

Opinion

We must confront the very real crisis facing our First Amendment rights

By EMILY BURTON
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Emily Burton Sherman

On this we can agree - there is no true democracy without a robust and free exchange of ideas among all citizens, even those the current administration finds undesirable. Freedom of speech is a beacon of hope on which our nation depends to find its way past the pitfalls of autocracy and fascism.

Lately, however, we find ourselves on the crumbling edges of a very dangerous precipice. The latest political attacks on free speech are nothing short of the beginning of our end. A citizenry that cannot hold a hearty and hale discussion of the nation's business, its leaders and its fools, is no longer the heirs of the inalienable rights they've been granted in perpetuity. Their coffers have been robbed by the very leaders elected to safeguard them.

A citizenry that cannot comment on the actions of its politicians - in jest, in anger, in fear, or in pursuit of the truth - has already capitulated to the tide of fascism poisoning our nation's blood. A citizenry that cannot hold their public servants and public personas accountable through the work of a hearty and independent media has already lost their place at the nation's rudder and instead has been confined as chattel to the darkened hold.

When the Pentagon forces journalists to promise to only report what it feeds them as "news," we are no longer a free people. When comedians are canceled because they offend the president's friends, we are no longer a free people. When political criticisms by the common man are recast as hate speech simply because they go against the President's chosen narrative, we are no longer a free people.

When the President shuts down the publication of

reports that our country's scientists and social workers rely upon to make crucial decisions at the national level, we are no longer a voting public to be feared but ignorant masses to be managed.

For example, the USDA's most recent study of food insecurity in America noted an approximately 13% increase from 2022 to 2023 in the number of homes where sufficient food was not guaranteed. During the first USDA Food Security Survey, in 1995, about 11.8 million U.S. homes experienced bouts of hunger or lack of sufficient food.

This number has now reached 18 million. This figure, however, does not paint a glowing picture of the President's ability to put a chicken in every pot, as his party famously promised voters in the 1920s. Therefore, the President shut down the USDA's annual report last week, despite the growing threat of hunger among the nation's working class. You see, it's hard for critics to prove there is a problem if there isn't any data collected to prove it.

The same fate has befallen our National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's weather and climate research, necessary to not only track major weather events but also contribute to the nation's understanding of climate change. In April, hundreds of scientists and experts working to produce the next National Climate Assessment were fired and the report's website taken down.

Shuttering the voices of our nation's best and brightest scientists does nothing to actually change our reality. It does nothing to better the future of our grandchildren. But our president has no interest in solving the nation's problems, only silencing them.

We no longer have the luxury to blame past administrations for the current struggles in our nation. History will not change its stripes under such criticism. Instead we must confront the very real crisis facing our First Amendment rights. It is the bastion on which all other constitutional guarantees rely.

We cannot protest a masked police force if we no

longer have the right to protest. We cannot criticize our elected officials and their appointed cronies if we fear the far-right's new cancel culture. We cannot question the false narrative being spun by the White House if we blindly accept that every criticism turned against them is some form of hate speech.

If we allow our nation to fall under this growing wave of censorship, there will be no shining beacon of light to guide us home, as George Orwell's famous protagonist, Winston Smith, realized in the novel "1984."

"The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command," Winston tells the reader. "His heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him ..."

One can sympathize after the events of last week.

In the past six months alone, The Party has told us political descent is hate speech. The Party told us hundreds of climate scientists were lying. The Party told us blatant human rights violations at ICE facilities were none of our concern and prevented legally allowed inspections by elected officials from taking place.

The Party told us some Americans deserved the blessings of the First Amendment more than others, and that they got to decide whom that would be from now on.

"If I lived in China or even Russia... maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges," said Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, shortly before his assassination. "But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for rights."

Somewhere I read that the president wanted to make America great again. One would hope this includes upholding The Constitution and all of its Amendments, even the uncomfortable ones.

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We need calm, compelling voices from the middle

By AL CROSS
Kentucky Lantern

I got a surprise phone call last week from the other side of the world, where an American expatriate was worried about the future of his country in the wake of the Charlie Kirk assassination. We agreed that the dis-United States of America needs calming voices who can command attention — a tall order in a media landscape that is dominated by sources that are provocative, inflammatory and often false. All of us need to help change that.

American public discourse is now driven by opinion, not by facts, largely because of social-media platforms that favor opinion and use secret algorithms that promote the most provocative views to compete in the new "attention economy." The decline of the traditional news business reflects the reality that the market for fact has shrunk while the market for opinion has grown. Americans prefer to be entertained, and have their views confirmed, than be informed — especially by facts that might conflict with those views.

So, what can we agree on? I would like to think that virtually all Americans agree that political violence is never justified, and that the vast majority of us would probably say likewise about speech that advocates political violence. There are laws against such things.

What, then, about speech that celebrates political violence, even a crime that results in death? That sort of speech, however repugnant, has been protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. But now people are getting fired for callous things they said about Charlie Kirk's death, and President Trump and his top lieu-

tenants are using the assassination to more deeply demonize and outright threaten their political opponents.

"Mourn him respectfully or suffer the consequences," as the Reuters news service described the approach. Ironically, Kirk, who had plenty of controversial views, was lauded most as a champion of free speech; now his friends and allies are using his death to suppress speech — and maybe more.

"There is no civility in the celebration of political assassination," Vice President JD Vance said Monday, alleging "leftist" funding of "terrorist sympathizers" and urging his audience to call employers of those who've made comments they find objectionable.

Trump said without evidence, "We have some pretty radical groups and they got away with murder." Lexington businessman Nate Morris, who began his Senate campaign with a Kirk-hosted rally and wants Trump's endorsement, was on the same page, telling Breitbart News that the "radical left has blood on their hands."

Trump's deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, said the government will use its power to take liberal groups' money and power "and, if you've broken the law, to take away your freedom." Miller recently said that the Democratic Party is not a political party but "a domestic extremist organization . . . exclusively dedicated to protecting terrorists, criminals, gang-bangers and murderers."

That's ridiculous, but it sets the stage for the government to go after the opposing party, and that's the sort of thing my expatriate friend and I worry about. Trump clearly revels in the exercise of power, and has indicated no interest in using the power of his office to cool the

conversation, as Utah Gov. Spencer Cox tried to do. But some Republicans wish Trump would.

On KET's "Kentucky Tonight" Monday night, Kentucky Republican strategist Amy Wickliffe said political leaders, from the White House on down, need to call for "taking the rhetoric down." She acknowledged that's "really hard" to do with "people in your sphere," but "Where we go from here, it's on us. It's on all of us."

The maxim, "All that is necessary for evil to prevail is for good men and women to do nothing," is not as operative as it was in the old media environment, when extreme voices had little access to mass audiences. Now, the extremes are amplified in huge echo chambers, and many Americans in the middle have dropped out of the toxic talk. The fact that flags went to half-staff for the death of a political activist who was unknown to many if not most Americans shows how our political tribes live in different realities.

Perhaps the best place for good women and men to do something about the current crisis is not on social media, but face to face, one on one and in small groups — where there is at least a modicum of trust and respect.

Cox, the Utah governor, said we should "log off, turn off, touch grass, hug a family member, go out and do good in your community." At a local philanthropic event in my hometown of Albany last weekend, I told a friend that everyone has a civic responsibility to improve the community where they live. Now, technology has made us part of a national community that needs improving, and we all have a role to play.

Rates of some cancers rising among younger adults

By DR. GARY GROSEL
Chief Medical Officer, UnitedHealthcare of Kentucky

The latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show 35,939 cancer cases were reported in Kentucky in 2022.

About 1 in 3 people in the U.S. are affected by cancer and about 2 million new cases of cancer are diagnosed each year.

Breast and colorectal cancer diagnoses, in particular, have been on the rise since the mid-2000s, and these cancers are being diagnosed more often at younger ages.

A cancer diagnosis can impact people's lives in many ways. Early cancer detection may play a key role in helping to improve health outcomes and lower health care costs.

The five-year survival rate for colorectal cancer when caught in its early stages is over 90%, for example. At the most advanced stages, the five-year survival rate for this type of cancer is 13% and treatment may result in long-term side effects.

So, what can you do to help potentially reduce your cancer risk? Here are three things to consider:

Understand your cancer risk factors

Knowing your risk factors of developing cancer or other chronic conditions is an important step in helping to protect your health.

Some cancer risk factors, like age, genetics and family history, are out of your control. Tell your doctor about your family health history to help determine if you may have a higher risk of developing certain cancers.

Understanding your risk can help you and your doctor decide when to begin certain preventive screenings and diagnostic services that may help detect any issues early when treatment may be more effective.

While there's no way to prevent all cancers, there are some lifestyle choices you can make that may support your overall health and potentially help reduce cancer risk as well.

Choose a healthier lifestyle

In the United States at least 18% of cancers are related to excess body weight, physical inactivity, alcohol consumption, and poor nutrition, according to the American Cancer Society.

There are some lifestyle modifications people can make that may result in better overall health and reduced risk for cancer and other chronic conditions.

Eat a balanced diet. Focus on vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean protein. A healthy diet can help to support your overall well-being. In fact, research shows that people who eat a "Mediterranean diet" have a lower risk of breast cancer, for example.

Prioritize movement and maintain a healthy weight. Regular exercise is good for your overall health and physical activity has been shown to help reduce the risk of certain types of cancer.

Limit alcohol consumption and avoid tobacco and smoking. Alcohol abuse is linked to some types of cancer like those of the oral cavity, esophagus, and liver. Smoking can increase the risk of developing many types of cancer including colon and lung cancers. Chewing tobacco is also linked to cancer, especially head and neck cancers.

Kentuckians and cancer screenings

In Kentucky, 69 percent of women ages 40-74 report receiving a mammogram in the past two years, while 64 percent of people ages 45-75 report receiving one or more of the recommended colorectal cancer screening tests within the recommended time intervals.

Keeping up with doctor visits, preventive screenings and diagnostic services can be an important part of overall health.

Remember to schedule your annual wellness exam and preventive screenings. Health plans usually cover preventive care, and you may pay \$0 out-of-pocket for certain covered preventive services if you go to a network provider.

Talk to your employer and health plan

Check with your employer and health plan to see what benefits are available to help support your health and well-being.

Timely diagnoses may improve health outcomes and help with medical expenses, especially when it comes to cancer. Screenings may include physical exams, lab tests, and imaging, many of which are used in cancer detection and may be covered by health plans.

Taking proactive steps to protect your health today may help you reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic conditions tomorrow.

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