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## Censorship Is Not All Bad

By **Barry Jason Mauer**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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Censorship is not *all* bad! Free-speech idealists argue that the solution to bad speech (misinformation, lies, abusive language, etc.) is not censorship but more speech. But bad speech can, and often does, drown out the good.

A classic form of bad speech is hate speech. Jeremy Waldron, a law professor at the New York University School of Law, describes it this way:

*“Its aim is to compromise the dignity of those at whom it is targeted, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of other members of society. And it sets out to make the establishment and upholding of their dignity... much more difficult. It aims to besmirch the basics of their reputation, by associating ascriptive characteristics like ethnicity, or race, or religion with conduct or attributes that should disqualify someone from being treated as a member of society in good standing.”*

Thus, hate speech is really anti-speech because it aims to shut down the speech of others. And in the United States, hate speech has shut down the speech of minorities and women for hundreds of years. Defenders of hate speech often disguise it as “pride,” “state’s rights” or “religious freedom.” But we are mistaken to treat anti-speech as if it were normal speech, deserving of protection. We can and should be intolerant of intolerance.

Although the United States has a First Amendment protecting free speech, it does not extend to the workplace, the classroom, or the dinner table. It is limited to the press, to religion, to assemblies, and to petitions. And as every journalist, parishioner or public

assembly participant knows, there are powerful limits in these arenas, too. We don't have absolutely free speech because we live within the confines of powerful and interlocking institutions: family, education, entertainment, commerce, career, the law, the military, religion and others.

These institutions offer benefits to their members but also constraints and a narrow range of choices of expression. If these institutions were to offer too much freedom, they would be unable to perpetuate the social relations that keep them functioning. So speech inside an institutional context is limited, but speech outside of an institutional context typically has less power. Speech is limited either way.

The question, therefore, is not *whether* we ought to have constraints on speech but *what kinds* of constraints?

Censorship is an institutional constraint. When we hear the word censorship, we often imagine a banned book (i.e. schools and libraries removing the book). This is censorship at the point of reception. Protests erupt. Demand for the banned book goes up.

Censorship happens more frequently at the point of distribution than it does at the point of reception, such as an institution refusing to distribute a speech or a text through its channels. This type of censorship rarely leads to protests because outsiders rarely hear about it.

The most common form of censorship is self-censorship, or censorship at the point of production, which means you have internalized the censor's rules and decided to abide by them of your own volition. Perhaps you learned that the benefits of compliance outweigh the costs of resistance, or you rationalized that you can't win anyway.

We may self-censor for good reasons, such as politeness, but sometimes we self-censor because we see someone else made into a negative example and we fear it could happen to us.

For instance, some journalists who otherwise might have criticized the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq silenced themselves rather than risk reprisal—from the government, their corporate owners, or those in the public who were for the war. The result was that journalism inflicted a major blow to its own integrity for behaving as an administration mouthpiece, and Americans became among the least-informed people in the world about the war.

Beyond self-censorship, there are other limitations: ideologies—such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia—that prevent us from even thinking certain thoughts, such as thinking of others as human beings with dignity and rights.

We have too much censorship in some areas of our society and too little censorship in others.

There is too much censorship from some plutocrats who suppress the truth about their misrule. They silence whistle-blowers while their propagandists hog the microphone. They maintain these beliefs either through outright censorship or through a pretense of balance in which the media referee fails to penalize those who lie consistently and brazenly. Might we have learned about the lead poisoning in Flint, Mich.'s, water earlier if we could have heard more of whistle-blowers and less of the politicians' denials?

If we hold to ethical principles, such as truth and justice, we can encourage or demand censorship as needed. For example, we should encourage ordinary citizens to participate in democracy, but ban unlimited political contributions by corporations. We should encourage the release of classified information that reveals government abuses, but ban lawmakers from becoming lobbyists once they leave office.

If you want to change the levels of censorship in our society—in other words, to benefit society by loosening or tightening censorship—the best approach is to appeal to the stated values of our institutions. Thus, to loosen censorship by expanding press freedoms, appeal to journalistic institutions as watchdogs of the powerful. To expand academic freedom, appeal to the university's stated aims to seek truth and benefit humanity.

And to appeal for greater censorship, apply the same appeals to our higher values.

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