This is a difficult topic for me to have a firm position on. I was at one time a free speech absolutist, but I’ve since recognized such an extreme position misses much of the nuance of this subject. When it comes to speech, I don’t think anyone would advocate for incitement of violence to be constitutionally protected speech. And when it comes to expression, there absolutely must be limits, otherwise we’d have public displays of nudity, sexuality, harm, etc… being performed under the guise of “artistic expression.”

Over the past decade, and especially in the last 4-5 years, social media has been used to spread not only propaganda, but also blatant falsehoods, lies designed to attack our understanding of objective reality. In 2019, I fell into the Q movement. I was witnessing political chaos in the media, culture beginning to collapse, and a social divide that’s only grown since. At the time, my life was somewhat turbulent, and I had very few people to socialize or even interact with. I was depressed and had trouble trying to figure out my path in life.

When the Q movement began spreading rapidly from its start on 4chan, I was drawn to the sense of community it created and the “secrets” its rabbit holes contained. I grew my follower count by the thousands and began glutinously consuming the content they were sharing. It was well formulated and constructed, using a blend of factual data and theories with an ocean of imagery, videos, and rhetoric, all designed to damage people’s ability to recognize reality from fiction. This information led to hundreds of hours of scouring the internet, websites with nonsense names, articles written by random nobodies, thought maps of images and ideas so loosely connected the whole thing rested on toothpicks.

But I believed many of them. Tiktoks of individuals around the country reporting strange events and sightings they’ve experienced, podcasts with panels of people I’ve never heard of touting nonsense credentials that sounded like they just came up with them, all discussing insane propositions and conspiracies. In another time, only those belonging in an institution would believe these things, but with society seemingly on the path towards a collapse akin to the Mouse Utopia experiments, it was too easy to give in to these ideas, fantasizing the world really operated like that.

Today, the country is filled with people suffering the results of this “age of nonsense.” There are massive communities of people out there who believe in things like star seeds and gnostic “one-ism”, adrenochrome, med beds, and that JFK Jr. is still alive working for Donald Trump as his VP. I still see these people pushing this insanity on my timelines across social media like it were a mission given to them by God.

I ultimately broke free from whatever this propagandistic nonsense was doing to me and firmly secured my feet to the ground. But I came away from it having learned a valuable lesson: when free speech is poisoned by societal and cultural decay, the population becomes susceptible to believing ideas which, harmless on their own, become something very dangerous in certain circumstances. The loss of our ability to recognize the difference between objective reality and lunatic fantasy has a destabilizing effect on the nation, impacting our politics, education system, economy, and more.

So while I recognize this kind of speech is harmful and something must be done about it, I also wonder if I would have been imprisoned for some of the ideas I had spread as a result? I wonder what damage my sharing of memes, articles, and videos pushing these crazy ideas had on my 5000 FB friends (at the time, though I’ve since reduced that number), or the 2,500 followers I have on X. I’ve spent hours over the years thinking about whether I was at fault for participating in that madness, or if I’m a victim of some foreign adversary’s highly effective propaganda and destabilization campaign?

So while I no longer consider myself a free speech absolutist, I also cannot say where the line is between what should be protected and what should be banned. If we were to give that power to the government, sacrificing our first amendment rights, then we’d be handing the keys over to our minds, ensuring the slow death of intellectual freedom and exploration. Truly bad ideas may be silenced in public spaces in such a circumstance, but those ideas would only grow and spread behind closed doors and in the shadows of society. I’ve always believed it a necessity that people with bad and harmful ideas be allowed to speak those ideas freely, so that they would be exposed, and that good and mentally stable people could see those ideas are their ugliness for what they are.

The only way to truly kill a bad idea is to expose it, ridicule it, and take from it its power. That cannot be done when speech is restricted. However, is that even something that is possible when society has become so broken that people will believe anything? When fake news is spread to the point it becomes believed as if it were reality and even spread by credible organizations? When AI deep fakes have become so convincing that all but those with training in digital content creation could not tell the difference between what’s real and what’s digitally generated? When foreign intelligence agencies have seeded social media with bots, targeting susceptible individuals and feeding them with content designed to warp their mind’s attachment to reality?

Ultimately, I think we must brave the storm and allow speech its freedom. I don’t see a good outcome, no matter which option is taken, but I have to hold out hope that humanity is not too far gone, and that there are enough good and sane people out there that these bad ideas and belief systems cannot grow beyond a cultural nuisance.