

"Government censorship remains necessary today."

To what extent do you agree?

By Aretha Reyhan Aryono (17A11)

In 2010, Wael Ghonim, an internet activist, took to popular online platforms to voice his unhappiness against then-president, Hosni Mubarak, and effectively sparked what was known worldwide as the Facebook Revolution of Egypt. As the name suggests, such is the unfiltered nature of the media in today's world, with the uncanny ability to empower and mobilize millions in the direction of their cause. In this digital age, information is accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. And the world becomes an audience to the woes, joys and anger of the keyboard warrior. Regulating said information, rampant in the media, in its largely unfiltered nature, might prove to be a difficult task to the government which is limited in success and viability, considering the sheer amount there is to sift through and filter out. However, it is the inexorable flow of said information, in its boundlessness and power to cause great change, that makes it all the more important for governing bodies to control, in order to protect the interests of the nation, stem dissent and maintain societal order. Hence, I agree to a great extent that government censorship remains necessary today.

Firstly, regulating the free-flow of information effectively protects the interests of the nation and the security of its people. With the limitless information the media and the Internet is home to today, and the great advancements in technology, come boundless opportunities for the misuse of information, seen in activities such as hacking and whistleblowing which could adversely impact lives not only on both the personal level and national level. Edward Snowden, for example, leaked top secret documents from the USA's National Security Agency, compromising the interests of the nation and undermining the power of the government. Julian Assange, similarly, was the founder of Wikileaks, a site on which people share hacked or stolen information for all the world to see. The existence of such a site in itself is proof of the uncontrollable nature of information available in the media today, and its adverse effects, such as the leaking of top-secret government information to rival countries, who could utilize the information, compromising national security and interests in the process. On a personal scale, hacking into one's private account subjects the common online user to danger if that information is used against him. There have been numerous cases of online assault, where money is paid in exchange of a promise not to leak private information online. All this is simply due to the uncontrolled nature of online media. It is therefore necessary for the government to step in and regulate the free-flow of information available online and the unlimited potential to be misused, in order to protect the security and interests of people not only on a personal scale but also on a national scale.

Next, government censorship is vital in order to prevent dissent that could hinder the nation's progress. As stated earlier, the unfiltered, liberal nature of the Internet promotes empowerment; it encourages people to voice and verbalize their woes with regards to the status quo. While this empowers certain social groups previously unheard of in society, it has the potential to be destructive, and to cause dissent against the ruling bodies of the government. The Arab Spring of 2010, for example, saw a series of revolts against the governments of Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries, which was sparked off and exacerbated by the rampant use of online media as a platform to speak out against the governing bodies. Online groups were formed that advocated the same agenda, culminating in a series of protests that lasted for months and took the lives of thousands involved in the protests. In that sense, to prevent dissent that could culminate in societal

unrest and the loss of lives of many in revolution, it is necessary for the government to step in and prevent societal unrest, which could hinder political cohesion of the nation and its development. To consolidate government control, regulation is important. This is particularly so in small states like Singapore; its small geographical size means that any form of unrest or protest would bring about immeasurable damage to the country. As such, government censorship is practised online and in newspapers and publishing companies such as Mediacorp. Therefore, government censorship is necessary to consolidate government control, prevent unrest and ensure the nation's growth.

However, the fact that so many people make use of the Internet to retrieve or release information renders government regulation largely futile and unnecessary. It is almost impossible to stem the free flow of information, as evident in the case of the Panama Papers or Wikileaks; large scale leaks and misuse of information just like these indicate an inability of the government to control information, in an age where information is thriving and multiplying in quantity and access. Furthermore, the active presence of the people on the media subject users of the media to online policing; they act as a check-and-balance, controlling the kind of content one publishes for the rest of the world to see. In the case of Amos Yee, who posted a video on Youtube insulting the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the government of Singapore did not have to intervene as other users of the Internet, appalled and disapproving of the offensive contents in the video, called him out and persecuted him. This, along with many other similar cases, are subjected to online policing; whenever one posts something, it is not published in a vacuum, others can view it and evaluate it, acting as checks-and-balance. Hence, government regulation is unnecessary in this age.

However, government regulation of the media prevents controversial pieces of information from being seen by the public audience in the first place, eliminating the possibility of conflicts between people by filtering out the content to retain and which to leave alone. This lowers the chances of conflicts between people of different racial groups, backgrounds or beliefs, and therefore maintains societal cohesion and harmony in the nation. This is especially important in nations with multi-ethnic groups in society such as multiracial Singapore and ethnically diverse Myanmar and Indonesia, because conflicts that arise out of a difference in belief and/or culture could very much displace the society that is constructed on a multi-ethnic, diverse foundation. This was why the incident of Amy Cheong, a Singaporean Chinese who insulted Malay wedding rituals online, caused such a big uproar and tensions brewed between those who agreed with her, and the Malays in Singaporean society. It is better therefore that the government intervenes and steps in, filtering out potentially divisive or controversial content in the media before it reaches the people and potentially causes dissent. Hence, to maintain social cohesion and harmony, government censorship is still necessary.

To conclude, the liberal, unfiltered nature of the media can be empowering and give a voice to the previously-unheard cast aside by society. However, while this is so, the free-flow of information, if unchecked, could lead to disruptive dissent, a compromise of national and personal security and interests as well as a division in society. As long as the government is free of ill-will and corruption, and acts in the best interest of its society rather than to pursue personal interests, government censorship will create a safe space in the media, for people to derive full enjoyment and benefit from. Hence, I agree to a large extent that government censorship remains necessary today.

Comments:

Aretha, a very perceptive and thorough essay that makes clear reference to the characteristics of modern media and society and relates that to the necessity of censorship. Examples are also very current and relevant. Language use is confident but can do with more concision. Sentences are sometimes long and unwieldy which affected clarity.