the school where administrators asked to read the story to make sure its wording didn’t upset donors. Kathleen allowed them to do so but added, “I don’t think I’ve seen [the principal] say no to a story. Rather, [the principal] would talk through all the reasons why [she is] wary about the story.” Also, interviewees from all four schools said that administrators rarely — if ever — take issue with a story post-publication, doing so at most once per year, according to most.

All interviewees also believed strongly in not having prior review, even at School P, the private school where prior review is undoubtedly legal. Kathleen said she does not think there should be prior review of a student press and that they “try not to have it” unless “she offers it,” which she said she sometimes does. Interviewees from the three public schools emphasized that not having prior review and other censorship is an important part of the paper’s identity and that it should be the case for scholastic journalism programs across the board. A student editor at School A, Eve, said that not having administrative prior review meant “we were able to cover real events in our school that maybe [administrators] wouldn’t want us to talk about.” Another student put it even more succinctly: “There should not be prior review of the student press. We don’t have that.”

In summary, the newspapers represented in this study’s interviews were able to enjoy high degrees of student press freedom in large part because students were able to lead discussions about content and make most content decisions.

2. Reasons for censorship, in the rare cases where it happened

All interviewees said that censorship — especially explicit administrative censorship — was relatively rare, but when it did occur, interviewees attributed it to two of the same general reasons described in the literature review: concern over relationships with administrators and self-

editorial censorship. The third general reason arose out of the student-directedness of the newspapers: decisions not to run content based on group discussions between students, advisors, and administrators.

a) Relationships with administrators

Stories would occasionally be censored either because students wanted to maintain a good relationship with administrators so they could retain access to important sourcing in the future or because students had a poor relationship with administrators from the past that blocked their access to information on which a story hinged.⁹⁵

Sometimes, administrators or other people in power would work to make publishing difficult for various reasons. For example, Annie and Sophie, student editors at School B, both spoke about their newspaper's poor relationship with their school counseling department. For Annie, this poor relationship greatly delayed and complicated her story about how her school's mental health behavioral screener was violating students' privacy and ultimately harming their mental health. This hold-up almost prevented her from publishing the story entirely. Sophie, on the other hand, was trying to enter an open meeting in the school's library for students to ask school board members questions, but the school's counselors were sitting by the front door and would not let her in because she was from the school paper. Because of this, she was not able to write the story. At the time of my interview with her, Sophie had scheduled a meeting with her journalism advisor and relevant administrators to talk about how to repair the newspaper's relationship with the counselors going forward.

In other cases, student editors made concessions to administrators in order to maintain a good relationship for future stories. "We kind of have to pick our battles," Annie said. Gina, an

⁹⁵ Interestingly, this reasoning is not exclusive to student journalism and is a common concern in professional news outlets as well.

advisor for School D, encouraged students to remove a naked image of American rapper and singer Lil Nas X from their newspaper: “I’m just like, is this really the hill you want to die on? The Lil Nas X cover with him naked on the front of the paper, and with a brand-new principal?” She added that she would rather them take this image down to prevent early administrative anger — so that the paper could build trust with the principal and, for example, be able to access important perspectives further down the line, such as through one-on-one calls with the principal about the budget.

Similarly, Kathleen’s example of letting administrators read a story that might upset donors before publication falls into this category. Also, Annie, an editor at School B, cited an example involving a city council member they had a “really good relationship” with. If, she said, that city council member doesn’t “like the way [his quote] sounds” in their article, “it’s not a quote that makes or breaks the story, and the story was never supposed to be controversial in the first place,” the student editors would be willing to change the quote. In one instance of this event, she ended up taking the quote out of the story entirely.

The role of the school’s public image also emerged as a central part of these discussions about student-administrator relationships. Two students, Ally from School D and Ryan from School A, expressed that administrators “probably” wanted everything to seem like there were no issues with the school because public image is of concern to them. “A lot of the time, they view it as if we’re putting them in a bad spot, just because we’ve had a lot of issues where students are reacting negatively to what the administration is doing. So when we’re talking to them, we’re asking about those things that students view as them doing wrong. And I think especially our current principal, she really wants everything to seem there’s no issues and everything is perfect,” Ally said. She added that because their school is surrounded by other “really strong schools” and has been struggling with attrition to those nearby schools, a negative public image could “push a lot of students out of the district.” Still, another editor at School B, Eve, said that “there were probably stories that the

administration didn't love to see us report on, but they never stopped us, which was good. They definitely sometimes refuse to comment on stories, but that was the extent of it.” Ryan similarly said administrators do not ask that a story not happen or that a story be taken down — his school is in a state where that is not legally permissible due to press freedom legislation — but said that administrators sometimes express “concerns” over a story, especially stories that involve racism, sexism, sexual assault or student or faculty crime, and “almost always because of public image.” But one advisor, Kathleen, said she doesn’t think public image is of that much importance to her students, who she said did not feel the need to have a good relationship with administrators.

Even though students and advisors largely said they were not frequently censored, their relationship with administrators proved to be a central presence in their discussions about controversial content.

b) Group discussions between advisors, administrators, and students

In contrast to the times where students saw advisors as interfering with story publication, student and advisor interviewees also spoke about many decisions not to publish a story as collaborative decisions between student, advisor and, in the case of School P, an administrator. In the public schools, students and advisors generally framed the final decision as the student’s final decision, even if it seemed like the student would generally take an advisor’s recommendation, whether due to a high degree of trust in an advisor or an inherent power dynamic because the advisor is older, more experienced, and a member of school faculty.

Annie, an editor at School B, spoke about an example that represented a collective decision between students and advisor. She said the story was “very, very problematic” for people at school — that a teacher was using plagiarized material to teach a class — and said that after several conversations with other editors and their advisor, “we collectively made the decision that it was not

the right story for [our newspaper] to write and that it was not how we wanted the newspaper to be used,” citing insufficient evidence for the story’s main allegation. She said her advisor would “let them write it” if they wanted to but was concerned about them writing it “well,” saying that “you can’t run the story the way it is right now” and offering suggestions for how to fix it.

Terri, an advisor at School P, spoke about a story that she described as a collective decision between students, advisor, and administration. The story centered the negative experience of transgender students at the school. Because School P is a Catholic school, and some Catholics do not accept trans people, according to Terri, the story seemed “controversial,” adding that “any time we talk about something like that, it makes people nervous because of the visibility of our [newspaper’s] website.” Thus, she “warned” the principal as the students began working on it, and the principal gave a “go-ahead.” But as the student journalists were finishing their interviews, the principal “got nervous” and held a series of three meetings to talk about the story and its implications with the student reporters, editors, Terri and, at the final meeting, the transgender students who were interviewed. At the meetings, the students and administrators took turns expressing concerns. The students, who said they did not want to silence the voices of the transgender interviewees who were speaking out and sharing their experiences, asked the administrators, “Why should we trust you if you haven’t listened to us before?” Out of those meetings, the paper “ended up not running the story, but not, I hope, out of any fear of controversy that caused the school, but because we were afraid for the kids interviewed in the story because we’ve had people in our community that have not been positive or supportive of our LGBTQ+ students, and we wanted to protect them,” Terri said. The story ended up not being published but was circulated privately among faculty and with the principal making promises to change policies to better support School P’s transgender students. This is an interesting case of an administrator-driven decision not to run a story but “compromising” to make some of the changes the story aimed to

push for. It's also an example of the tensions and balance I mentioned in the literature review between administrators censoring due to public image and censoring due to genuine concern for student safety.

Still, most interviewees said that most stories that did not run were stopped from running mostly by student editors alone. For example, Sophie said that editors spoke with opinion staff members about anti-mask and anti-trans athlete columns they had submitted and, without much involvement from their advisor, decided not to run the piece, again citing insufficient evidence, which ties into the third main reason for censorship, student self-censorship.

c) Student self-censorship

Finally, students expressed that even though explicit administrative censorship was rare, self-censorship was more common — because students were afraid of getting in trouble, breaking bridges, or being negatively perceived by members in the school community.

Eve, an editor at School D, explained the implicit tendency to self-censor content due to student-administrator power differences: “There’s a sense of this wanting approval from the administration even if it’s not explicit ... because there is a power difference between administrators and students” where if administrators imply “that you shouldn’t be doing something,” they are also implying that students could get in trouble for reporting on something a certain way.” She added that many students, especially those who were less sure of themselves, didn’t pursue controversial stories because they did not want to “get in trouble” in this way and decided it would just be easier for them to write about something less controversial.

Kathleen, an advisor at School P, also commented on the role of the administrator-student power differential. She said that although self-censorship at her school often takes the form of a conversation between student and advisor or administrator, the reason discussed in the previous

section, student would hear a concern about a story and, instead of earnestly engaging with it, simply decide they didn't want to write it anymore. Because the student felt the person telling them what to change "is a person in power," she said, students sometimes felt they would need to "work really hard to make sure it's the perfect story" and not get them in trouble or otherwise cause problems — which would deter some students from writing the story at all.

Ryan, an editor at School A, commented on self-censorship's effect on the students writing the story. "We weren't sure how [a story] would affect the students" who were reporting it," he said. His advisor, Joanne, said that "kids deal with [self-censorship] all the time," adding that they also wonder, "how will this impact me if my byline is associated with this topic? ... A lot of the students at our school are really savvy and think about the long-term implications for having their byline associated with something."

In summary, most self-censorship happened because of a power differential between students and advisors/administrators as well as a feeling of "how will this reporting affect me?" since students were inherently and inextricably part of the communities they reported on. The reasons behind self-censorship contribute to the complex ways in which students and advisors must navigate questions of press freedom and indicate that to lower censorship, we may need to ask questions like what Gina, an advisor at School D, asks her students: "We try to nip self-censorship early on," she said. "She has conversations with her students to "make sure it doesn't happen," often asking questions like, "Well, why not? Why can't you do that?"

3. Student-advisor relationships

Relationships like those between Gina and her students are representative of the eleven interviewees' responses: Students expressed a high degree of trust in their advisor and their advisor's ability to make their coverage fair and responsible, and advisors placed a high level of confidence in

their students' ability to cover controversial topics well. Both students and advisors said that advisors generally take a passive, background role in their newspaper, advising only when students ask them to help or when they see something of great concern — all of which helps their newspapers have press freedom.

Much of the trust students expressed in their advisors were because, across the board, advisors were experienced. All had been working in a role as scholastic journalism teacher/advisor for at least a decade. For example, Joanne, an advisor at School A, has been involved in scholastic journalism teaching and mentoring both in schools and for national journalism educators' associations, for 20 years. Now, she holds summer camps where she teaches students how to cover controversial topics responsibly. Another advisor, Gina, was in a high school journalism program herself that advocated strongly for student press freedom and had not stepped away from scholastic journalism since then. Kathleen said that as she gained experience as an advisor over the years, she felt like she could trust her students more and wanted them to take more ownership of the process, emphasizing that less experienced advisors are likely to be more ingrained in the publishing process. It's worth noting that the four schools represented have such experienced advisors because they are well-resourced and able to locate and hire these advisors.

On the student side, several interviewees credited their advisors and their expertise for creating a program that allowed the students to lead and cover controversial topics confidently and responsibly, a theme we will return to in greater detail when examining what factors allow for greater degrees of press freedom. Thus, students and advisors both said that the students are the ones who usually initiate conversations with advisors about controversial content. "There are times where I'll come to [my advisor] and say, 'I have a problem, can you tell me how to fix this?' Or 'I don't know how to handle this situation.' But he almost never comes to us first," said Annie, an editor at School

B. She said that their newspaper editors' rule of thumb was to go to their advisor when they felt like their "knowledge is at its limits."

Gina, an advisor, expressed something similar, emphasizing that she does not grade⁹⁶ until after stories are already published and will only look at a story if a student asks, citing recent examples of an obituary after a student had died and a story where a faculty member allegedly used a racial slur. "I'm always like, 'I'm not your editor.' ... I don't tell them what to do. I just provide feedback and I'm like, these are some red flags ... but they make the decision on whether to [follow my advice] or not. My job is, once [the story] is done, to say, okay, how could you do this better next time?" One of her advisees agreed, saying that "we're obviously a fully run student newspaper, so she really just advises us, and she knows a lot." Still, other students such as Mary, who is also one of Gina's advisees, noted that Gina was present through the entire publishing process and does sometimes give input throughout the process. Also, as noted in the "student-run" section, most advisors did read every story and provide input on every story at some point prior to publication.

Another interesting phenomenon that came up in interviews was that advisors often "help students" with press freedom in a clandestine way, since they cannot always explicitly speak out against administration because they are also employees of the school. Interviewees at School D and School P mentioned examples of this. Gina, an advisor at School D, said that if students "run into a situation in which there's a first amendment issue, I can't fight the fight. They have to fight the fight, but I always tell them who to contact in order to fight the fight." Gina often referred her students to people at the Student Press Law Center, which would sometimes review her students' work to make sure they could not get in legal trouble for publishing it. Similarly, Kathleen, an advisor at School P, said a student was working on a story about faculty firing, and she helped direct the student to outside resources — for example, the student talked to a neighboring public school's advisor but not

⁹⁶All 28 newspapers in this study's sample were classes and part of the official school curriculum.

to Kathleen. The student didn't want Kathleen to get in trouble with administration but also thought that "if this scandalous thing were true, it's really essential that I publish the story."

In summary, interviewees navigated questions about press freedom and controversial content through student-advisor relationships that were primarily student-driven relationships that still drew heavily on the wealth of experience of the newspaper advisor.

4. What else allows for press freedom?

Now that we have built an understanding of how students and their advisors navigate questions of press freedom, it's worth examining what, specifically, allows them to maintain high degrees of press freedom. Interviewees largely attributed their newspapers' press freedom to 1) access to sources and networks of power, 2) knowledge of legal press rights and 3) confidence in students' and advisors' ability to cover hard topics well.

a) Access

Interviewees spoke about access in two main ways: access to participation in the school newspaper program itself and access to administrative and other sources that would make coverage of controversial topics more feasible.

First, several students and administrators said that people who join the newsroom tend to be whiter, wealthier, and more connected than the rest of the student body. To the question "who joins the newsroom?", Joanne, an advisor at School A, said it's high achievers and "students who are surer of themselves," often students who want a leadership position in the paper to help their chances at acceptance to a selective college. Annie, an editor at School B, said it was students who were already "more connected" or "want to be more connected," meaning that they had ties to powerful people in the city or in local politics such as company executives or city councilmembers. Eve and Mary,

both editors at School D, said that students who are more privileged — who tend to be disproportionately white and wealthy — usually join the newspaper. “There is definitely a higher percentage of white people on the paper. I can't lie about the facts,” Mary said. Several of these students also said that even within the organization, students that belonged to these “more privileged” groups were more willing to take on controversial stories because they were surer of themselves and their power in society.

The other facet of access students and advisors often discussed was their access to administrators and other sources who were powerful people in their community, such as local politicians or prominent business owners. It's worth noting that having access to these networks and knowing how to navigate them is a central part of a quality democratic education, and interviewees from these award-winning scholastic journalism programs all said they have “exceptional” or similarly high levels of access to these sources. Joanne emphasized that this access helped the programs both win awards and empower students.

“The access is exceptional here,” said Joanne, an advisor at School A. For example, student journalists at School A have standing meetings with administrators and who are willing to be interviewed about any topic anytime. “We get [administrators] used to the idea that these student journalists are going to be here and that you have to answer their questions and they make some really hard questions. If these kids weren't winning all these awards, I'd be like, what's wrong with you guys? You have everything you need to, to succeed. You have great computers, cameras, access to field trips, I take them to conventions every year, you have free press, you have administrators who will answer your questions.”

Ally, a student editor at School D, said, “We have a great friendship with our mayor ... a lot of people know us, are used to the process, and are easily accessed.” Annie agreed, adding that the student journalists “spend a lot of time cultivating those relationships” to keep that access open.

Students who said they sometimes struggled to get sourcing for a controversial story often cited lack of access to an administrative perspective as the reason for doing so. In summary, Eve, an editor at School D, said, “I think it's really important to have student press freedom, but at the same time, it requires a lot of access to different things.”

The dependence of student press freedom on access to powerful societal networks contributes to the relationship between press freedom and democratic education — if we are able to help all scholastic journalism programs achieve this level of access, students would be better equipped to succeed in democratic society. But this kind of access is difficult to come by and often relies on systemic factors such as school funding and location as well as community relationships that are built over long periods of time.

b) Knowledge of legal press rights

Several of the students and most advisors interviewed mentioned legal protections of the student press and how knowing what they were legally allowed to do helped them cover controversial topics more comfortably.

School A was the strongest example of this, as they are in a state with the “oldest student press law on the books” and generally strong student press freedom, with a specific education code that protects student journalists and does not allow for prior review. Joanne, an advisor at that school, said that the strong legal freedoms and teaching her students about those freedoms contributes to a culture where everyone expects the student press to cover what’s happening in the community, no matter how controversial. Alvin, one of Joanne’s students, commented in the first few minutes of our interview on the existence of a press law that allows them to publish anything they wanted and said it was covered in the school’s introductory journalism sequence.

Gina, the advisor at School D, mentioned a student-made guide in her program that gets passed down from year to year explaining what to do if someone tries to censor an article. She said that administrators were sometimes more willing to talk to students because they know that the students understand the Freedom of Information Act — an act that allows students to request records from any federal agency, including public school districts — and would often use that to get the information themselves if the administrator declined to speak with the student.

Even with School P, where the First Amendment does not protect private school students from censorship since private schools are not public forums of speech, Kathleen and Terri, advisors at that school, said they educated their students about student press freedom — including policies like prior review and what external resources are available, such as advisors at neighboring public schools or the Student Press Law Center.

c) Confidence in their own abilities and trust in their advisor through the process

A third factor that contributed to students' ability to cover controversial topics freely was the confidence they expressed in their own abilities and in the power of the student press throughout our interviews. The first two factors — access and knowledge — clearly contribute to this sense of confidence, which is paired with students' trust in their advisors to make sure students are equipped to cover difficult topics well.

Eve, an editor at School D, said “the only reason that I felt so empowered to do that kind of reporting [on controversial topics] is because I knew I had been trained well, and I trusted in the fact that like we had this prerequisite course about journalism where I had to learn how to do certain things.”

Joanne, an advisor for School A, spoke to the mutual trust between student and advisor as something that gave students the confidence to go out on their own and report, because her

students have the skills to get — and get responsibly — the information they need for their stories. She emphasized that scholastic journalism programs need both access and empowerment to have true press freedom. When that happens, she said, “that kind of trust is established, whereas if you’re a newer advisor, you don’t always have the experience and don’t always feel super confident in what your students are doing and if it is legal or not.”

Several students and advisors even said their high school paper’s coverage of controversial issues at both the school and district/city level was of a higher quality than that of their local professional paper. Annie, an editor at School B, said they as student journalists have a unique perspective — in that they know their readers well — and real power to change things. “Our stories can go more in depth because we have more time, and we have more access,” Annie said. She cited several examples where her stories led to real policy change in her school and district. Joanne said something similar, adding that “the only difference” between their paper and their local paper “is that the stuff that my kids write is better than what our local newspapers are working on.” Gina, an advisor at School D, even said her students are more willing to cover controversial topics than their city paper because the city paper is “scared to.” She said students are more empowered and that they don’t, for example, have businesses that could revolt against them for negative coverage. Gina cited an example of a story where a teacher was arrested. Her students covered the incident, but their local paper did not.

What ties the themes in this section together is a sense of empowerment and that the work students are doing is real work that effects real change, which we will explore further in the following section. Sophie, an editor at School B, said it well: “That’s what keeps me going. The fact that people can see what I write and what I publish, and then it makes an impact. That is just so cool. And it’s just so rewarding, and I just love it.”

5. Impacts of press freedom

Interviewees not only had high levels of press freedom within their programs and believed strongly in press freedom, both for their own programs and for scholastic journalism programs more generally — they also spoke about press freedom as empowerment. When describing press freedom, they often used language very similar to language that is inherent in democratic education: working to tell under-told stories from multiple perspectives, writing — and therefore caring — about difficult issues in their community and navigating the systems of power at play in their communities. Several editors used phrases like “powerful” and “empowering” when asked to describe the impacts of having a high degree of student press freedom in their school newspapers.

A quote from Eve, an editor at School D, underscores several of these points, all without being prompted with the phrase “democratic education” or anything similar: “Being able to ask tough questions and being able to challenge leaders who often were surprised that I had real ideas that could be challenging was really empowering and made me feel good. It made me feel like I was doing justice for my community, because I had the privilege to do so but also, hopefully, the awareness to ask the right questions that weren’t just privileged questions.” She also emphasized the “huge connection between political activity, political awareness in engagement of young people and writing for newspapers.”

Overall, students and advisors all said that student press freedom had a positive impact on them and their — even if they did not use this phrase — democratic education. Remarkably, all but one interviewee said that all scholastic journalism programs should ideally be able to have student press freedom. But several interviewees added caveats to that blanket statement, generally emphasizing that sufficient knowledge, training and access were necessary criteria for “responsible” press freedom. Those caveats may make the structures and relationships that allow for press freedom in NSPA award-winning schools difficult to generalize to schools with less privilege.

Annie, an editor at School B, said that “as long as there is someone in charge who knows what they are doing — my advisor, who went to Columbia’s graduate school of journalism and has worked for many, many newspapers, I would say knows what he is doing — and it’s not just children going rogue, that we should be able to voice our voices in the same way that a professional newspaper.” Several other student editors voiced concurring opinions.

Similarly, Kathleen, an advisor for School P, the private school, believes strongly in the importance of autonomy in the classroom and, by consequence, the student newsroom, saying that it gives students a sense of ownership and community that is valuable to their learning and development as a student and as a person. She said that her dissertation, a case study on autonomy in her school’s student newsroom, showed that being in an autonomous environment with wise limits and supportive teaching made them “feel like real people with decision making power in real life” — even for kids that “did badly” at first. Still, she stressed that this freedom must come with limits, because she said high school students may not always know about or anticipate the negative implications coverage can have on community members’ safety and reputation.

To Kathleen’s point, Joanne, an advisor at School A who has worked with multiple state and national journalism educators associations, emphasized that advisors can access free mentorship through, for example, the Journalism Education Association, and that the National Scholastic Press Association, Student Press Law Center, Society of Professional Journalists, and other organizations provide free resources to journalism advisors who want to equip their newsrooms so that they can freely cover difficult topics and thus have a greater degree of press freedom. Joanne is a mentor to two journalism advisors at underserved schools through one of those national organizations. Kathleen, who did not have journalism experience prior to becoming a journalism advisor, used resources from several of these organizations to build her knowledge base.

Press freedom empowers student journalists to write about what they care about and know that it matters, which is why everyone should have it, interviewees said — given that they have the tools and resources to do it “ethically” and “responsibly.”

Conclusion

Through this project, I aim to shed light on student newspapers' relationships with press freedom and student-advisor discussions on whether to run controversial stories. Hopefully, my study contributes to an understanding of how much press freedom a high school student can expect in their news organization and how those discussions unfold when they happen productively — in, for example, these well-resourced schools with high amounts of press freedom.

This capstone's sample of schools that won NSPA awards did not see high degrees of censorship, especially administrative censorship, in their scholastic journalism programs. The 28 papers sampled were generally able to cover controversial topics frequently and freely, with more than one-third of the 711 articles sampled tagged with a controversial topic, most often COVID policy. These articles tended to be longer, have more administrative sourcing and have more dissenting voices.

In the rare cases where censorship did happen, students and advisors interviewed spoke of three main factors that contributed to what they perceived as a high level of press freedom: access, knowledge of legal press rights and confidence in students' own abilities as student journalists. These factors corresponded with the factors outlined in this study's literature review and are also markers of social and political capital⁹⁷ — essential components of a successful democratic education. Related phrases like “empower,” “what I'm writing matters” and “impact” came up often when I asked interviewees about what press freedom grants them. Thus, expanding student press freedom can empower students to have that kind of democratic privilege, and programs that grant high degrees of press freedom can facilitate democratic education in high schools.

There is, of course, much to be explored when examining issues of student press freedom and democratic education. As previously discussed, this project focuses exclusively on the scholastic

⁹⁷ Siisiäinen, “Two Concepts of Social Capital: Bourdieu vs. Putnam.”

journalism programs that do have student press freedom, with much of it attributed to the schools' status and access to resources. It is also worth recognizing that my choice to focus on a relatively privileged sample of journalism programs contributes to the problem that more privileged structures are easier to access — and have thus always received a disproportionately high amount of academic attention. That said, what do these programs look like in schools with underfunded or less established journalism programs? What about programs that run as extracurriculars instead of classes? Or programs that are concentrated specifically in low-income areas? Districts where most students, unlike the ones in this study's sample, are mostly people of color?

Now, the question becomes: How do we ensure all schools, especially the ones that do not have the same levels of access, knowledge, and confidence — proxies for wealth and other kinds of privilege — can have the same degree of press freedom as those on the NSPA list?

Perhaps we should give scholastic journalism programs more funding. Maybe it just always comes back to funding. Almost every interviewee mentioned that the level of experience their advisor had was a main factor in the program's ability to have press freedom. Hillary Davis, advocacy and organizing director of the Student Press Law Center,⁹⁸ said that less experienced advisors don't encourage students to reach for the more controversial stories because "they themselves don't feel comfortable fighting in those battles." More funding would allow schools to attract and hire more experienced advisors.

But absent additional funding, several interviewees mentioned online resources and free mentorship from national journalism educators' associations, and the Student Press Law Center is working with a network of students, advisors, and policymakers nationally to 1) pass press freedom legislation and 2) educate programs so they know about their freedoms and can implement them,

⁹⁸ Davis, interview.

but the latter part of this program is still in its early stages. There is, of course, more that can be done and other methods that can be suggested through further research.

And as we continue in our current political moment with critical race theory debates, legislation like the “Don’t Say Gay Bill” and other debates, we need to pay special attention that they do not exacerbate censorship and self-censorship that student journalists are already facing. In my interview with Hillary Davis, advocacy and organizing director of the Student Press Law Center,⁹⁹ said that this type of legislation and a rise in legislation that censors curriculum will inevitably influence “administrators who are already nervous about communities complaining about what’s in the student paper” and cause them to “crack down even harder and more inappropriately on student journalists who are already heavily censored. It’s going to prohibit students from grappling with big ideas in a proactive and healthy way, because everybody’s afraid that somebody’s going to lodge a complaint against their school.”

Society will always grapple with controversial issues, ones that may or may not change over time — after all, the issues presented as controversial in *Hazelwood*, teen pregnancy and divorce, are still often censored in scholastic journalism programs today. We will always question how we want to see our own histories and speak about our leaders. But even when social and political tensions are at a high, I hope to see a society in which empowering opportunity granted by scholastic journalism to freely ask and write is never jeopardized for any student under any circumstance.

⁹⁹ Davis, interview.

Appendix: data

The datasets I worked with throughout this study can be accessed at the following link:

<https://github.com/pheebini/EDSTCapstone>. This table below shows select columns and demographics of school-level data.

School	Total # of articles ¹⁰⁰	% Controversial	% Student sources	Dissenting voices rating	School type	% white ¹⁰¹	% Asian	% Hispanic/Latino	% Black	% SES disadv. ¹⁰²
A	14	64	51	2.07	Public	12.2	79.6	3.5	0.2	5
B	30	53	34	2.13	Public	42.6	2	8.1	42.5	29
C	18	50	40.1	2.39	Public	66.2	14.9	19.2	5.6	11
D	6	50	50	2.33	Public	18	58	10.4	1.8	35
E	18	50	61.2	2.11	Public	53	3.2	12.7	23	37
F	14	50	13	2.78	Public	76.7	2.3	4.1	12.8	12
G	10	50	13	1.8	Public	72	6.8	5.8	10.5	15
H	16	44	68	2.80	Public	86.6	2.2	8	1.7	6
I	10	40	53	2.9	Public	29.6	44.9	15.6	0.8	14
J	15	40	48	2	Public	66.5	12.6	12.7	3.1	13
K	42	40	54	2.52	Private	51.9	19	5.7	9.3	N/A
L	15	38	31	2.63	Public	47.3	2.2	29.5	16.6	38
N	15	33	29	1.93	Public	66.7	8	7.5	14.7	15
M	29	31	73	2.57	Public	45.4	33.5	11.9	2.1	8
O	24	29	33	2.58	Public	61.3	12.1	4.3	18	6
P	39	26	44	2.64	Private	N/A ¹⁰³	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Q	4	25	33	2.75	Public	69	13.5	12.5	0.7	3
R	37	24	48	2.56	Public	67.6	17.6	4.6	4.4	11.3
S	5	20	47	2.2	Public	7.4	1.1	74.4	15.3	74

¹⁰⁰ Published on the newspaper's website between September and December 2021.

¹⁰¹ Demographic data was sourced from U.S. News and cross-checked with state Department of Education websites. Most data is from the 2020-21 school year, with a handful of schools with slightly older or slightly newer data.

¹⁰² The percent of students who would have been eligible for free and reduced lunch, even though all public-school students received lunch for free in 2021 as part of pandemic-related policies. More information on this threshold can be found [here](#). It varies from state to state and family to family but is often used as a proxy for financial status.

¹⁰³ Private schools are not required to report this data.

T	27	19	55	2.56	Public	56.6	3.4	17.3	18	37
U	42	19	46	2.71	Public	74.3	5.1	5.8	10.3	18
V	59	17	53	2.85	Public	72	2.2	20.2	3.5	12
W	96	15	69	2.86	Private	55.6	21.4	8.4	7.5	N/A
X	15	13	49	2.8	Public	85.5	1.5	3.1	6.7	10
Y	20	10	82	2.65	Public	20.6	70.2	2.4	1.9	2
Z	73	8	50	2.89	Public	73.3	12.9	3.7	3.6	9
AA	10	0	35	3	Public	67.3	16.1	8.3	4	13
BB	7	0	46	3	Private	68.2	13.9	14.4	3.4	N/A

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