

Censorship of the internet and mass media



The conversation regarding censorship amongst states, meaning nations or countries in this context, has been a highly contested and conflicted debate for over a century. According to The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “censorship is suppression of speech, public communication, or other information, on the basis that such material is considered objectionable, harmful, sensitive, politically incorrect or “inconvenient” as determined by government authorities or by community consensus” (Merriam-Webster). Nearly all states, even those that are considered to be extremely free states, practice numerous forms of both direct and indirect censorship. Censorship is usually rationalized to protect from dangerous, obscene, and/or negative information from being released and exposed to certain audiences or the general public. It is important to be noted that self-censorship, where one or more individuals censor their own personal discourses and environments, is not the type of censorship that pertains to this essay as it will focus on official acts of censorship. In her book, *Censorship In America*, historian Mary E. Hull defines official acts of censorship as official actions by a government or governing body that restrict access to certain information to their audience (Hull, 1). For the purposes of this essay, the United States of America will be the main focus when discussing censorship and its effects and implications. If given the absolute power and ability, the censorship of the internet and mass media in America could produce detrimental effects amongst nearly all aspects of society. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that free, open, public, and uncensored access to the internet and medias across the United States of America must remain and be protected.

Technology and increased globalization have interconnected states and their citizens more than ever which has led to the creation of the “ global citizen”. Because of this, some governments have highly censored media within their states as freedom of speech and access to different thoughts and ideologies poses high risks. Across the globe, numerous non-governmental organizations research and work to determine the amount and ways-in-which information is censored in different states. Reporters Without Borders (RWB), a United Nations consultant, studies the freedom of expression and information in states and publishes their findings in the annual *World Press Freedom Index*. The *World Press Freedom Index* consults and surveys expert lawyers, sociologists, media professionals, and journalists on pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, infrastructure, and abuses within their country. The 2018 report that surveyed one hundred and eighty states concluded that Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands are the most free and/or least censored states while Syria, Eritrea, and North Korea are currently the most censored and least free states (RWB, 2018). For reference, Canada is the eighteenth most free state, the United Kingdom is the fortieth most free, and the United States falls as the forty-fifth most free state. The United States fell two places from 2017 to 2018 which can be attributed to the actions of President Donald J. Trump and his administration. Trump notoriously declared the press an “ enemy of the American people”, which has triggered attacks against journalists and their credibility using the fallacious and often erroneous term “ fake news” (RWB, 2018). Reports and research like this help truthfully determine the freedom of speech, press, and information across the globe from a nonbiased perspective.

Censorship in The United States of America

Censorship in the United States of America is a highly controversial topic given how prominent and institutional the liberty of freedom of speech and the press is engrained into legislature and society. The First Amendment to The Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." (U. S. Const. amend. I). The freedom of speech in America is not absolute as it does not protect hate speech or obscenity, meaning that strongly offensive speech or speech that promotes hateful acts based on bias can legally be censored as they are not protected forms of speech (Hull, 3). The First Amendment can be attributed as the foundation for the popular American motto and saying, "land of the free". This nationalistic saying has permeated American society as many Americans pride themselves on the thought of America being the land of freedom and justice despite numerous rankings and studies pointing otherwise (RWB, 2018).

Since the creation and implementation of the First Amendment, numerous laws and rulings have been instituted and repealed in order to restrict the freedom of speech and press. Notably, the Sedition and Espionage Acts, imposed under President Wilson in 1917, declared it illegal and treasonous for citizens to speak against the United States government, military, and flag. This act attempted to bend the First Amendment, however, it was repealed in 1919 as it clearly violated the freedom of speech and press clause. In 1971, *The Pentagon Papers*, officially titled *Report of the Office*

of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force, were classified United States of America military and government documents that were leaked. The *Pentagon Papers* detailed the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War from 1945-1967 (Hull, 27). These documents revealed that the United States had gone against legislation and made official decisions without the aid or input from Congress, which is legally required. They were leaked, according to Hull, because "critics charged that the government resorted to excessive classification of documents in order to conceal activity from the public, whereas the government maintained that it was acting in the interests of national security" (Hull, 29). This leak was taken to the Supreme Court of the United States and was ruled legal as the Supreme Court determined that the general public has the right to these documents despite the government's attempt to censor the press. Although the First Amendment has been tested numerous times, it stands generally true that individuals in the United States of America are entitled to freedom of speech and press so long as it does not fuel the occurrence of legitimate crimes.

Internet Censorship in the United States

Within the past few decades, the rules and guidelines set by the First Amendment have made the waters murkier than ever when discussing censorship and the media. The internet has made news and media more accessible than ever which enhances the effects, debatably both positive and negative, censorship can have. Given the capitalistic nature of the internet, major news sources occupy a massive section of the internet and tend to circulate only chosen specific media and news stories that fit their agenda, this is known as corporate censorship. Project Censored, a news

source that publishes important news and media that was not reported by the mainstream mass media, works to eliminate corporate censorship as they see it as a blockade towards democracy and free press. (Jensen, 2018). Although corporate censorship is highly problematic, it is protected by the First Amendment as companies and individuals have the right to broadcast what they see as fit.

The Internet Must Remain Free from Censorship

Internet Censors and Blockers

In the United States, the First Amendment protects against and prohibits majority of internet censorship involvement from the federal, state, and local governments. However, private companies have more leeway in their actions to censor content, particularly in regards to public spaces. There tends to be a steep crossover between these private companies and the state as the government or government officials often support and fund companies whose interest align with theirs. This is a classic incident of corruption with the government finding a loophole to overstep their rightful bounds. Internet censorship is typically performed by content blockers and removers that are created, installed, and programmed to block all content deemed obscene or unfitting. The major problem of these programs is determining what content is and is not okay... a process that can be easily corrupted. In the words of Mary E. Hull, "What is indecent in one person's mind may be decent in another's; thus, regardless of the censor's motive, the result of censoring is the denial of another's freedom to choose." (Hull, 2).

This exact problem was exacerbated in 1997 in a Virginia library that had installed a blocking program on its public computers. The intention of the

program was to block and censor sexually explicit content from minors, which is perfectly legal and the decision was supported by the National Law Center for Children and Families (Hull, 35). However, this program, advertently or not, also blocked the American Association of University Women website and an AIDS website which is extremely problematic because this blocker is now restricting access and information from the public. The center of this controversy is not the use of a blocker, as individuals should have the right to knowingly censor content in private, but the fact that a publically funded device was censoring appropriate content. Given this incident occurred in 1997, it is unlikely that the censoring of those two specific websites was directly intentional, however, it remains unclear as numerous biases could lead a company to explicitly censor more than originally intended.

This incident, albeit small, shows how detrimental censorship of the internet can be and why the internet needs to remain publically uncensored.

It is extremely important that the First Amendment be rigorously upheld in the United States of America as it is the major piece of legislation that prohibits extreme censorship. For this reason, totalitarian control of the internet has not been observed in the United States but other countries can be used as examples of this. The People's Republic of China is notorious for their strict censorship of the internet, especially social media, and suppression of news and information. According to the 2018 *World Press Freedom Index*, China is the one hundred and seventy-sixth (fourth worst) least free states as President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party implement extreme censorship and surveillance on the citizens (RWB, 2018). China has been very innovative to censor the internet by creating different

apps and networkingsites that resemble sites like Facebook and Twitter (Walker & Orttung, 77). China's censored version of Twitter, called Sina Weibo, has a massive member basewith over six hundred million users. Keyto their censorship is strict criminal punishments for publicizing thoughts, ideologies, and ideas that go against China and the Communist Party (Walker& Orttung, 78). China also restricts nearly all forms of media by requiringnewspapers to register with the government and all television is broadcasted bygovernment-run China Central Television. The extreme censorship in China hastaken the voices away from the people and subjected them to only the thoughtsand rhetoric provided by the government. This is extremely dangerous as nearlyall forms of dissidence, personal expression, thought exploration, education, and legitimate news are deprived from the people so that they unintentionallysurrender themselves to the country. In order for democracy and freedom toremain in the United States, it is absolutely essential that the internet andsocial media remain free from government interaction.

The Importance ofSocial Media

Thegrowing accessibility and prevalence of the internet in daily lives has allowedfor social medias to play pivotal roles in individuals' personal lives, politics, and society as a whole. Both Facebook and Twitter have become majorsources of news, information, and misinformation in America. Both of thesesites have become hubs for people to share their personal opinions in reactionto the news, especially politics. Politics in America has become more polarizedthan ever which has increased greatly increased tensions and

amplified party affiliations from the election of Barack H. Obama in 2008 to the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016.

Misinformation, especially political misinformation, has become increasingly more prevalent and believed through platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Misinformation can be partially attributed to motivated reasoning, the illusion of objectivity, and partisan-driven motivated reasoning as they explain why voters cling to certain ideologies, misperceptions, and corrections (Thorson, 463; Berinsky, 7; Nyhan & Reifler). In short, motivated reasoning is a phenomenon where one will support a desired conclusion if they can rationalize it (Kunda, 482-483). A study researching the presence and diffusions on Twitter during the 2012 election showed that rumors were shared by polarized accounts that created “‘echo chambers’ defined by political homophily that were based on ideological attitudes not truth and merit” (Shin, Jian, Driscoll, & Bar, 1227). Social media sites harbor misinformation because they are highly polarized, therefore misinformation is more likely to become believed via motivated reasoning if it aligns with one’s belief system or party alliance. An extremely detrimental piece of misinformation began in 1988 when Andrew Wakefield published a report that incorrectly linked the Measles-Mumps-Rubella vaccine to autism. This link has been extensively discredited yet still persists and has caused numerous recent outbreaks of measles. In a study conducted by Mark R. Joslyn and Steven M. Sylvester, they found the individuals’ belief in this myth became politicized and led to faulty governance and policies that allowed outbreaks to occur (Joslyn & Sylvester, 17). Although this report was false, it is important for it to be noted that social media has enough power to influence

politics and government. Social media also becomes an accessible intermediate that exposes its users to current news, political beliefs, and ideologies. Numerous studies show that social media becomes an environment where individuals can find like-minded individuals and share their thoughts, however, those same factors also nourish misinformation.

As previously mentioned, Donald J. Trump coined the term “fake news” when referring to news that is not favorable toward him or his administration, regardless if the news is actually true or false. This term is extremely problematic because it discounts journalists providing truthful information while diminishing that problem that legitimately false news poses. False news tends to spread faster and quicker, however, eventually, it tends to reach a much smaller audience. In 2016, a tenth of conservative Republicans accounted for consuming sixty-five percent of fake news (Carey, 2018). In order to tackle this problem, Facebook has embedded a fact-checking service into flagged articles so the consumer knows it is misinformation before they choose to share it (Hunt). Fake news and “fake news” are both very real problems as legitimate journalism is of value and should be protected.

Censorship is a dangerous tool that should be used in a very selective manner as it can deprive individuals of necessary information. In the United States of America, it is incredibly important that the First Amendment is upheld as it provides all citizens with a voice and platform to both share and receive thoughts, information, news, and ideologies. Free speech and free press absolutely has its downsides as dangerous misinformation can easily be shared and believed but the benefits of freedom of speech and press are

so much greater. Protection of freedom of the internet is essential in order for the United States to remain a democratic, liberated, and just nation.

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