To: Professor Mann

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Subject: First Amendment Questions and the Digital World

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1.

As someone protected by the First Amendment, I use online tools and platforms to get and share information. I read news from TikTok and YouTube commentary channels because they are convenient, and I am already on those sites. I also check out a few articles if I want some more coverage on topics. For quick updates, I use X. It gives me fast information, but I know they also spread wrong or half stories. To share my own views, I use group chats. I use ChatGPT to help me understand topics or to draft posts. I can say I'm well-informed when it comes to the topics I'm interested in. I tend to stay far away from politics. I try to read different sources, but sometimes I rely on social media. I trust sources that cite evidence and correct their mistakes. I do not trust the first viral TikTok posts that come out about a topic. I tend to go look for articles talking about the topic, like, for instance, the D4vd situation, where there were posts saying he ran from the cops, which never happened.

2.

The government has a reasonably limited role in controlling speech because of the First Amendment. They cannot restrict speech just because it's offensive or false. But it can step in when speech falls into special categories like threats, violence, or fraud (Brandenburg v. Ohio, 1969). For example, the Department of Justice goes after terrorist propaganda online. The Federal Trade Commission also stops companies from using false ads. Another example is when the government investigated foreign misinformation during the 2016 election (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). I think the government should stay focused on protecting national security, stopping violence, and preventing scams. If it goes further, it would be censorship and limiting free speech.

3.

Private companies like Facebook, X, and YouTube do not have to follow the First Amendment. They make their own rules about what speech is allowed on their platforms. For example, YouTube bans hate speech and health misinformation, especially about COVID-19 (YouTube). After the January 6 Capitol riot, Facebook and Twitter banned Donald Trump because his posts were seen as encouraging more violence (BBC, 2021). I think private platforms should limit content that spreads hate, violence, or dangerous lies. But they should also be clear about their rules and give people ways to appeal decisions.

4.

In 2017 at Middlebury College in Vermont, students protested when Charles Murray was invited to speak. Murray is controversial because of his book The Bell Curve, which people say has racist ideas. Students shouted him down, and when he tried to leave, the protest became violent (Heim, 2017). I do not think shutting down the event was the right choice. A university should be a place where tough ideas are discussed and debated. By stopping him from speaking, students stopped open discussion. At the same time, I get why they were upset and think his ideas were harmful. A better approach would have been to allow him to speak but also create space for protest, fact-checking, and debate afterward.

5.

I believe technology and the internet have made democracy stronger, but they also bring problems. On the light side, digital platforms give voices to many people who were often ignored. Movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo grew because people could share stories and organize online (Clayton, 2016). On the dark side, misinformation spreads faster than ever. For example, conspiracy theories like QAnon spread widely on Facebook and other sites, leading to real world violence (Frenkel & Benner, 2021). Social media algorithms also put people into echo chambers, where they only see views that agree with their own. The internet strengthens democracy when people use it responsibly, platforms are fair with their rules, and the government enforces laws against real harm. Without these the same tools can weaken trust and divide people.

Sources

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