

On Censorship and Freedom of Speech

The act of censorship has been around since the beginning of civilization. Historically, censorship has been spearheaded by the two most powerful social domains: government and religion. But the motivations and justifications for censorship have certainly changed over the centuries.

Virtually [every major era](#) throughout human history has had to deal with censorship of one sort or another—from the ancient Greeks and Romans all the way up through medieval Christianity and the Enlightenment.

Recently, Puffin Books, a children's imprint of Penguin Books, hired consultants to revise some of Roald Dahl's famous oeuvre. Dahl was a well-known 20th century Welsh writer of children's books, including [Charlie and the Chocolate Factory](#), [Matilda](#), and [The Witches](#).

Dahl has recently [been targeted](#) for his use of the words "fat" and "ugly" that are now deemed so offensive that they are actively being taken out of his work by those who believe the works need to include more inclusive language. As a consequence, there has been much disagreement on whether it's justified to retroactively edit someone's work to make it more palatable for a contemporary audience.

It is my position that no work should be limited in its circulation, especially if it has already passed through the publishing process. It does not matter who it offends or makes uncomfortable: Limiting and silencing ideas that could possibly offend is antithetical to the First Amendment.

To truly be in favor of free speech means that we must be willing to protect someone else's right to speak their mind, especially if it is something we disagree with. If we only

apply free speech to the ideas that we support, we are no better than the most draconian despot in history.

I am reminded that some of the greatest works of literature were, at one point or another, censored or silenced. These include J.D. Salinger's [*The Catcher in the Rye*](#), James Joyce's [*Ulysses*](#), Salman Rushdie's [*The Satanic Verses*](#), George Orwell's [*1984*](#), Lewis Carroll's [*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*](#), and William S. Burroughs' [*Naked Lunch*](#).

There is no doubt that there are moments in these works that could make one feel uncomfortable, but we have a decision to make. We can decide to read the work or not. But it would be an error in judgment to suggest that because we are offended by a piece of literature that no one else should be able to read it either. It is also a questionable stretch to suggest that children would be hurt by the words "fat" and "ugly," as in the case of Dahl's work.

It is also true that censoring work often has the opposite effect it was intended to. As a child, when I was told not to do something, it would often ignite my interest and motivation to do that very thing. For better or worse, it is a part of the human condition that we are drawn to those things we are told to stay away from. We all want the ability to make our own decisions about what we consume. It is not for someone else to make that decision for us.

However, it is important to note that censorship, broadly speaking, should not be confused with parents deciding what is age-appropriate for their children.

For instance, in Florida, it was [reported last week](#) that Toni Morrison's novel [*The Bluest Eye*](#) had been removed from high schools throughout the state. The reason given was that the novel portrayed pornographic content. While this claim has been disputed, parents exercising discretion over what their kids are exposed to—and having concerns about graphic content

in schools—is certainly different than a publisher retroactively censoring a text or other forms of censorship.

Instead of policing language, creators and publishers ought to focus on creating and publishing and allow individuals—or, in the case of kids, parents—to make their own decisions about what they consume.

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