



“If You Ask Me” Op-Ed: Censorship from the Left

Changing Perspectives on Intellectual Freedom

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Previously published in Against the Grain, August 13, 2021.

After many years of encountering censorship from conservative sources on the right, I have concerns about similar efforts from the liberal left. Most of this censorship does not currently affect items in library collections. The major effect to date has been to suppress public speech as well as the publication of materials that could be appropriate purchases for libraries. I will say at the outset that I’m radically opposed to censorship of all kinds and support discourse from all positions within the American political and cultural spectrum, even and especially those that don’t support my personal beliefs.

I prepared the first version of this column for the Emerging Issues Committee of the Freedom to Read Foundation where I provided examples of liberal censorship. For the current column, I have a section on “Implications for Political and Popular Culture” to provide some historical perspective and to expand my thoughts on the issues. I’m aware that this short column cannot claim to provide

a comprehensive treatment of the complexities of censorship. In the first section, I’ve chosen representative examples of censorship in selected categories; but others might have picked different ones. Finally, given the limited length for this column, I’ve made some broad generalizations where a more nuanced treatment would paint a more accurate picture. I defend, however, the substantive



accuracy of what I say. To provide more information on this subject, I’ve appended a short bibliography of general discussions of this topic in addition to the sources in the footnotes.

Definitions of First Amendment Rights, Censorship, and Intellectual Freedom

Wikipedia provides the following definition of censorship that will be used in this column: “Censorship is the suppression of speech, public communication, or other information. This may be done on the basis that such material is considered objectionable, harmful, sensitive, or ‘inconvenient.’ Censorship can be conducted by governments, private institutions, and other controlling bodies” (“Censorship”). Censorship is a much broader term than First Amendment rights though many have trouble making this distinction. The First Amendment applies only to government bodies within the United States and speech that has been determined to be illegal such as incitement to violence and child pornography (“Freedom of Speech”). To give examples, libraries in federal and other state prisons are not allowed to provide only materials on Christian topics; and publicly funded colleges and universities can’t prohibit peaceful public demonstrations based upon their political viewpoints. On the other hand, the American Library Association list of challenged books illustrates an attempt to censor publications only in this broad definition of the term by asking them to be removed from the library. In fact, any attempt to suppress or make illegal such challenges would itself be a violation of the First Amendment right “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

This column will distinguish between illegal or potentially illegal censorship according to the First Amendment and legal activities on the part of government, private institutions, or individual, which meet the broader definition of censorship that includes any efforts to limit the free flow of ideas. In current intellectual freedom discussions, these legal activities to restrict information have much greater importance even if little can be done to eliminate them beyond the pressure of public opinion.

Intellectual freedom is the broadest term and will be used in this column in keeping with the American Library Association definition: “Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be

explored” (“Intellectual Freedom and Censorship”). This definition supports efforts to positively make information available on all aspects of any issue and thus goes beyond suppressing information from censorship.

Activities that are Potentially Illegal Because of the First Amendment

Activities in this category are limited. Conservatives are responsible for most cases including laws to restrict materials in public libraries, to enforce rules on what can be taught in public schools, and to remove certain classes of materials from prison libraries while favoring religious publications. Both the right and the left have sometimes agreed on efforts to restrict Internet access to pornography within public libraries. Conservatives do so on moral/religious grounds while liberal feminists consider pornography degrading to women (“Opposition to Pornography”). Overall, Supreme Court decisions have established the legality of consensual pornography by adults for distribution to adults (Stevens). Such distribution includes access on public library computers to such materials though not all libraries accept this decision, and some continue to discourage or prohibit such use (“Libraries, the Internet, and the Law”).

The left has supported restricting speech on public college campuses to specific areas or only after obtaining special permissions. Multiple court cases have reaffirmed the right to free speech on campuses and have ruled against most limitations (Alger; “Speech on Campus”). As David Wippman and Glenn C. Altschuler have commented: “Free speech and academic freedom in American education are once again under attack, from both the right and the left. The tactics differ, with the right relying more on state power—legislation and executive orders—and the left on social norms and peer pressure” (Wippman). In other words, the right focuses more on censorship that potentially violates the First Amendment while the left’s activities are censorship in the broader definition of the term. More troubling has been efforts to restrict private speech of students, faculty, and staff—most often on social media. Court cases dealing with public institutions subject to the First Amendment have tended to support such private speech as long as the individual minimizes any institutional involvement and the speech does not cause disruption on the campus or in the school. For example, the Supreme Court has recently supported the rights of students to comment on social media about negative public school experiences (Liptak).



Activities That Are Legal but Potentially Restrict Intellectual Freedom

Restricting Speech that is Offensive to Some Groups

The left has been most concerned about racial or ethnic slurs. Even the most offensive language is protected by the First Amendment if this speech does not incite violence or other illegal actions. Part of the problem is that some of these words were commonly used in the past so that they appear in texts of literary importance. The most frequently cited example is the N-word. A major area of contention is teaching works by Mark Twain where this word often appears though the author is generally considered to be sympathetic to African American rights. Multiple court cases have generally supported the right of schools to teach his works (Powell). As another example, on the recent PBS special by Ken Burns on Hemingway, one of his texts had the offensive words crossed out on screen, an act that some would call censorship (Burns). The left often argues that this word and others like it should be suppressed. The right often criticizes this attitude as an attempt to eliminate speech that accurately reflects its time or is used for legitimate dramatic effect. Conservatives also argue that any derogatory speech against the dominant white majority should then be condemned. Furthermore, they point out that liberals often invoked free speech protection for works that offended conservative Christians as being “blasphemous” (Morrison).

Speech that Recalls Traumatic/Painful Events

The second category is less contentious because the speech is acceptable to many but can have a negative effect on some because of their past experiences. Common cases include sexual crimes including abuse and rape or PTSD for soldiers or victims of other traumatic events. Within all levels of education, the common proposed solution for these cases is to provide trigger warnings and allow individuals to be excused from any mandatory exposure to the troublesome speech (“NCAC Report: What’s All This about Trigger Warnings?”). The counter-argument is that exposure to such texts is a valid educational objective and that drawing the line of acceptability can be difficult.

The Issue of Historical Accuracy

Potentially offensive speech can also be tied to issues of historical accuracy with implications for the related issue of fake news. While changing the name of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award by the American Library Association was specifically stated not be an effort to censure her works, the reason given was that her works “reflect dated

cultural attitudes toward Indigenous people and people of color that contradict modern acceptance, celebration, and understanding of diverse communities” (LaRue). At issue is how a modern writer of history or especially historical fiction can accurately portray how people acted in this or many other periods without including some offensive passages that replicate the beliefs and actions of the people who lived then. On the other side, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* created enough of a controversy that Scholastic pulled the book even though it “was written, illustrated and edited by a diverse group of people of color” and described a historically correct example of well cared for house slaves (Peralta). The counter-comment was that this “accuracy,” however, was overshadowed by the horrible lives of most enslaved African Americans and could be interpreted as an attempt to whitewash slavery.

Cultural Appropriation

Efforts to eliminate or reduce cultural appropriation may be the most controversial type of censorship in this brief column and much too complex to analyze in detail. To use the Wikipedia definition: “Cultural appropriation is the adoption of an element or elements of one culture or identity by members of another culture or identity. This can be controversial when members of a dominant culture appropriate from minority cultures” (“Cultural Appropriation”). None of these activities are illegal under the First Amendment so that they are censorship only in the broader meaning of the term. Opponents of cultural appropriation consider these actions as disrespectful while defenders contend that the borrowing from other cultures can be a sign of respect. In any case, activities such as wearing black face or practicing religious ceremonies of another culture are legal but considered unacceptable by many while Halloween costumes with foreign dress are much less controversial. To take this principle to its logical conclusion, cultural appropriation censors the right of the individual to change by adopting any elements of other cultures. “I didn’t choose my culture at birth, and I’ll be damned if some progressive with a penchant for labels insists I must act in accordance with his list of ‘white, middle-class behavior’” (Patterson).

Suppression of Publications Contrary to Liberal Views

Mainstream publishers are not immune to pressure that has the potential to harm their reputations and diminish sales. Protests and boycotts are legal but can restrict the flow of information. Both conservatives and liberals use such strategies. One example of liberal pressure already appears above in the successful efforts to cease



distribution of *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Peralta). Another example is the recent efforts by hundreds of employees and thousands of signatories to force Simon & Schuster not to publish Michael Pence’s upcoming book (Arken).

Implications for Political and Popular Culture

Since its founding, the United States has had a strong libertarian streak that has influenced its political and popular culture. The American Constitution reflects 18th century enlightenment values supporting intellectual freedom, opposition to censorship, and political and religious liberty, at least for white males. A pushback against these values in the late 18th century and the early 19th century helped create a Christian, white, male dominated culture that mostly persisted until the 1960s even with the freeing of the slaves and women’s suffrage. During this period, any efforts to fight censorship normally came from liberals who sought to strengthen the protections of the First Amendment and to counter censorship of legal materials offensive to mainstream values. Especially towards the end of this period, the American Library Association and many librarians took part in battles to expand their collections to include unpopular positions, support for marginalized groups, and works that offended the traditional morality of conservative Christians.

The liberals won many battles starting in the 1960s to support greater civil rights, feminism, LGBTQ equality and to impose fewer restrictions on creative works. Conservatives often fought back against these changes with only some success. In the last few years, the shape of the battle between conservatives and liberals has changed so that conservatives have become the defenders of intellectual freedom in order to oppose any censorship of their viewpoints. In my fifty year career as a librarian, my firm stance in support of intellectual freedom was directed against any censorship of liberal attacks against conservative viewpoints that dominated American politics and culture. Of late, some liberals have developed an orthodoxy that I personally mostly agree with but whose adherents have sought to impose upon the broader American community. I’m troubled by the fact that I find myself in opposition to censorship by those whose beliefs I basically support. I’m thus speaking out against any censorship from the left because of my firm commitment to intellectual freedom and from a sense of fairness that all should have the same right to present their viewpoints as I claim for myself.

From my perspective, both sides have used the same strategies to achieve their ends and to attack the opposing positions. The first step is to win or retain acceptance for their ideas in American culture so that their positions are generally accepted without argument such as happened for conservative beliefs in the 1950s. Doing so requires favorable media coverage; political power; and establishing, with or without proof, the rationality of their positions. At times, people strongly believe statements that aren’t factually true but have a great power to persuade. For examples, conservatives overlook research that indicates that sex crimes have lessened since the introduction of internet pornography. Liberals underestimate the gains won by BIPOC groups in many areas. The result is that both sides of the political spectrum have created orthodoxies that are accepted by their supporters and rejected by their opponents.

The second step is to mount attacks against the opposing orthodoxy. Both sides use the courts whenever possible to advance their points of view and, when they can, choose jurisdictions where they are more likely to prevail. For this column, I am more interested, however, when these attacks focus on the broader principle of intellectual freedom and the general agreement of many Americans in the libertarian principle of free speech. The attempts by conservatives to remove materials from public libraries is a good example. The American Library Association chose to frame these actions as banning books when actually most of the challenged materials remained on the shelves because the majority was opposed to removing such materials. The other strategy was to focus on those cases where the reasons for banning were particularly weak and would be more likely to elicit laughter than sympathy from the public. An excellent example from the political sphere was using humor to ridicule clothing nude marble statues in Washington (Associated Press “Nude or Barely Covered Statues”). In a similar fashion, one of the arguments used against censoring novels was the “truth” that many American engaged in illicit and immoral sexual activities and that soldiers commonly used the f-word in their conversations. Overall, the American public moved away from the hegemony of the earlier conservative periods to embrace a broader perception of intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights.

The dynamic has changed recently since some liberals now wish to restrict certain types of speech as indicated above while conservatives, so long opposed to free speech rights on matters that they disapproved of, now find that they can call upon the First Amendment and free speech rights to support their positions. Since I



started planning to write this column, I have monitored the *Wall Street Journal* for articles, editorials, and columns in support of free speech that either opposes liberal positions or makes fun of them. I’ll stress that this publication has a reputation for ethical journalism and occupies a position on the right equivalent to that of the *New York Times* on the left. I have such a large stack of materials that I would find it hard to single out a few specific examples. These conservatives have used the same strategies as the liberals before them. They have coined the catchy phrase “cancel culture” (Kurtzleben) and the derogatory expression “woke culture” (Sanderse). They also stress the broad scope of the First Amendment that protects hate speech, racist comments, and white privilege (Wermiel). Some conservatives explicitly state that everyone should learn how to deal with hostile attacks as part of life and that the focus should be on how far racial justice has progressed rather than on how much more is needed to be done.

The former unqualified support against censorship and for First Amendment rights and intellectual freedom has put organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Library Association in a difficult position of having to defend against the charge of logical inconsistency when they overlook liberal censorship after decades of opposing similar conservative actions. My personal opinion is that both organizations and others like them have to be consistently content neutral or change their mission statements to reflect their new realities. The new hardened position on both the right and the left have made discussions on controversial topics difficult. Reconciling such radically different viewpoints on American politics and culture in this polarized environment may be next to impossible. Both sides are likely to support censorship or free speech depending upon which option furthers their objectives.

Concluding Thoughts

To restate the basic principles of this column, First Amendment rights and intellectual freedom are two separate concepts. Legal application of the First Amendment is restricted to relatively few cases where the government attempts to suppress speech in publicly funded institutions

or to enforce legal limits on speech deemed harmful such as incitement to violence and child pornography. Many actions by individuals or organizations that are completely legal, on the other hand, can limit intellectual freedom and the free flow of information by hindering the availability of information sources of all types.

Overall, the focus of activities against intellectual freedom has shifted from being almost exclusively centered on materials that offended morality, usually in sexual matters, of conservatives to also include censorship of political positions against key liberal values. Most, but not all of these, seek to redress what the liberals perceive to be injustices against racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. While censorship from the right remains more prevalent and the greater danger to intellectual freedom in most areas, neglecting the recent threats from the left should not be overlooked.

To date, in my opinion, libraries have not been greatly affected in their ability to provide a broad range of information resources to meet the needs of their communities; but segments of the broader society have not been so lucky. Negative consequences, mostly in academia, have convinced some of the dangers of speaking against liberal values in the same way that speaking against conservative orthodoxy is punished in other milieus. Professors and students may currently hesitate to speak out openly against the prevailing liberal orthodoxy in the classroom, on social media, or in their publications for fear of public censure or faculty/administrative disapproval (Anderson; Kaufmann).

Finally, censorship from the left is in conflict with two widely held library principles on intellectual freedom. The first truism is that the answer to bad speech is more speech, not eliminating troublesome materials. Of late, some liberals have attempted to suppress speech by conservatives who say that social justice should have less priority in American political thought. The second truism states that everyone should find something in the library that offends them. Not offending has become a goal in much liberal thought. As librarians resisted censorship of moral standards that offend many conservatives, they should also resist censorship of political/social speech that offends many liberals.

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