

Reigniting The Free Speech Debate: In Defence of The Right To Offend

VATSALYA SRIVASTAVA

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DKODING Studio

The danger of limiting people’s right to air their views, in a world where everybody else can, might be a recipe for disaster. The rise of social media has necessitated a new conversation on free speech.

Think of a park or a garden in the heart of a **modern metropolis**. On a weekend with beautiful weather, people are out in droves. Some are there for a picnic, others are just hanging out, sharing stories with their little group of family and friends. Others still are there for a stroll or a jog lost in their thoughts, discovering their inner self. Some of these conversations and thoughts are about fond memories – others are about food and travel. Some others are hateful, bigoted flights of fancy of world domination and conspiracy theories. In this milieu of the best and worst of humanity, imagine having the nose of a dog, the ears of a cat and the eyes of an eagle. If the sensory overload does not cause you to pass out, it will soon lead to a **heady mix of emotions that will be almost impossible for a human brain to process**. The happiness that comes from being able to hear a kind word, the delight of seeing and smelling good food will be accompanied by the **anger and outrage of observing the darker sides of a fellow human**. And if everyone in the park had these superpowers, the same park will evoke different emotions for different: a gourmet dish for one might seem horrible to another, a **revolutionary to some, might sound like a terrorist to others**.

Watch: Jordan Peterson on Free Speech and the Right to Offend

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This is the world of social media many of us inhabit. Struggling through the constant emotional turmoil that comes from being plugged in. The questions of how social media use can affect self-worth, and create anxiety and loneliness will keep **psychologists** busy for some time to come. My more immediate concern is how it has reignited the age-old debate on the **limits of free speech**. If what I say or more likely type offends someone or annoys them, do I lose the right to air my views? But what is the right to free speech if not the right to offend? If what I say is amenable to everyone, if I do not offend anyone, I do not need any legal protection. No one is likely to try and stifle my opinions. In a world where a post or a video can travel across the world, these questions are more pressing today than they ever have been in the recent past.

Democratization bring all Sorts

Social media has democratized public discourse. But the **democratization of the process of generating opinions** means all kinds of people can now access a large audience. Some of the views shared will be good, some terrible, others downright abhorrent. In the political process by which most countries operationalize the idea of democracy, Bill Gates and I both get one vote each, irrespective of overwhelming evidence that he is much smarter and more of a do-gooder than I am. He can be upset with how I choose to exercise my right to vote, but cannot take it away from me.



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Similarly, the much-celebrated democratizing influence of the social media will inexorably lead many of us to vehemently disagree with the views of others. But any attempt at sabotaging the platforms available to the ones we disagree with will hit at the core of the idea that everyone should have a voice; whether by **a vote, or a post or a video**.

Spiral of the Outrageous

Both Bill and I might have one vote each, but we differ significantly in our ability to influence others' votes. Similarly, everyone has access to the same social media platforms, but **not everyone is or can be an influencer**. But the very fact of equal access instills a sense of the importance of personal ideas and creates incentives for many to try and enlarge their sphere of influence. All of us who post on these platforms are marketing ourselves in our distinctive ways. And almost any attempt at marketing quickly opens up a **pandora's box of ethical dilemmas**. About 90 years ago, in probably the first modern-day advertising campaign, **Edward Bernays** decided **to sell cigarettes to women** by calling them "torches for freedom". Attempts by content creators today to market their product similarly test the outer limits of the possible in garnering the one thing that matters most: **attention**. In this immensely competitive space, more attention will likely require increasingly outrageous claims.

In the good old days, if you did not like a book or if the author seemed to be making false claims, you could just put it away. But on social media, **every consumer of opinions is a potential producer of opinions**. Ignoring a post entails more than just not reading the contents of a post, it may feel like conceding ground to someone whose ideas, it seems to you, can cause harm. The sense that **not responding constitutes a dereliction of responsibility** may fuel a self-righteous attempt to not only respond in kind but to make sure that as many people as possible know of your response. The latter will lead to further attempts at marketing that will very likely derive its sustenance from even more outrageous claims. The more outrageous the claims, the louder the demands (often outrageous themselves) to get rid of them, completing the circle.

ATTEMPTS BY CONTENT CREATORS TODAY TO MARKET THEIR PRODUCT SIMILARLY TEST THE OUTER LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE IN GARNERING THE ONE THING THAT MATTERS MOST: ATTENTION.

Women Are Free! AN ANCIENT PREJUDICE HAS BEEN REMOVED

Equally, publicly and secretly women have been emancipated from those chains which bound her. AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE has expanded the ridiculous theory that served the organs of infamy upon a sin.



“toasting did it”—

Gone is that ancient prejudice against cigarettes—Progress has been made. We removed the prejudice against cigarettes when we removed harmful corrosive ACRIDS (pungent irritants) from the tobacco.

YEARs ago, when cigarettes were made without the aid of modern science, there originated that ancient prejudice against all cigarettes. That criticism is no longer justified. LUCKY STRIKE, the finest cigarette you ever smoked, made of the choicest tobacco, properly aged and skillfully blended—“It’s Toasted.”

“TOASTING” the most modern step in cigarette manufacture, removed from LUCKY STRIKE harmful irritants which are present in cigarettes manufactured by the old-fashioned way.

Everyone knows that heat purifies, and so “TOASTING”—LUCKY STRIKE’S extra smart process—removes harmful corrosive ACRIDS (pungent irritants) from LUCKIES which in the old-fashioned manufacture of cigarettes cause throat irritation and coughing. Thus “TOASTING” has destroyed that ancient prejudice against cigarette smoking by men and by women.

“It’s toasted”

No Throat Irritation—No Cough.



“It’s Toasted”—the process that describes the extra “toasting” process applied in the manufacture of Lucky Strike Cigarettes. The finest tobacco—the Crown of the Cup—are scientifically subjected to pyrolytic heat at minimum, 250°—maximum, 280°. Followed, the exact, expert regulation of such high temperatures remove impurities. More than a dozen, “It’s Toasted” is recognized by millions of the best smokers step in cigarette manufacture.

Poster from Edward Bernays’ campaign to sell cigarettes to women. | DKODING | Image Credits: uOttawa

Reversion to the Past?

There is a reason why all the people in our hypothetical park were not all part of one large gathering. Most of them would not have liked each other if they would have met. Which is precisely why most of who still remember the world before social media, will recall that very few could maintain an **active social circle** of more than a couple of dozen people. We all are too idiosyncratic to bear each other regularly in the real world. But within the small set of people we know, we can use the

information we have about the person to provide context for views she shares. Some of our friends are prone to exaggeration, others may have a penchant for cracking scandalous jokes, but most mean well. We were all trained to understand a world in which conversations were **almost always tied to inter-personal connections**. In most cases, these interactions were governed by norms around what to speak, to whom and when. But these norms are reliant on being able to put the interaction in context, which is exactly what social media platforms strip away.

In the **absence of the mediating influence of the norms of good behaviour**, content has proliferated as our ears and eyes have gotten sharper. But our brains have not kept pace hindering our ability to sieve out the meaningful from the useless. To improve our ability to deal with all the information around us one approach could be to extend our norms of propriety to the virtual world. Just like we were all schooled in what not to say in front of aunts and uncles and which relatives to not take very seriously, **the training for how to interact on social media must start at a young age**. If that seems to be too tame a suggestion, consider that this is not the first time that society has had to deal with an upheaval caused by rapid technological transformation. **Gutenberg's printing press** was just as **revolutionary for its times** and launched a series of far-reaching changes, many of which were instrumental in creating the world we now inhabit. It took us many years and many wars to get to the point where most civilized societies agreed on how to deal with the **dissemination of information that printed books facilitated**. Perhaps the most succinct representation of this consensus is the right to free speech to everyone. To everyone. Not conditional on race, not on religion, not on political views, not on gender and certainly not on whimsical interpretations of 'true' intentions.

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But what if someone pretending to be a doctor prescribes scented candles as a cure for cancer? I can train myself or my loved ones in the norms of good conduct, but what of those who want to cause harm? To that, I say that if the **objective is to rid the world of people selling snake oil**, then we would do well to remember that there were plenty of those before the advent of social media and they are unlikely to ever go away. Further, it is only if we can offend, can we tell the candle selling doctor to see real one. The Chinese say that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness; even if it doesn't cure cancer. But bad jokes aside, the only way for individuals to deal with the potential for wrong information, is to **get better at identifying good and bad sources**. Most of our education systems are still geared to provide information. Perhaps it is time for us to make a conscious move to **develop teaching pedagogies to help process the plethora of information** already out there.

Watch: Laura Kipnis on Free Speech and Right to Offend

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Good governance requires societies to measure tradeoffs, an attempt to crush all bigotry, besides the fact that we all cannot agree on what constitutes bigotry, will entail stripping away hard-earned freedoms. **The cost of freedom is anarchy, the cost of having free speech is the offence caused by the free speech of others.**