

Coronavirus and Free Speech

PREMISE OF THE LESSON:

The world suddenly faces the daunting challenge of a viral pandemic. In this lesson, students consider an article by FIRE President Greg Lukianoff in which he argues that freedom of speech is an essential component to create the scholarly climate that will allow varying opinions on the virus to be discussed in a useful spirit of open inquiry.

LESSON PLAN:

Have students read the summarized article and respond to the questions below.

VOCABULARY:

epicenter
whistleblower
authoritarian
regime
sleuthing
objective (truth)
veracity
inhibited
credibility
systematically

QUESTIONS:

Why might an authoritarian regime consider free speech a threat?

How did censorship of speech in China contribute to the global coronavirus pandemic?

Why does the United States government have “little legitimate power to control what citizens say?” What does the First Amendment require of the government regarding free speech?

How does the First Amendment apply to newspapers, television news, and the internet in the United States during this coronavirus pandemic? How is it different in China?

What are some reasons the Chinese government might have thought it was a good idea to withhold information about the initial spread of the virus?



What differences are there in speech rights between an authoritarian regime and a constitutional, democratic republic? What can happen to a person in China who says things that the government doesn't like?

The author claims that the value in someone expressing [an inaccurate] opinion is the ability to know what opinion an individual holds. Do you agree or disagree that there is value in hearing someone express something that is not entirely accurate? What can you learn from allowing them to express inaccurate opinions?

This article asserts that, "Both for scientific reasons and for our success as a democratic republic, we need to know more, not less about the ideas in our fellow humans' heads." Why is it important, in a democratic republic, to know what people are thinking?

Can the spread of inaccurate information cause harm? What remedy is there for that, under the Constitution and the First Amendment?

[Some possible answers:

[Counterspeech](#) - "The remedy for speech that is false is speech that is true. This is the ordinary course in a free society. The response to the unreasoned is the rational; to the uninformed, the enlightened; to the straight-out lie, the simple truth." —[Justice Kennedy, United States v. Alvarez](#)

"If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence" and "the fitting remedy for evil counsels is good ones."—Justice Brandeis, [Whitney v. California](#)

Some famous, classical thoughts on truth and its ability to withstand and overcome falsehood:

"And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"
—Milton, [Areopagitica](#)

"But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."
— John Stuart Mill, ["On Liberty"](#)

"Printers are educated in the belief that even when men differ in Opinion,



both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick: and that even when Truth and Error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.” —Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania Gazette June 10, 1731.]

Mr. Lukianoff states that, “It is always important to know what people really believe, especially when the belief is perplexing or troubling. In the overwhelming majority of scenarios you are not safer or better off for knowing less about what people really think.” Do you agree that knowing less about what people really think makes you less safe or less well off? Why or why not?

Is saying something that is inaccurate or untrue against the law in the United States?

What might happen if the United States government had the authority to determine which views are correct and which opinions must be expressed?

Why does the US Constitution protect the right to be incorrect or wrong?

The author of this essay says that “China was foolish to silence early whistleblowers for ‘rumor mongering.’” Do you agree or disagree with this assertion?

What does it mean to “chill” or “inhibit” speech? Has this ever happened to you or to someone you know?

What is “objective truth?” What is the opposite of “objective truth?”

What role will free speech and a free press have to play in finding treatments and a vaccine for the coronavirus?

