

Censorship gets us nowhere

Apparently, some people on this campus think I'm guilty of censorship. I find that curious since I am so strongly opposed to censorship. I much prefer using dialectic to change the attitudes that perpetuate society's ills than trying to cover those attitudes up. That won't get us anywhere.

I came to the conclusion that these people must not know what censorship is. So I looked it up for them in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*: censorship - the institution, system, or practice of examining communications (as in letters, articles, films, etc.) and deleting or prohibiting materials considered harmful or objectionable.

Disagreeing with someone's ideology is not censorship. Censorship would be to prohibit that ideology from being spoken about. If someone is afraid to speak up in an open forum on racism, that is not the result of censorship. Censorship would be prohibiting an open forum. Telling someone that her or his political agenda does not allow for equal representation in certain areas, or that it perpetuates a hostile environment for people of different ethnic backgrounds is not censorship.

People do have a right to disagree with affirmative action and diversity requirements, just as others have a right to speak out against those disagreements.

Just because someone's ideas don't go over so well at an open

forum on racism doesn't mean that person is being censored - it means that people didn't like what he or she had to say, and that's not censorship.

Disagreeing with an idea, and prohibiting an idea are two very different things; the distinction is an important one.

While people may be making an effort to change a person's attitudes, that does not constitute censorship. And there is nothing wrong with trying to teach a person things such as that skin color is not God's way of telling one group that they are better than another.

However, I do recognize the point that Mr. Strunk made in his letter to the editor last week. In and of themselves, supremacist attitudes are acceptable under the First Amendment.

Because of my position on censorship, I will protect the rights of anyone to say anything, even down to the worst neo-Nazi propaganda. However, freedom of speech becomes a confusing and highly debatable subject when it enters the area of civil rights. The two have increasingly become opposing forces. Having to make a decision between the two, I would, in some cases, side with civil rights.

I feel that freedom of speech loses its protection under the Constitution when someone hides behind the First Amendment in order to infringe upon someone else's rights.

My argument for such a

stance is as follows. Racism and sexism do, at times, violate or prohibit the legal rights of others. A racist, sexist person discriminates against people on the basis of gender, ethnic background or religious affiliation. That violates constitutional rights - rights such as freedom of religion and guaranteed equality.

People who say they can be sexist supremacists and not at times infringe upon others' rights are fooling themselves. It is human nature that people's attitudes shape their behavior.

If anyone thinks that individual supremacist attitudes have no effect on society, they should take a look at what's happening in Louisiana.

Enough white supremacists have crawled out of the woodwork to elect David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, to the state senate, and are in the process of trying to give him a governorship as well.

I understand that electing a white supremacist to office is constitutionally acceptable. But it seems inevitable with his past history, a history which includes selling neo-Nazi pamphlets from his state legislative office and advocating government grants to encourage high-IQ white couples to breed, combined with the support of his like-minded constituency, that he will attempt to pass legislation which is detrimental to the minorities of that state.

If you'd rather stay closer to home, I can provide you with another example of how dangerous racist attitudes can be. Two friends of mine (both black) were detained for nearly an hour in their car by three Pennsylvania state policemen. Refusing to give a reason for stopping them, the policemen let them go after warning them "and their kind" to stay out of the area. This happened last year in Conneaut Lake.

Granted, had these policemen been average citizens their comments would have been protected under the First Amendment. But a representative of the law has no legal power to detain a person because of her/his skin color. Those policemen abused their positions in order to act upon their racism.

As I mentioned earlier, I fully support freedom of speech. As a writer, I would be foolish not to. But with these examples I hope to point out why my sympathies lie with civil rights. Hate resulting from race and gender biases is a dangerously powerful weapon that can be used against people who have no way to fight back.

With all this talk of censorship and First Amendment rights, I think people are losing touch with what the fundamental goals of the PC movement are: opening up the canon, rethinking exclusionary standards, expanding an ethnocentric language to include all people. Basically, it

boils down to treating others with respect. It simply means acknowledging the non-white, non-male citizens who also make up this country. And really, what is so wrong with that?

People feel uncomfortable with the PC movement because it puts them into the position of having to defend attitudes that were once accepted as true and right, and sometimes even sanctioned by law. These people, largely the conservative traditionalists, cannot simply state their opinion and have it accepted any more. They must now defend their opinion because it is no longer the only one.

I find curious also that Ms. Mack, in her letter to the editor last week, decided to use John Stuart Mill to refute my article. I'm not sure if she is aware of it, but Mill was one of the more radical feminists in the 19th century.

John Stuart Mill's position on censorship is one with which I fundamentally agree. I also agree with his positions - essentially arguments supporting what we now call affirmative action and political correctness - in his great 19th century feminist treatise, *On the Subjection of Women*.

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Dos Passos never even knew DOS

A young college man wanted advice. "I'm planning a career as a writer, and I'd like to ask you a question," he said.

I braced myself, fearing he would ask me about style, plot, sentence structure, dangling participles, split infinitives and all the petty details that caused my English teachers to fling papers back in my face.

But instead he said, "What kind of computer do you recommend I buy?"

Now that was something I could help him with. Indeed, I could lecture at Harvard on the subject of the computer and the writer.

So I said, "How much were you planning on spending?"

He said he could go as high as \$1,200.

No need to spend that much, I told him. I could get him started in writing for about \$10, maybe less.

He said, "You're kidding. There's no computer that cheap."

True, but for \$10 you can buy a large box of pencils and a tall stack of blank paper. And maybe a cheap pencil sharpener, although an old paring knife will do. Then you can write.

He still thought I was joking, even after I pointed out that libraries were crammed with great books written with pencils, scratchy pens or even goose quills. Shakespeare didn't worry about how much RAM he had. And Mark Twain didn't feel

deprived for the lack of a laser-jet printer.

"Well, I'd really like something with a spell checker," he said.

Then blow an extra ten spot and buy a dictionary.

But he persisted. "I'm sure a computer with a good word-processing program would make it easier. I've been looking at the computer ads, and I think I can get..."

Ah, yes, the computer ads. Sleek machines that are user-friendly, user-adoring. Able to perform miracles with a single keystroke. No, not even a keystroke. Just spin the little mouse and tap its plastic head and obedient little icons will dance across your screen.

Forget it, I told him. If you are going to become a writer, the last thing you want is a computer because you won't become a writer, you will become a nerd or a nervous wreck.

How can any machine be user-friendly if the user must wade through a 500-page manual to understand how the creature works? But there's no point in reading the manual because it is written in computer gibberish.

But that's just the first manual. You have another 500-page manual for something called DOS.

They could have called it: "The Buttons You Got to Hit to Run Your Computer," which we would understand even though we

could never hit the right buttons. Instead, they call it DOS. That's what I mean. Is DOS a word? Not around here. Maybe in Europe: "DOS me zuh ball, Fritz."

But you can't understand that manual, either, because it is even worse gibberish than the manual on the machine. By the second



chapter, your eyes glaze. By the third, your jaw goes slack. By the fourth, you scream and throw it across the room. You have read 100 pages that could have been written by a madman or a monkey hitting typewriter keys at random.

And it goes on. You have still another 500-page manual for the word-processing program. That one will tell you about fonts and macros. Did Hemingway ponder a macro? He would have thought it was a fish.

But don't worry, the computer

ads say. Now it is all simple. They have created something called "window." And windows will give you little cartoon-like creatures that are supposed to fulfill your every wish. If you can understand that 500-page manual.

Did William Faulkner have little creatures on his old typewriter? If so, they were the product of whiskey, which adds the brain less than cartoon creatures and menus and buttons that send messages to the screen demanding: "Abort? Quit? Try Again? Drop Dead? Exit? Go To Hell You Schnook?"

So when your screen fills with crazy talk and abuse, you rush to the computer store's book section and snatch up books that simplify everything. That has become an industry in itself--\$25 books that claim to turn the computer manuals into English.

But don't be fooled. Yes, they begin: "This is how little Mary and her daddy learned to use their brand new BreezYeasY 2, 4, 6, 8 Oh How We Appreciate computer program. It is so much fun. First, daddy hit the Alt key, while holding down the shift key, and the F-9 key, until the prompt c/...came on the screen, and Mary laughed because it was so BreezYeasY."

That's their trick. They still use gibberish, but they throw in baby talk. Or maybe try to sound like a buddy down at the bar. Except if a buddy down at the

bar talked that way, he would be taken to detox.

But maybe you persevere, plunging ahead for weeks and months, becoming baggy-eyed and gaunt, until you finally understand the mysteries of hitting Shift, Alt and F-9 keys. And c/...makes perfect sense.

Then what happens? Are you now a writer? No, because you no longer care about writing. You have become a computer freak. Now all you want to do is crunch numbers, interface, sit there at 3 a.m. whipping messages through your modem to distant electronic bulletin boards, eagerly sharing the joys of... Or even...

And somewhere in an old farmhouse in Maine, a middle-aged housewife is using pencils and grocery-bag paper to write her innermost, erotic fantasies that will become next year's biggest best seller.

So keep it simple. And if you must leap into the computer age, try Nintendo and Super Mario. Believe me, it is easier to kill the King of the Koopa than to fathom the profundities of Syn.Erk/Blip.

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