The Ethics Of… Censorship

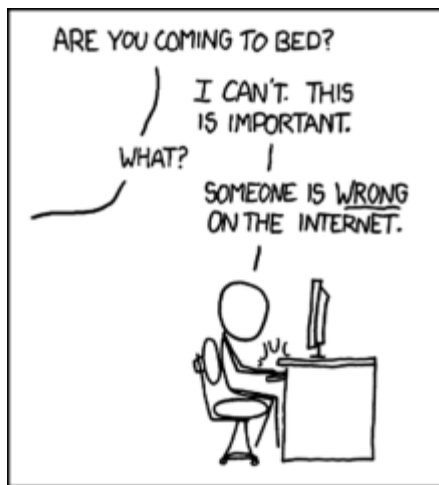https://theethicsof.com/2014/07/03/the-ethics-of-censorship/

It is the dark spectre that looms over any debate. The shadow that follows every philosopher, every scientist, every politician, indeed every person who has a strong opinion about anything. It is the awful power that haunts us and beckons us to the dark side of ideology, tempting us with promises of clarity, simplicity and control.

Yet we must resist it, for we know all too well that down that path lays only ruin and despair.

It is the great and terrible phrase:

"Shut up"

If I had a dollar for every time I've wanted to drop that simple, beautiful phrase, I would never have to work again. To just turn around to the many ignorant, hateful, uneducated Neanderthals I've debated over the years (and since I work in the environment field, this has included some truly exceptional idiots), and tell them to shut their mouths… oh the sweet release of it!

Though let's be honest; I bring most of this on myself

No more having to be the bigger person, be respectful and stick to the standards of reason and evidence I know are so important, while they try to drown me out through sheer volume. To be able to end all of that and just make them shut their stupid, stupid face holes would make me ever so happy. And a lot less homicidal.

And here we see the devastating power and terrible appeal of censorship. To be able to restrict what other people could say is possibly the most power anyone can have.

Sure, violence will always be the base form of power since eloquent arguments are difficult with a faceful of fist. But violence doesn't just come out of nowhere. Indeed the greatest and most devastating acts of violence are almost entirely dependent on speech to exist; running a massacre solo is enough work for anyone, let alone a war or a genocide. These acts require recruiting supporters, organising your efforts, and most of all, belief in the righteousness of your cause. These things are all achieved entirely through speech – the spread and reinforcement of ideas.

Given this it might seem like censorship is a great thing; if only the German government had censored anti-Semitism before it became popular and propelled the Nazis to power – imagine the suffering that could have been averted!

Sure, such ideas have a tendency to flourish underground (as we've found out with our recent attempts to stop radical Islam by shooting at it), but that just calls for even stronger censorship – controlling every aspect of speech in public and private so that dangerous ideas never find the ground they need to take root.

It might sound like something straight out of Orwell's worst nightmare, but if the alternative is the deaths of 25 million soldiers, 55 million civilians, countless injuries, and the systematic attempt to eradicate entire groups of people from the earth? How could any degree of freedom be worth allowing that to happen again? In this, as in my own frustrations with twits, if only life were that simple. But of course it is not.

As with any form of power, being powerful does not make a person right – worse, the more power is concentrated into a few hands, the more likely it will be abused. And when the power we're talking about is the ability to control what people can say, what ideas can spread, and what can be criticised or not, whether people can protest something or not… we're in extremely dangerous territory.

The unfortunate fact is that for every time I've wanted to tell some tool to just shut up, they have been thinking exactly the same thing about me. And what if I were to indulge myself? What if I gave up on the right for everyone to express their ideas, and just tried to silence my opponent instead? Haven't I just given them permission to treat me the same way?

Suddenly the truth of the matter is irrelevant – the debate becomes nothing more than a clash of force. And who is to say I would win? And keep on winning?

And worst of all, what if I'm wrong?

What if, after conquering my opponents, suppressing them and crushing their ideas through censorship, I find out that the opinion I was fighting for all along was untrue?

Would I have the character to admit it? Would I be willing or able to admit that the cost of my victory was completely unjustified? Or would I just stick my head in the sand and convince myself that I was right all along? Suppress any criticism and simply yell my idea even louder to drown out my nagging conscience?

Censorship might indeed have prevented World War 2 and the Holocaust, but censorship also had a huge part in making it possible – you can't motivate an entire nation to go to war unless they at least accept the rationale for it, and the Nazi's weren't going to win anyone over with the truth.

More recently we're seeing the alarming spread of the anti-vaccination movement throughout western nations, resulting in lowered herd immunity, the endangerment of thousands of children, and the resurgence of diseases that haven't been a serious threat for generations. There is no debating that this ignorant, alarmist movement is both stone cold wrong and highly dangerous. So should the idea be censored?

On the one hand the risks the idea poses are huge, and the idea behind it easily proven to be totally false. The movement also seems terrifyingly unconcerned with things like evidence. Smothering the idea will help prevent suffering and quite a lot of death.

But on the other hand, this would hand the government a precedent upon which to censor other ideas they deem 'dangerous'. And given most democratic governments have sweet bugger all accountability to their people already, how long do you reckon it's be before someone decided 'criticising the government during a time of war' was an idea too dangerous to exist?

Can these two perspectives be resolved? Is there a degree of censorship that can prevent terrible ideas, but not put our freedom of speech at risk? Or is this the wrong question to be asking?

The fight against ignorance is a just one that we all must take a part in, but censorship is only one of the weapons available to us in this fight – and while it may be powerful, it is also very, very dangerous (and the last thing we want is an arms-race here).

Education, learning and above all, encouraging critical thinking skills are tried and true methods in the struggle against stupidity. And while they may take longer to work and be excruciatingly frustrating to use, they have the great benefit that they cannot be turned against us. Fostering a culture that seeks that facts of a matter and views them with a critical eye simply can never go wrong, because it will inevitably correct itself.

So the next time some fool opens their mouth and spouts a truly impressive cloud of wrongness, take a deep breath, respect their right to their opinion, and keep calm … Then use your superior grasp of logic, evidence and reason to destroy their opinion utterly.

Good times.