

FABL Showtime Essay

The First Amendment and Social Media

The volume of information posted on the Internet is growing exponentially, and at the same time is creating, in some instances, misinformation and harm. Cyberbullying, which has led to suicide, is often supported by misinformation. Divides within our society, especially on political and social issues, are many times the result of inaccurate information that has led to violence and riots. Instructions to make bombs and other weapons are readily available. Postings of private information about people that result in fraudulent schemes and loss of money or stolen identity are also examples of how misinformation on the Internet can be harmful. Influencers, at times, lend perceived legitimacy to otherwise inaccurate information, which further expands the reach of the misinformation. People who support unrestricted access to these types of information look to the Constitution as the answer for opposing regulations by the government.

The idea of regulating communications to the public, however, is not a new one. In fact, information distributed on television, radio, and in print is already regulated by the government. The First Amendment of the Constitution is not, as some people think, a complete protection for free speech. There are limits to free speech, which include obscenity, false statements, words that incite violence, and attacks on privacy. The regulations that address these non-protected forms of speech are intended to protect the people in the country and avoid harm to people.

A lot of information on the Internet falls within the categories that are subject to protection, and while the Founding Fathers had no idea what the Internet was or would become, their principles remain appropriate and, in my opinion, should be extended to the Internet to prevent the same harm they identified as being unprotected by the Constitution. People should not be bullied on the Internet. Threats and inciting violence should not occur. And the Internet should not be used as a way to steal from people. Just like bad words cannot be said on network television and radio, and false information cannot be published to hurt someone, similar regulations that do not impact the type of speech protected by the First Amendment should be imposed to control the harm being done through misinformation and information aimed at hurting people.

Balanced regulation is beneficial to society to respect the Constitutional rights of people but also protect against harm that can result from free speech. We get the benefits of instant information on the Internet, but with that and a couple clicks of a button, we also have to suffer the consequences of misinformation that spreads in nanoseconds and is repeated to millions of users. There has been little regulation so far, and hardly any by the government. It is time to confront the misinformation and the harm it is causing people, including the loss of life, by having the government impose regulations in the form of fines and penalties against the people who post and distribute inappropriate content.