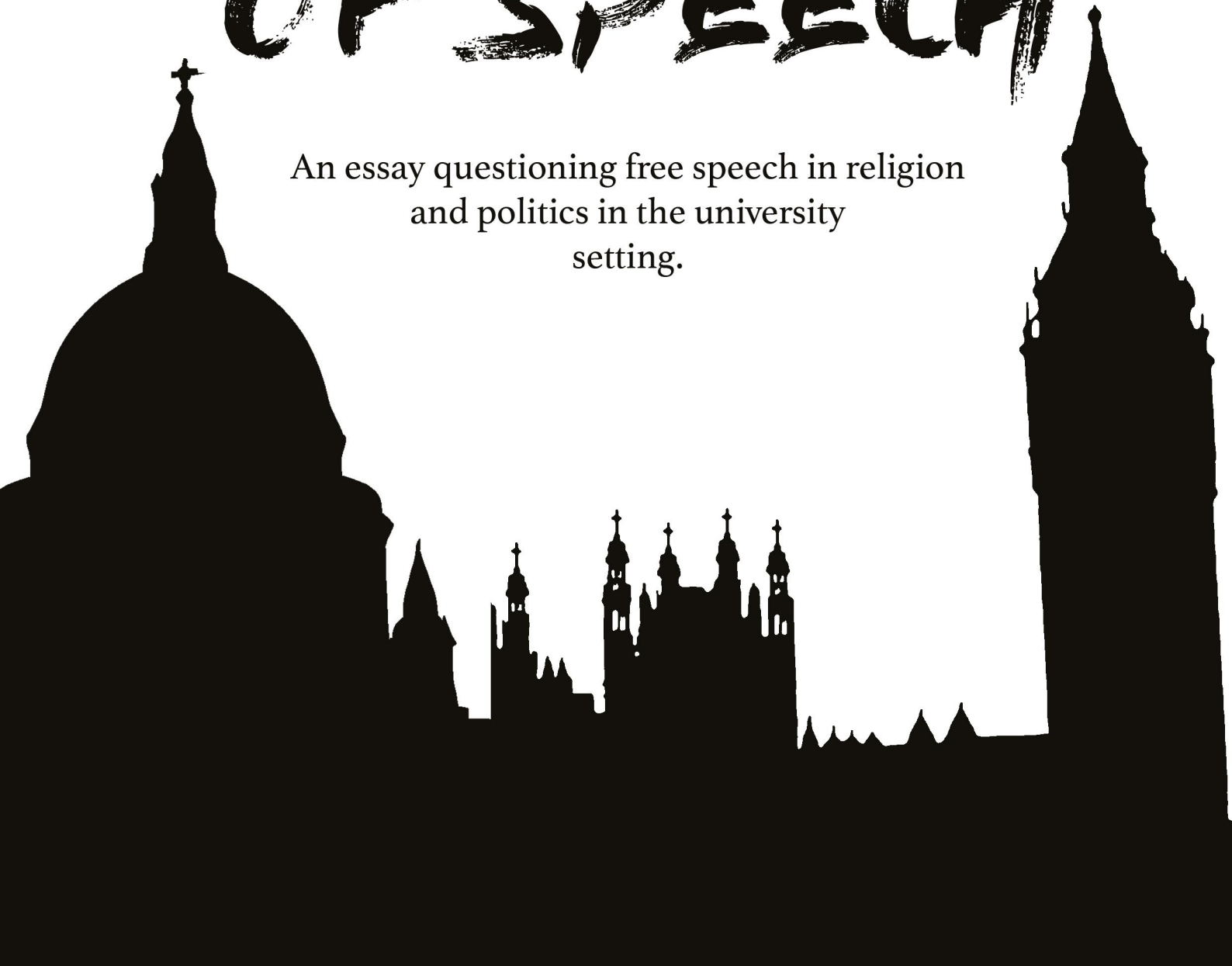


THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS FREEDOM OF SPEECH

An essay questioning free speech in religion
and politics in the university
setting.



Introduction

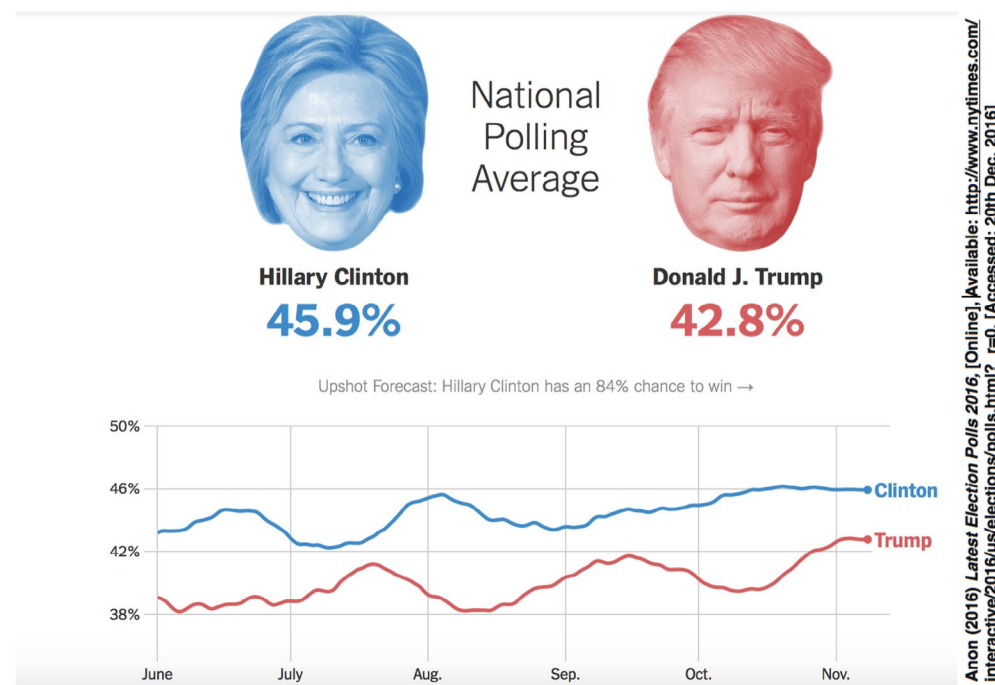
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What is free speech? The Amnesty International website defines it as ‘the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, by any means’ (2013), but should there be any limits put on our speech? And if so, what are the benefits or hindrances on society by doing so? Throughout this writing, I’ll explore free speech in politics and religion, especially in the university setting. I believe in the present day, and especially in “liberal” universities, people don’t express their opinions for fear they’re not “politically correct”, and here, I’ll try to explore and propose a design solution to help, what I consider, this problem at hand.

Free Speech in Politics

The most recent example we have of people being scared to voice political beliefs is the 2016 US Election. Trump, with his racist, misogynistic and overall bigoted views caused controversy throughout the election process. And while Clinton could not, herself, be called a saint, she was held in a much higher regard by the majority of the USA's population. Or so we thought. The *NY Times* posted an infographic on their website of a national polling average throughout the year leading up to the vote. In every month, Clinton took the lead. So why did things go “wrong” on the day?



Due to Trump's often controversial comments, I believe people were too scared to voice their support for him through fear of backlash. An example of this was during a Clinton campaign rally that Obama was speaking at. When an elderly man held a pro-Trump sign up during Obama's speech, 'the crowd shouted and chanted at him' (Fisher, 2016) to which Obama told the crowd, "We live in a country that respects free speech... Don't try to shut [Trump supporters] down, no matter how much you might disagree with them". Trump supporters shouldn't have been scared to openly support their candidate for fear of damaging their reputations, and I believe the amount of celebrity endorsement Clinton received compared to Trump highlighted how much of an issue this was. If we'd known the amount of supporters Trump actually had throughout the election process, things could've turned out differently.

Free Speech in Religion

Another area I believe freedom of speech is threatened is within and surrounding the subject of religion. There have been many controversial cases on the topic of whether non-believers should be allowed the freedom to mock or forcefully question religion, or whether believers have the right to lawfully stop this. In his book *Free Speech: A Very Short Introduction*, Warburton notes this area is a difficult one to resolve as there's 'no straightforward resolution without giving one priority' (2009, p46); it's especially true when thinking of religions as beliefs, and if not believing in religion is a belief in itself, then why should one have the right not to be offended, over the others right to offend? An example is the Monty Python film, *Life of Brian*, in which the messiah (inspired by Jesus Christ) is called Brian, and when crucified the song 'Always Look on the Bright Side' is played. Many Christians were outraged by this sketch, but as Warburton notes, if 'secular heroes, such as Bertrand Russell, have not been immune from parody...why then should religious figures be immune?' (2009, p50)

This leads me on to question the difference between purposely offending and innocently questioning religions. Aayan Hirsan Ali made a film in 2004 that showed verses of the Qur'an painted on women's bodies to highlight her view that Islam treated women unfairly. Many Muslims were offended by the piece and proceeded to attack Aayan and the film's director even though, in interviews after the film's release, she stated 'her intention was not to attack Islam' but a 'plea for self-reflection within Islam' and that 'every form of self-expression should be allowed - except for physical and verbal abuse' (Warburton, 2009, p53). And while Muslims had the right to be upset by it, trying to remove Ali's freedom of expression by assassinating the film's director, Theo Van Gogh, surely is just as bad, if not worse.

While Ali's work may be considered blasphemy, which is of course deeply offensive to believers, and as Warburton quotes 'might easily be re-described as hate speech directed at the religious', he also states that 'all types of belief should be open to scrutiny, criticism, parody and potentially ridicule in a free society' (2009, p50) which I myself also believe. As with politics, in order to make informed decisions on your idea of "the truth" you

must allow your beliefs to be put under attack at times, by yourself or others, in order to see how far you can defend it, and if you can say your ideas have 'emerged unscathed or even strengthened', only then do we have 'any right to think of our judgement as better than another's' (Warburton, 2009, pg 27).

In the university setting

In the context of universities, especially those with the label of being "liberal", the problem with having this label is that it brings the assumption of only voicing left-wing or "politically correct" views. While researching, I found a student-written website called *TheCollegeFix* on which one article was based on discrimination due to people speaking their "controversial" views at their colleges in America. One student at Wesleyan University, who is a white male, wrote an article in his University newspaper where he questioned the Black Lives Matter movement. This student wasn't against it, but said that by supporters inciting violence towards police, it perhaps directed attention away from the important matter at hand instead of finding a solution. Once his article had been published, Bryan Stascavage was called a "racist and trash" and his picture was "posted online with comments that seemed to be calling for violence" (Stascavage, 2016). While the readers of the paper had every right to be upset, the problem comes when someone is bullied in to silence for expressing an opinion. He also said that while many students supported him, they were 'too scared to speak out in support'. Stascavage's views may not be correct, 'progress is achieved through a polite battle of ideas rather than through one side having exclusive access to the podium' (Warburton, 2009, p29); if we only let the opinions that are socially accepted to be heard, how will we know if there's a better way for us, as a society, to progress.

I think the problem with voicing controversial opinions in the university setting is perhaps our notion of what is "politically correct". What is wrong about this notion of "correctness" is that its 'judgements of right and wrong are made from an angle' (Warburton, 2009, p79), so while it may be "correct" for one set of ideas or beliefs, it's not true for the many coloured opinions of the whole.

This is also having an effect on the actual teachings we now have available in the education system. In 2016, 'one of Donald Trump's most provocative supporters' was 'barred from speaking at his former grammar school in the UK' (Ough, Swinford, 2016). The school had set up the talk 'with the consent of [the students parents]' for the students to gain insight and debate Yiannopolous' views. The event was cancelled 'after the Department for Education raised concerns about security and potential "reputational issues"' (Ough, Swinford, 2016).

How is this censorship on free speech sustainable for a multi cultural, democratic, diverse and interesting education and society? In his book, *'There's No Such Thing as Free Speech'*, Fish tells us that the key to exercising tolerance 'is not to avoid oppositional activity but to engage in it' (1994, p37), and this is the key idea we must sustain. Although this school was in the UK and had no say in the Electoral Vote, it's still vital for young people to understand the logistics of free speech in politics in order to sustain a democratic way of living in the future.

Catch 22

As I have mentioned many times throughout this essay, there's the Catch 22 aspect for what we can and can't censor to sustain freedom of speech, but also nourish a positive society. Where should the line be drawn between someone's freedom of speech, and the negative versions of it, such as hate speech and discrimination? As Fish said, to fight for free speech 'would require the disciplining of those who spoke scornfully of white and males and even Nazis, as well as those who spoke scornfully of blacks, women and gays' (1994, p75), which while may be true, Nazi- sympathy is something we clearly won't do as a society. So in theory, does that mean that some people deserve more access to the public podium?

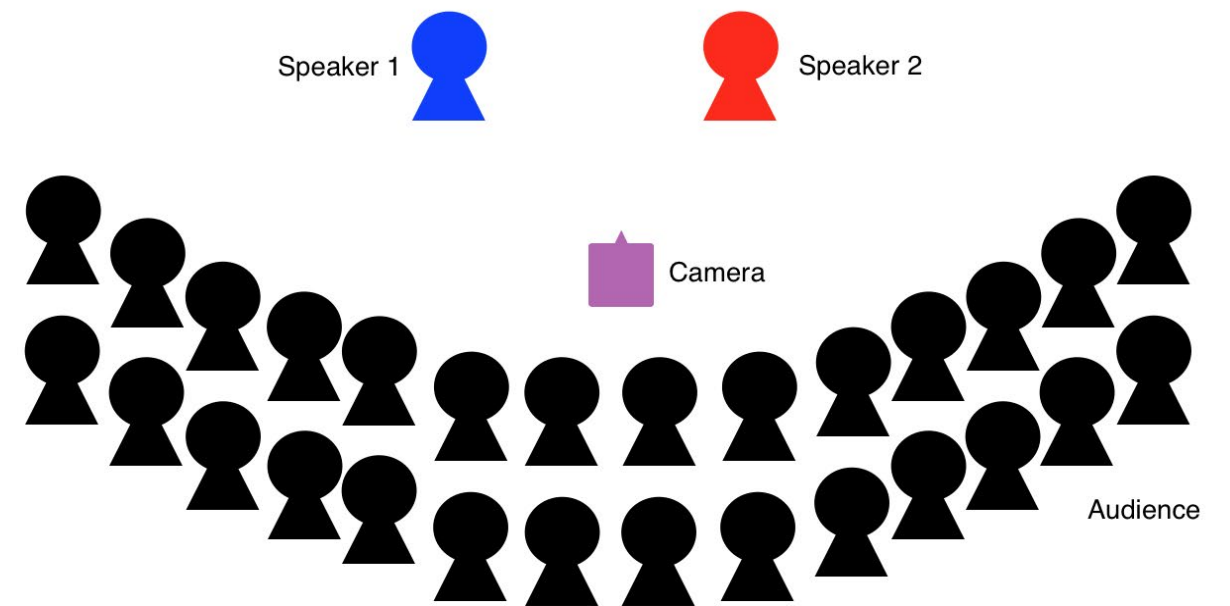
One example would be in Skokie 1977, where a 'First Amendment defence was used to protect a planned Neo-Nazi march' (Warburton, 2009, p56). The town of Skokie was known for being occupied by many Jewish families, some, themselves, holocaust survivors. The marchers planned to 'wear their uniforms' and 'carry swastikas' throughout the march, which of course, would cause extreme distress to the survivors. The local council had banned public marches after finding out about this, but the American Civil Liberties Union 'took up the case as a free speech issue' (Warburton, 2009, pg 57) and eventually won. This example of free speech shows that, to be a defender of it, you must protect 'the speech that you don't want to hear as well as the speech that you do' (Warburton, 2009, p1)

In my opinion, and backed up by that of John Stuart Mill, we need to set the boundary of free speech somewhere. No one should have the right to ostracise someone because of their beliefs, politics, race, etc, but we should have the right to say "I don't agree" or to voice our opposing opinions. Warburton explains in his book, that Mill, 'set the boundary [of free speech] at the point where speech or writing was an incitement to violence' (2009, p9) and I wholly agree with this. As long as you are not physically interfering, or trying to interfere, with the way that someone lives their life we should all have the freedom to express our opinions, controversial or otherwise.

Design Led Action

So, to design a method for solving the problem of speech being censored, feared or otherwise tarnished, I first looked at universities. I think the very simple resolution is to allow ourselves to hear as many different types of people inform us of their beliefs. As many problems come from the advertisement of speakers who come to talk in universities - e.g. affiliation with certain societies - causing people to make assumptions of what “side” they will take, I think it’s important for anyone coming in to be completely free of links to certain groups. I also think, to avoid as much protest or disruption to a talk, it’s important to bring an opposing side in at the same time; this way, one group are less likely to feel they are being attacked. It’ll also ensure that both sides of the argument are hearing the opposing side, at the same time as the person they’re supporting. We need this ‘challenging argument’ as without a debate on our values and beliefs, we ‘will be less alive as thinkers’ and ‘this will be bad not just for us, but for society at large as well’ (Warburton, 2009, p29); we need to hear the other side of the story to question, and either reaffirm or readjust our own. By doing this, it means the talks must sometimes host extremely controversial people to ensure we’re actually hearing every type of opinion; Kenan Malik, as quoted by Warburton says, ‘challenging bigotry by banning it can produce worse results than toleration and counter speech: ‘You simply let the sentiments fester underground’ (2009, p58), so we must let these, often despised opinions be heard from the people themselves, in order to question and perhaps tackle them.

Bringing this out in to the wider world, I think one problem with shows like *Question Time*, which has a very similar set up to the one I’ve just described, is the presence of a “presenter”. By having a middle person, although it directs the conversation, they can inadvertently “pick a side”, which effects the audience’s discussions in turn. Also, by having the shows broadcast on certain channels, which can be affiliated with different political parties, religions, etc, you’re already targeting people that would normally watch these channels, rather than reaching everyone; this means that the majority of people watching may share similar opinions, so there won’t be an interesting discussion from both sides off the back of it. To tackle this, I think the idea of presenters on debate shows should be removed and instead replaced by each speaker randomly choosing people from the audience to ask questions.



This way, they don’t know whether they are choosing someone who is for or against their ideas, and a more interesting discussion will come from this. Secondly, there needs to be a new television channel that is solely for the purpose of these types of shows, and be affiliated with nothing outside of the shows it produces. These shows must then be broadcast at a popular time so they are available for everyone to watch; this should be a tool for education, not entertainment.

Consequences

The negative consequence of this design-led action would be the offence inevitably caused to some people during the discussions, but this is one problem with free speech that we have to target: we can't disallow someone to speak because it causes upset, the 'best answer to bad speech is good speech, not censorship' (Dershowitz by Warburton, 2009, p34). We must also educate people in the difference between offensive and hate speech; hate speech '*aims to cause extreme offence and vilify its target audience*' (Warburton, 2009, p55) and offensive speech is just someone expressing their opinion, with *no intention* to hurt an individual. We can't stop people talking because it "touches a nerve", we must only stop them if it's clear their aim is to attack someone or incite violence.

We then come to the 'No Platform Argument', where some believe we shouldn't give bigoted people a platform to speak on as it may be 'indirectly endorsing' them (Warburton, 2009, p41). Should terrorists and dictators be given the chance to express their views in public? It's a difficult decision, as some believe this gives them credibility or a chance to "recruit" people; but as a defender of free speech, you have to apply the rule to all, not just those we find morally sound. And it works both ways, just as we are being allowed to listen to their side, they are also listening to ours, and it may challenge the way they think. Quoted by Warburton in his book, Richard Posner says, that people 'get upset when their way of life is challenged, yet that upset may be the beginning of doubt and lead eventually to change', and that's what we must hope for with discussions like these.

Conclusion

To conclude, the whole idea of free speech can be defined by the words of Voltaire, "I despise what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it" (n.d.), and if we truly believe in free speech, this is the attitude we must adopt. I believe we will not ever come to a complete resolution to everyone agreeing how far free speech should be allowed to go, as the same problem *for* it applies to its *solution* as well: we all have different ideas. But I believe taking the first big step towards allowing our opponents to speak as loudly and clearly as our allies will help us to better understand each other, and create a more accepting environment for all opinions to be equally heard, which will, in turn, sustain the democracy we live in. And not only will free speech sustain democracy, but 'without [it], humankind may be robbed of ideas that would otherwise have contributed to its development'. Some of the greatest scientists have been called mad at the time of their discoveries, but if we had silenced them because of this, would we be where we are today?

Probably not.

Word count: 2,711

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