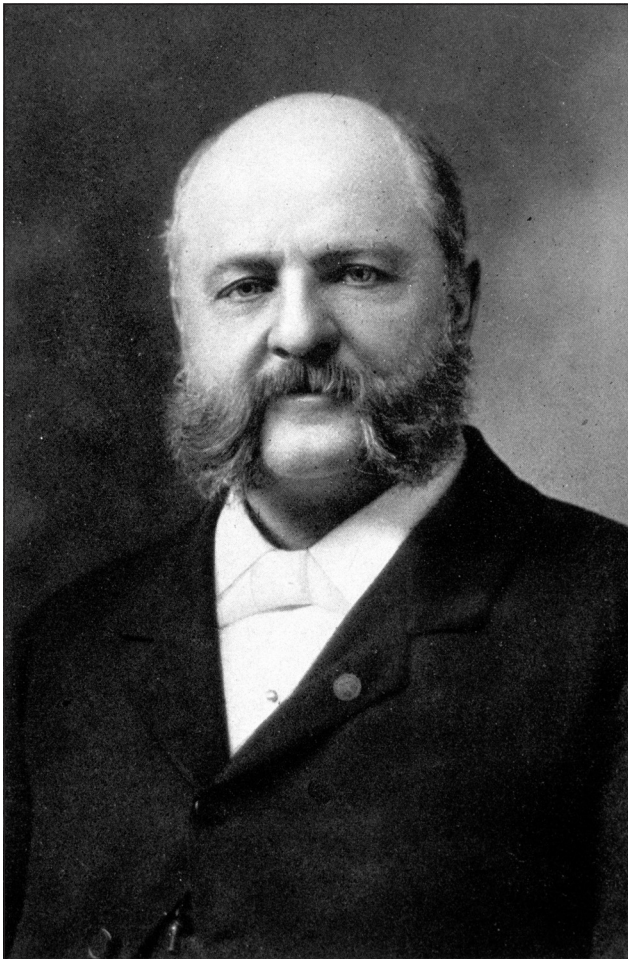


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Understanding Censorship



The Comstock Act of 1873, named after anti-vice activist Anthony Comstock (pictured above, ca. 1913), was an early example of book banning in the United States. Photo via Wikipedia. [Public domain.]

Challenging Information

Censorship can be broadly defined as an effort, by persons in some authority position, to restrict access to information of some kind or to refuse to house or store information in some capacity. While it is possible to try to censor verbal or vocal expression of ideas, censorship more often refers to efforts to restrict access to certain kinds of writing or other kinds of art.

Despite often influential claims to the contrary, censorship rarely serves a benevolent purpose, nor does it improve a society. Ideas and information cannot be eliminated through censorship and, to this point in history, there is no example of any censorship campaign that achieved its purpose. There are examples of instances in which censorship made some individuals within a society feel more comfortable and less frightened of the ideas they oppose, but censorship has never succeeded in eliminating any of the ideas or expressions that have been censored.

American society has had a complicated relationship with censorship. The right to access information, in the United States, is based in part on First Amendment guarantees.

First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment says that Congress cannot make laws that limit free expression and this applies to the state governments as well, through the incorporation doctrine. The First Amendment was intended to be a bulwark against the kind of censorship that occurred in the British monarchy when laws prohibited certain kinds of political expressions and ideas and were used to prevent resistance to authoritarian policies. The very idea of the First Amendment is that Americans are free to challenge authority and to organize and exchange ideas about important topics. However, though the architects of American society took a major leap forward in protecting free speech and expression at the constitutional level, this protection has never been absolute. When those in power, in America, perceive that certain ideas threaten their power, there have been efforts to censor or restrict those perceptively “dangerous” ideas.¹

It is widely agreed that censorship is permissible in cases involving information that poses a threat to public safety or security. A person might be prohibited, therefore, from publishing a dangerous pamphlet that called for some illegal or harmful action. A pamphlet calling for Americans to kill someone, for instance, could be censored on the basis that the idea in question was a request for illegal and harmful activity. Likewise, states are afforded the freedom to censor the publication or transmission of state secrets, military secrets, and other information that might pose a legitimate threat to national security. These powers, afforded to the state, can and have been abused. For instance, the leak of the Pentagon Papers in the 1970s, proving that successive American presidents and politicians had been lying to voters and the American public about the Vietnam War, was filled with information that had been classified on the basis of protecting national security. In reality, however, the information that was eventually leaked was not a threat to American security but merely an embarrassment to the politicians who had lied and misled voters for many years.

Many argue that it is permissible, in some cases, to restrict certain kinds of information from certain environments. A library that serves only children, for instance, may refuse to stock books that are beyond the capability of children to comprehend. Many Americans believe that children below a certain age (with much disagreement about what age) should not have access to information containing prohibited words, phrases, types of speech, or sexual content. This is the main form that censorship takes in modern America—the debate over what kind of information is appropriate for children and students.

Many might argue that it would be understandable, for instance, for a Jewish library to refuse to stock Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, citing moral objections to the ideas expressed within. There are, on the other hand, many Jewish scholars who have a copy of *Mein Kampf* or might want access to this text for research and scholarship purposes. The existence of certain ideas within a library or educational institution does not necessarily mean endorsement of the ideas therein on the part of the faculty or staff. While there are cases where censorship or exclusion of ideas is permitted and understandable, in general, censorship primarily serves the interest of those in power who fear that the spread of certain ideas or concurrent changes in society will diminish their privileges and power in the future.²

Power and Censorship in History

A prime example of how censorship serves those in power can be found in the many different efforts, over the centuries, to ban or restrict access to variations of the Christian Bible. Throughout history, there have been many separate efforts to ban or censor the Bible. In the Soviet Union, for instance, Christianity was for a long time depicted as a dangerous cult, while similar antireligious laws were established in the People's Republic of China. In the United States, Protestant authorities prohibited the reading or publication of Catholic Bibles or scripture. In all cases, conservatives in power feared that the ideas contained within

Christian scripture would lead people to organize in ways that would eventually challenge their power or privileges. Communist states banned religion not because religion is “bad” for people, but because they feared that religious movements would become strong enough to challenge their authority. Protestants in America banned the open practice of Catholicism not because they were interested in protecting the well-being of people, but because Protestant leaders feared that the organization of Catholics would challenge their dominance in American society.

There have been many cases of societies using censorship in an effort (that always fails) to eliminate ideas, but more often censorship is a symbolic action. Politicians, since prehistory, have used the censorship of ideas and expressions as a way to incite concern among the populace about larger issues. A book with profanity might be used, therefore, to make arguments about the decline of decorum or civility in modern society. A book with sexual themes might be used to make statements about the perceived decline in moral standards. Censorship stirs controversy by activating the engine of First Amendment debate, and this serves political needs allowing politicians to concentrate support and voter interest.

The censorship of political ideas is actually a very old tradition in America, beyond prohibitions on religious content. During World War I, the authoritarian executive branch under Woodrow Wilson passed laws that gave the government the power to censor any idea or expression that was critical of the US war effort or the effort to promote the war. This was clear political manipulation of the highest order and served no legitimate purpose, but the Wilson administration was able to use the fear of “subversion” and “espionage” to convince the public that censorship was needed to protect Americans from foreign and “enemy” manipulation. In this case, the promoters of censorship were supporters and beneficiaries of the military industrial complex, the combination of corporate leaders, political leaders, and military leaders who collectively control and profit from American militarism and foreign policy. The “dangerous ideas” in question were anticapitalist, pacifist, and antiestablishment ideas that called the nature of the military industrial complex and their leadership into question.³

Modern censorship is not typically about religious expression or political ideas, but typically focuses on concepts of morality. This is also a very old tradition in America where, from the beginning, ideas and expressions were censored when they conflicted with conservative Christian perceptions of morality, sexuality, gender relations, and many other social mores and norms specific to this dominant group.

A prime example can be found in the 1873 Comstock Laws, which were used to ban the publication of information on human anatomy and sexuality and then exploited to restrict access to birth control and other forms of contraception. In this case, the persons in power were traditionalist Christian conservative white men and the purpose of the Comstock Laws was not to protect children or American morality but to maintain male dominance and control over women. By denying women access to contraception, to education about their bodies and