

First Amendment Questions and the Digital World

To: Instructor Yusi

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Subject: First Amendment Questions and the Digital World

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1. Sources of Information and First Amendment Freedoms

I get most of my information from online news, social media, podcasts, YouTube, and conversations with other people. I use sources such as Reuters, BBC News, Al Jazeera, CNN, and The Wall Street Journal, while also checking X, YouTube, and Reddit to see different perspectives. I believe I am moderately well-informed because I compare sources instead of relying on one outlet. However, misinformation spreads quickly online, and algorithms often push emotional or controversial content because it increases engagement (Jiang et al., 2021). I trust sources that provide evidence and avoid sensational language. I distrust anonymous accounts, clickbait websites, and influencer commentary that does not cite facts.

2. The Role of Government in Restricting Misleading or Hateful Content

The government should have a limited role in removing online speech because the First Amendment protects even unpopular or offensive opinions. However, the government can act when speech becomes a true threat, incites imminent violence, supports criminal activity, or involves foreign interference. For example, CISA has warned that foreign actors use online platforms to spread disinformation and divide the public (CISA, 2022). After January 6, investigators also examined how extremist groups used social media to support illegal activity (United States House of Representatives, 2022). In my opinion, the government should focus on

public education, transparency, cybersecurity, and enforcing laws against threats instead of broadly censoring speech.

3. The Role of Private Companies and Social Media Platforms

Private companies like Meta, X, and YouTube also have responsibility because they control major communication platforms. Since they are private businesses, they are not bound by the First Amendment in the same way as the government. They should remove direct threats, harassment, terrorism-related content, and clearly harmful misinformation. At the same time, they should avoid removing lawful political debate simply because it is unpopular. Their rules should be clear, consistently enforced, and include an appeals process. Users should also understand through platform terms that online information comes from many people and should be viewed carefully.

4. University Speaker Protests and the First Amendment

A published example occurred in 2017 at Middlebury College when students shouted down Charles Murray and prevented him from speaking (PBS NewsHour, 2017). I do not think that was an appropriate response. Students have the right to protest, but stopping a speaker completely undermines free expression. Universities should allow peaceful protest, questioning, and criticism, but they should not allow disruptions that silence invited speakers. Letting someone speak does not mean the school agrees with the speaker.

5. Technology, the Internet, and Democracy

Technology both strengthens and weakens democracy. It helps people access information, organize movements, expose wrongdoing, and participate in public debate. At the same time, misinformation, echo chambers, and algorithm-driven outrage can weaken public trust and increase polarization (Reuters Institute, 2018). AI and deepfakes may make these

problems worse. Overall, I believe the internet is still more helpful than harmful, but society needs stronger media literacy, responsible platform policies, and careful protection of First Amendment rights.

References

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