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Response to Censorship and Silence

In his 2009 speech, *Censorship and Silence*, Umberto Eco argues there are two main censorship methods: censorship through silence and censorship through noise. Eco then goes on to explain why overpowering noise is the preferred method of censorship today. Finally, Eco explains the dangers of censorship through noise, and why people need to reduce the amount of information received and use spoken words to communicate.

Eco sums up censorship through silence concisely: “To avoid causing behavior considered to be deviant, don’t talk about it” (Eco). According to Eco, “deviant behavior is encouraged by the fact that the media give it coverage” (Eco). Basically, Eco argues, whenever problematic events (such as protests, suicide, crime, etc) are mentioned by mass media, the frequency of such events actually increases due to more people considering them. Thus, censorship through silence attempts to stop deviant behavior by silencing mass media, usually through government control.

If censorship through silence is characterized by a repressed press, censorship through noise follows the opposite pattern. Eco summarizes censorship through noise as, “to avoid talking about deviant behavior, talk a great deal about other things” (Eco). He argues, an overwhelming stream of true, but otherwise meaningless, information, is just as effective a method of censorship as repression. In supporting his point, Eco gives the example of searching

the internet for information. Even though the information needed is present online, the vast amount of additional information, advertisements, and distractions prevent all but trained researchers from finding what they need quickly. In other words, the “noise” of extra information censors the useful facts.

Eco argues, just as silence was the censorship method of fascist states, an overwhelming noise of irrelevant topics is today’s method of concealing information from the public. Although less malicious in nature than burning books, today’s amount of informational noise makes it nearly impossible for the public to access reliable facts. And in addition, people have become so used to the noise, that they cannot stand silence any longer. Think of declining attention spans and cell phone and social media addictions; As Eco states, “this great need for noise is like a drug; it is a way to avoid focusing on what is really important” (Eco).

Eco finds the growing trend against silence worrying. He explains, “in losing the condition of silence, we lose the possibility of hearing what other people are saying, which is the only basic and reliable means of communication” (Eco). According to Eco, human spoken word is, in a way, usually immune to censorship. He states “All people, even when they are oppressed by the most censorious tyrants, have been able to find out all that is going on in the world through popular word of mouth” (Eco). But with the growing reliance on noise, even spoken word, the last reliable source of information, is drowned out.