



## **Ancient versus Modern Series**

### **‘Approach to information censorship through time’**

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## **Series Summary**

When we talk about directions and the latest trends in information and data management, we often focus on the here and now without necessarily looking at the historical influences that have helped us in our journey. This series of research papers and subsequent presentations will take us back in time to delve into aspects of our past and discuss the attitudes and approaches that may have impacted on the advancements of today. It is only through the advancement in collaboration, research and technology that we have been able to uncover the approaches of the past to help steer our journey of the future.

### **PAPER - Approach to information censorship through time**

For better or worse, censorship of taboo information is about control. Be it digitally or physically, we now have the luxury of archiving information in an orderly fashion, enhancing our ability to analyse data effectively and in a controlled environment. Was this always the case?

From time immemorial people have found ways to censor that which threatens the status quo. Although we have the luxury of using digital methods for managing records and censoring information that allows us to retain the bulk of the content, we are faced with such an abundance of digital and physical information that it can feel like an impossible challenge to feel as though we have full control.

The ancients had a similar, yet all too different problem:

Consider the challenge of doing so in an era in which much of the content in need of silencing was through word of mouth alone, leaving behind no physical record. Still, censorship remained, only in other forms.

The democracy of ancient Greece (particularly Athens) allowed for a lot of self-expression, provided it did not undermine the values of Greece at the time. When this boundary was crossed (often by historians and writers) they would be tried for their crimes, and, not uncommonly, exiled. Anaxagoras, for instance, was a philosopher that was charged with impiety and exiled from Athens to Lampsacus c.450BCE for his theory that the sun and the moon were, in fact, made of rock and were not the works of gods.

If being exiled was not enough of a punishment, then those who dared to speak against the established ways of life and were considered a threat to the future of Greek culture would be put to death. Bring your mind to the execution of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates in 399BCE-the consequence of accusations of having disrespected the gods whilst also

introducing new ones, as well as his efforts to corrupt the minds of the younger generations. Or did he? Although his name and philosophy are familiar to many, he himself is not thought to have written any of the texts that we attribute to him. Rather, these accounts were written by his pupil, Plato. This is a consistent problem students of ancient history run into: the uncertainty of authorship which, consequently, makes it impossible to come to specific conclusions.

This execution is a prime example. It is possible that Plato had glorified Socrates, minimising his crimes and manipulating the ways in which future generations perceived the philosopher. Should this be the case, then we can argue that this is a form of censorship in its own right.

Another issue with ancient texts is that we are unable to rely solely on physical files due to wide-spread illiteracy. Alternatively, one of the key sources of information surrounding taboo, political affairs, and social values were theatrical plays. Even then, these were not without their fair share of censorship. Should a play include a scene of battle, it was to be performed off stage, while the chorus (a collection of people on stage that sang and told the story) explained the gruesome details of the scene. Actors were to wear masks, portraying the concept of the person they are playing rather than a direct representation, especially if they were portraying authorities or deities in an unfashionable light. It should also be known that it was not considered appropriate for women to watch too many tragedies at once, the thought being that their constitution could not handle too many emotions in one sitting. This, it can be argued, is another form of censorship, although rather than removing the confronting content of the plays themselves, they would remove the women entirely.

Upon reflection, it can be concluded that a significant part of censorship of taboo information in antiquity saw the removal of the person, be it by exile or death, rather than the redaction of specific written passages.

Time moved on, and with it came new social norms. Amongst other things, religious movements created more strict expectations on what was deemed appropriate in relation to romance, sexuality, and marriage. As such, explicit content was often at the forefront of taboo information redaction. In fact, there were often specific locations in libraries dedicated to keeping said content away from prying eyes. The Bodleian Library in Oxford, United Kingdom was no exception to this. In fact, from the year 1882 the shelves of the notorious library kept a collection of books locked away from public consumption known as the Phi Collection. If the spine of a book was stamped with a Phi symbol ( $\Phi$ ), this told those in the know that the contents of the book were explicit and unacceptable, housing over 2000 literary texts. They were kept from students and the public alike, whilst also ensuring that there was no interference with the texts themselves. Despite this, the collection itself did

not suffer much outrage, nor were the texts intended for destruction. Rather, it can be inferred that libraries upheld a standard of preservation even for texts that threatened societal sanctity, prioritising the preservation of information (Houston, 2015).

Amongst these forbidden books sat some of the most iconic pieces of literature we continue to familiarise ourselves with today, including the first edition of *'The Picture of Dorian Gray'* by Oscar Wilde. Many people are familiar with the iconic tale of a young man who so greatly wishes that he could retain his youthful beauty, watching in horror and regret as his wish came true and the portrait he'd had painted aged and warped before his eyes in his stead. However, how many know that the version of that book we are so familiar with is not the original, and is in fact a highly censored text that omits themes of homosexuality? The keepers of the Phi Collection certainly knew. The text was deemed inappropriate for public consumption, but by today's standards the text is incredibly tame:

*"It is quite true," Basil confesses, "that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should give to another friend... Somehow I have never loved a woman"* (p144, Wilde; Frankel).

What we may learn from this is that when we, as modern consumers, read the word 'explicit,' we hold it not to a different standard (indeed, the people of the past were just as passionate about their societal standards as we are) but to a different meaning. As such, we expect much more vulgarity than a text of this kind offers, the preservation of these texts giving insight into the transition of values over time.

Wilde's homosexual subtexts were certainly not the first to shock the public into censoring his work. Throughout his career that spanned from the mid-1500s to the early 1600s, William Shakespeare produced a number of sonnets that are still regarded as some of the most important pieces of English literature to this day.

Decades after Shakespeare's death, in the year 1640, a seemingly disapproving John Benson republished the sonnets after changing the pronouns from masculine to feminine in order to adhere to current laws and accepted behaviours. Classic sonnets: iconic verses, all censored to avoid the confronting romanticisation of one man's love for another. *"A man in hue, all hues in his controlling...for a woman wert thou first created"* the speaker of Sonnet 20 declares, for example. Despite the original texts being restored and made public a century later, these censored versions of the sonnets remain the most commonly used in education and leisurely reading. It is here we see how censorship of the past has ingrained itself into our current perceptions of history and culture. It is important to remember that there was no particular word for homosexuality when Shakespeare was writing his sonnets,

but that did not stop it from being a crime at the time, and as such the censorship of the texts were, in a sense, the bodies to receive the punishment so the writer could survive.

Human nature conditions us to prioritise and protect that which we hold to great importance. When weather or warfare threatened the preservation of texts, history has told us that there was, in fact, a hierarchy and an order in which books were to be protected. This tells us a lot about what people valued during various lifetimes, or perhaps how authoritative influences represented the masses that may actually have felt differently. Even so, it is worth wondering, if texts such as these were truly so unforgivable and threatening to former ways of life, why would the people of the past not just simply destroy the books?

Sometimes, that's exactly what people did.

Libraries and archives would often prioritise preservation over destruction, finding the value in learning even from that which they don't agree with whilst also maintaining the texts for future scholars. Sometimes, though, the weight of the words within the texts posed too much of a risk to the established way of life and subsequently had to be destroyed.

In 1933, members of the German Student Union collected books containing anything that contradicted the ideologies of the Nazi Party. This is known as the Nazi Saurberung, and consisted largely of books pertaining to socialism and Jewish culture. Once these texts were found, they were then thrown onto pits of fire in a public display of authority over people, but also over information. Information is identity, so by destroying texts relating to a particular group of people, they were also eradicating legacy.

One of the most frequented collections of Jewish materials in the Bodleian Library is the 'Copenhagen Collection,' a series of Hebrew books that were under threat of siege and destruction amidst the Nazi invasion of Holland. This collection was first moved to a Jewish school, but as the threat of prosecution became more severe, the books were later moved to a Dutch school for safe keeping.

The survival of most of these books (a couple having been obtained and destroyed) shows the collaborative efforts and sacrifices made to preserve written records of culture. The surviving books are labelled with a stamp attributed to the Offenbach Archival Depot, allowing us to trace, analyse, and further preserve the texts of this collection.

There were also more subtle yet less conventional approaches to hiding information from the public. Lee (2020) recounts a conversation in which he shows a photo of an armchair to the owner of a furniture store. Innocent though this may seem, the truth is that the reason for such interest in this chair is because, stuffed inside and sewn into the cushions were documents related to the Nazi party. Although this method is unorthodox and impossible to

control, Lee's recount of this conversation proved that there was little surprising in this (p17), and that sensitive information would be censored by any means necessary. Censored, and yet right under our noses.

The privilege we have as modern media consumers is that we can look back on events such as these and think, with blissful ignorance, that we have come a long way and will not be threatened by such vigorous censorship. It is vital that we remember, however, that taboo topics are ever-changing and the value to which censorship is held has never faltered. In fact, it is arguably more prevalent now than ever.

Social media is an integral part of our lives, and in many ways, we have become blind to just how frequently we are faced with censorship. Online posts may limit interaction to those in specific groups; images are blurred and labelled with a warning before the user can decide if they want to see the contents; specific words are flagged and can cause the post to be taken down.

Amongst the blatant taboo and strict censorship, there exist topics that don't require as much action yet are still found in wide-spread conversations of distaste or even outrage. With the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), there is a growing concern about how integrated (and, indeed, threatening) it is becoming with human life.

Colloquially, one of the biggest concerns of this regard is the increased use of AI to create pieces of art, sparking heated philosophical questions as to whether anything not created by people, shaped as we are by our experiences and emotions, could truly be considered art.

Social media apps such as TikTok and Instagram are major platforms for those dubbed 'AI artists;' a title that is often criticised as being an oxymoron and exists solely to make 'easy money' by laundering art with no 'meaning' or 'soul.' Similarly, AI artists are accused of plagiarising man-made works of art, given that AI learns from pre-existing references.

Many may look at this topic and consider it to be a waste of time and not of much importance. What we must remember, though, is that social media often influences real life more than real life influences media, and as such offline social interactions become framed by what has been widely deemed appropriate according to anonymous netizens. This becomes more of an issue when major companies implement the use of AI art, as the implication is that the employment of people in creative industries is being threatened by a mechanism the public has little respect for and is viewed as simply a way of saving money. In this way, the censorship comes more in the form of trying to deny allegations of the use of AI in art or

promotional materials in order to preserve the reputation of the artist/company as opposed to the actual content.

How can we possibly accurately archive work that is attributed to no particular person, place, time, or medium? Art has always been a platform on which people can express their personalities and religious/socio-political passions, and as such has always been a significant point of contention when the content matter contradicts the current social standards.

Titians' painting Venus of Urbino (1534) faced considerable backlash for the seductive pose of Venus combined with the humanising details of a loving marriage (the small dog sitting at the end of the bed that, it is implied, is shared, while the maids tend to their business in the background). Sexualising Venus in a way that seemingly sought to represent all married women was considered wildly inappropriate, and yet not strictly hidden. Even so, this work of art remains highly regarded for both its boldness and its skill. Today, we still consider stark nudity and sexualisation to be vulgar and inappropriate but are considerably more forgiving of artistic expression in the name of sexual empowerment than people of the past would have been.

That being said, there are many responsibilities that come with this topic, such as creating content warnings and appropriate censorship, but most importantly, consent. The more AI learned from its surroundings and exposure to all forms of culture, the visual and audio quality improved and became strikingly life-like. While many people online chose to utilise this to make jovial videos or political statements, others took a more sinister approach and used this newfound skill to create explicit content using the faces and/or voices of celebrities, causing considerable threats to their careers, reputations, and privacy.

Although social media platforms tend to remove videos or images of such nature fairly quickly, often banning the person responsible for a period of time, it is safe to assume that this is more of an attempt to adhere to guidelines rather than to enact significant action against this behaviour. It is not unfathomable, nor unreasonable, that future attempts at sabotaging others in this way will become a criminal offence.

We may reflect on the past and the lengths that were taken to control and censor forbidden information but also ought to relish in the freedom we have to express ourselves creatively, politically, and socially that we experience now and in the future.