

CENSORSHIP NEWS

National Coalition Against Censorship



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FREEDOM TO OFFEND

Social media—and the power and responsibilities of those who control it—is dominating conversations among free speech advocates. This summer, all major social media platforms removed content from Alex Jones and Infowars. Many cheered. But others raised questions about content regulation, censorship and who chooses what we can see. A harsh light was shown on the challenges tech companies face in applying their own content guidelines.

As private companies, these firms can take down whatever they want. They also run the largest global forums for the exchange of ideas—and presumably want to stay that way. But guidelines surrounding offensive content remain vague, subjective and confusing. What happens when the gatekeepers dislike speech you support? Who decides what is offensive enough to ban? Who do we empower to draw that line?

Before we outsource control of the online public sphere to Big Tech, we need to consider the implications. There are other ways to confront toxic ideas. We do not pretend this is easy, but as we deal with online speech, we must remain true to our commitment to First Amendment principles.

Our democracy demands that we protect free expression.

82-97% of book challenges go unreported.

(Via the American Library Association)

The best way to fight censorship is to say something when you see something.

**Report Censorship:
ncac.org**

Policing Books

A local Fraternal Order of Police in Charleston, South Carolina challenged the inclusion of two popular young adult books on the Wando High School summer reading list. *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas, and *All American Boys*, by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, have both been highly praised for their complex handling of stories centering on the intersections of racism and police violence. Neither is a stranger to controversy.

NCAC offered support to the school district in encouraging them to keep the books on the reading list. The district followed its formal review policy and ultimately retained the books.

The film adaptation of *The Hate U Give*, which opened in October 2018, has already begun to cause controversy.

An Elegant Solution: Art in Dialogue

The University of Kentucky (UK) has unveiled a new site-specific public artwork by Philadelphia artist Karyn Olivier, commissioned in response to a controversy around a historical fresco. The fresco was created by UK alumna Ann O’Hanlon for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in 1934 to document “the American Scene.” It is one of only 42 existing PWAP murals. In 2006, the Student Government Association demanded its removal. In 2015, a group of students included the mural among their concerns about the experience of people of color on campus.

NCAC urged the university to preserve the mural and add information around the broader context of the state’s and the nation’s history of slavery. The fresco was first draped with a white cloth, then, after almost two years, was put back on view with contextualizing signage.

Olivier’s piece was commissioned to function in tandem with the mural, creating a space where members of the community can reflect on the politics of history and the dynamics of race. Olivier describes her work as addressing issues of race and inequity, and hopes it will help put the mural in a new context for future discussion.

UK is not alone among universities and other institutions facing outcries over historical artworks, monuments, or buildings that honor people who may now be seen as problematic. By commissioning this work, UK has created a model for others to follow.



Artist Karen Olivier installs her piece “Witness” (Photo: Mark Cornelison)

Desecrating Artistic Freedom



Josephine Meckseper's *Untitled (Flag 2)* hung outside space for "unconventional thinking" at the University of Kansas as part of an ongoing installation of sixteen commissioned flags by different artists, simultaneously displayed at partner sites nationwide. The work is a collage of an American flag and an abstract painting of the contours of the United States divided in two, symbolizing current national polarization.

In July 2018, both Kansas Governor Jeff Colyer and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach separately pressured university officials to remove the display, calling it a "desecration." The work was subsequently moved to an indoor location.

NCAC petitioned Colyer and Kobach to refrain from using their public positions to pressure a university to censor art on its campus. In addition, NCAC joined with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the ACLU of Kansas to remind the university's chancellor of the First Amendment rights of students and faculty, urging that the work be restored to its original location.

The US Supreme Court has held that restrictions on use of the flag in art and protest violate the First Amendment [*United States v. Eichman* (1990)]. In *Texas v. Johnson* (1989), the Court found that "We do not consecrate the flag by punishing its desecration, for in doing so we dilute the freedom that this cherished emblem represents."

Both Colyer and Kobach suggested that publicly-funded institutions should not "promote" this type of art, but, in fact, it is precisely public institutions like KU that are bound by the Constitution to refrain from viewpoint censorship.

From the Executive Director

Christopher M. Finan

We are living through an age of protest.

People are taking to the streets in numbers that rival the civil rights and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s. There are protests by the left and by the right; by women, students, white men, and NFL athletes. It seems that the only thing we agree on is that we are polarized.

Ironically, it is during periods like this that our commitment to free speech wavers. In our anger at how things are, we are tempted to limit the rights of those whose ideas we oppose.

Sometimes the government tries to suppress criticism.

The President of the United States is being sued for threatening journalists and authors and using the power of the federal government to pressure media companies that criticize him.

Sometimes the media itself is guilty. Several liberal publications apologized for disseminating ideas that some regard as offensive, even dangerous.

Our democracy is built on principles. The right to think for ourselves and create art that expresses our individuality. The right to criticize the government and voice opinions that make other people mad.

These rights are being fought for every day by students, teachers, professors, journalists, librarians, publishers, booksellers, artists, activists and other citizens. We cannot allow them to be eroded, even in promoting another worthy goal, whether it be defending patriotism or battling white supremacy.

We put our own right to dissent at risk if we demand that opposing voices be silenced. Our best response to social injustice is to speak up—loudly—for our belief in equality and freedom.

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THE CASE AGAINST DE-PLATFORMING

Svetlana Mintcheva, *NCAC Director of Programs*

“TO SUPPRESS FREE SPEECH IS A DOUBLE WRONG. IT VIOLATES THE RIGHTS OF THE HEARER AS WELL AS THOSE OF THE SPEAKER.”

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1860

Support for free speech is not a dogma never to be questioned. When white supremacists violently march in Charlottesville under the banner of “free speech” while NFL players are penalized for protesting the murder of unarmed black people, can one still insist that those of us standing up against racism and working towards a more equitable society should engage politely with racist ideologues? Every bigot is free to speak without government interference, but why should noxious ideas be granted the platforms of our liberal institutions? Don’t such platforms legitimize destructive ideas as part of normal democratic debate?

These are vital questions, but they need to be considered in the broader context of our fractured public sphere. Instead, they are often presented as self-evident arguments to put pressure on liberal institutions to refuse any platform to pernicious ideas.

De-platforming highlights a growing crisis of liberal democracy, where the incivility of a populist president is mirrored by leading liberals’ refusal to engage in “polite conversation” with a “fascist” (to quote Roxane Gay on Steve Bannon’s since-rescinded invitation to the New Yorker Festival). Worse, liberal dissenters today are often subjected to inter-

nal progressive bullying where Twitter mobs force heretics in line or cast them out. But who profits from an atmosphere where political disagreement is met with moral opprobrium and treated as a contaminant to be put under quarantine?

Those who hold so fast to their own moral certitude, and readily punish anyone within their own ranks who dissents, willfully blind themselves to the different ways some of their fellow citizens experience the world. The appeal of influential ideas needs to be understood, no matter how distasteful they may be. Locking ourselves in echo chambers of consensus and outrage and denying there is anything to learn about the political other may be comforting, but it is a losing strategy. This has been amply demonstrated by the populism thriving today.

The free exchange of ideas alone will not resolve the current political crisis. Yet the demonstrative refusal to listen across emotionally fraught differences is making it worse. Denying liberal platforms in the age of the Internet is unlikely to wither pernicious ideologies or reduce the influence they have among their followers. It does, however, contribute to social polarization, which provides fertile soil for a growing oligarchy-serving populism.

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