
Why Freedom of Speech is Important for the Progression of Society

George Orwell once stated “if liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to know”. One of the founding principles of the United States of America is the unalienable liberty given to us by our creator. This liberty extends to the Bill of Rights of which the first amendment is the freedom of speech. This freedom of speech is the most essential part of American freedom. Without such provisions, the government would be able to control the flow of ideas and society itself would stagnate. Freedom of speech is the way in which ideas can progress and evolve. Even though some ideas do not hold any informational merit, they are still essential to the foundations of freedom of speech. A wrong idea will lead to the discovery of a new idea, and its rejection will allow critical analysis from the public. If freedom of speech wasn't apart of current society; then people would mindlessly follow whatever was set forth to be true without critically analyzing the accuracy of the claim or the motives behind it.

Freedom of speech is crucial to the progression of society. Freely expressing thoughts and ideas allows for them to develop unfettered by the restrictive lenses of governmental policy. This is important because without this independence from the government, semi-formed ideas that seem to go against the government or its ideas would be eliminated before they can be fully formed. John Stuart Mill asserts that “those who desire to oppress it [ideas], deny it's truth; but they are not infallible” (16). Those who claim to deny the vocalization of an idea by claiming that the idea is invalid do not hold the truth. They merely hold their perception of it. Their denial of one idea does not validate their own idea, if this denial is borne of pure opinion and not critical analysis. However, this restriction of ideas would exceed governmental policies, if a scientific discovery goes against what is currently known and accepted, it would also be restricted. An example of such a restriction would be the imprisonment of Galileo Galilei who invented the first telescope during the Renaissance. His imprisonment was due to his refusal to recant the heliocentric view of the solar system as proposed by Copernicus. Galileo's imprisonment is the perfect example of what happened when freedom of speech is restricted. He was unduly thrown in prison for much of his life, due to his belief. This set back the progress of scientific discovery solely based on the undue restriction of freedom of speech.

Another example of how the restriction of freedom of speech leads to the impediment of society's progress is that of the Communist appropriation of China. After WWII the Chinese Communist party overthrew the dynastic rulers of China. The Communist party was favored by the peasant class, as the party promised to institute land reforms. The Party did reform the way land was divided which pleased the peasants, but the Communists routinely publically shamed all those who went against the Communist agenda. This included landlords, nobles and even teachers. The people of China turned against their neighbors and each other to eradicate anyone who they felt was against Communism or who they personally didn't agree with. This restriction lead to the removal of most teachers in Chinese school; because of this schools were closed for two years before replacements could be found. Years after the Communist regime had taken control, university students attempted to protest against the regime. They were viciously massacred by the police. This violation of freedom is disastrous, the regime is so fanatically oppressive, that it would kill its own citizens rather than allow them to speak freely. One protestor, Wang Dan, explains the motives of the Communist party on restricting the

freedom of speech from the citizens; “the party in power and the present government represent the interests of the people and hold the key to truth” (Dan 143). This sweeping generalization of the government suggests that only those in power can understand the true needs of the citizens; the citizens themselves are unable to formulate a plan to accommodate their needs. Furthermore, the government holds the “key to truth” (143). This is highly improbable, that only the government can find the truth. More likely, the government holds the key to the truth as it suits the political agenda of the state, not the needs of the citizens. The second reason the party gives in favor restriction of freedom of speech is that “the irresponsibility of the opposition’s ideas may lead to serious social defections” (143). Dan refutes this by stating that the propagation of dissenting ideas will increase the validity of the truth. When truth can be countered against falsehood, it will become stronger due to the need to critically examine it, in order to ensure its validity. By restricting freedom of speech, China stagnated socially. Without the ability to banter new ideas against the party’s regime, Chinese education suffered. Children were not taught critical thinking but rather just fed the communist manifest as approved by the government. The inability to exercise freedom of speech leads to the stagnation of society.

In defense of the restriction of freedom of speech, one could look to the incident at UC Berkeley in the 1960’s. The students viewed this incident as a restriction of their rights, however, the prosecutors sought to restrict not the ideas of the students but the use of the “filthy” language of their campaign. This raises an important distinction in the restriction of speech; by prohibiting the use of language deemed “inappropriate” but allowing the intention behind the language to remain, is freedom of speech truly restricted or it is just allowed less outlets to be presented in? Does this constriction of language deteriorate the intent behind the message or merely regulate the message to a publically acceptable criteria?

Freedom of speech could be restricted within publically acceptable language. This would allow more ideas to be propagated and conversed. As when presented with more radically organized ideas, people tend to gravitate away from them, for people search for ideas that validate their own assumptions. Radical ideas tend to create assumptions which go against most conventional ideologies. By diminishing the language of the idea, it can become more appealing to the masses. However, this would undermine the intent of the idea and manipulate the public. “Watering down” ideas diminishes the purpose of the idea itself. By catering to the public, the idea loses its original integrity. If all ideas were forced to restrict language in which they are presented to publically approved criteria, ideas would develop to be extremely similar rather than opposing. The most important factor in freedom of speech is the ability to banter ideas that counter each other in order to seek the truth from both. By removing language, the intent is removed, therefore the idea itself would become unrecognizable, and in such, it would be impossible to counter truths if only one idea is presented as such.

Restriction of freedom of speech leads to the defacement of minority groups. Allowing the persecution of the ideas and justifying the marginalization of one minority groups, ensures the marginalization of all other groups as well. Rosenberg’s article written during the Second World War exemplifies this principle; the systematic marginalization of the Jewish population by the Germans. Through this lenses, he countered arguments that speech that contradicts that of popular opinion must be accepted by society in the same way as popular opinion is. It doesn’t need to be true, but allowing it to exist is essential. It is essential because without dissenting ideas, critical examination of the truth is impossible.

In order to have true liberty, a society must have freedom of speech as an inherent and

recognized right. Society must be able to freely address dissenting ideas in order to become closer to a truth. As Mill states “the steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of other...is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it” (19). The elimination of this process leads to the stagnation of society. If a society is unable to progress and evolve new ideas, it will suffer greatly. This can be seen in previous attempts at stifling the freedom of speech in China and in scientific discoveries throughout history. Stifling speech creates an unhealthy environment for absolute governmental control and leads to tyrannical dictatorship. Without freedom of speech, society is asphyxiated and unable to grow.

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