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Free Speech

The **First Amendment (Amendment I)** to the United States Constitution prevents the government from making laws which regulate an establishment of religion, prohibit the free exercise of religion, or abridge the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble, or the right to petition the government for redress of grievances. It was adopted on December 15, 1791, as one of the ten amendments that constitute the Bill of Rights.¹

Today freedom of speech in particular has been a topic of debate, specifically in regard to hate speech. Certain social media platforms, such as Facebook, have come under fire for their policies for handling content that is perceived as hateful or false. Some advocate that such content be restricted or prohibited while others, usually citing the First Amendment, say that there should be no restrictions. On a recent Fareed Zakaria program in one segment he pointed out that the Nazi swastika, salute, and statements of Nazi beliefs were illegal and prohibited in Germany. He pointed out that this is not the case in America and as such in North Carolina white supremacists openly marched with Nazi flags. He asked whether such behavior should be outlawed in the U.S. as well in spite of the First Amendment.

In this day and age we are overwhelmed with information by all types of media and as has been shown in recent years, much of the information is either biased or unfactual – “fake news”, as some refer to it. Trying to ascertain whether the information we receive is true or not is not easy. And therein lies the crux of the problem. To form an opinion and to shape our own values we base them on facts or information we believe to be true. As a result, when individuals who hold opposing views, each believing they are based on facts, but which often are contradictory, we see the division and animosity towards each other caused by each’s own adamant reliance on his own views. The political divide in America today is an example of that.

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge, justification, and the rationality of belief.² This was one of the required courses I took in university that was part of a major in Philosophy. It is a discipline which attempts to seek the truth by analyzing beliefs and their rationality. In observing news events today I try to identify the key elements of who, what, where, why, when, etc., by freeing them from biased presentations, but that is not always easy to do. Some arguments can be most persuasive.

I believe there will always be opposing views and arguments. Whether they become predominant or not primarily depends on the eloquence of the presenter; his ability to use the medium, which is language, most skillfully. That being the case, then rather than seeking restrictions on speech, I think it better to learn how to more eloquently refute speech and ideas we find repugnant.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution

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