



January 17, 2021

Free Speech versus Censorship

By Steve Horton

The decision by Twitter and Facebook to ban President Trump's accounts, coupled with Amazon, Apple, and Google removing Parler, a social-media platform favored by many in the conservative universe, due to the growing number of posts with violent messages on its site, have prompted cries of censorship. Both of those moves came on the heels of the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

Of course, free speech versus censorship has been an ongoing debate in this country and elsewhere. It dates back over the centuries. Interestingly, the fact that we can have an open and robust debate on the question is a sign of free expression, given that the censors in some nations would not allow it.

When we have this discussion, it's often done within the political arena, involving governmental proposals and policies, the actions of public officials, contentious issues, and similar matters, although it certainly includes other areas of society and culture. The 'powers that be' do not always welcome criticism or like the scrutiny, believing that it threatens their position (which it may well do), so they attempt to stifle and halt any and all communications and the spreading of information.

The right of free speech is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, part of the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights. Specifically, it states that “Congress shall make no law abridging the right of free speech...”

Twitter, Amazon, Facebook, and Google, however, are private companies. They, too, have a right of free speech that gives them latitude to decide what content is permissible, to prohibit anything they feel violates their rules of conduct, and to remove content they feel is inappropriate or decline to help disseminate it.

You and I may disagree on their definition of what’s permissible or inappropriate, but from what I understand, there is a sizable case history in the law of courts ruling that private media companies—those that publish news and opinion—can pick and choose their content. Government cannot compel them, in the name of free speech, to do so.

As the publisher of a newspaper, I am the gatekeeper of what goes on the pages of the publication. In that sense, I can be a censor. I am always mindful that not all speech is an unencumbered right. There are laws against libel and slander and ethical considerations regarding false information, discriminatory or inflammatory language, and character assassination.

Not every ‘letter to the editor’ gets published. Nor do I (by choice) run articles on somebody claiming they got poor service from a local business. Also, just because I receive a news release doesn’t obligate me to publish it.

Yet, I’m mindful as well of the long and storied history that newspapers have had in this nation and elsewhere in the world, Exposing governmental deception and corruption,

championing transparency in policy decisions, reporting on the actions of public officials, and offering a forum for columnists and letter writers to express an opinion, espouse a cause, or register a beef is a vital part of that heritage and expectation.

There have been numerous occasions when a viewpoint appeared in the newspaper has been different than my own—sometimes profoundly so—or pushed up close to where I considered tossing it. In most instances (maybe not always wisely), I have erred on the side of free expression and published the piece. The yardstick I often use is if the viewpoint, criticism, or point of contention is being discussed or published in other venues. Is it part of the public debate, with proponents as well as detractors? If so, then why should I keep it out of the paper?

I harbor a number of strong beliefs. You might even call a few of them principles. Still, I don't presume to be infallible or feel that someone who disagrees with me or holds a contrary view is necessarily wrong, or—given the current level of divisiveness—be regarded as an enemy or evil. A few might fall in that category, but most of them are looking at the situation from a different perspective or coming at it from a different mindset.

I don't want the newspaper I publish to be an echo chamber of my political, social, and cultural viewpoints, preferring it serve as a marketplace of ideas and hopefully as a soapbox for civil and rational dialogue where readers can obtain information, see alternative possibilities (the pros and cons), and possibly gain a better insight—or, at least, have a better understanding of what's happening and what others are thinking.

This is admittedly not a foolproof system for making editorial judgments. Probably it's more of a seat-of-the-pants, spur-of-the-moment approach than an operational guidebook with firm rule.

That said, my newspaper only occupies a small parcel of the media landscape. The social-media and internet giants like Twitter, Facebook, Apple, Google, and Amazon—with their varying ways of providing a platform for content and/or dispersing it—have become pervasive in a relatively short period of time, touching and influencing millions of lives.

They're a place and a means by which everyone—from the President to the humblest citizen—can express their thoughts and opinions, often with little or no restraints.

Such unbounded freedom of speech can be liberating and intoxicating. Unfortunately, not all expressions are benign, polite, considerate of others, or have an intent to be factual and truthful. Some of the utterances have been distortions, fabrications, hateful, threatening, malicious, insulting, intimidating, and even seditious, thus, inviting an enforcement of rules.

The challenge, as I well know, is where to draw the line—well aware that one of the dangers to free expression is drawing it—but knowing also that, as a gatekeeper, the social good sometimes requires that you do so.

Certainly, someone could argue 'Who appointed you to be the gatekeeper?' and the answer would be 'No one.' Other than I own the newspaper and get to make the rules. But my first rule is to promote and defend the right of free speech and through it, foster the exchange of ideas. Without that liberty, there can be no free press.

Steve Horton is a mid-Michigan journalist and editor-publisher of the Fowlerville News & Views.