

“Burning Issues: An Analysis of Penguin Random House's ‘The Unburnable Book’ Campaign”  
Jacqueline Law

In May 2022, Penguin Random House LLC collaborated with author Margaret Atwood to introduce a new campaign known as “The Unburnable Book” campaign. This is a true public relations campaign that at the heart is working to promote the organization's mission and goals. Although the campaign lacks a historical perspective due to being less than a year old, it is a fascinating example of how public relations can play a vital role in the promotion and execution of a company's mission, values, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. This analysis will include a description of the campaign, details about all of the organizations involved, context related to the issues addressed in the campaign, and conclusions about the success and impact of the campaign.

For the campaign, a special fireproof edition of Atwood’s famous novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” was created and sold at auction for \$130,000. All of the proceeds from the auction went to PEN America, a nonprofit organization that works to fight censorship and protect free speech. Penguin Random House states the goal of the campaign was to, “raise awareness about the proliferating book banning and educational gag orders in American schools nationwide, and to raise money to support PEN America’s crucial work to counter this national crisis of censorship”(“Margaret Atwood & PRH Fight Censorship With an “Unburnable” Edition of THE HANDMAID'S TALE”). The special edition was printed on fire-resistant paper and bound with a flame-retardant cover. To launch the campaign, Penguin Random House released a one-minute video debuting the special edition which showed the author pointing a flamethrower at the book and flames all around it but not burning it. The video included captions overlaid on top of the video that introduced the unique book and the inspiration for the campaign. Penguin Random House and Margret Atwood also posted the launch video on their various social media accounts on May 23rd. Prior to the social media launch, Penguin Random House posted a blog post about the campaign on their website which detailed the creation of the campaign and featured quotes from Penguin Random House executives and various other people involved in the campaign. A separate website, [unburnablebook.com](http://unburnablebook.com) was also created and has various information related to

the special edition and the auction. The book debuted at the annual PEN America Gala. After the launch, Penguin Random House worked with Sotheby's, one of the largest brokers of art and fine jewelry in the world, to auction off the one-of-a-kind edition. According to the campaign's official website, the book was presented for auction by Sotheby's in New York from May 23 to June 7, 2022, before being sold for \$130,000. It is important to note that there is no accessible information about who bought the book.

In order to understand the campaign it is vital to get to know the main organization behind the campaign, Penguin Random House. Penguin Random House is one of the largest publishing companies in the world and is the highest-earning publishing company in the world. The company is the result of a merger in 2013 of two of the world's largest publishing houses, Penguin Publishing and Random House Publishing. Penguin Random House states that they are, "the international home to more than 300 editorially and creatively independent publishing imprints" ("Our Story"). Penguin Random House states its mission on its official website saying, "Our mission is to ignite a universal passion for reading by creating books for everyone. We believe that books, and the stories and ideas they hold, have the unique capacity to connect us, change us, and carry us toward a better future for generations to come" ("Our Story"). Penguin Random House is a relatively large company operating in 20 countries across six continents with more than 10,000 employees worldwide, with more than 5,000 employees in North America.

The company also has a large market share with almost 16% of the worldwide publishing market share. According to their official website, they publish 70,000 digital and 15,000 print titles annually, with more than 100,000 eBooks available worldwide. The company's accolades include publishing more than 80 Nobel Prize laureates and hundreds of the world's most widely read authors. Most relevant to this specific case, Penguin Random House claims they are, "a cultural institution dedicated to serving our communities beyond the books we publish. Through our campaigns, partnerships, and internal initiatives, we strive to shape a more equitable, diverse, and sustainable world" ("Our Story"). They also have a link to their 2020 Social Impact Report, which is a summary of their 2020 global commitment to "serving our communities

beyond the books we publish” through their three pillars of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Environment and Sustainability, and Free Expression and Joy of Reading (“Our Story”).

Penguin Random House chose to collaborate with the well-known author, Margret Atwood, for the campaign. Atwood is a Canadian writer who has published eighteen novels, eleven non-fiction books, eighteen books of poetry, and a multitude of other works. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Toronto and a Master's Degree from Radcliffe College, the then-women's university associated with Harvard. Atwood is a New York Times Best Selling author and the winner of multiple literary awards including two Booker Prizes, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and lifetime achievement awards from the National Book Critics Association and the PEN Center USA. Atwood has been a professor and faculty member at over nine different Universities in Canada and the United States and is also a current Vice President of PEN International (“Biography - Margaret Atwood”).

“The Unburnable Book ” created for the campaign was a copy of Atwood’s famous book *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985. The book is about a dystopian society set in near-future

New England where a patriarchal, totalitarian state has overthrown the United States government. The novel explores themes related to the loss of female agency and individuality, oppression, rebellion, and suppression of reproductive rights (Baldwin). Since its publication, over eight million copies of *The Handmaid’s Tale* have been sold as well as the novel becoming a New York Times Best Seller and winning many prestigious literary awards (Boyd and Gibson). Atwood’s novel was also adapted into a film in 1990, an opera in 2000, and a television series in 2017. The 2017 show, created and streamed by Hulu, was a large success and has aired five seasons so far and won eight Primetime Emmy awards. Despite its massive popularity, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has faced a lot of criticism and has been banned by schools, libraries, and even whole states. Multiple American school districts banned the book in the early 2000s claiming it was graphic, sexually explicit, morally corrupt, and detrimental to Christian values (Titus). The book has been banned by the states of Texas and Oregon with

Texas schools arguing it should be banned, “for several reasons, including profanity, overly sexual tones, being anti-Christian, featuring LGBTQ+ protagonists, and being overall morally corrupt” (Reilly). “The Handmaid’s Tale” seems to have been the perfect fit for the campaign and PR Week agrees saying, “Atwood’s Handmaid’s Tale was not just the right fit because of its dystopian plot line, but because the novelist has had numerous of her books banned across the world” (Wood).

The organization that the campaign raised money for is PEN America. PEN America is a registered 501(c)(3) headquartered in New York City and the largest of more than 100 centers worldwide that make up the PEN International network (“About Us”). PEN was originally an acronym for Poets, Essayists, and Novelists but as membership expanded to include many others, the name was kept but not as an acronym. The organization was founded in 1922 and states its mission is, “to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible” (“About Us”). PEN America has over 7,500 members including novelists, journalists, nonfiction writers, editors, poets, essayists, playwrights, publishers, translators, agents, and other writing professionals (“About Us”). The organization works to fulfill its mission through dozens of free expression and literary programs such as Campus Free Speech, Press Freedom Incentive Fund, Artists at Risk Connection, PEN World Voices Festival, and the PEN America Literary Awards.

The creation and behind-the-scenes work of the campaign was done by Rethink Communications. Rethink defines itself as “one of the largest global independent agencies” that has offices in New York, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. (“Our Story - Rethink”). Rethink has worked with many well-known companies including Kraft, IKEA, WestJet, Heinz, and Coorslight. Last year Rethink won Strategy’s Agency of the Year, a Silver Award for Public Relations Agency of the Year, and Campaign of the Year for their campaign with Heinz. Rethink creative director Caroline Friesen is credited with coming up with the idea of creating an unburnable book and the agency worked with Penguin Random House to pick what book would be used.

In order to understand the campaign and the why behind it, there is context that needs to be addressed. While this campaign works to address freedom of expression and fight censorship in today's society, the issue of censorship has a very long and extensive history. Due to this campaign being focused on North America and the United States in particular, a review of censorship in the United States is most relevant. The American Library Association defines censorship as "a change in the access of status material, based on the content of the work and made by a governing authority or its representatives; such changes include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age/grade level changes." Censorship is often viewed as a violation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, however, interpretation of the First Amendment is not concrete and has been challenged throughout US history, even in the Supreme Court. According to Jennifer Steele's article titled "A History of Censorship in America", obscenity is one of the oldest and most commonly cited reasons behind book changes and censorship attempts in the United States. There have been various supreme court cases dealing with obscenity, the first being *Rosen v. United States* in 1896, then *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* in 1933, *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 1964, *Miller v. California* (1973), *Miller v. California* (1973), and *Osborne v. Ohio* (1990). *Roth v. the United States* (1957) was a particularly important case in which the Supreme Court ruled that obscenity is not covered under the First Amendment (Steele). Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" has often been banned based on the argument that it includes "obscene material." Other well-known Supreme Court cases not related exclusively to obscenity have resulted in "tests" that are used to determine if something is protected under the First Amendment or not. In 1919, the "bad tendency test" was created as a result of *Abrams v. United States* which is used to determine if criticism of the government and particularly war efforts is protected under the First Amendment (Purdy). Probably the most famous test is the "clear and present danger test" which was a result of the 1919 case *Schenck v. United States* which is referenced most often in First Amendment cases (Purdy). In 1943, another landmark case, *Jones v. City of Opelika*, was decided and resulted in the "preferred freedom doctrine" which set the precedent that some constitutional freedoms are entitled to greater protection than others (Purdy).

Instances of Censorship and First Amendment challenges have continued into the present day and are still some of the most talked about issues in our society. Penguin Random House expressed why this campaign needed to be created in a blog post saying the campaign is a response to, “the proliferating book banning and educational gag orders in American schools nationwide.” The same blog post claims, “PEN America has been at the forefront of the fight against this wave of censorship in American schools.” Included in the post is a quote that shows the increased relevance of this issue saying, “Its [PEN America] recent report ‘Banned in the USA,’ documented 1,586 instances of individual books being banned, in 86 school districts in 26 state, and more than 122 million Americans live in the 19 states that have passed legislation or issued executive orders prohibiting the teaching of various subjects and ideas in public schools, colleges, and universities.” The report referenced was published by PEN in April of 2022 and shows how this issue has become even more relevant in recent times. The report lists bans on over 1,145 titles and encompasses different types of bans, including removals of books from school libraries, prohibitions in classrooms, or both, as well as books banned from circulation during investigations resulting from challenges from parents, educators, administrators, board members, or responses to laws passed by legislatures (Evison). It is also important to note that among the titles in the Index, there are common themes reflecting the recent backlash and ongoing debates surrounding the teaching and discussion of race and racism in American history, LGBTQ+ identities, and sexual education in schools (Evison). In order to protect the First Amendment rights of students in public schools, procedural safeguards have been designed to help ensure that districts follow transparent, unbiased, established procedures, particularly when it comes to the review of library holdings (Evison). However, the report also states that there has been a shift in how instances of censorship are handled, with more and more bans being enacted without going through the established processes (Evison). Another notable shift explored in the report is the increase in bans tied to state officials and elected lawmakers in contrast to the traditional process of bans being introduced and championed by local community members.

There is a lot of important social, political, and historical context related to “The Unburnable Book” campaign and the issues it works to address. Through investigating the campaign, the organizations involved, and the context surrounding it, some conclusions can be made. The age of the campaign does make it challenging to gauge the overall success because there could still be a negative backlash in the future. With that being said, the campaign was successful in bringing awareness to the increase in censorship in recent times and raising money for PEN America. The sale of the special edition of “The Handmaid’s Tale” raised \$130,000 for PEN America. The campaign was mentioned in dozens of articles from well-known newspapers and stations including the New York Times, The Guardian, US Today, CNN, and others. The campaign was also mentioned in Press Farm’s Top Public Relations Campaigns of 2022 and PR.co’s 5 Best Public Relations Campaigns of 2022, as well as multiple other lists. While it is harder to prove the direct impact the campaign had on the company's financials, Penguin Random House sales did go up by 4.8% in 2022. This campaign was also successful because it truly put Penguin Random House’s corporate social responsibility initiatives to work. Many companies are all talk and no show when it comes to their values and CSR goals, but this campaign proved that Penguin Random House is walking the walk. Other companies looking to put their values into action should look at Penguin Random House's “The Unburnable Book” campaign as a prime example.

## Works Cited

- “About Us.” *PEN America*, <https://pen.org/about-us/>. Accessed 14 May 2023.
- “Biography - Margaret Atwood.” *Margaret Atwood* -, <https://margaretatwood.ca/biography/>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Brookes, Les. “A History Of Modern Censorship.” *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 26, no. 1-2, 2015, pp. 174-177. *Taylor & Francis Online*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09574042.2015.1035072?scroll=top&needAccess=true&role=tab&aria-labelledby=full-article>. Accessed 17 April 2023.
- Carrasco, Ana. “pr.co blog - 5 best PR campaigns of 2022 (so far).” *pr.co*, <https://www.pr.co/blog/five-best-pr-campaigns-of-2022>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Curcic, Dimitrije. “Penguin Random House Statistics – WordsRated.” *WordsRated*, 15 November 2022, <https://wordsrated.com/penguin-random-house-statistics/>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Evison, Jonathan. “Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students' First Amendment Rights (April 2022).” *PEN America*, <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Laing, Heidi. “The right (not) to read "The Handmaid's Tale" in school: Tensions within conversations about risky texts.” 2010. *Google Scholar*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.20381/ruor-12586>. Accessed 17 April 2023.
- Makkai's, Rebecca. “Margaret Atwood & PRH Fight Censorship With an “Unburnable” Edition of THE HANDMAID'S TALE.” *Penguin Random House*, 25 May 2022, <https://global.penguinrandomhouse.com/announcements/margaret-atwood-prh-fight-censorship-with-an-unburnable-edition-of-the-handmaids-tale/>. Accessed 17 April 2023.
- Milliot, Jim. “Profits Fell 11% at Penguin Random House in 2022.” *Publishers Weekly*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/financial-reporting/article/91878-profits-fell-11-at-penguin-random-house-in-2022.html>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- “Our Mission.” *Social Impact at Penguin Random House*, <https://social-impact.penguinrandomhouse.com/our-mission/>. Accessed 17 April 2023. “Our Story -



- Rethink.” *Rethink Communications*, <https://rethinkideas.com/us/>. Accessed 14 May 2023.
- Purdy, Elizabeth R. “Censorship | The First Amendment Encyclopedia.” *Middle Tennessee State University*, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/896/censorship>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Steele, Jennifer E. “A History of Censorship in the United States.” *Journal Of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2020. *Google Scholar*, <https://doi.org/10.5860/jifp.v5i1.7208>. Accessed 17 April 2023.
- Wood, Paul. “Penguin Random House taps Margaret Atwood to take a stand against book burning.” *PR Week*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.prweek.com/article/1788326/penguin-random-house-taps-margaret-atwood-s-tand-against-book-burning>. Accessed 17 April 2023.