

Types of, Reasons for & Consequences of Censorship

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Abstract: Censorship can be defined as the suppression of knowledge and/or information or their exchange. It is typically imposed by government entities, private organizations, or powerful groups. Other entities involved in censorship include industrial lobbies, political and social activists, thinktanks, political groups, and even groups of ordinary citizens. The reasons and intentions behind censorship vary, as do the consequences and outcomes of it. Some types of censorship are more overt and may be easier to spot, such as direct censorship, while others are more subtle like indirect censorship. The rationale behind the reasons for censorship may be motivated by faith, as is the case with religious censorship, or it may be inspired by more mundane concerns, e.g. financial ones, which often happens with corporate censorship. Finally, the consequences of censorship may be regarded as positive, for example when it aids in protecting children from potentially harmful content, or as negative, such as when it is used to discourage or silence students, scholars and researchers.

Keywords: censorship, politics, religion, society, mass media.

1. Introduction

On the surface level, the core principle behind censorship is that certain knowledge or information is harmful to the individual, society, and the nation. If such information is disseminated and reaches the masses, the social order and citizens' lives can come under threat. While knowledge is the awareness, understanding, or skills you gain through experience or education, information consists of the facts or details about a subject. Since they are closely related—knowledge is about what you understand, while information is what you can (or sometimes can't) know, these terms will be used interchangeably in this article.

The following is a comprehensive but not exhaustive list of kinds of censorship which will be discussed in this article.

- Direct censorship
- Indirect censorship
- Moral & Justified censorship
- Religious censorship
- Progressive censorship
- Political censorship
- Corporate censorship

Contrary to popular opinion, the consequences of applied censorship may not necessarily be negative. In certain circumstances, censoring data seems to be the only viable option to keep individuals and groups safe from harm. In order to give a balanced overview, both positive and negative consequences of censorship will be discussed.

In the conclusion, a general summary and overview will be provided on the complex issue of censorship.

2. Direct censorship

This includes withholding information, altering/modifying information, excluding certain information, destroying information, and self-censoring. Sometimes, the objectionable content is excluded, while at other times, the information is destroyed. A historically parallel example is the burning of “unsuitable” books during the Nazi regime. It indicates that destroying knowledge is not a 21st-century activity, but has indeed been going on for ages. In the 12th century, the Turk Muslim invaders burned a colossal library of the ancient Nalanda University of India, in which 9 million books were burned¹⁶. We cannot imagine the sheer amount of ancient knowledge of Vedas, Upanishads, and Buddhist scriptures that were lost. Similar incidents are happening in the 21st century.

3. Indirect Censorship

Indirect censorship is also called soft censorship. Indirect censorship is more sophisticated than direct censorship¹⁷. In indirect censorship, knowledge is not censored through attacking, killing, destroying, or

¹⁶ Ravikumar Pillay, “Nalanda: 9 Million Books Burnt in 1193 by Bakhtiyar Khilji,” *My India My Glory*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.myindiamyglory.com/2017/09/11/nalanda-9-million-books-burnt/>.

¹⁷ Carlos Cortés, “Indirect Censorship: The Silent Enemy,” *AS/COA*, November 19, 2009, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/indirect-censorship-silent-enemy>.

shutting down media outlets. The imposed restrictions are invisible. For example, there are several censorship incidents in which the government freezes the funds of some research institutions. For example, during the Trump administration, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was asked to remove climate change-related information from its website¹⁸. The research conducted by the EPA and the United States Department of Agriculture was strictly monitored and reviewed before its publication. The review committee consisted of political appointees. The White House also imposed several restrictions on big news outlets and allowed only those who were favorable to the government. This move was unconstitutional. It was indirect censorship, consisting of activities such as holding or curtailing funds, monitoring studies, removing unfavorable content, or altering it.

In today's world, the government prefers to impose indirect censorship to avoid outrage. Indirect censorship is not limited to politics and literature, but it is prevalent in art also. Robert Mapplethorpe was a photographer, and his artwork, including some nude photographs, was canceled on the grounds of nudity and obscenity. That was back in the 1980s. Recently, in 2023, the art exhibits in Idaho were canceled and censored. These artworks included the cross-stitch work on mifepristone and misoprostol, some series and documentaries in which women were sharing their experiences on abortion. These exhibits were removed from the exhibition¹⁹. This incident was shocking and unbelievable for the artists. Such censorship and canceling practices are concerning and harmful for a democratic country like the United States.

The libraries in public schools are also under scrutiny, and the faculty members in the colleges are fired for speaking freely and giving their opinions. Boone²⁰ reported that the bans on books are also growing rapidly in the United States. A total of 1586 books were banned in April 2022, according to a Washington Post report, which further states,

¹⁸ Valerie Volcovici, "Trump administration tells EPA to cut climate page from website: sources," *Reuters*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-epa-climatechange/trump-administration-tells-epa-to-cut-climate-page-from-website-sources-idUSKBN15906G/>.

¹⁹ Rebecca Boone, "Experts say attacks on free speech are rising across the US," *AP News*, March 15, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/first-amendment-free-speech-censorship-mccarthyism-815865bafa52bb821400be15fd76119>.

²⁰ Ibid.

*“The bans targeted 1,145 unique books by more than 800 authors, and a plurality of the books—41 percent—featured prominent characters who are people of color. Thirty-three percent of the banned books, meanwhile, included LGBTQ themes, protagonists, or strong secondary characters, and 22 percent ‘directly address issues of race and racism’.”*²¹

Such growing activities of banning books have become a serious threat to American educational institutions. The political opponents are also silenced and blamed for holding undemocratic opinions.

Indirect censorship is on the rise in the United States, and this phenomenon is concerning for people who think that the government is actively engaged in censoring freedom of speech.

Various types of indirect censorship have been reported in previous studies. Podesta²² mentioned some of the examples of indirect censorship:

- Bribing journalists to promote narratives in favor and support of the government.
- Threats of national or local governments to withdraw the revenue stream of newspapers and broadcasters by stopping advertising in them.
- Pressuring private businesses to publish adverts only in certain media, excluding others.

4. Moral & Justified Censorship

Sometimes, limiting freedom of speech becomes mandatory due to several reasons and circumstances. Moral censorship is the type of censorship in which the government intends to protect the citizens from something morally wrong. In the United States, hate speech also cannot be censored because the First Amendment has offered the privilege of free speech to the citizens of the United States. Moral censorship is the act of

²¹ Hannah Natanson, “More books are banned than ever before, as Congress takes on the issue,” *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/04/07/book-bans-congress-student-library/>.

²² Don Podesta, “Soft Censorship: How Governments Around the Globe Use Money to Manipulate the Media,” *Center for International Media Assistance*, January 9, 2009, <https://www.cima.ned.org/resource/soft-censorship-how-governments-around-the-globe-use-money-to-manipulate-the-media/>.

censoring immoral acts²³. This censorship intends to protect children from pathogens. Therefore, such censorship must be allowed. It prevents potential threats to individuals and society.

Dholakia²⁴ makes a salient point when he argues that although freedom of speech is the right of every citizen of a democratic nation, it cannot be absolute. Reasonable restrictions on speech are what may be called justified censorship. For the collective well-being of the citizens, social stability, and national security, if this freedom is restricted, it is justified and moral because it does not have any selfish intention. Mauer²⁵ argues that good or moral censorship is the solution to bad or hate speech, including rumors, abusive remarks, and misinformation. Hate speech is aggressive, violent, and poisonous, and it suppresses the minorities' voices. Such hate speech creates biased violence in which both the individual and society at large are affected. While focusing on the moral censorship of hate speech, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres²⁶ argues,

“Addressing hate speech does not mean limiting or prohibiting freedom of speech. It means keeping hate speech from escalating into something more dangerous, particularly incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence, which is prohibited under international law.”

However, morality, goodness, and badness are relative and circumstantial concepts, and their context varies from person to person. It would be an injustice if individuals' opinions were suppressed in a democracy, but the citizens should also know that they are publicly accountable. There-

²³ R. A. Anderson and E. J. Masicampo, “Protecting the Innocence of Youth: Moral sanctity values underlie censorship from young children,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 43, no. 11 (2017): 1503-1518, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217722557>.

²⁴ Het Dholakia, “Censorship Mandates: Better Or For Worse,” *Legal Service India*, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-9042-censorship-mandates-better-or-for-worse.html>.

²⁵ Barry Mauer, “Censorship Is Not All Bad,” *UCF Forum*, March, 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297730211_Censorship_Is_Not_All_Bad.

²⁶ Antonio Guterres, “Opening remarks at press encounter at launch of United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech,” *United Nations*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2019-06-18/un-strategy-and-plan-of-action-hate-speech-press-remarks>.

fore, they should use words responsibly, especially on public platforms. If the public arena is becoming insecure and unsafe due to the comments, statements, and speeches of any individual, it becomes mandatory to censor them.

Military censorship is also justified censorship, which is the activity of keeping military strategies secret to prevent enemies from accessing it. Such censorship is critical, especially during wartime. The national security relies on this military censorship. If any confidential data is leaked, it can put the entire nation in great danger. However, within the military, everyone should have a clear understanding of which information is to be hidden and which information is to be disseminated. Dissemination of necessary information is as crucial as censoring information. So, military personnel should be clear in their decision-making regarding censorship.

5. Religious Censorship

Religious censorship is imposed on individuals by religious authorities. It is not a recent phenomenon but has been practiced in many societies since ancient times. Religious censorship is imposed on multiple grounds. For example, the work is censored because it is considered obscene in the religious framework, or sometimes it challenges the religious dogmas if something is a direct challenge to the religious principles. The Catholic Church has banned hundreds of books that were directly challenging the Church's authorities. In Islam also, censorship was imposed, which is called *Fatwa*.

In Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims are not allowed to perform their religious activities in public. If such a person is found, he/she may be imprisoned, deported, or tortured²⁷. Such incidents are largely absent in the western world. However, in a global context, it is essential to discuss how religious censorship is a serious issue.

6. Progressive Censorship

Attacking freedom of speech is not a modern phenomenon, but it existed in previous centuries as well. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 cen-

²⁷ "2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Saudi Arabia," U.S. Department of State, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/saudi-arabia/>.

sored writing against the United States, calling it scandalous, malicious, and false. However, today's political censorship has also become a great threat and cannot be overlooked. Along with the government and political entities, academicians, students, writers, innovators, and other such non-political individuals, groups, and social media are engaged in censoring. This progressive agent-driven censorship is more dangerous than the Alien and Sedition Acts. The major reason is that the First Amendment rights are guaranteed by the constitution but progressive acts of censorship are perpetrated and enforced by private entities.

Social media and censorship have a close connection. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube remove some content from their sites that they perceive to be wrong, untrue, and misleading. It is undoubtedly justified or moral censorship, but while doing this, these sites do not remove other untrue and wrong content. They are selective in censoring the content. Here, the problem is that offensive, objectionable, and inappropriate content is subjective, especially the censorship imposed by the progressive agents. It is selective because, according to Facebook, a certain matter will be inappropriate, but Instagram or Twitter policies may not censor the content. Many progressive agents censor the content on different grounds, and it becomes challenging to decide whether the content is really censorable. For example, a feminist group might appeal to the government to ban a certain film or book that is offensive to women. The LGBTQ groups may appeal to ban a certain film or content that offends the group. It means that there is no clear definition of objectionable, controversial, or inappropriate content.

This indicates that censorship has become highly complex in the modern technological era, unlike in the past. The government's or church's activities of censorship are taken over by progressive agents, including individuals, groups, and social media.

7. Political Censorship

Government and political leaders are the key agents in political censorship, in which the government bans content, books, films, or any such content that they feel is inappropriate. One such example is China's control of all media in the country. The communist government regulates

the media. Bennett & Naim²⁸ state that governments around the world are trying to manipulate and regulate media through various means of censorship. The government plays a crucial role, especially in autocratic regimes, in disseminating information. For example, Chinese citizens will know what the Chinese government wants them to know. They have no privilege to explore and gain knowledge independently. The knowledge acquisition process of Chinese people depends upon the government's wishes and attitudes.

The technological disruption and emergence of smart technologies have made it challenging for the government to control the information. However, governments are active and finding techniques to regulate digital media. For example, according to recent amendments, the government can close websites or content if it feels that national security and public orders are under threat. Recently, many journalists in Turkey were imprisoned for investigating taxation. In Russia, Vladimir Putin ordered to ban and block several websites and medical outlets.

8. Corporate Censorship

Corporate censorship happens when businesses regulate information. Corporate censorship is economically motivated²⁹. Businesses are highly careful about controversial content and censor it to keep the reputation of the company. If any accident or wrong thing takes place within the premises, the companies' first response is to hide it from outsiders, especially the media. It is to preserve the reputation and good image of the corporation.

9. Positive Consequences of Censorship

9.1. Protecting Children from Risky Content

Children are vulnerable to fake and falsified information. The kids must gain proper knowledge and information. However, some sources are ex-

²⁸ Philip Bennett and Moses Naim, "21st-century censorship," *Columbia Journalism Review* 53, no. 5 (2015): 22-28, https://www.cjr.org/cover_story/21st_century_censorship.php.

²⁹ Susanne Kopf, "Corporate censorship online: Vagueness and discursive imprecision in YouTube's advertiser-friendly content guidelines," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 4 (2022): 1756-1774, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221077354>.

tremely dangerous because they provide them with partial or wrong information in which they start believing. The inappropriate content for children includes violence, pornography, and websites promoting unhealthy and anti-social behavior. For example, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and consuming drugs are projected positively in ads, films, or video games. When the kids see it as a socially accepted activity, they are motivated to partake in them. It can further lead to the development of substance abuse problems or anti-social and violent behavior among children.

Exposure to highly sexualized content at a tender age may lead them to start copying sexual acts at an early age. Furthermore, they are equipped with false information about sex. Therefore, they are likely to be involved in unsafe sexual activities. According to Ben-Joseph³⁰, early and excessive exposure to violence is extremely dangerous for the healthy growth of children. The author stated that American children are exposed to 200,000 violent activities by the age of 18 through mainstream media such as television. Such content makes them frightened and upset and can adversely affect their mental well-being.

Every day, their screens are flooded with commercials, and they can make children confused about what is authentic and what is fake. They are simply too young to interpret what they see and thus cannot differentiate between good and bad. These floods of commercials also sow the seeds of consumerism among children at a very early age. If all these adverse outcomes of information are to be avoided, the wrong, inappropriate, and dangerous information deserves to be censored.

9.2. Protection and Wellbeing of the Citizens

Censorship is justified by associating it with public welfare and the protection of public interests. It is also used to prevent insults of shared values. Sen³¹ puts forward the concept of “broad social purposes” to explain the well-being and protection of the citizens. The writer argues,

“The broad social purposes of censorship can be laid down as to

³⁰ E. P. Ben-Joseph, “How Media Use Can Affect Kids,” *Nemours KidsHealth*, August, 2022, <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/tv-affects-child.html>.

³¹ Shameek Sen, “RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH AND CENSORSHIP: A JURISPRUDENTIAL ANALYSIS,” *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 56, no. 2 (2014): 175-201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43953700>.

*ensure that ordinary members of the community are not affronted by the display of material to which a majority of reasonable adults would object, to maintain a level of public decency [...]*³²

For example, it is strictly banned to burn the national flag in some countries around the world or to show the destruction or defamation of any such artifacts that might be suitable to hurt public sentiments, leading to communal fights or riots. Censoring something to protect the public from life-threatening incidents is undoubtedly justifiable. However, the concept of welfare is relative and subjective.

Another point to be mentioned here regarding public protection and censorship is related to public welfare. It is said that overfishing leads to a serious marine threat and imbalance in the marine ecology. If such research is published, it may lead to aggressive demands from environmentalists and other people to ban fishing (even if just partially). This decision will push several people into unemployment because millions of people will lose their main source of income. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has reported that today, around 58 million people are associated with fisheries and aquaculture. When there is a question of protecting the collective welfare of the citizens, censorship becomes mandatory for the government. Out of such objectives, if censorship is imposed, it is justified. Such subtle and inconsistent factors make it challenging to define the role of censorship in protecting citizens' welfare.

9.3. Maintaining Peace and Order

The peace and order of the society and nation can be threatened due to the dissemination of certain content. If hateful and offensive speech or content is published, it leads to serious conflict and damages law and order. To regulate such content, the government or concerned organizations have to impose censorship. Race, sex, religious beliefs, and LGBTQ issues are some of the most sensible topics. Peace and order are likely to be at stake if something is published on these topics in certain societies. However, it depends upon how the content creator deals with these topics in his/her content. If the topic is handled sensibly, it will bring positive outcomes, but if it is presented in an objectionable man-

³² Ibid., p. 175.

ner, it will disturb social harmony. Therefore, it becomes essential to censor these topics from social media content or research.

9.4. Regulating Military Operations

No scientific evidence is required to state that the 9/11 terrorist attack is one of the biggest failures of the American government and military. After the attack, much was talked about the safety and security of the nation. However, no study is available on the probability of leaking military and other sensitive information. It is clear that the American military was unprepared. However, it is also true that sensitive and confidential information must have leaked, and the terrorists had utilized it to attack not just the World Trade Center but the pride of the United States. Here, strict and uncompromising censorship of sensitive data would have been critical. Failure to enforce such censorship led to the terrorist attack. Not just this attack but many of the terrorist attacks in different parts of the world might have occurred due to the blatant disregard for the rules of military censorship. It is the self-developed theory of military censorship of the researcher, so it is highly recommended that this theoretical perspective should be further researched to find the probability of inadequate censorship in the failure of military activities.

10. Negative Consequences of Censorship

10.1. It Limits the Process of Acquiring Knowledge

Censorship of books, articles, or any resources from which individuals acquire knowledge means taking away intellectual power. In schools, when an unjustified ban on any specific content or book takes place, it denies the right of the students to gain power through knowledge. Knowledge acquisition is not just a process of obtaining information, but it further leads to thinking critically and improving analytical thinking.

The process of censoring knowledge starts in school and later continues in colleges, workplaces, and society. The swift flow of knowledge is blocked through unreasonable and unjustified censorship from various entities. Knowledge censorship means pushing society several years behind or keeping society immature.

Critical inquiry and creative thinking are the backbones of knowledge. The pedagogy stimulating critical and creative thinking of the stu-

dents includes social, economic, cultural, and multiple other critical components. Such an all-encompassing curriculum encourages students to explore things from multiple perspectives. It widens the peripheries of knowledge. In short, it helps to gain knowledge about the world through texts and apply textual theories in real-life situations. Critical inquiry is crucial in almost every field. Additionally, the benefits of reading books or otherwise engaging with unfamiliar material also encourages personal growth, allowing for the development of values such as empathy and compassion, and to use imaginative engagement “[...] *to conceive of the world beyond ourselves and our own viewpoints, widen our appreciation for ways of living that are different from those we know, and gain insight into what gives meaning to others.*”³³

10.2. Threat to Democratic Values

One of the arguably most essential traits of a democracy is people’s right to access knowledge and information and the right to freedom of expression. However, it is also challenging for the government to balance between freedom of expression and national security, law and order, as many times they are bound to come into conflict.

10.3. Spreading False Ideologies and Propaganda

It is a common strategy of politically dominant groups to manipulate data and thus spread false ideologies, which are not facts but propaganda to pamper their political interests. Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and several other countries have imposed upon the public explicit laws and policies to keep citizens away from the facts³⁴.

10.4. Discouraging and Silencing Students, Scholars, and Researchers

Censorship makes people fall or stay silent because they know the dire consequences of speaking out. By censoring topics and banning books, schools and universities have shut down the voices of students, acade-

³³ Heidi J. Torres, “Developing Imaginative Engagement in Young Children Using Children’s Literature,” *The Social Studies* 110, no.4 (2019): 161-169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2019.1587736>.

³⁴ Allie Funk et al., “Freedom on the Net 2024. The Struggle for Trust Online,” *Freedom House*, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2024/struggle-trust-online>.

micians, and scholars. The entire campus is thus censored by limiting students' rights to free speech and writing.

All this can lead to self-censorship, where, instead of questioning manipulative research for its legitimacy, researchers and scholars prefer to be silent rather than lose their credibility³⁵.

11. Conclusion

This article has discussed various forms of censorship and several examples were given. It has made clear that censorship is not a new phenomenon, but one that has accompanied humankind and its various cultures and civilizations for many centuries.

Still, with the rapid advancements in science and technology in the recent decades, it is undeniable that censorship has reached a new quality and pervasiveness, especially owing to mass media and mass communication.

While censorship does indeed often infringe on personal and civil liberties, it would be unwise to dismiss it as an altogether negative or destructive phenomenon. State, group and personal welfare unfortunately often require a certain amount of secrecy or discretion.

³⁵ Esa Väliaverronen and Sampsa Saikkonen, "Freedom of Expression Challenged: Scientists' Perspectives on Hidden Forms of Suppression and Self-Censorship," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 46, no. 6 (2020): 1172-1200, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243920978303>.