

# Censorship and the internet: a dangerous precedent



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Censorship and the Internet: A Dangerous Precedent This essay will examine the effects of the internet on speech and the issue of censorship. There is no doubt that speech has proliferated globally with the internet. In most cases, this proliferation has been beneficial. Scholars are able to more widely disseminate research findings, students are better able to learn about the world, and diverse people are granted access to thoughts and to facts which were once inaccessible. There are, however, certain people and groups which find the internet threatening in particular ways. Corrupt governments, for example, are known to censor speech on the internet (Rodan, 1998: 64); in addition, there are other categories of speech, such as hate speech, defamation, and yelling " fire" in a crowded theater, which have led to calls for limits on internet speech in even the freest of societies (Lawson, 2000: 275). This essay will argue that the benefits of promoting free speech outweigh the costs of censorship.

As an initial matter, it is important to acknowledge that internet speech has impacted knowledge and liberty in positive ways. Internet speech, to take one example, is perhaps the greatest threat in the world to corrupt individuals and authoritarian governments. This is because it is no longer enough for powerful people and powerful governments to control media outlets in their own countries (Rodan, 1998: 68). Contemporary citizens in China or Thailand, where censorship is on the rise, can still find out what is truly happening in their countries. Thai citizens, to illustrate, can post news stories, listen to international news broadcasts, and exchange personal commentary on the internet. The truth is more likely to become evident when information is not censored.

On the other hand, calls for internet censorship are not receding; quite the <https://assignbuster.com/censorship-and-the-internet-a-dangerous-precedent/>

contrary, there are those whom do and would like to censor speech which is deemed a national security threat, which promulgates ideas deemed contrary to public morals, and which are defamatory or unduly alarmist (Lawson, 2000: 278). Censorship, it must be noted, is an old concept. The issues are complicated in this particular context by the lack of a central regulatory authority. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the nations of our world to agree on common standards and procedures regarding speech and censorship. More, moral systems and standards of appropriate social discourse are different all over the world. The mere thought of censoring the internet would inevitable lead to dramatic excesses and inconsistencies. Censorship would be a huge mistake.

What, therefore, if any, ought to be the limits on speech Censorship is prohibitive in nature, preventing speech from becoming accessible. The legal case, Village of Skokie v. National Socialist Party, discussed an attempt to censor the National Socialist Party in Illinois. The theory was that the speech was hateful and offensive (1977). In Texas v. Johnson, the United States Supreme Court addressed laws prohibiting the desecration of the American flag (1988). These cases illustrate the broad interpretation as to what constitutes speech and how virtually any action can be interpreted as speech. This essay asks for my opinion, rather than a philosopher's or the Supreme Court's, and my opinion is that speech on the internet should be allowed in all cases except for one situation. Speech should be limited when a deliberate falsehood is spread which may damage society. I envision situations, such as in South Africa, where people are told that Aids is not a virus and that they need not worry about it spreading as a virus does. Where the knowledge is so contrary to established knowledge, and where it

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threatens to affect people globally, I believe that censorship may be justified. In other cases, censorship ought to be prohibited.

We must believe that people are rational, though data suggests we often are not, and protect our liberties at all costs. There is no greater threat to liberty and the pursuit of liberty than censorship and the free flow of information.

The lies that we are told, both historically and today, are strong evidence of the need to preserve the freedom of the internet. Censorship is nearly always a fear-mongering and a defensive tactic to preserve corrupt and dishonest individuals or interests.

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