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Conflicts of Censorship

**Introduction**

Ever since the internet has been made available to the public in the late 20th century, ideas, knowledge, and information has been quickly exchanged throughout the world. The effects of globalization has created a much more unified and close-knitted world, where one can easily communicate with distant relatives, share their works -- such as short stories, and artworks -- to the public, and even participate in discussion with complete strangers on certain topics. However, there’s a dark side. The internet is permeated with abuses, offensive material, as well as criminal activity. Due to this, many -- especially parents -- have considered censorship, though not just for the internet, but for other forms of media as well. Censorship is a heavily debated controversial subject and is rejected primarily by western societies that celebrate free speech. Supporters of censorship believe that censorship is a necessary evil, one that could limit what the impressionable youth can be exposed to, and could be used to benefit the common good in the long-term. On the other hand, critics of censorship argue that censorship could be abused and censor more than just the criminal and the obscene. Rather, it could censor essential discussions that characterizes a society and violate free speech. Censorship, they argue, could distort the truth, and disallow people to form their own opinions and ideas. Amidst the thick debate, the main question remains -- should there be any censorship allowed in media and literature and if so, to what extent?

**Presentation of Side One: Pro-Censorship**

The youth is the major concern regarding censorship. Parents argue that their children must be protected and what is shown to them must undergo intense supervision. The youth, they argue, are at an impressionable age, a time when they can be extremely vulnerable and make poor judgements; “a time of enormous opportunity” as a child psychiatry researcher Jay Giedd once said. Media, in this day in age, is considered the other “parent” of the adolescent youth, and have a direct influence in their development. Violence, sex, suicide, and other graphic content in media can negatively affect the youth and influence their behavior as they grow up, and parents worry that the media can promote bad behavior in their children. In a recent national study, there has been evidence that showed that teens exposed to sex on television are more likely to have sex than teens who are exposed to little or no sex on television. Based off the findings of this study, parents are unsettled that this is not just limited to sex on television, but to much more obscene or graphic subjects, such as suicide, in other forms of media and literature.

In the recent years, “authentic literature” has been introduced to school libraries, and these books -- claiming to portray American culture as well as culturally and intellectually enrich readers -- present the “fringes of society”, outcasts such as gang members, thieves, and druggies. Critics believe that these kinds of books undermine American values that classical literature have promoted or at least kept and they assert that such books glorify characters that live a negative lifestyle. Disquieted by rise of such books available to the youth, the pro-censorship assemblage reminisce that “the books that used to inspire; which celebrated American values; that chronicled the exploits of trailblazers, astronauts, and other heroes, are fast disappearing” (Baldwin 14). Concerned parents Alba English and Paula Silvey question fellow parents, “We wonder about the increased rate of suicide among our teens, but we fail to make the connection. We expect them to read these [graphic] books and yet to separate it from their own thinking. Are we not ‘contributing’ to the delinquency of a minor?” (Silvey 70). Critics of censorship argue that censorship suppresses freedom of speech, but supporters of censorship find it difficult to believe that the First Amendment was created so that the youth are able to be exposed to such literature and media that have harmful ideas, and ultimately raising them to have polluted values.

Protecting the far-reaching community is what censorship is believed to achieve by its supporters. On September 9, 2001, a tragedy befell the U.S when two terrorist planes crashed into the twin towers, causing hundreds of deaths. Compelled by the incident, President Bush established an intelligence agency that would monitor suspects and access personal data, and by doing so, he exchanged U.S liberty for U.S national security. Much of the population reacted violently, claiming that such action was a violation of individual rights. “But what is he to do”, supporters countered, “let the terrorists run wild in our own land?”. During wartime, or a conflict, supporters argue that censorship is pivotal if national security is to be maintained from intruders and enemies, reasoning that “a temporary reduction of personal and media freedoms is an acceptable price to pay in order to lessen the chance that Islamic fanatics will commit further atrocities against the American people” (Baldwin). Supporters stress that insistence on civil liberties during wartime only limits the national government from taking any action to protect their country, and potentially allow other terror attacks to materialize. Publishing government secrets to the public during wartime has the capability to endanger and sabotage national security and any criticism of the government and the army during wartime could also serve as a threat to the nation. During WWII, censorship was applied to almost all forms of media and entertainment. Criticism of the government and the army was prohibited in order to maintain military morale and prevent hysteria to in turn prevent danger from the enemy. This, the pro-censorship proclaim, was all done to protect the common good, to prevent them from rivals and even themselves during wartime.

Plagiarism -- the act of stealing and passing another’s original content as your own -- is a common crime in the internet. Hundreds of copied works are distributed throughout the internet, including artwork, short stories, poems, videos and other forms of content. Because of this plagiarism plague, the SOPA bill was introduced in 2012. SOPA, Stop Online Piracy Act, is an antipiracy bill whose purpose is to restrict access to websites -- which would be compiled into a blacklist -- that host pirated content, especially foreign pirate websites, thus decreasing plagiarism. SOPA calls for search engines and other providers to make the flagged websites unavailable and restrain their services to those websites. Critics agree that the SOPA bill has the potential to decrease plagiarism, yet it promotes censorship and could stimulate censorship further that just pirated websites. The SOPA bill, they argue, has vague criteria of what pirated websites are and that it could really target any website, including websites that might not even be engaging in copyright infringement. The SOPA bill could easily be taken advantage of and be used improperly. However, supporters believe that this bill could prevent further criminal internet behavior regarding copyright infringement as “online piracy leads to U.S job losses because it deprives content creators of income” (Blankley). Supporters believe that, although it promotes censorship, it can protect the people from internet theft and ultimately benefit the common good.

Censorship defenders gather that censorship and limits on what can be available is the solution to harm. It can prevent corruption and harm to the amenable youth in their ‘salad days’ -- the peak of their naivety -- who will grow up to be our future leaders; decrease criminal and pirate internet activity and protect content creators; and spare a nation from harm from rival nations who would not be able to access the government secrets detrimental to their national security. Defenders argue that although at a price in the form of freedom, in essence, censorship of media and literature can lead to success.

**Presentation of Side Two: Against Censorship**

Censorship directly contradicts our enumerated right to freedom of speech. This fundamental right, especially when expressed through the press, checks governmental power over the people by informing citizens how their elected officials are protecting or not protecting them. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the government often exercises censorship, especially during wartime. Decades ago, the Supreme Court ruled to stop the government from hiding the infamous scandal known as the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War. Justice Hugo wrote: “The government’s power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of the government and inform the people” (Baquet 34). Justice Hugo reminds us that the clash between the government’s wish to retain its secrets and the press’s duty to expose all for the benefit of the people is a long lasting war of its own. It is important to keep in mind that a journalist’s job is “to bring our readers information that will enable them to judge how well their elected leaders are fighting on their behalf, and at what price” (Baquet 34). Some argue in favor of censorship of the press because of modern terrorism and national security threats. Of course journalists understand the fear for terrorism and national security that comes with exposing the government; they live and work in some of the most targeted cities. They take their responsibilities as Americans very seriously, however, they value their independence and their freedom of discretion. The press operates for the American people, not against it. They fight the censorship battle with the government to keep citizens informed, and elected officials accountable.

Not only does the banning of censorship benefit the American people from a political standpoint, but also an artistic one. Dominic Cooke explains in his essay on censorship and the arts, “Artists have a right-and sometimes a duty-to offend their audiences” (Cooke 46). Cooke’s underlying point is that artists can, and should, take ownership of their freedom of speech, and exercise it as they may. From an artistic standpoint, artists should feel free to project any message they wish. Their artistic visions and goals should never be limited by an authority, since that would violate the enumerated and human right to freedom of speech and expression. Cooke elaborates on historical artistic examples of censorship. He cites plays such as *Jerry Springer-The Opera,* and *Behzti,* which played at the Birmingham theatre. Both artistic works were protested, and in the case of *Behzti*, terminated by religious groups. By limiting artistic freedom, Cooke suggests that we are not only hurting the artists, but also the citizens. “In all these cases, religious fundamentalists have attempted and, in the example of Birmingham, won their attempt to deny freedom of expression to artists, and to audiences the opportunity to make up their own minds” (Cooke 47). The entire population suffers as a result of artistic censorship. Artists are creatively constrained, and citizens lack intellectual freedom. If we are to limit artistic mediums, the strong impact that art has on society will be lost. Like Cooke says, artists are sometimes supposed to offend. Citizens should be able to analyze and debate art without being intellectually imposed on by the government or religious groups. Censorship threatens our crucial natural right to intellectual freedom.

Censorship is not only limiting intellectual freedom, but it is also limiting cultural awareness in young people. One of the arguments in favor of book banning is that young minds need to be shielded from “disturbing” concepts such as magic, homosexuality, and bullying. Censors are often triggered by the presence of these modern social issues in literature. They strongly believe that they have the right to filter books since young readers should not be contemplating “the world’s ills” (Scales). Pat Scales writes that “Ironically, censors who wish to control what children read question the controlled society in *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Jonas is a hero, but censors don't care. They see only the issue of euthanasia, and they say *no*” (Scales). Censors often the ignore the overall value of literature, and automatically censor it due to the presence of a controversial issue. If this practice of “red-flagging” was fully enforced, some of the best-selling and most impactful books of our generation would have never been enjoyed. These stories have touched millions of kids’ hearts, and have inspired them to be heroic and brave in their own lives. If this censorship was fully supported, I would never be able to save Hogwarts with Harry, or attend the Ceremony of Twelve with Jonas. I never would have learned that being a smart, strong woman is okay through the stories of Hermione. Not only does literary censorship wrongly write off important literature, but it also narrows the minds of children. If we shield children from social issues, how will they behave as adults? Early exposure to these issues will result in education and familiarity. If young people have the opportunity to read stories with gay characters, death, war, and all of the other “unmentionable” subject matters, they will be more tolerant as adults. This is the clear path to raising an accepting and tolerant generation. We should not fear early exposure to social issues, we should embrace it with the purpose to achieve full education and understanding for our next generation. Overall, censorship of literature eliminates valuable literature, and discourages social tolerance.

**Person A Beliefs**

Personally, I do not believe in censorship. Regarding little children, yes, I do agree to some level of censorship, but at some point in one’s life, one must be exposed to different perspectives of the world, because that is how a person grows, and learns to become themselves. Teenagers are at a prime age where they are transitioning from a child to an adult, and if parents continue to treat them as children who constantly need protection from the horrors of the world, that transition will be delayed, and when it’s time for the young adults to be out of the family nest, they might not be ready to face the real world. Not just to the youth, censorship can limit access of readily available information to adults, creating less room for improvement in their lives. The thing about censorship, although argued to protect the government and the common good, it can also do the opposite. If the democratic government had an increased involvement in what should be shown to their citizens on the internet, political or controversial discussions that might be deemed harmful to the government could be censored, thus disallowing people to further research differing opinions on an issue or media, resulting in a rise of ignorant and unsophisticated decisions in society as a whole. In the long run, this can cause problematic consequences, politically, economically, and socially. In my reasonings, there should be less censorship in media and literature as its benefits are too idealistic and its consequences are far more harmful than argued to be.

**Person B Beliefs**

Upon an in depth analysis of both sides, I have concluded that I am not in favor of censorship. I believe in freedom, and I believe that freedom is a key component of what makes America strong. By condoning censorship we are also condoning the limiting of free speech, art, and intellect. I believe that controversial social subjects should be discussed, since avoiding them only results in ignorance of the issues. Also, if these discussions are not carried out, we are not able to formulate an educated stance on them as American citizens. I want to be a educated and up-to-date intellectual participant in society from both a social and political standpoint. Also, in terms of art, I believe that artists should be left free to make whatever art their creative mind desires. From my viewpoint, I see that if we limit the artists, their work is no longer an accurate representation of what they want to convey. I feel strongly that we should let people in America fulfill their dreams, so, we should allow the teachers to teach, the speakers to speak, and the artists to create. Overall, I see censorship as a detrimental opponent to society. I do not want to experience a world where my speech, art, and thoughts are all limited by censorship.

**Reconciliation**

The debate over censorship is an important one, since the decision made on censorship sets a precedent for freedom of speech in America. If the pro-censorship side comes out victorious, there will be safety “exceptions” added to the protection of freedom of speech. However, if those against censorship win the debate, freedom of speech is guaranteed protection for at least many decades to come. There is no doubt from either side that the stakes are high.

Establishing censorship over adolescent media and literature would allow children to grasp their childhoods for as long as they possibly can, and keep their minds pure from negative influences. On the other hand, censorship of children’s literature containing references to controversial social issues would deny kids important social lessons, and would also deprive them of some of the most iconic stories overall from our generation. Also, censorship of the press should be allowed by the government in support of national security interests. But others argue that the press’ job is simply to inform American citizens, and it is necessary that the American public is aware of governmental actions in order to hold elected officials accountable. Lastly, censorship of the arts imposes on intellectual freedom, and denies citizens the opportunity to make up their own minds of controversial subjects.

We have reached a consensus that an agreeable compromise is able to be made if both sides are willing to give and take. This compromise would include censorship on children’s media, limited censorship of the press, and no adult artistic censorship. In regards to children’s media, censorship would be allowed in order to protect young kids from early exposure to negative content. Also, because limited censorship of the press would exist, the government would only be able to “veto” very few press works. This way, the government could stop the few articles that severely threaten national security, and the press would be able to inform American citizens mostly without getting censored. Lastly, all adult artistic expression, defined as the creation of art forms primarily for adults, would be unlimited by censors. We believe this is a fair settlement since both sides are taking both wins and losses.

In regards to the conflicts of censorship, it is apparent that the definitions of free speech, artistic expression, child protection, and security threats are to be defined by future generations; It is their responsibility to continue the resolution of this debate. Since the birth of American democracy, many laws and understandings have been changed through the voices of the American people. It is up to the young people to understand the debate at hand, and to voice their opinions on what they think is right. May we only hope they do what is best for the American people.

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