

The Importance of Free Speech in the Digital Age

In 1960, in an address to the American people regarding the threat of censors, President John F. Kennedy stated that, “we must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all the criticisms. Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors.” This statement issued nearly 60 years ago heralded one of America’s most important ideals: that all speech must be protected, regardless of content.

However, times have changed since the Kennedy administration, or the colonial ideals he referenced. Thoughts and ideas are no longer spurred on through telephone wires, printed on printing presses, or shot through the air in radio waves. These mediums have been replaced by the internet and online forums. Since the beginning of these new technological innovations, Americans have treated online ideas the same as traditional ones and protected them like they would traditional means. However, the internet has offered up new challenges in upholding a good and moral society. With the invention of the internet, anyone on Earth can express their opinion all over the planet with relative ease. What once took horseback riders and trans-Atlantic cables can now be achieved instantly with an email address. This new ease of communication has driven people to highlight the internet as a form of radicalization - by being effortlessly connected to anybody and everybody, people with evil ideals and intentions can receive validation with other like-minded individuals with relative ease.

To take a modern example, the shooter in the Christchurch mosque shootings was radicalized online through extremists. Before the horrible attacks, the shooter published a manifesto online declaring his evil intentions. Fearing an increase in radicalization, New Zealand has made it a crime to possess or read his manifesto declaring his intentions.

This is where the modern world gets thrown on its head. Subscribers of traditional free speech ideals would say that such an attempt is foolish to our protection. Proponents of the ban would say those ideals are outdated and need to be adapted to the modern era of information. As American citizens who are familiar with terror attacks we need to make the decision of the century: should we allow the spread of all speech as the First Amendment indicates, even if it costs us lives? I sincerely believe that we must uphold the traditional ideals of our Founding Fathers: that all speech, no matter how despicable, must be protected. By drawing lines on what is okay to say and to read, we create a lucrative prize to people who resist the contrary. Those who feel persecuted will have their suspicions confirmed when their opinions are made legal.

The only true way to stamp out this hatred is to let truth prevail. We must do our duty to let public discourse flow freely, and allow the citizens to have thoughtful discourse. Only by allowing Americans to educate and fully explore these issues will we allow ourselves to put those evil ideals behind us. Though communication has changed drastically, and will no doubt continue to transform in years to come, we must still uphold the freedom of speech and publishing. The best way to combat hatred is to allow truth to grow. By attempting to stamp out one, you will inevitably eliminate the other. It is our duty to foster that truth, whether it be through books or tweets.

— Jacob E. Gunderson, *Maple Mountain High School*