

Name: _____ Class: _____

Censorship: For the People, or for Controlling the People?

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Censorship has, and continues to be, a highly debated topic. Some people believe that in order to secure the safety of citizens, information should be closely censored. However, many other people believe that this is a violation of Americans' rights. In this piece, Jessica McBirney identifies different forms of censorship, as well as its benefits and disadvantages. As you read, pay close attention to the different types of censorship and consider the pros and cons of each.

- [1] Have you ever been told not to say something? It is very common for families to have rules about what can or cannot be said at home, but as it turns out, governments do the very same thing. When a government passes a law restricting what people or organizations can say, it is called censorship.



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Governments can censor anything, including spoken words, public or private written communication, communication via the internet, art, movies and entertainment, news media, and even advertising. Censorship is an extremely controversial issue, and each country usually has its own reasons for passing these laws. However, there are a few core reasons why a government would want to restrict communication.

Types of Censorship

Moral Censorship

Moral censorship occurs when a government wants to protect its citizens from something it considers morally wrong or deplorable.¹ For example, while the United States cannot censor hate speech because it is protected as "free speech" under the First Amendment, it can censor threatening language that could provoke violence. The government also requires television companies to "bleep" bad words from TV shows so the audience does not hear them.

Military Censorship

This type of censorship occurs when the government eliminates words from letters and newscasts about the military's location or strategy during a war. This is to prevent enemies from intercepting² any information that lets them know what the military is up to.

1. **Deplorable (adjective):** deserving strong disapproval or even punishment
2. **Intercept (verb):** to stop and take someone or something that is going from one place to another place before that person or thing gets there

- [5] The United States practiced military censorship frequently in World War I and World War II. When a soldier sent a letter to his family, the government would first look through it and black out any words that might give away where he was, what he was doing, and any future plans he had heard. Similarly, the government monitored journalists and newscasters to make sure they did not give away any important information that might be useful to the enemy.

Political Censorship

Political censorship is when someone in power restricts others from voicing opposing ideas. A political leader or party might do this to maintain their top position and keep the public from learning about ways they might be wrong.

For example, the Communist Party in the Soviet Union³ during the late 1900s enforced severe political censorship. Inspectors from the party monitored journalists, writers, and artists to ensure they said nothing negative about the party or the Soviet Union itself. Weather reporters were not even allowed to predict that it might be raining on a holiday!

Religious Censorship

This type of censorship occurs when the dominant religion in a country does not allow people from other religions to share their beliefs. Usually when this is the case, the dominant religion is tied to the government in some way, which gives them the power to enforce these rules. They do this to maintain the unity and power of their religion in society, and to keep their own power intact.

One famous example of religious censorship happened right around 1600, when Galileo Galilei⁴ proved that the sun does not revolve around the earth, but that the earth revolves around the sun. This was directly against the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church at the time, and the Church worked hard to prevent him from spreading his discovery. They eventually forced him to lie and say he had been wrong about the whole thing, and he was sentenced to live out the rest of his life confined⁵ to his home.

Corporate Censorship

- [10] Corporate censorship is when a company warns its employees not to say anything that might put the company in a negative light. This kind of censorship is a little different from the others, because it usually does not involve the government or any laws; instead, it might be the company's own policy that employees feel they must follow so they don't lose their job. For example, about 40% of reporters say they sometimes avoid writing a newsworthy story because it might say something bad about the company that owns their newspaper.

Pros and Cons

Censorship does have some benefits. It can protect people from slander⁶ or violent threats. It can strengthen national security by keeping information away from enemies. Some people believe it can make a society more unified or moral. Others support it because it can benefit certain groups in a country, such as the main political party or the main religion (although this is often at the expense of others).

However, there are also many downsides to these kinds of restrictions of communication. The government's decision about what to censor can be random or unfair. Censorship also limits individual freedom to speak openly, and protest things that are not right. Suppressing⁷ opposing views can also hold back social progress and restrict people's ability to learn more about the world and other people.