

## **Does free speech build or break a community?**

Communities are fragile concepts (Bauman, 2000). Most people struggle to identify a physical community they belong to, yet historically, they have been essential for trust and societal efficacy (Anderson, 2010). The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2024) defines ‘community’ in several ways, including groups based on geography, identity, and common interests. This essay will consider all three when exploring whether free speech helps build and sustain communities or undermines them to the point of dissolution.

Free speech is often correlated with diversity, allowing the discussion of a broad range of ideas that may otherwise be suppressed. This diversity of thought is beneficial as a variety in ways of thinking means that a range of views are put forward, and that these are evaluated and judged fairly by those that see certain concepts differently: substantiated discourse occurs, strengthening decision-making (Page, 2007). When people with diverse perspectives can critique ideas, the consensus becomes more robust and well-developed. This is why a diversity of opinions, resulting from the freedom of speech, forms part of the core of modern Western democracy. This is emphasised by a societal and governmental emphasis on diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2020; Gedling Borough Council, 2021). Diverse ideas are instrumental to Western communities as way to decide on courses of action together. In many communities, elected councils, commissions, and boards ensure free speech. Their representative members reflect the community’s diversity, leading to better decision-making. Since beneficial decisions promote community development, this suggests free speech helps build communities.

However, restrictions on speech are not entirely negative for communities. In medieval Europe, the Roman Catholic Church denounced heresies, what were perceived as sinful, blasphemous differences in theology and religious practices, leading to severe persecution. The Waldensian movement, for example, was zealously hunted—their brutal mistreatment started with the burning of eighty of their members in Strasbourg in 1211 (Ellwood and Alles, 2007). Despite restrictions on religious speech, many medieval Catholic European communities thrived, remaining cohesive through faith. These settlements still form the roots of settlements in Europe today. This demonstrates that censorship can provide stability to communities, helping them to survive. On the other hand, as later discussed, this was not without heavy religious conflict. Repression bred resentment and a desire for retribution. A mix of underground movements, violent resistance, and rulers converting meant

that Protestantism eventually became commonplace, especially in Britain and the Low Countries, despite the opposition it faced. Whilst censorship initially maintained order, this division challenges the idea that restrictions on speech increase the long-term survival of communities and their strength.

However, in certain cases, censorship may still aid communities. In a theoretical sense, the harm free speech presents is clear: by allowing the expression of dissent, it is allowed to spread. As unity often depends on shared beliefs and leadership, this can lead to fragmentation, damaging the community. This is linked to the idea of social change cascading. For example, in the United Kingdom, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967, the age of consent was equalised in 2001, and same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013. It is unlikely the latter two would have occurred without the first. Repressing non-mainstream concepts, such as homosexuality, can delay social change. This division prevents integration between minority and majority groups. However, by making these unorthodox ideas less visible, they inevitably spread much slower. This limits the amount of dissent and otherness, providing common ground for the community. This highlights how the restriction of speech can aid community-building. By regulating speech, governments can enforce unity within their community, strengthening them against external pressures and promoting internal stability. Another example of this is Joseph Stalin's Great Purge, which, through censorship and propaganda with harsh punishments for alleged dissent, created a unified front that allowed for military and economic success, such as the Five-Year Plans and rapid Soviet industrialisation, contributing to their resilience during the Second World War, and thereby strengthening their community. However, the long-term damage to individual freedoms, extensive human costs the purges had, and the creation of a culture of fear, suggest that whilst extreme censorship may provide short-term stability, it undermines the fundamental values of trust and collaboration that sustain a healthy community. The fear-driven loyalty it produced was unsustainable, necessitating reforms as part of de-Stalinisation, as introduced by Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev.

Moreover, history also shows that this censorship is often ineffective. Even under strict censorship, unorthodox ideas continue to spread—albeit slowly. The British government's efforts to suppress homosexuality only intensified the gay rights movement, which reached a peak in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the AIDS crisis and with the repressive Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. Similarly, what were perceived as heresies survived in Europe despite several inter-denominational wars—the Albigensian Crusade, the

Hussite Wars, and the Eighty Years' War to name a few—and the severe punishment of dissenters such as Jan Hus and Thomas Cranmer through torture and execution. Nowadays, these 'heresies' are widespread in Europe, Protestants accounting for a fifth of European Christians (Pew Research Center, 2011). This shows that restrictions on speech can be ineffective at containing unwanted ideas and thus do not always help to promote unity within a community. Additionally, strict impositions may exacerbate tensions, both inside the community and externally, causing more conflict. This means that restrictions on speech may even help to damage and break a community by introducing irreparable social and legal divides.

Today, free speech is widely recognised as a fundamental human right, with censorship like that overseen by the Lord Chamberlain in the UK prior to the 1960s being rare in developed countries (Handley, 2004). Despite this, a sense of community has declined in real life. Trust, neighbourly conversation, and overall cohesion have significantly fallen within local communities in the last decade (Borkowska and Laurence, 2021). A sense of belonging has been on the decline for the last decade, as well as reported membership of political, voluntary, professional, or recreational organisations (Mohdin, 2020). However, this trend applies mainly to physical communities, not virtual ones. Future evaluation should consider how digital communities, such as those on platforms such as microblogs, imageboards, and forums, are affected by free speech and censorship.

Ultimately, free speech is crucial in the early stages of a community. In a vulnerable state, informed decision-making improves survival. By leading to the free exchange of ideas, free speech fosters trust, social equality, and democracy, helping decision-making. However, whilst gentle censorship may increase social cohesion and harmony by slowing the spread of minority viewpoints, this often leads to greater unrest and division in the long term. Free speech enables communities to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances, fostering trust, progress, and effective decision-making, essential for enduring unity and resilience. In contrast, heavy-handed restrictions, as in medieval Europe and the USSR, weaken the very foundations of communities by stifling discourse and creating artificial, fear-driven unity. This has ultimately led to entrenched divisions and perceptions that mean these restrictions have continued to harm society, such as in the Troubles, originating from sectarian divide in Northern Ireland. Therefore, despite the risk of divisive opinions, free speech remains essential to sustainable communities. Rather than breaking them, it allows them to rebuild, reform, and grow stronger.

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