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Protecting Rights Without Silencing Voices: Why Censorship Harms More Than It Helps

In today's society, a single controversial statement can lead to public outrage, social punishment, and even legal consequences. In a world full of people advocating for a vast variety of sensitive topics and ideas, it can be difficult to determine where a line should be drawn between what is acceptable to say and what is not. The United States is often praised for granting freedom of the speech to its citizens, and it is seen as a fundamental right. However, throughout history, there have been many times where this right wasn't fairly enforced. The government is only human, and therefore is bound to be affected by personal bias, experiences, opinions, and perspectives. The question here is who gets to decide what is too harmful to be spoken? While it is true that every citizen is granted freedom of the speech, should the government have the right to limit their words to maintain a civil society? Society should not limit certain types of speech in an attempt to prevent systemic harm, as controversy is necessary for positive progress, and "harmful" words can be subjective.

First of all, freedom of speech should not be limited, as bringing up unpopular opinions is crucial to move society forwards. According to the official publication of the Government Documents Round Table of the American Library Association, "suffragist speeches emphasized the need for women to have a voice in decisions that affected their lives and the importance of women's opinions in politics and governance" (Songstad). During the Suffrage Movement,

women fought for more rights and equality. At the time, there were many who opposed this belief. Those who opposed it also happened to have more influence and power. Consequently, women advocated for decades in order to get their rights. As shown in the quote, the only way that they were able to achieve this was because they were guaranteed the freedom of speech by the U.S. Constitution. This is important because it demonstrates how crucial the freedom of speech was in order to get to the point of gender equality where the world is today. If the government had the power to limit the suffragists' freedom of speech, the suffragists would not have been able to speak up so publicly and be noticed by so many. Their words, however, managed to create huge, positive change and have a lasting impact on the history of not just the United States, but on the world. This proves that limiting freedom of speech will also limit forward progress in society. Therefore, unlimited freedom of speech allows controversial, yet important ideas to be heard and make change in society.

Secondly, the standard of what should and should not be said is extremely debatable. As stated by the Library of Congress, “[The Civil Rights Movement] took many forms, and its participants used a wide range of means to make their demands felt, including sit-ins, boycotts, protest marches, freedom rides, and lobbying government officials for legislative action [...] they faced opposition on many fronts and fell victim to bombings and beatings, arrest and assassination” (The Civil Rights Movement). This highlights the use of freedom of speech by Civil Rights activists to advocate for their cause, and the negative reaction that it prompted. It also demonstrates how activists were punished for what they were promoting while using their freedom of speech. During the Civil Rights Movement, activists were fighting for a very controversial topic, and they were met with lots of opposition from those in power. The reason behind the controversy was that many believed that their cause would be detrimental to society.

Not only that, but many, including those in positions of power, deemed their words and actions threatening to the general public. In summary, citizens' words should not be censored because there is no guideline or specification that decides what is considered publicly acceptable speech, and what is not.

Some may argue that censoring certain speech would protect marginalized communities, which prevents harm to communities and society. However, they would be better protected by laws against harassment and violence, not broad laws limiting speech. The American Library Association defines hate crimes as “overt acts that can include acts of violence against persons or property, violation or deprivation of civil rights, certain ‘true threats,’ or acts of intimidation, or conspiracy to commit these crimes. The Supreme Court has upheld laws that either criminalize these acts or impose a harsher punishment when it can be proven that the defendant targeted the victim because of the victim's race, ethnicity, identity, or beliefs”. This displays an example of how laws can help protect targeted communities. Broad speech restrictions can often overlap with the rights granted to every citizen in the First Amendment of the Constitution. However, having laws in place to protect individuals and communities from physical danger can not only serve to keep them from harm but can also discourage the abuse of the right to the freedom of speech. Censoring speech, while it would be able to provide marginalized individuals and communities with safety, would limit the amount of freedom that is actually given to citizens. This could lead to questions about whether these laws are constitutional, and would stop real free speech that allows people to express their opinions without fear of oppression. This is important to the nation as a whole, because if certain speech was censored, then the United States, with its ever changing political atmosphere, would be limited to the ideas that it promotes. As aforementioned, freedom of speech allows citizens to state their opinions openly. However,

censorship would erase these core values that the United States holds. Thus, while some believe that the censorship of speech may be necessary to ensure the safety of marginalized communities and individuals, establishing firmer laws based on protection against violence would be more effective and maintain real freedom of speech for every citizen, as promised in the Constitution.

All in all, the conclusion is simple: speech should not be censored in order to try to eliminate systemic harm. Progress has never come from silence - it has always come from challenge and disagreement, and the courage to speak up. What is considered “acceptable” in society is deeply subjective, which makes any fixed standard impossible to enforce without involuntarily suppressing voices that deserve to be heard as well. In a world with over 8 billion people, no two individuals think the same, live the same, or experience the same realities. However, this diversity is not a weakness - it is our greatest strength. If we embrace our diversity and exchange ideas through open dialogue and honest disagreement, societies will be able to grow stronger and more unified. In a world where there’s already so much that divides us, let speech be a bridge that connects, challenges, and ultimately strengthens and connects us.

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