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Leaders | Free speech

Under attack

Curbs on free speech are growing tighter. It is time to speak out



Jun 4th 2016

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IN A sense, this is a golden age for free speech. Your smartphone can call up newspapers from the other side of world in seconds. More than a billion tweets, Facebook posts and blog updates are published every single day. Anyone with access to the internet can be a publisher, and anyone who can reach Wikipedia enters a digital haven where America's First Amendment reigns.

However, watchdogs report that speaking out is becoming more dangerous—and they are right. As our [report](#) shows, curbs on free speech have grown tighter. Without the contest of ideas, the world is timid and ignorant.

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Free speech is under attack in three ways. First, repression by governments has increased. Several countries have reimposed cold-war controls or introduced new ones. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia enjoyed a free-for-all of vigorous debate. Under Vladimir Putin, the muzzle has tightened again. All the main television-news outlets are now controlled by the state or by Mr Putin's cronies. Journalists who ask awkward questions are no longer likely to be sent to labour camps, but several have been murdered.

China's leader, Xi Jinping, ordered a crackdown after he took over in 2012, toughening up censorship of social media, arresting hundreds of dissidents and replacing liberal debate in universities with extra Marxism. In the Middle East the overthrow of despots during the Arab spring let people speak freely for the first time in generations. This has lasted in Tunisia, but Syria and Libya are more dangerous for journalists than they were before the uprisings; and Egypt is ruled by a man who says, with a straight face: "Don't listen to anyone but me."

Words, sticks and stones

Second, a worrying number of non-state actors are enforcing censorship by assassination. Reporters in Mexico who investigate crime or corruption are often murdered, and sometimes tortured first. Jihadists slaughter those they think have insulted their faith. When authors and artists say anything that might be deemed disrespectful of Islam, they take risks. Secular bloggers in Bangladesh are hacked to death in the street (see [article](#)); French cartoonists are gunned down in their offices. The jihadists hurt Muslims more than any others, not least by making it harder for them to have an honest discussion about how to organise their societies.

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Third, the idea has spread that people and groups have a right not to be offended. This may sound innocuous. Politeness is a virtue, after all. But if I have a right not to be offended, that means someone must police what you say about me, or about the things I hold dear, such as my ethnic group, religion, or even political beliefs. Since offence is subjective, the power to police it is both vast and arbitrary.

Nevertheless, many students in America and Europe believe that someone should exercise it. Some retreat into the absolutism of identity politics, arguing that men have no right to speak about feminism nor whites to speak about slavery. Others have blocked thoughtful, well-known speakers, such as Condoleezza Rice and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, from being heard on campus (see [article](#)).

Concern for the victims of discrimination is laudable. And student protest is often, in itself, an act of free speech. But university is a place where students are supposed to learn how to think. That mission is impossible if uncomfortable ideas are off-limits. And protest can easily stray into preciousness: the University of California, for example, suggests that it is a racist “micro-aggression” to say that “America is a land of opportunity”, because it could be taken to imply that those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame.

The inconvenient truth

Intolerance among Western liberals also has wholly unintended consequences. Even despots know that locking up mouthy but non-violent dissidents is disreputable. Nearly all countries have laws that protect freedom of speech. So authoritarians are always looking out for respectable-sounding excuses to trample on it. National security is one. Russia recently sentenced Vadim Tyumentsev, a blogger, to five years in prison for promoting “extremism”, after he criticised Russian policy in Ukraine. “Hate speech” is another. China locks up campaigners for Tibetan independence for “inciting ethnic hatred”; Saudi Arabia flogs blasphemers; Indians can be jailed for up to three years for promoting disharmony “on grounds of religion, race...caste...or any other ground whatsoever”.

The threat to free speech on Western campuses is very different from that faced by atheists in Afghanistan or democrats in China. But when progressive thinkers agree that offensive words should be censored, it helps authoritarian regimes to justify their own much harsher restrictions and intolerant religious groups their violence. When human-rights campaigners object to what is happening under oppressive regimes, despots can point out that liberal democracies such as France and Spain also criminalise those who “glorify” or “defend” terrorism, and that many Western countries make it a crime to insult a religion or to incite racial hatred.

One strongman who has enjoyed tweaking the West for hypocrisy is Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president of Turkey. At home, he will tolerate no insults to his person, faith or policies. Abroad, he demands the same courtesy—and in Germany he has found it. In March a German comedian recited a satirical poem about him “shagging goats and oppressing minorities” (only the more serious charge is true). Mr Erdogan invoked an old, neglected German law against insulting foreign heads of state. Amazingly, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, has let the prosecution proceed. Even more amazingly, nine other European countries still have similar laws, and 13 bar insults against their own head of state.

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Opinion polls reveal that in many countries support for free speech is lukewarm and conditional. If words are upsetting, people would rather the government or some other authority made the speaker shut up. A group of Islamic countries are lobbying to make insulting religion a crime under international law. They have every reason to expect that they will succeed.

So it is worth spelling out why free expression is the bedrock of all liberties. Free speech is the best defence

against bad government. Politicians who **err** (that is, all of them) should be subjected to unfettered criticism. Those who hear it may respond to it; those who silence it may never find out how their policies **misfired**. As Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate, has pointed out, no democracy with a free press ever **endured** famine.

In all areas of life, free debate sorts good ideas from bad ones. Science cannot develop unless old certainties are **queried**. Taboos are the enemy of understanding. When China's government orders economists to offer optimistic forecasts, it guarantees that its own policymaking will be ill-informed. When American social-science faculties hire only left-wing professors, their research deserves to be taken less seriously. The law should recognise the right to free speech as nearly absolute. Exceptions should be rare. Child pornography should be banned, since its production involves harm to children. States need to keep some things secret: free speech does not mean the right to publish nuclear launch codes. But in most areas where campaigners are calling for enforced civility (or worse, deference) they should be resisted.

Blasphemy laws are an anachronism. A religion should be open to debate. Laws against hate speech are **unworkably** subjective and widely abused. Banning words or arguments which one group finds offensive does not lead to social harmony. On the contrary, it gives everyone an incentive to take offence—a fact that opportunistic politicians with ethnic-based support are quick to exploit.

Incitement to violence should be banned. However, it should be narrowly defined as instances when the speaker intends to **induce** those who agree with him to commit violence, and when his words are likely to have an immediate effect. Shouting "Let's kill the Jews" to an angry mob outside a synagogue qualifies. Drunkenly posting "I wish all the Jews were dead" on an obscure Facebook page probably does not. Saying something offensive about a group whose members then start a riot certainly does not count. They should have responded with words, or by ignoring the fool who insulted them.

In volatile countries, such as Rwanda and Burundi, words that incite violence will differ from those that would do so in a stable democracy. But the principles remain the same. The police should deal with serious and imminent threats, not arrest every bigot with a laptop or a megaphone. (The governments of Rwanda and Burundi, alas, show no such **restraint**.)

Are **digital online**

Facebook, Twitter and other digital giants should, as private organisations, be free to decide what they allow to be published on their platforms. By the same logic, a private university should be free, as far as the law is concerned, to enforce a speech code on its students. If you don't like a Christian college's rules against swearing, pornography and expressing disbelief in God, you can go somewhere else. However, any public college, and any college that aspires to help students grow intellectually, should aim to expose them to challenging ideas. The world outside campus will often offend them; they must learn to fight back using peaceful protests, rhetoric and reason.

These are good rules for everyone. Never try to silence views with which you disagree. Answer objectionable speech with more speech. Win the argument without resorting to force. And grow a **tougher** hide.

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "Under attack"

Leaders

June 4th 2016

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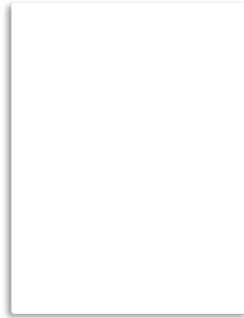
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