

Censorship In Social Media: Political Satire and the Internet's "Oppositionists"

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Abstract

Censorship has been prevalent through time in various forms, at different historical periods all over the world. It is negatively perceived, and it is considered to undermine democracy and violate human rights. As a rule, it is a feature that characterises conservative societies, totalitarian regimes, as well as individuals with ideological preconceptions. The areas mostly affected by it include freedom of expression and free movement of ideas. Governments try to ward themselves against this phenomenon in various manners, in particular by establishing laws that protect human goods and moral values, as those have been shaped from the Age of Enlightenment onwards. However, in recent years, in the midst of the rapid dissemination of technology and the swift development of social media, a tendency has emerged consisting in trying to influence the unsuspecting public opinion and resulting in excluding from the public sphere opinions which are not pleasant to part of the media users, often serving "external" interests. Therefore, the online medium, free par excellence and offering, in principle, the possibility to everyone to publicly and courageously express their opinions, hinders and becomes an obstacle to the dissemination of "another" opinion, in spite of this dissemination being the ultimate intellectual feature of contemporary societies. This type of censorship has now been included in the long list of the many aspects of the phenomenon seen to this day.

Keywords: Censorship, Political Satire, Internet, Social Media, Freedom of Expression, Free Movement of Ideas, Human Rights.

Introduction

Censorship is a phenomenon that may be seen all over the world and that appears in many forms, depending on the time and on the manner a country is governed. It can usually be identified as the restriction of freedom of expression and free movement of ideas, due to the challenges these cause to political systems, given that expressing opinions which go further and beyond the established (political, ideological, religious, moral, etc.) "settings" may put in place the conditions for influencing public opinion towards particular ideological directions. According to international experience and bibliography, censorship may appear under one of the following forms: political, moral, religious censorship, censorship affecting national symbols, gender, ecological, aesthetic, and feminist censorship [1].

According to its current definition, "censorship" means "any intervention restricting any person's intellectual activity", and in particular "control exercised by a special government service on media, art, and literature, aimed at preventing the dissemination of information or ideas which are contrary to the principles of the then authority" In terms of the modalities under which censorship appears, there exist various forms and types. The most common type of censorship, which consists in direct intervention with the view of restricting freedom of expression, is "repressive" censorship, usually emanating from the government and exercised after the work of art

has been made public [2].

"Preventive" or "paternalistic" censorship is another type of censorship which appears at the time the work of art is created. It is usually of official nature, and it is a feature characterising totalitarian regimes. In this case, the censor emerges as the "guardian of morality, aesthetics, and the responsibility of the community or the individuals themselves" [2].

Another form of censorship is the so-called "self-censorship", which refers to the internal process in the artists' mind that leads them to imposing restrictions or prohibitions on their own artistic creation, although these may actually result from external or internal factors [2].

The aforementioned types of censorship fall within institutionalised or intervening or "regulatory censorship". There also exists another form of censorship, the so-called "new censorship". This is a form of structural censorship, where social interaction and communication are determined "by forms of statutory regulation and expression" [3-5]. These are the forms "regulating the limits of culturally possible and permissible speech" [6].

However, currently, in the environment of cyberspace, conditions have developed for imposing censorship on opinions and images that are not pleasant to Internet users, thus resulting in excluding or restricting freedom of expression. We are exclusively referring here to intellectual creation and not to other forms of human activity (such

as pornography). Social media, such as Facebook, have acquired so much power that they are capable of determining who can actually speak and of censoring a wide array of goods enshrined in the Constitution [7].

The Power of Social Media

Since the beginning of the new millennium, social media have become the most popular means of communication all over the world. The number of users interacting through social media has exponentially increased, whereas most adults as well as teenagers are members of several platforms and have replaced “physical” communication, entertainment, and information by the “digital” versions thereof.

The development of social media and their great success in recent years lies with the Internet’s “participatory culture”, and in particular the Web 2.0 technology, which has made it possible for users to create relationships, to “build” communities, to live another aspect of socialisation, and, lastly, to become members of a more “democratised” facet of society [8].

On the other hand, aside from the change in the modalities of communication and socialisation between users, a drastic change can be observed in the “image” world. Images are not only created in various ways and forms, they are now also shared at great speed. Millions of images and videos are uploaded on a daily basis on Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, YouTube, etc. According to O. Grau and T. Veigl, the digital image offers endless possibilities of manipulation, creating new pathways in the history of art traditionally involved in political illustration [9].

However, the power of social media does not only lie with the number of users and the speed of information sharing, but also in the manner in which they influence society. It has become evident that social media have an opinion-making ability and that they are capable of determining the dominant norms, rules, and values of society [10].

Nevertheless, in spite of the “democratisation” of society through social media and the infinite ability of users to make public their thoughts and images, social media themselves have set certain restrictions on this form of expression. For example, Facebook’s Terms of Service contain the following clause: “You will not post content that: is hate speech, threatening, or pornographic; incites violence; or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence” [11]. However, this statement leaves a significant margin of subjectivity to Facebook’s “censors”, and several instances of censorship have already been reported, in particular with regard to works of art where nudity is a commonplace occurrence [7]. For example, Facebook has recently censored an erotic drawing by Egon Schiele, a nude by Picasso, whereas individual pages on which *The Origin of the World* by Gustave Courbet had been posted have been deleted.

Case study: Contemporary political satire in Greece and risks of censorship

The Internet has undoubtedly offered unlimited possibilities for freely expressing opinions as well as countless opportunities for disseminating knowledge to millions of users around the world. The flagship platform supporting and promoting free expression of individual opinion, without bounds and dependencies, is, of course, Facebook, included among many other media (Instagram, Twitter, etc.), to which anyone, and in particular the anonymous user, may have recourse. This is the springboard for anyone wishing to experience the delightful condition of absolute freedom.

Facebook is a personal system of democracy, the product and outcome of modern technology, highlighting human individuality in a world inundated with information of all kinds; a world controlled by renown and patronage originating from both governments and powerful individuals. Facebook has been the conquest of the anonymous citizen and a tremendous achievement of modern technology.

The Internet “invented the freedom of expression as well as active and passive freedom of information. Access to knowledge has been significantly facilitated, and human beings have come closer to one another. Approaching other people and other cultures is no longer the prerogative of the few having the financial ability to travel or travel often, but has become a possibility for anyone having a telephone connection. In this sense, knowledge has been decentralised and has been diffused downwards. This has undoubtedly been the Internet’s enlightenment work” [12].

Indeed, there has never been so much freedom of expression in public discourse between users of website pages and with other people, without any racial, civil, religious, or other forms of differentiation or characterisation. This should be the meaning of absolute democracy. And yet, within the immensity of cyberspace there have appeared symptoms of censorship and prohibitions on expressing free opinions, as has been pointed out by official bodies (for example, the United Nations), as well as by many users.

The underlying reason or cause for this censorship has been the implementation of an algorithm “checking” for any “violations of mores” or other malicious actions, which leads platform administrators to block the “guilty” page for a specific period of time. This is a clear manifestation of censorship being imposed as a result of the platform administrators complying with mass online “protests” by users, who with or without malicious intent interfere with the page’s contents. Many instances of this censoring have been recorded and similar patterns of behaviour have also been reported globally.

In Greece, the most flagrant incident occurred recently and involved the satirical sketches of one of the most famous Greek cartoonists, who also has a personal Facebook page under his pseudonym of ARKAS (Figure 1 and 2). The incident has been characterised as censorship and it related to the political contents of the cartoonist’s sketches that referred to the former Greek government of the SYRIZA party and its leader [13].



Figure 1: Satirical Sketch by Arkas about the Childhood of the Former Prime Minister (Teacher: Indicate which one of the answers is correct! Pupil: I said “Yes” to all!)



Figure 2: Satirical sketch by Arkas about the childhood of the former Prime Minister (I negotiated with the opponents and we won't have to play... We've already lost!)

The notice by the platform made public by the artist/cartoonist himself in August 2019 read as follows: “Stories from your page do not appear in updates. This may be due to activities in your page which are not in compliance with Facebook policies” [14]. Many people had denounced the political criticism of ARKAS directed at a specific party. This had been noted in various media, with comments such as: “The fact that his cartoons were indirectly, albeit unmistakably, criticising SYRIZA and Tsipras has made him [ARKAS] the Number One online enemy of the previous government’s supporters” [15]. This incident of censorship revolving around ARKAS’ cartoons has shocked the Greek intelligentsia, and unfavourable comments regarding Facebook’s practice have multiplied, indicating that the issue will not go away as long as organised supporters of opposing views will continue to coalesce

with the purpose of silencing freedom of expression, including by artists (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Satirical sketch by Arkas on the occasion of the censorship incident (We are now free to express their opinion!)

Conclusion

The rapid development of technology and the incredible array of possibilities currently offered by the Internet have created conditions for the democratisation of societies and for transforming individuals into public opinion makers. Facebook, in particular, as well as other platforms, have been used as the space for free expression of opinions *par excellence*, and its online pages have become podiums for freedom of expression. By way of comparison, the world had not known similar freedom since the Age of Enlightenment. However, Internet users are bound by rules controlled by an algorithm aimed at identifying pornography as well as malicious human behaviours directed towards other people, in view of protecting their dignity and personality. Nevertheless, instances of censorship regarding works of art have been recorded all over the world and most recently in Greece. In this case, censorship was directed at the satirical sketches of cartoonist ARKAS which referred to the policies of the former SYRIZA government and the former Prime Minister. The organised reaction from supporters of this party has resulted in the removal of the cartoonist’s page from the Facebook platform for a week during last August. This has been the first incident of censorship imposed on an artist because of his political ideas.

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