**John Green's 'The Fault in Our Stars' banned in Riverside**

By MICHAEL SCHAUB, *Los Angeles Times,* September 29, 2014

One of the most popular young adult novels of recent times has been banned in Riverside. The Riverside Unified School District has forbidden John Green's "The Fault in Our Stars" in its middle school libraries.

The Riverside Unified School District’s book reconsideration committee voted to [remove](http://www.pe.com/articles/book-750585-school-committee.html) three copies of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* from the library shelves of Frank Augustus Miller Middle School and to forbid its inclusion at other middle school libraries in the district. Even donations of the book are not to be accepted.

The ban comes after a complaint from a parent that the book contains profanity and references to sex.

Green responded to the ban on his Tumblr page, after a fan asked for his reaction:

"I guess I am both happy and sad," he writes. "I am happy because apparently young people in Riverside, California will never witness or experience mortality since they won’t be reading my book, which is great for them."

Green jokingly continues, "But I am also sad because I was really hoping I would be able to introduce the idea that human beings die to the children of Riverside, California and thereby crush their dreams of immortality."

Green is possibly the most popular author of young adult fiction in America today. The movie adaptation of "The Fault in Our Stars" was a hit with critics and audiences, and three of his other works are also being adapted into films: "Let It Snow," "Paper Towns," and "Looking for Alaska."

Yet Green's books are frequently challenged by schools and libraries. His novel "An Abundance of Katherines" was suspended recently by a Highland Park, Texas, school district, along with books by Sherman Alexie, Toni Morrison and Jeannette Walls. Last night, the superintendent of the school district [reversed that ban](http://www.dallasnews.com/news/community-news/park-cities/headlines/20140929-highland-park-isd-reverses-book-suspensions-at-high-school.ece) and apologized for suspending the books.

### Top 25 banned or challenged books: 2000-2009

1. Harry Potter series, by J.K. Rowling

2. Alice series, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

3. The Chocolate War, by Robert Cormier

4. And Tango Makes Three, by Justin Richardson/Peter Parnell

5. Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck

6. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou

7. Scary Stories (series), by Alvin Schwartz

8. His Dark Materials (series), by Philip Pullman

9. ttyl; ttfn; l8r g8r (series), by Lauren Myracle

10. The Perks of Being a Wallflower, by Stephen Chbosky

11. Fallen Angels, by Walter Dean Myers

12. It's Perfectly Normal, by Robie Harris

13. Captain Underpants (series), by Dav Pilkey

14. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain

15. The Bluest Eye, by Toni Morrison

16. Forever, by Judy Blume

17. The Color Purple, by Alice Walker

18. Go Ask Alice, by Anonymous

19. Catcher in the Rye, by J.D. Salinger

20. King and King, by Linda de Haan

21. To Kill A Mockingbird, by Harper Lee

22. Gossip Girl (series), by Cecily von Ziegesar

23. The Giver, by Lois Lowry

24. In the Night Kitchen, by Maurice Sendak

25. Killing Mr. Griffen, by Lois Duncan

Source: The American Library Association

**Rewriting history? Texas tackles textbook debate.**

*CBS News,**Sept. 16, 2014*

**AUSTIN, Texas** -- The long-running ideological dispute over what gets taught in Texas classrooms flared anew over proposed history textbooks Tuesday, with academics decrying lessons they said exaggerate the importance of Christian values on the nation's Founding Fathers while conservatives complained of anti-American, pro-Islam biases.

The Board of Education will approve new history textbooks for the state's 5-plus million public school students in November. But it heard hours of complaints about 104 proposed books during a sometimes heated public hearing.

Jacqueline Jones, chairwoman of the University of Texas' History Department, said one U.S. history high school book cheerleads for President Ronald Reagan and the significance of America's free enterprise system while glossing over Gov. George Wallace's attempt to block school integration in Alabama. She also pointed to a phrase stating that "the minimum wage remains one of the New Deal's most controversial legacies."

"We do our students a disservice when we scrub history clean of unpleasant truths," Jones said "and when we present an inaccurate view of the past that promotes a simple-minded, ideologically driven point of view."

Objections such as Jones' were the most common, but some conservatives complained that the books marginalized Reagan and other top Republicans, even as they heaped praise on former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"I guess Ronald Reagan did nothing in two terms," scoffed Republican board member Ken Mercer of San Antonio.

Debates over academic curriculum and textbooks have for years thrust Texas' Board of Education into the national spotlight, sparking battles over issues such as how to teach climate change and natural selection. Many publishers sell books created for Texas to school districts in other states.

Last November, [a dispute over teaching evolution](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/evolution-debate-engulfs-texas-textbooks-approvals-again/) delayed approval of a new science textbook.

In 2010, while approving the history curriculum standards that this year's round of new books are supposed to follow, conservatives on the board required that students evaluate whether the United Nations undermines U.S. sovereignty and study the Congressional GOP's 1994 Contract with America.

Kathleen Wellman, a history professor at Southern Methodist University, said many books give Moses - the biblical Hebrew leader who received the Ten Commandments from God - credit for influencing the U.S. Constitution, so much so that Texas students might believe "Moses was the first American."

"Moses shows up everywhere doing everything," Wellman said.

All of Tuesday's comments are sent to the publishers, who can provide responses in defense of what's written, or make changes, before final approval of the books.

Some community leaders complained that proposed books downplayed Hispanic accomplishments, incorrectly depicted jihad as a call to holy war, or were biased in favor of Israeli points of view in Middle East conflicts. But conservative activists said they didn't go far enough in accurately depicting religious extremism in modern terrorism.

Amy Jo Baker, a retired history teacher and former social studies director for the San Antonio Independent School District, said she was saddened that one book for sixth graders incorrectly described jihad, for many Muslims, as the struggle to be a better person. She also noted a high school history text that said young people in Cuba receive "many benefits" from the communist government, while also noting that they live in a police state.

"I think our students deserve textbooks that are historically accurate and not politically correct," Baker said, adding that she wants textbooks that "reflect not America as the bad guy, but America as an exceptional nation."

A group of experts convened by the left-leaning advocacy group Texas Freedom Network has objected to some proposed books' overemphasizing the influence of the Ten Commandments and other Christian tenants on the American Revolution.

"There are more than 100 pages of errors," said Kathy Miller, Freedom Network's president. Board member David Bradley, a Beaumont Republican, noted that some of the academics doing reviews for Miller's group were paid and that she was "a hired gun" because she is a registered lobbyist with the Texas Legislature.

Despite some testy moments, Mount Pleasant Republican and board vice chairman Thomas Ratliff joked that the exchanges were cordial compared to past board ideological clashes.

"We're batting a thousand," he laughed, "No one took a swing at each other."

Why you should worry about NSA snooping: Editorial

By Star-Ledger Editorial Board**,**  September 01, 2013

Thanks to Eric Snowden, we now know that the National Security Agency is scooping up millions of phone records and scouring them for evidence of terrorist connections.



Edward Snowden, the NSA contractor who leaked data on NSA surveillance programs.

You might think this has nothing to do with you, but it does. One reason is that the agency’s internal auditors recently concluded that NSA staffers often break the rules intended to protect privacy. So anyone could be caught up in this net.

Another is that the government can find out a great deal about you without listening to your conversations, just by examining whom you speak to and when. That was recently spelled out in painful detail by a Prince­ton University professor, Ed Felten, in a legal brief supporting a lawsuit against this dragnet surveillance filed by the American Civil Liberties Union.

Suppose, for example, you or someone in your family dials a hotline for those considering suicide, or for victims of domestic violence. Suppose you call an employee assistance line for people with drug or alcohol problems.

Suppose that two people in an intimate relationship call each other every night, and then stop. The NSA databanks could tell their agents that the relationship likely ended. And a second dive into the data may tell the agent when a new relationship has begun, and with whom.

Another chilling scenario: A young woman calls her gynecologist, then her mother, then a man she regularly speaks to after 11 p.m., and then an abortion clinic. That reveals a great deal, even without knowing a single word of any conversation.

So we all have a stake in this discussion. Our privacy is indeed at stake. And even those who defend the program as an important tool in the fight against terror agree that reforms are needed to keep a tighter leash on the agency.

President Obama has made some useful suggestions. Under current law, the secret court that authorizes these activities, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, hears from only one side — the lawyers seeking permission to snoop. Obama wants to establish a new office to make the counterargument before the court. He has also promised greater oversight at the NSA, which plans to hire a full-time civil liberties guardian.

That’s a start. The idea that a government agency could scoop up all this private information without a warrant is chilling. If the program is to survive, it at least must be tamed. Because the threat to personal privacy is beyond dispute.

What Happens When Artificial Intelligence Turns On Us?

*In a new book, James Barrat warns that artificial intelligence will one day outsmart humans, and there is no guarantee that it will be benevolent*

By **Erica R. Hendry,** SMITHSONIAN.COM, JANUARY 21, 2014

Artificial intelligence has come a long way since R2-D2. These days, most millennials would be lost without smart GPS systems. Robots are already navigating battlefields, and drones may soon be delivering Amazon packages to our doorsteps. Siri can solve complicated equations and tell you how to cook rice. She has even proven she can even respond to questions with a sense of humor.

But all of these advances depend on a user giving the A.I. direction. What would happen if GPS units decided they didn’t want to go to the dry cleaners, or worse, Siri decided she could become smarter without you around? "Before we share the planet with super-intelligent machines, we must develop a science for understanding them. Otherwise, they’ll take control," author James Barrat says of his new book, *Our Final Invention: Artificial Intelligence and the End of the Human Era*.

Before long, Barrat says, artificial intelligence—from Siri to drones and data mining systems—will stop looking to humans for upgrades and start seeking improvements on their own. And unlike the R2-D2s and HALs of science fiction, the A.I. of our future won’t necessarily be friendly, he says: they could actually be what destroy us.

**In a nutshell, can you explain your big idea?**

In this century, scientists will create machines with intelligence that equals and then surpasses our own. But before we share the planet with super-intelligent machines, we must develop a science for understanding them. Otherwise, they’ll take control. And no, this isn’t science fiction. Scientists have already created machines that are better than humans at chess, *Jeopardy!*, navigation, data mining, search, theorem proving and countless other tasks. Eventually, machines will be created that are better than humans at A.I. research

At that point, they will be able to improve their own capabilities very quickly. These self-improving machines will pursue the goals they’re created with, whether they be space exploration, playing chess or picking stocks. To succeed they’ll seek and expend resources, be it energy or money. They’ll seek to avoid the failure modes, like being switched off or unplugged. In short, they’ll develop drives, including self-protection and resource acquisition—drives much like our own. They won’t hesitate to beg, borrow, steal and worse to get what they need.

**What evidence do you have to support your idea?**

Advanced artificial intelligence is a dual-use technology, like nuclear fission, capable of great good or great harm. We’re just starting to see the harm. Today, [an] ethical battle is brewing about making fully autonomous killer drones and battlefield robots powered by advanced A.I.—human-killers without humans in the loop. It’s brewing between the Department of Defense and the drone and robot makers who are paid by the DOD, and people who think it’s foolhardy and immoral to create intelligent killing machines. Those in favor of autonomous drones and battlefield robots argue that they’ll be more moral—that is, less emotional, will target better and be more disciplined than human operators. Those against taking humans out of the loop are looking at drones’ miserable history of killing civilians, and involvement in extralegal assassinations. Who shoulders the moral culpability when a robot kills? The robot makers, the robot users, or no one? Nevermind the technical hurdles of telling friend from foe.

**Who will be most affected by this idea?**

Everyone on the planet has much to fear from the unregulated development of super-intelligent machines. An intelligence race is going on right now. Achieving A.G.I. is job number one for Google, IBM and many smaller companies like Vicarious and Deep Thought, as well as DARPA, the NSA and governments and companies abroad. Profit is the main motivation for that race. Imagine one likely goal: a virtual human brain at the price of a computer. It would be the most lucrative commodity in history. Imagine banks of thousands of PhD quality brains working 24/7 on pharmaceutical development, cancer research, weapons development and much more. Who wouldn’t want to buy that technology?

Meanwhile, 56 nations are developing battlefield robots, and the drive is to make them, and drones, autonomous. They will be machines that kill, unsupervised by humans. Impoverished nations will be hurt most by autonomous drones and battlefield robots. Initially, only rich countries will be able to afford autonomous kill bots, so rich nations will wield these weapons against human soldiers from impoverished nations.

**How might it change life, as we know it?**

Imagine: in as little as a decade, a half-dozen companies and nations field computers that rival or surpass human intelligence. Imagine what happens when those computers become expert at programming smart computers. Soon we’ll be sharing the planet with machines thousands or millions of times more intelligent than we are. And, all the while, each generation of this technology will be weaponized. Unregulated, it will be catastrophic.

**How Your Cell Phone Hurts Your Relationships**

*The mere presence of a phone affects how you relate to others.*

*Scientific American*, Sep 4, 2012 (By Helen Lee Lin)

Most of us are no stranger to this scenario:  A group of friends sits down to a meal together, laughing, swapping stories, and catching up on the news – but not necessarily with the people in front of them!  Nowadays, it’s [not unusual](http://techcrunch.com/2012/06/21/nomophobia-attacks-harris-says-74-of-users-panic-over-phone-loss-58-of-us-cant-stay-away-from-mobiles-for-more-than-an-hour/) to have one’s phone handy on the table, easily within reach for looking up movie times, checking e-mails, showing off photos, or taking a call or two.  It’s a rare person who doesn’t give in to a quick glance at the phone every now and then. Today’s [multifunctional](http://jmq.sagepub.com/content/72/4/922.abstract) phones have become an [indispensable lifeline](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Cell-Phones.aspx) to the rest of the world.

We might expect that the widespread availability of mobile phones boosts interpersonal connections, by allowing people to stay in touch constantly.  But a recent set of [studies](http://spr.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/07/17/0265407512453827.abstract) by Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein of the University of Essex showed that our phones can hurt our close relationships. Amazingly, they found that simply having a phone nearby, without even checking it, can be detrimental to our attempts at interpersonal connection.

Przybylski and Weinstein asked pairs of strangers to discuss a moderately intimate topic (an interesting event that had occurred to them within the last month) for 10 minutes.  The strangers left their own belongings in a waiting area and proceeded to a private booth.  Within the booth, they found two chairs facing each other and, a few feet away, out of their direct line of vision, there was a desk that held a book and one other item.  Unbeknownst to the pair, the key difference in their interactions would be the second item on the desk.  Some pairs engaged in their discussion with a nondescript cell phone nearby, whereas other pairs conversed while a pocket notebook lay nearby.  After they finished the discussion, each of the strangers completed questionnaires about the relationship quality (connectedness) and feelings of closeness they had experienced.  The pairs who chatted in the presence of the cell phone reported lower relationship quality and less closeness.

Przybylski and Weinstein followed up with a new experiment to see, in which contexts, the presence of a cell phone matters the most.  This time, each pair of strangers was assigned a casual topic (their thoughts and feelings about plastic trees) or a meaningful topic (the most important events of the past year) to discuss — again, either with a cell phone or a notebook nearby.  After their 10-minute discussion, the strangers answered questions about relationship quality, their feelings of trust, and the empathy they had felt from their discussion partners.

The presence of the cell phone had no effect on relationship quality, trust, and empathy, but only if the pair discussed the casual topic.  In contrast, there were significant differences if the topic was meaningful. The pairs who conversed with a cell phone in the vicinity reported that their relationship quality was worse.  The pairs also reported feeling less trust and thought that their partners showed less empathy if there was a cell phone present.

Thus, interacting in a neutral environment, without a cell phone nearby, seems to help foster closeness, connectedness, interpersonal trust, and perceptions of empathy — the building-blocks of relationships. Past studies have suggested that because of the many social, instrumental, and entertainment [options](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2083/cell-phones-texting-internet-photos) phones afford us, they often divert our attention from our current environment, whether we are speeding down a highway or sitting through a meeting.  The new research suggests that cell phones may serve as a reminder of the wider network to which we could connect, inhibiting our ability to connect with the people right next to us.  Cell phone usage may even [reduce](http://healthland.time.com/2012/02/20/is-your-cell-phone-making-you-a-jerk/) our social consciousness.

Perhaps it would be going too far to prepare for important conversations by throwing your cell phone into the closet, or leaving it in the car on first dates. But if you are spending the day with people you really care about, you might want to reconsider the next time you reach for your phone to reply to a text message or check sports scores.  Just having that phone nearby is bad enough.

**Our Attention Spans Are Getting Shorter, And It's A Big Problem**

*Huffington Post*, October 23, 2013

Today’s children are growing up in a new reality, one where they are attuning more to machines and less to people than has ever been true in human history. That’s troubling for several reasons. For one the social and emotional circuitry of a child’s brain learns from contact and conversation with everyone it encounters over the course of a day. These interactions mold brain circuitry; the fewer hours spent with people – and the more staring at a digitized screen -- portends deficits.

All of that digital engagement comes at a cost in face time with real people – the medium where we learn to “read” nonverbals. The new crop of natives in this digital world may be adroit at the keyboard, but can be all thumbs when it comes to reading behavior face-to-face, in real time – particularly in sensing the dismay of others when they stop to read a text in the middle of talking with them.

Then there are the basics of attention, the cognitive muscle that lets us follow a story, see a task through to the end, learn or create. In some ways the endless hours young people spend staring at electronic gadgets may help them acquire specific cognitive skills. But there are concerns and questions about how those same hours may lead to deficits in core emotional, social, and cognitive skills.

The ingredients of rapport begin with total shared focus between two people, which leads to an unconscious physical synchrony, which in turn generates good feeling. Such a shared focus with the teacher puts a child’s brain in the best mode for learning. Any teacher who has struggled to get a class to pay attention knows that once everyone quiets down and focuses, they can start to comprehend that lesson in history or math.

Rapport demands joint attention -- mutual focus. Our need to make an effort to have such human moments has never been greater, given the ocean of distractions we all navigate daily.

At the third All Things D(igital) conference back in 2005, conference hosts unplugged the WiFi in the main ballroom because of the glow from laptop screens, indicating that those in the audience were not glued to the action onstage. They were away, in a state, as one participant put it of “continuous partial attention,” a mental blurriness induced by an overload of information inputs from the speakers, the other people in the room, and what they were doing on their laptops. To battle such partial focus today, some Silicon Valley workplaces have banned laptops, mobile phones, and other digital tools during meetings.

After not checking her mobile for a while, a publishing executive confesses she gets “a jangly feeling. You miss that hit you get when there’s a text. You know it’s not right to check your phone when you’re with someone, but it’s addictive.” So she and her husband have a pact: “When we get home from work we put our phones in a drawer. If it’s in front of me I get anxious, I’ve just got to check it. But now we try to be more present for each other. We talk.”

Our focus continually fights distractions, both inner and outer. The question is, what are our distractors costing us? An executive at a financial firm tells me, “When I notice that my mind has been somewhere else during a meeting, I wonder what opportunities I’ve been missing right here.”

It’s not just that we’ve developed habits of attention that make us less effective, but that the weight of messages leaves us too little time simply to reflect on what they really mean. All of this was foreseen way back in 1977 by the Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon. Writing about the coming information-rich world, he warned that what information consumes is “the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

*From "Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence." Copyright 2013 Daniel Goleman. Reprinted with permission from HarperCollns Publishers.*

**Op-ed: If it's the Information Age, why are we so ignorant?**

*Jay Evensen, Deseret News,**Jan. 4, 2015*

Vladimir Putin appears to be up to tricks again. One of his leading political opponents was convicted of fraud this week, then released on a suspended sentence, and then re-arrested hours later at an unauthorized protest.

Putin’s government seems intent on squashing criticism and keeping people from hearing opposing views.

But he’s going about it all wrong. Just let people say whatever they want on any number of platforms, from endless cable TV channels to even more endless blogs and Twitter posts. Pretty soon, nobody would pay attention.

At least, that seems to be what’s happening in this country.

The dawn of this new year is not the first time pollsters and academics have struggled to find reasons for widespread and growing public ignorance in the midst of the greatest explosion of accessible information in recorded history. But a new poll has found that not only are Americans mostly ignorant of current events, a vast majority doesn’t think it’s important even to try to keep up with what’s happening.

The poll, by the Associated Press-Gfk, measured Americans’ sense of civic duty in questions that covered everything from volunteer work to jury duty.

The picture it paints is not good. It certainly doesn’t resemble anything Norman Rockwell might have done. And among the results, only 37 percent of those surveyed said they feel it is important to keep up with news or public issues.

The ironies at play here are rich. About a year and a half ago, the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project determined 61 percent of Americans owned a smartphone. Given how quickly that percentage grew from earlier surveys, my guess is the figure is higher today.

That means a solid majority of us carry in our pockets a device that instantly can put us in touch with breaking news in a variety of formats, including video and text. It provides access to millions of books and videos. Daily newscasts are available as podcasts. Breaking stories stream online. Alerts can be programmed to tell us instantly when something important happens.

It’s a marvelous tool previous generations may not have dreamed was possible, and yet we use it to watch cat videos.

Thirty years ago, Neil Postman published his book, “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” which argued that television was conditioning the nation to expect the world to be more entertaining than informative or interesting. But he hadn’t imagined what it would be like when social media allowed us to be the entertainers, as well.

The website Openeducation.net has agonized, “Given that we are in the midst of an information age, the fact that so many of us are uninformed has experts scratching their heads. Is the failure one of effort or a result of the pace of our society? Is it a lack of intellectual prowess that prevents the assimilation of all the available information or an overall malaise that overcomes even the most well-intentioned of efforts?”

Or is it perhaps that the easier something is to achieve, the more we take it for granted? If the party conversation turns to the crash of an AirAsia flight, we can hit the Google app on our phone and quickly learn enough to keep up. Why worry about it ahead of time?

The problem isn’t so much that information is available at the exact moment we need it, it is that so few people have any desire, or natural curiosity, to know about the world around them until it is needed.

Blame anything you want, from public education to the ease of general prosperity to the widespread cynicism wrought by cranks who also access the information stream. We all have a stake in somehow finding a cure. The consequences are more serious than many people believe.

In 1597, Sir Francis Bacon wrote “scientia potential est,” which translates as “knowledge is power.” Those who are motivated to use the Information Age hold a distinct advantage over everyone else.

Russia’s government is hardly the first to want to suppress information, but there is little difference between that and a nation in which people have access to information but choose not to seek it.