Risks and Poses of Contemporary Censorship. The Case of Social Networks

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Abstract:
Throughout history censorship has taken many forms and has been used with similar intent, all the while depending on the technological, material and political resources of the respective times.

In the information age, where digitization is extremely important, censorship can take another form, an unforeseen, even unexpected one, different from the classic models used in other historical periods.

If in real life, an individual was constrained by social norms, by accepted behavioral conduct but also by a chiseled language, on the Internet these constraints did not have much value in the past. We can talk about an environment where one could be whoever wanted to be and say whatever they wanted, and in the worst-case scenario they were laughed at. However, things are no longer like that at the moment.

We can say that censorship starts from two directions. The first, from the abuse of the algorithm that can wrongly identify users' posts and then correct them, and the second from the abuse of other users, who if they do not agree with the information posted by others, they can send a complaint to the social networks to have them deleted and the user corrected and/or punished, in many cases unfairly. Next, we can also talk about a certain intensity of censorship, the greater the intensity, the more it restricts individual freedoms. So, we can say that the objective of this paper is to identify different types of censorship and expose how they impact certain freedoms.

In this direction, the biggest risk would be the fact that one, if not the most important right that man has, that of free expression, is endangered by these modern poses of censorship.

Keywords: *Censorship, social networks, fake-news, risks and poses of censorship, society, freedom of speech.*

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The topic of censorship is not an easily approachable one, and studies in this direction are limited by the taboo elements that revolve around the topic, which is why I believe that any study in this direction would be beneficial to the scientific community as well as society.

Another, more personal motivation is the fact that I strongly support the principle and right of freedom of expression, having personally experienced situations in which I was unjustly censured, but I also know many close people who have had similar experiences, and the remarks and complaints against the digital authorities have never been successful.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2023), the term censorship is used to describe "any regime or context in which the content of what is publicly expressed, exhibited, published, broadcast, or otherwise distributed is regulated or in which the circulation of information is controlled". We can develop this definition by stating that censorship is the suppression of speech, public communication or other information on the basis that such material is considered subjective, harmful, sensitive, inconvenient or offensive. Censorship can be carried out by governments, public and private institutions and corporations.

Censorship is generally applied in a variety of different media, including speech, books, music, films and other arts, the press, radio, television, and the Internet for various reasons, including national security, to control obscenity, child pornography, hate-speech, to protect children or other vulnerable groups, to promote or restrict political or religious views and to prevent defamation. Direct censorship may or may not be legal depending on the type, location and content. Many countries provide strong safeguards against censorship by law, but none of these protections are absolute, and it is often difficult to balance conflicting rights to determine what can and cannot be censored. In the case of online social networks, the most popular justifications are preventing hate speech, spread of fake-news, discrimination of any kind and some forms of terrorism.

We can say that censorship has followed the free expression of people like a shadow throughout history. Although we can easily say that this procedure of limiting and controlling information has existed and been used since the beginning of history and humanity, the information about its use does not exist in particularly large quantities because it has been used extensively in the last centuries, much more much compared to previous periods.

Although government-instituted censorship had apparently been abandoned by most Western countries during the 19th century and most of the 20th century, public concern about offensive literature did not abate. Public libraries were supposed to act as benevolent guardians of literature, especially books for young readers. Consequently, this gave teachers and librarians license to censor a wide range of books in libraries under the guise of protecting readers from morally destructive and possibly offensive literature.

Surprisingly, in liberal-minded countries like Sweden and Norway, which boast the oldest press freedom laws, oversight of public and school libraries remained a concern for authors and publishers even into the latter part of the century. No less surprising is the tradition of book surveillance in schools and libraries in the United States (Black, 2001: 63-80).

Throughout its 400-year history, the media has been the first casualty in times of war, whether in external or internal conflicts. As a rule, the press faced a choice

between strangulation and closure. Many respectable newspapers were simply taken over by a country's new rulers or were subjected to becoming the voice of new governments.

Censorship has been criticized throughout history for being unfair and hindering progress. In a 1997 essay on Internet censorship, social commentator Michael Landier argues that censorship is counterproductive because it prevents discussion of the subject being censored. Landier extends his argument by arguing that those who impose censorship must believe what they censor to be true, since self-righteous individuals would welcome the opportunity to reject those with contrary views (Landier, 1997).

Types and levels of censorship

Proponents of censorship have sought to justify it using different rationales for different types of censored information:

• **Moral censorship** is the removal of material that is obscene or otherwise considered morally questionable. Pornography, for example, is often censored under this argument, especially child pornography, which is illegal and censored in most jurisdictions around the world.

• **Military censorship** is the process of keeping military information and tactics confidential from the enemy. This is used to counter espionage.

• **Political censorship** occurs when governments block information from reaching their citizens. This is often done to exercise control over the population and prevent free speech that might fuel rebellion.

• **Religious censorship** is the means by which any material deemed unacceptable by a particular religion is removed. This often involves a dominant religion forcing the limitation of the less widespread. Alternatively, one religion may shun the works of another when they feel the content is not appropriate for their religion.

• **Corporate censorship** is the process by which corporate media publishers intervene to disrupt the publication of information that presents their business partners or their own business in a negative light, or to prevent alternative offerings from reaching public exposure (Jay, 2000: 208-209).

In the **information age**, a very important role in the transmission of information is played by social networks. Considering the very large amount of information that circulates on these platforms, we can take into account the fact that they are susceptible to some forms of censorship.

In this modern age of information, we can observe a relatively new form of censorship, namely, **reverse censorship**, which is achieved by flooding the public, often via online social networks, with false or misleading information. American legal scholar Tim Wu explained that this type of information control, sometimes carried out by state actors, can "distort or stifle disaffected discourse by creating and disseminating fake news, paying fake commentators and deploying propaganda bots " (Wu, 2017: 573).

Fake news is false or misleading information presented as news. They are often intended to damage the reputation of a person or entity or to make money through advertising revenue. However, the term has no fixed definition and has been applied more broadly to include any type of false information, including unintentional and unconscious mechanisms, and also by high-profile individuals to alter any news unfavorable to their personal views (Higdon, 2020).

Once commonplace in print, the prevalence of fake news has increased with the rise of social media, particularly the Facebook news feed (Himma-Kadakas, 2017: 25-41). Political polarization, post-truth politics, confirmation bias, and social media

algorithms have been implicated in the spread of fake news. It is sometimes generated and propagated by hostile foreign actors, especially during elections. The use of anonymously hosted fake news websites has made it difficult to prosecute fake news sources for libel. In some definitions, fake news includes satirical articles misconstrued as genuine and articles that use sensational headlines or clickbait that are not supported in the text. Here is where the algorithms that try to constrain the spread of fake-news can fail and censor legitimate opinionated people (Tsang, 2020).

Other terms that are tangential, complementary, or may even represent certain forms of censorship are **political correctness** and **shadow-banning**.

Political correctness is a term used to describe language, policies or measures that are intended to avoid offending or disadvantage members of certain groups in society. In public discourse and the media, the term is generally used pejoratively with the implication that these policies are excessive or unjustified. Since the late 1980s, the term has been used to describe a preference for inclusive language and the avoidance of language or behavior that can be seen as excluding, marginalizing or insulting disadvantaged or discriminated against groups of people, especially groups defined by ethnicity, sex, gender or sexual orientation (Kohl, 1992: 1-16).

Considering the modification of the language or the intentional avoidance, sometimes even for good reasons, of certain expressions, we can say that political correctness imposes a certain form of censorship.

The term shadow-ban or "ghost-ban" is the practice of blocking or partially blocking a user or their content from an online community so that it is not easily noticed by the user. For example, prohibited "shadow" comments posted on a blog or media site will not be visible to other people accessing that site from their computers (Clive, 2009).

By partially hiding or making a user's contributions invisible or less visible to other members of the social network, the hope may be that, in the absence of reactions to their comments, the problematic or unfavorable user will become bored or frustrated and leave the platform, and that spammers and trolls they will not create new accounts (Walsh, 2006: 183).

Although the intentions of this concept can be justified and even effective to favor a civilized dialogue between users of an online platform, we cannot but include it in the category of censorship, this represents a very clear form of censorship, the only difference is that the user does not necessarily know that it is censored and the censor knows for sure, be it an administrator or a software. We can say that a possible advantage of this type of censorship is that the censored user, not being sure whether or not he was the target of such censorship, does not have enough reasons to react impulsively or violently.

Another element related to censorship, in addition to the algorithms of social networks, is the algorithms of search engines. Although we cannot say that they actually censor information, they provide the most "relevant" results usually on the first search page. If we want to look for the same information on different search engines, we will be able to see an obvious bias in the displayed results. Most of the time the differences are related to controversial topics or recent public scandals or influential people. Also, search completion suggestions differ on different search engines (Goldman, 2006).

Since the advent of the Internet, people have started using it more and more. There was no institution or body to control and manipulate the way information flows on the Internet, let alone censor it. From the beginning, the Internet meant the free and efficient flow of information, the place where people from different parts of the world

could "meet", chat, create relationships, do business and gather information without having to go to a library or meet face to face. If in real life, an individual was constrained by social norms, by accepted behavioral conduct but also by a chiseled language, on the Internet these constraints did not have much value. We can talk about an environment where you could be whoever you wanted and say whatever you wanted, however you wanted, and in the worst-case scenario you were laughed at.

I must emphasize that the types of censorship presented below represent more of a personal approach to the severity of the limitation of freedom of expression.

Level 1 censorship. A common place where people "meet" on the Internet were, and still are, discussion forums and chat rooms. These "places" allowed almost instantaneous communication but were controlled by a small authority who was the administrator, that individual who took care that there were no discussions on his forum that would lead to illegal gestures or that were not related to the domain of the forum or a section of it. Here we can speak of a minimalist form of censorship, one that aimed more at ensuring the legality of discussions. Another form of weak censorship could be blocking inappropriate content for children up to a certain age.

Level 2 censorship. After the emergence of social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, even YouTube (more of a content creation network), the interactions between people increased significantly, but also their interests began to diversify. Rules of conduct or clear community guidelines began to appear for each site, social norms began to "infiltrate" this environment that at one time resembled the Wild West, where everyone did almost what they wanted and could find immense opportunities, but also dangers. We can say that these established norms are a reasonable form of censorship or "common sense", just as it is reasonable for a man to use civilized language in an institution or in a normal social environment.

Level 3 censorship. Although the previously mentioned forms are acceptable and often even desirable, in recent years, censorship in the online environment has started to be much more obvious. Under the pretext of respecting the established norms or the community guide, we can even talk about an abuse on the part of the companies or corporations that own the social networks, in the direction in which many users are unfairly affected in the conditions where they have not directly violated the mentioned provisions. For example, Facebook's community standards state that language that promotes violence, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, etc. is prohibited and often the algorithm works effectively and deletes the comments and posts that are in question and prohibits that user from posting on a length of time, usually from 3 days to several months (Facebook/Meta, 2023).

We can say that censorship starts from two directions. The first from the abuse of the algorithm that wrongly identifies the posts of users and corrects them, or from the abuse of other users, who, if they do not agree with the information posted by others, can send a complaint to Facebook so that it deletes the post and corrects that user. If multiple people file a complaint against a user, even if that user has not violated any standards, the algorithm will delete their post, possibly the account just because multiple people have filed a complaint, without checking whether the complaints are valid or not.

On the YouTube platform, many videos are deleted and accounts blocked for similar reasons, such as violating the standards, although often it is just that several individuals, or as they are called on the Internet, trolls, intentionally file complaints on reasons of bad faith, precisely to harm that user.

On the social media platform Twitter, the case was, before it became Platform X, if someone posts, say, a joke, and someone finds that joke offensive and files a complaint, the user who posted it risks having their account permanently closed.

Level 4 censorship. We can say that a combination of the ideological tendencies of the owners of the social networks, of the users as well as the precarious emotional state of those active on the Internet, leads to a much harsher form of censorship than the first mentioned, a form that is felt in a completely unpleasant way and which endangers the right to free expression. For this type of censorship, it is necessary that the ideologies and opinions of the owners of social networks, or the way in which they have been transposed in the algorithms of the platforms, coincide with only a part of its users. In this situation, for example, dissenters will be easily censored if the software detects a complaint that coincides with its programming, and if the situation were reversed, it would not react or it will send a message stating that everything is fine.

Level 5 censorship. Although there are not many examples of such censorship on the Internet, throughout history we can observe some examples of such censorship, usually found in totalitarian regimes, where any mention of a subject considered taboo by the state was severely punished, sometimes even with capital punishment. The mention or study of certain subjects would have been totally forbidden, as would the possession of documents or books containing ideas undesirable to the state, or in this case, whoever has control over a specific social media platform, may it be the will of the people (the users in this case) or the will and interests of the owner.

Who is affected by censorship?

In the age of information and the Internet, many people gain notoriety, through followers on various social networks, gain income from donations or sponsorships, some working almost a full-time job on these platforms to ensure their livelihood. This livelihood is put in jeopardy by the aforementioned mode of censorship, as they are the most affected of the users. Although even if your account is closed, you can make another one, re-signing sponsorship contracts and regaining a high number of followers, speaking of hundreds of thousands or even millions, is hard work for several years at least.

The second category of people that is affected by this censorship are simple users, who are not looking for followers or funds but who care a lot about freedom of expression and because of other users who find their simple posts or comments offensive, instead of explaining this problem they resort directly to filing a complaint.

One can see a clear, almost ideological tendency to censor certain views, whether extreme or not, and not to censor other views, whether extreme or not. The tendency is rather one of the lefts, or as the political left is commonly perceived, and to censor anything that appears to be right-wing. For example, a post praising communism is lightly accepted by the algorithm, but a post praising fascism is heavily censored. A YouTube video showing the many wrongs caused by refugees or immigrants is mostly deleted, but a video showing the same wrongs caused by European citizens is welcome on the platform. The argument is often simple but devoid of substance, any approach that does not put those mentioned in a good light is xenophobic, racist, even fascist in nature, absolute tolerance not being a characteristic of how the right is perceived.

It is noticeable that the most vocal people active on the Internet are generally strongly ideologically anchored or emotionally unable to deal with different opinions, they use the power of the group to file complaints towards the censure of any individuals

who do not seem to hold the same values or political opinions. To top it off, those who claim to be tolerant of the opinions of others are actually the most intolerant of opinions that oppose their own. If they are different and that's it, it is acceptable, but if they are opposite, then a problem arises for them.

As ordinary individuals increasingly use online forums, blogs, and their own social media pages, a new kind of censorship has emerged, one in which people selectively and willfully remove opposing political viewpoints from online contexts. In three studies of behavior in online forums, supporters of a political cause (eg, abortion or the rights to bear arms) preferentially censored comments that opposed their cause. The tendency to selectively censor information that represents an incongruent cause was amplified among people whose cause-related beliefs were deeply rooted or "fused" with their "identities. Moreover, six additional measures related to identity also amplified the effect of selective censoring. Finally, selective censorship occurred even when opposing comments were harmless and polite. We can say that because online censorship adopted by moderators can distort online content consumed by millions of users, it can systematically disrupt democratic dialogue and threaten social harmony (Ashokkumar, Talaifar, Fraser, Landaburb, Buhrmester, Gomez, Paredes and Swann, 2020).

Censorship is more extreme than biased information seeking because, in addition to biasing one's own online environment, censorship limits the online content that other people are exposed to. Also, by silencing dissenters, censorship prevents them from expressing their views, and although the psychological processes underlying censorship may overlap with some of the defensive motivations that produce selective information seeking, excessive censorship may cause a hostile motivation to eliminate the opponents of the cause (Hart, Albarracin, Eagly, Lindberg and Merill, 2009: 555).

Conclusions

I believe that the main reasons why censorship has started to be felt more and more often in the online environment are of an ideological, political and economic nature. Given that views that appear to be politically more right-wing than left-wing, or that may give the impression that they are, are more often censored, the growing presence of views on the left side of the political axis is not surprising, nor is the tendency of the companies that own the social networks to support the larger part of their users. An important factor that supports this argument is the emotional precarious condition of social media users, most of whom are young, civilized discussion and the virtue of listening and debating arguments is lacking, the solution being a clear one, the censorship of those who do not want to share the same values and ideas. After talking with several people who are active on social networks, I found that the ideological element seems to be the most important, most of the time, with people who do not have political opinions online being much less exposed to the phenomenon of censorship.

The political cause arises because many politicians have begun to realize how important online presence, campaigning and propaganda is in the case of a political campaign or maintaining or increasing notoriety, which is why the rigor with which they also treat opposing views that it could negatively affect their online image, so they resort to censorship through the means mentioned, that of complaint, but also through comments or deleted posts.

The last cause, the economic one, is supported both by politicians, who have to pay for the advertisement that for example, Facebook, makes for them, so that they are seen by more people, especially by companies, who also pay to display its ads in the

virtual space, as well as by naive users who click on those ads. We can say that a political environment considered by many, one that is more "diplomatic", or more modern and politically correct, would not allow statements that incite violence, racism, homophobia, etc. so that any comment or post that seems to have the slightest connection with those mentioned can be easily censored. The same situation applies to companies that invest money in Facebook and advertising, we cannot say that a beneficial environment for doing business and getting customers is one in which even a small part of potential customers feel insulted. The better the potential client feels, the less offended by everything, then the chances of him becoming a client increase, even if in order not to be offended or disturbed, the average user ends up being deliberately misinformed by the investment agents on the social networks.

Given the contradiction between the representative values, human rights and different freedoms that democracy should provide and what censorship stands for, we can rightly consider that they are fundamentally incompatible and thus should not be related to each other. Moreover, a democratic regime should in principle not accept and support any form of censorship, and in the most extreme case tolerate its weak forms in order to maintain social order and to avoid disinformation.

Interestingly, although there is a minimal form of censorship applied by various democratic governments of the world, they tolerate and sometimes support more serious forms of censorship by outsourcing them sometimes willingly, sometimes involuntarily to various private companies and corporations, especially those representing social networks.

A lot more empirical research is needed in order to analyze how much censorship dis actually spread on the social media platforms and how acceptable this phenomenon is for the different type of users.

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