

Censorship: Individual Freedom vs. Government Control

Yayuan Zhan

6/03/12

#5 Junior

“We the people”: the memorable opening of the Constitution of the United States dictates the country’s intended form of government in just the first three words. Seemingly simple, yet eloquently phrased and significantly apt, “we the people” symbolizes a governing body whose powers derive directly from the people themselves. Such a system guarantees the protection of each citizen’s natural rights, spurring a long, deeply valued tradition of freedom for all. Through literature, history, and modern developments, censorship is revealed as an undesirable means to achieve political goals. In a nation built upon the morals of liberty and equality, censorship should not be allowed because it places government control above individual freedom.

A society in which the government uses mass media to manipulate the actions and beliefs of the people results in extreme conformity and a lack of individualism and innovation. In the dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, the corrupt government uses television and radio as widespread forms of communication to transfer false information to the people. Everyone is blind to the realities, of lack thereof, of their world, as they are so dependent and inseparable to their technological gadgets. Schools teach children trivial facts to cloud their heads and give the impression knowledge, instead of delivering concrete information to stimulate their thinking. The government fears any form of rebellion, so even a lone thought becomes a spark that demands to be put out. However extreme Bradbury’s society seems, it provides the reader with a glimpse of a world without individual thought or initiation, in which governmental power dominates over every other aspect of society.

Even when circumstances threaten national security, excessive and unusual government involvement result in unjustified, desperate measures. During the Cold War, the government created the House Un-American Committee (HUAC) to investigate pro-Soviet leanings in Hollywood. As a result, numerous actors, directors, screenwriters, etc., lost their jobs. Those who resisted, including the Hollywood Ten, were prosecuted and put in prison without a fair due process of law. All movies with a positive Soviet image were banned. Hollywood was not allowed to express any idea that conflicted with political interests, for the fear of spreading Communist influence in the country, even though a negligible amount of the people in the United States were actually Communist. However, this is not the only time in history in which the First Amendment has been threatened by the government's actions.

Pieces of legislation are the stepping stones to transform society, whether one that focuses on political power or on personal rights. Recently, Congress proposed two bills, SOPA and PIPA, to fight the theft of intellectual property and goods. Despite its decent intentions, by attempting to protect the interests and profits of private companies, the bills violate many forms of expression. SOPA and PIPA make it easy for corporations to file lawsuits against even innocent productions, such as, but limited to, covers of popular songs posted and shared online. Such a prohibition prevents people from expressing their creativity and spreading their ideas. The legislation would hinder the success of businesses as well, which would effectively halt economic prosperity. President Obama announced that, "Any effort to combat online piracy must guard against the risk of online censorship of lawful activity and must not inhibit innovation by our dynamic businesses large and small." Some opponents fear that SOPA and PIPA will lead to censorship of other less justifiable items besides the protection of private property. If the

legislative systems keeps journeying down the path set by SOPA and PIPA, the United States would eventually be unrecognizable as once the example for the democratic world.

For a nation which highly values its democratic beliefs, its government has denied, or attempted to, free expression on multiple occasions. Literature, history, and current events have shown us that censorship has interfered with this country's core ideals of freedom and justice. Placing government control before individual freedom has proved dangerous and detrimental to such a society.