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Truth, Free Speech, and Democracy

Truth is the cornerstone of a well-functioning democracy. This is because in a democracy, the people decide what decisions their government makes and for those decisions to be good decisions, they need to be informed by how the world actually is; their success is contingent on “knowing” the truth. How to best go about spreading the truth has been a long-standing topic of debate. There is a fundamental tension that exists between allowing freedom of speech and challenging the misinformation (unintentional false information) and disinformation (intentional false information) that may arise from it. Although often in conflict, both, when nobly pursued, are an effort to empower society with the truth.

Freedom of speech can be chaotic. And with chaos can come a deviation from the truth. When everybody is interpreting the objective world through their subjective lens, there are bound to be countless varied perspectives on what the truth is. With all of these differing perspectives of the truth is the possibility that the actual truth is drowned out to where it is difficult to discern between what is real and what is false. Even when people have the best of intentions, misinformation can be a challenge for a democracy to overcome. Even worse, the disorder of freedom of speech can be exploited by those with the worst of intentions by undermining society using the very freedoms that society bestowed them with. For reference, firehosing is a propaganda technique which illustrates how this can happen. Instances of this being employed can be seen in Russian linked media spheres of influence. The RAND corporation, which originally coined the term of what is now known as firehosing, described it this way in one of their publications, “We characterize the contemporary Russian model for propaganda as ‘the firehose of falsehood’ because of two of its distinctive features: high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions” (Paul and Matthews, 2016). In the publication, the authors explained how this modern Russian propaganda strategy distinguishes itself from previous propaganda techniques utilized by the Soviet Union because of its new and effective use of “Internet, social media, and the evolving landscape of professional and amateur journalism and media outlets” (Paul and Matthews, 2016). It is notable that this propaganda technique typically utilizes decentralized means of communication which is made possible by some degree of freedom of speech. The publication mentions how the Russians put it to use to change narratives since their incursions into Georgia as well as their annexation of Crimea and war with Ukraine. It is important for a society to be wary of the potential vulnerabilities that freedom of speech can carry as the society might paradoxically find itself less free, despite the inherent freedom it is afforded, if it is not vigilant.

Despite its disorder and the loss of truth that can come from it, freedom of speech is still the way for a society to best arrive at the truth and prevent the erosion of democracy. One of the best examples where this was demonstrated in recent history was the Iraq War. The US federal government’s assertions that Iraq had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction were false. The Associated Press said in article looking back on the war 20 years later and examining the impact it has had since that, “The ultimately incorrect assertions about Iraq’s nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs, repeatedly cited to build support for the war in America and abroad, did lasting damage to the credibility of U.S. intelligence” (Merchant, 2023). And the allegations varied in certainty, but some government officials were quite clear in their language. In August 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney said in a speech to a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us” (Doherty and Kiley, 2023). Ultimately the claims made broadly by the Bush administration that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction were unsubstantiated. However, during the war this was the mainstream narrative partially because of the rally around the flag effect in the aftermath of 9/11, and if one voiced opposition to the war because support for the war was built on unsubstantiated claims, you could have been deemed to have been spreading misinformation or even disinformation. The biggest problem one runs into when trying to counteract misinformation and disinformation is who is going to watch the watchmen as it is impossible for anyone to be the definitive arbiter of truth. In this situation, the people who were entrusted to be the purveyors of truth were government officials in the US Intelligence Agencies and the Bush Administration, and even if they had the best of intentions, their claims were ultimately shown to be incorrect. The other problem which stems from any attempt to create a ministry of truth is that it is too much concentrated power for any centralized organization to possess. If this power were in the wrong hands, then how would it be any different than a propaganda machine? In such a system, it would be impossible to expose to the public any wrongdoing the government might have committed. And even if the people still have the right to vote, if the “truth” placed before them informing their vote is the “truth” those with power want them to see, it seems the society has ceased to be a democracy because the power no longer presides with the people.

Even though the spread of false information that can come about because of freedom of speech can be a challenge for a democracy to address, the alternative of censorship and control of information is an even greater threat to democracy. It seems the best path forward for a democracy is to have faith in its citizens, to navigate the chaotic landscape of information by empowering its citizens to think critically and approach the world with healthy skepticism. A democracy is only good as the people who make it up. And a democracy and its people are doomed if they do not have access to the truth.

Works Cited

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