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Free Speech, Limits, and Censorship

The topic of free speech and the idea of setting limitations on it has always been complicated to me. On one hand I do believe that everyone should have the ability to express themselves without facing any sort of repercussions or be persecuted for it. On the other hand, I think that the idea of free speech without any sort of limitation is not a reality in the world we live in. With that said I do not agree with the idea of having any sort of government regulate and monitor the media being consumed by the general public. I have simply accepted the fact that we live in our own individual worlds tailored to us by mass media corporations and our government.

Freedom of speech not only has the power to change history but more importantly it keeps history from being erased. Without having a thorough understanding of history we would be unable to grow without acknowledging our faults to move forward. The idea of censoring or completely refusing to acknowledge certain historic events because they are too “graphic” or “inappropriate” sets a dangerous precedent that the only historical events that should be recorded are those that depict humanity in a positive light. For example, in 2020 Masha Gessen wrote an article in the New Yorker about the National Archives altering certain signs on a photograph of the 2017 Women’s March on Washington. In the article the signs that were altered were a sign that said God hates Trump which had the word Trump blurred out along with many signs that contained the words “vagina” and “pussy”. The National Archives argued

that the words “vagina” and “pussy” may make visitors uncomfortable and that they are a non-political and non-partisan federal agency. This in turn defeats the entire purpose of recording history because if images of historical events do not invoke some sort of emotion whether that is sadness, anger, or make you uncomfortable then the effect and meaning captured are lost.

Which leads me to my next point being if free speech is to be monitored, who gets to decide what is allowed as free speech and who carries out their will? One current event that I felt connected seamlessly to this thought was Queen Elizabeth’s death and British citizens being arrested for protesting the new monarch, King Charles III. An article by Christy Cooney and George Bowden for BBC news covers the event by reporting that three people were arrested two for a “breach of the peace” and another for “suspicion of a public order offence”. The man who was arrested for the latter was later released but the fact that he was still detained for simply yelling “Who elected him?” is a deeply troubling reality. Later in the article the writers report that a man was “ushered away” by police officers for holding up a sign that said “Not my King” before the Kings arrival. Another current event that further explores my question is the national security law passed in Hong Kong in 2020 criminalizing words and images that were protected beforehand as free speech. In an article by Jin Wu and Elaine Yu for the New York Times they report that the new law prohibits any sort of image or piece of literature critical of the Chinese government. Including amending textbooks to remove information about corrupt government officials and the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. This not only kills the idea of free speech in Hong Kong but also destroys the ability for the future generations to have the ability to think for themselves and have opinions that don’t align with those forced upon them by the Chinese government. These two real life examples give me an answer to the question

that I was thinking earlier. If free speech continues to disappear from the world, we occupy it will be monarchs and governments who decide what is appropriate and it will be their police force that will carry out their will.

Reading these stories, to be completely honest, gives me very little hope for the future of free speech and its place in modern society. What really concerns me is the fact that these are not new developments they are only modern examples of the ignorance and greed of mankind crushing over those who decided to voice their opinion in the hopes of making a change. Although those reports left me with a feeling of hopelessness just the fact that I was able to access these stories and read about not just the threat of censorship but also the public's resilience to keep fighting to keep free speech left me with more of a silver lining.

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