

Censorship and Silence: A response

In his essay “Censorship and Silence”, Umberto Eco describes his observations on censorship in the modern world. Eco explains how censorship has evolved through the years, from silencing undesirable information to creating “noise” which keeps people distracted from real, pressing issues. Eco describes noise as a flood of information, largely insignificant, that permeates society. This noise comes in many different forms and through many different mediums, whether it be unreliable internet blogs or newspapers and magazines that print celebrity gossip and scandals. Noise distracts people, and if utilized maliciously, can be used to cover up real pressing issues, such as government scandals. Eco argues that the pervasiveness of noise in the modern era has resulted in the existence of a group of people that cannot live away from noise. Eco regards the problem of noise and how to return to a more “silent” world away from the noise as one of the most pressing issues facing society today.

I agree with most of Eco’s thoughts. I agree with him concerning the way censorship has evolved. While it may be true that the classical censorship method of withholding information from the people is still in use in many places around the world, democratic western nations seem more prone to censorship through noise. There is an overwhelming amount of information in the modern era, especially for those who grew up with computers and the internet permeating their life (ie. my generation). Many websites are specifically designed and tuned to distract you and keep you glued on the

website. Therefore, it's not a big jump to imagine that world governments use this fact to distract at least some people from big scandals and the like. Nor is this use of distractions limited to the internet. Governments try to pass popular policy right before elections (ie. student loan forgiveness) to ramp up approval and perhaps distract from earlier misdeeds. It is clear that, especially in the west, the form of control embraced by the powerful is to barrage with information rather than withhold it.

However, I think Eco places too much emphasis on returning to silence. I believe it would be more worthwhile to make people aware of the noise that they are drowning in rather than to ask them to turn it off. Many people like the noise, and telling them to reject it might prompt a stubborn counter-reaction. Nonetheless, I believe there is merit in further studying how noise (and silence) affects the many aspects of our life and society. It will be truly difficult to return to silence or even to reduce the noise. But perhaps understanding the noise will aid us, even just a little, with exercising greater control over our own lives.