

Freedom of Speech: The Next Casualty of COVID-19?

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State](#)
& [Civil Rights](#)

The question of free speech in our current COVID climate is something that begs revisiting, particularly since there have been enough recent incidents on the global stage that have appeared to diminish the potency of that freedom.

I believe most people generally hold to the value of freedom of opinion and that the majority of us, likewise, endorse the freedom to actually express that opinion. Being a Canadian, I draw first from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, specifically the assurance provided therein that every person has the fundamental freedom of “thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication” (Section 2). Furthermore, Section 24 of the same Charter assures us of the freedom to pursue legal courses of action if any of these freedoms are “infringed or denied” in any way.

Similarly, the First Amendment of the US Constitution clearly holds that “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press” is a violation of constitutional rights. As a general proclamation, the Constitution specifically “guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely” (Legal Information Institute of Cornell Law School).

Unsurprisingly, if we look to our Atlantic neighbors in the United Kingdom we find an identical spirit of embraced freedoms carried over from the European Convention on Human Rights, not the least of which is the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” as well as “the right to freedom of expression” (The UK Constitution / House of Commons).

Furthermore, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlines that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.” This includes “the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations).

While we could easily draw further confirmations of similarly-held values across our shared planet, I think we get the point. Plainly speaking, those of us who subscribe to a healthy standard of civilization that is rooted in the highest ideals of Democracy tend to take issue with any person, agency or policy that either infringes or outright prohibits our freedom to speak our mind and share our perspectives.

Many of these constitutions do include some form of exemplary clause, however, which is intended to safeguard against any potential harms that may arise from such freedoms. Hate speech, in particular, tends to be the most obvious example in this regard. It is also understood that the US Constitution, by way of example, discourages any form of expressed opinion which may incite “imminent lawless action” (Walker, 2018, p.1). Naturally, we would consider these to be sensible and preventative aspects of any constitution – the lack

of which could arguably result in some pretty disastrous outcomes.

With these things in mind, I think it's worth revisiting the way in which freedom of speech may be at risk of being undermined in light of our current global pandemic. Specifically speaking, I'm referring to the emerging controversy surrounding alternative views of COVID-19 itself.

While my aim here is not to necessarily promote any particular viewpoint regarding the questionable origins of COVID-19, I do take serious issue with the way in which such viewpoints (as espoused by many individuals in the world) has been vilified, discouraged and ultimately forbidden on various social media platforms and online video sharing services. Not only that, I find it equally if not more disturbing that such censorship is being partnered with initiatives to replace such expressions with deliberate exposure to more culturally and corporate-approved perspectives.

For example, a lot of attention has recently been placed on a recent episode of *London Real*, which is a popular video podcast series hosted by Brian Rose. On April 6th, Rose interviewed veteran conspiracy researcher David Icke, only to have YouTube pull the episode very soon afterwards – purportedly as a result of Icke's comments linking COVID-19 with the rollout of 5G technology. UK's Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden reportedly placed pressure on Ofcom (the British communications regulator) to investigate and address the content which aired on that particular night. Dowden himself is quoted as referring to Icke's comments in the interview as “lunatic conspiracy theories,” and that “no sensible person would give them a moment's thought” (Metro News UK, April 9, 2020).

Vimeo, a widely-used American video platform, also pulled the episode from their listing the day after it aired, presumably for similar reasons. While the episode can still be viewed on the independent websites of both *London Real* and David Icke, platforms such as YouTube are tightening the reigns on any content that seems to question the official narrative of COVID-19, in addition to anything that attempts to draw a link between the alleged virus and 5G technology. According to one of YouTube's media spokespersons, the platform has “begun reducing recommendations of borderline content such as conspiracy theories related to 5G and coronavirus, that could misinform users in harmful ways” (The Guardian, April 5th).

On April 16th, NBC released an article detailing how Facebook will be taking affirmative steps to curtail and redirect consumers away from posts that contain alternative views on the coronavirus, and ultimately towards information backed by the World Health Organization. As the article explains:

“Users who have liked, commented on or otherwise reacted to coronavirus misinformation that Facebook has flagged and removed as “harmful” will be directed to a website debunking coronavirus myths from the World Health Organization.”

The NBC article took the liberty of blatantly labelling any non-WHO endorsed perspective as “misinformation,” “misleading claims,” “misinformed beliefs,” “false,” as well as a “massive infodemic.” The article specifically uses the term “harmful” throughout its length and, like the majority of its mainstream media news counterparts the world over, generally delivers

its message from the preconceived assumption that the official designation of COVID-19 is already scientifically proven and is therefore journalistic Gospel. The very idea that there could be alternative medical, technological and social insights on this global pandemic is simply not entertained, and the official story continues to be held up. Appropriately, the standard narrative is further reinforced through a virtual arsenal of shaming tactics, not the least of which is the FCC's Brendan Carr's recent diagnosis of a COVID-19 / 5G connection as being "straight from the most dangerous depths of tin foil hat land" (CNET News).

While an argument can be made that such alternative views may incite "lawless action" (referring to the reported destruction of 5G towers in both the UK and the Netherlands), I am convinced that this is essentially a red herring fallacy that has no more credibility than the idea that anti-vaccination opinions are leading to widespread arsons at pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities. A reasonably intelligent consideration would regard this as borderline conflation, while also recognizing the immaturity of silencing a specific idea out of fear that it could trigger a whole array of undesirable behaviours.

But surely we have moved beyond this crude form of logic in our overall pursuit of Democracy, have we not? I, for one, have no desire to retreat backwards. Is not the calculated effort to censor and suppress alternative perspectives the more fundamental problem that we are dealing with here? And yes, I do understand how information which challenges the standard WHO position could be interpreted as potentially harmful to the more vulnerable members of our society, but I would argue that this perspective, likewise, is born out of mere assumption rather than unilaterally-accepted scientific fact. I dare say it is regarded as fact merely because we are told it is so. The reality is that it is simply the dominant perspective, and one which seems to carry an insidious and unprecedented contagion of censorship – the likes of which our culture seems to be more than happy to swallow under the oft-repeated mantra that "we're all in this together." Forgive my saying this, but I can't help but be reminded of a certain US President who, not that long ago, uttered the words "you're either with us or...."

May I politely challenge this mantra by questioning whether the idea of being "in this together" is actually referring to a genuine embracing of our human diversity (including our varied perspectives on such a huge issue), or simply just a uniform and unquestioned brand of obedience to something that we have not actually bothered to investigate properly? How many of us can't help but inwardly cringe whenever we hear that hollowed-out phrase echoed from our radio stations and supermarket loudspeakers, as it reminds us not of our shared humanity – but rather of an assumed stance of 'responsible' behavior which, if not collectively adhered to, is akin to social homicide?

Don't get me wrong. While I remain skeptical to the official narrative, I'm not about to be flippant in how I behave with other people who are feeling nervous and vulnerable over this whole pandemic. I'm not about to go around touching every piece of produce at the grocery store while licking my fingers in a gutsy show of bravado between each handling. Nor am I about to ridicule others for following the prescribed social guidelines for physical distancing. But that's the whole point. I think we need to give due credit to our fellow members of society as having the sense of decency and respect toward each other that they will not deliberately make others feel unsafe, regardless of whatever personal beliefs or opinions they may have. In that sense, is such a broad pandemic of speech censorship really necessary? Is that really where we are?

Maybe what I find particularly unfortunate is the way in which this culture of censorship has

managed to bleed its way down to the surgical gloved-strewn street level of our everyday life. My observation is that one is apt to face strong skepticism, if not outright disgust, when any alternative insight on COVID-19 is expressed in a social setting. Speaking personally, there is a sense of utter disapproval that borders on religious exclusivity which – naturally – makes it challenging to believe that my nation's Charter is fully on board with my inherent desire to search, question and share information that I feel might be of benefit to people.

Funny, but I thought we really were “in this together.”

Maybe that's why I continue to feel driven to find out what “this” is really all about.

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