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### Censorship: A Historical and Contemporary Phenomenon

Throughout just about every major civilization in world history, government institutions have developed various standards that indoctrinate what is moral or permissible in religious and political traditions, thereby creating a model according to these standards for citizens to adhere to. In order to uphold such an idealistic model, there is a need to filter out, or censor, individuals' or content in language and literature that violate a society's morals and/or traditions. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the term "censorship" is defined as the "changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good." The act of censorship has been practiced for thousands of years since ancient times, and remains widely employed in the contemporary era, justified by numerous causes ranging from public concern for morality to protecting political or religious views. However, censorship has dealt centuries of criticism, particularly in the United States, from citizens who believe it limits First Amendment rights to free speech and expression. At the same time, the citizens of historically conflicted regions, such as South Africa during apartheid and Nazi Germany, have contended the practice has enabled abhorrent political practices to persist, including torture, mass extermination of people, and racism. These two perspectives represent just a few of the effects of censorship in history, and these effects continue to stir controversy in today's age of the Internet, as social media platforms and major news networks employ censorship to filter out material appearing to breach "community guidelines" or broadcast contentious topics.

During the classical period of ancient Greece, around about 399 BCE, Socrates preached the purpose of education as the way people can attain wisdom through knowledge to lead more fulfilling lives, but he was censored by the Athenian city-state for allegedly corrupting the minds of youth by questioning whether “wise” men were truly intelligent, and purporting the existence of unorthodox deities. In Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates does not apologize for, but rather, defends his actions, as he states the following,

“Thereupon, those examined by them [youth] are angry at me, not at themselves, and they say that Socrates is someone most disgusting and that he corrupts the young. And whenever someone asks them, ‘By doing what and teaching what?’ ... They say the things that are ready at hand against all who philosophize: ‘the things aloft and under the earth’ and ‘not believing in gods’ and ‘making the weaker speech the stronger’ ... Since they speak about me in an organized and persuasive way, they have filled up your ears, slandering me vehemently for a long time” (pg. 6-7).

Socrates was ultimately found to be guilty by an incredibly minor margin, because since the public slandered his name around Athens, it seemed only ideal for the good of the state to censor his influence and sentence him to death by drinking poison. Following this, his final remarks to the assembly at the trial served to exemplify how truly wise men who are censored for their beliefs should never give in to those who condemn or silence them so as to not arouse their community, as he asserts, “I have been convicted because I was a loss, not however for speeches, but for daring and shamelessness and willingness to say the sorts of things to you that you would have been most pleased to hear: me wailing and lamenting, and doing and saying many other things unworthy of me” (pg. 20). Socrates genuinely understood what he spoke to be

true, he stoically admitted himself as a martyr of his cause, now revered by both historians and students of philosophy alike, to challenge traditional definitions of wisdom and religion.

Later on, during the period of Nazi Germany, which was founded in 1933, censorship was heavily regulated through the institution of movie laws such as the Reich Cinema Law of 1934. This law required producers to first submit a synopsis of their films to the Propaganda Ministry Official, called the *Reichsfilmdramaturg*, which exercised the ability to supervise just about every stage of the film's production to "establish a new 'positive' censorship by which the State could encourage 'good' films rather than discouraging 'bad' ones" (Raphael, 2008, pg. 61). While this law initially appeared conducive to the film industry, "good" films, even those made for entertainment, in Adolf Hitler's view, had the ability to "promote the official worldview of things and reinforce the existing social and economic order." As a result, the majority of films commissioned by the State, according to Scott E. Raphael, in his 2008 Master's dissertation for the California University of Pennsylvania, titled "Censorship of the Media in Nazi Germany and Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Comparative Analysis as to Security in the Homeland", he stated, "were designed to promote various Nazi themes in dramatic, fictionalized form. Although not always overtly political, they were produced with the intention of producing themes such as the Leadership Principle, the People, Blood and Soil, and anti-Semitism..." (pg. 67). If any film did not coincide with these values or appear satirical or subversive in any way toward the will of the State, it was censored, and thus, the film industry came to represent the values of discrimination and anti-Semitism that Hitler quite painstakingly championed.

Furthermore, another example spanning throughout much of the history of censorship occurred with the deliberate burning and destruction of library books and entire libraries. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, libraries everywhere were expected to serve as "benevolent guardians

of literature,” for both young readers and school teachers. According to Mette Newth, writer for the Beacon for Freedom of Expression, a database within the National Library of Norway, in the United States, surveillance of literature through the years has resulted in the banning of literature thought to express questionable or subversive ideas, as she stipulates, “One of the most stunning examples, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884 UK, 1885 US), was first banned in 1885 in the Concord Public Library (Massachusetts)... Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has remained controversial in the USA because of the author’s portrayal of race relations and racial stereotypes” (2010, para 29-33). It’s not surprising how censorship of Twain’s children’s tale represented the racist institutions of segregation in the United States, despite the inclusive policies of Library Bill of Rights, which opposed the practice of banning literature. According to the American Library Association, the first policy of the Library Bill of Rights is as follows, “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of their origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation” (1939, para 2). Several libraries challenged the practice of censorship, as they believed they should not limit the knowledge of the majority for the sake of protecting the beliefs of a prejudiced few. Despite the Library Bill of Rights and several other similar doctrines, harsh regulatory laws mandated the burning books at the stake or deliberately destroy libraries so as to prevent ordinary people from learning information the government would not approve of.

As a consequence of the advancement of communications and technology, it can be said governments around the globe are far more democratic than they have ever been, as the influence of Western values such as the freedom of speech and expression has pervaded just about every corner of the globe. However, all of these modern forms of communication, especially today’s

most popular social media network, Facebook, have established strict limits over what its over 1.1 billion users can post in the form of “community standards”, which are available publicly online for anyone to view and learn. According to Katie Grant, reporter for a British newspaper, *Independent on Sunday (UK)*, a terminally ill woman affected by breast cancer, named Rowena Kincaid, was censored for posting a particularly objectionable picture in the view of Facebook’s algorithms, as she recounts,

“Last Saturday Ms. Kincaid posted a photograph of her right breast, showing a blotchy red rash around her nipple. Breast cancer can present itself in many ways, she explained, ... within two hours the photograph had made 72,000 “impressions,” but, Ms. Kincaid claimed, when she tried to log-on later that day she was notified that the image had been taken down because it had violated Facebook’s code of practice” (para 4-5).

At superficial glance, such a picture would appear to be sensitive or questionable to the average Facebook user, but instead, Kincaid’s page “has become a valuable source for people affected by the [breast cancer] disease and those wanting to learn more” (para 4). In this case, Kincaid’s intentions were not to offend anyone or arouse any controversy, but rather to make effective use of her resources to educate those who know little about breast cancer on how to detect it, especially those who are afflicted by it as well but may not realize it. There is no clear method on how Facebook specifically deals with these types of media, as the one section on the official community standards page relevant to Kincaid’s case, captioned, “Sexual Violence and Exploitation,” only states, “Our definition of sexual exploitation includes solicitation of sexual material, any sexual content involving minors, threats to share intimate images, and offers of sexual services.” Thus, Kincaid cannot be blamed for sharing her photo in her manner and with the intentions she had, because she was not seeking any form of exploitation, but rather inviting

visual understanding for a typically taboo topic that would be rather difficult to explain merely by words alone to women of different body types.

The practice of censorship has existed and persisted since the classical era of civilization, exemplified by the very first office of the censor being established in ancient Rome in 443 BCE. Advanced societies and hubs for information, such as classical Greece, Rome, Nazi Germany, libraries across Western Europe and the United States, and Facebook represent just a few of the countless examples of areas where censorship has thrived for centuries, representing a significant progression in how different sensitive material was censored. Nonetheless, each case expressed ideas not particularly aligned with governmental institutions, ranging from subversive ideas to questioning authority as championed by Socrates, to filtering German movies to only embrace the politicized ideals of anti-Semitism, to burning down entire libraries to prevent groups of readers from being exposed to repulsive genres of literature. In conclusion, censorship remains an issue that is so deeply ingrained in human nature, because humans have done consistently, and still do, filter out that which appears repugnant in order to uphold “morals” and “standards,” yet do not consider the repercussions on the censored, for they are limited in the actions and words they can use to appeal to governmental institutions.

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