

Free Speech Shouldn't Need Elite Approval - Matt Taibbi

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SUMMARY

The discussion centers on the evolving perception of free speech in America, particularly under the Biden administration, which some argue reflects a shift towards thought control reminiscent of dystopian ideologies. The speakers express concern over the diminishing consensus on First Amendment values and the increasing elitism within journalism that prioritizes ideological conformity over objective reporting.

- There is a perceived shift in American values regarding free speech, moving away from the foundational belief in individual autonomy.*
- The speakers argue that the current climate reflects a distrust in the public's ability to handle information, leading to censorship of certain viewpoints.*
- Historical context is provided, highlighting how past movements for civil rights and free speech have been overshadowed by contemporary ideological divides.*
- The rise of "moral clarity journalism" is critiqued for prioritizing certainty and ideological alignment over objective reporting.*
- The transformation of journalism from a fact-finding mission to an ideological tool is noted, with a focus on elite-driven narratives.*
- The discussion touches on the impact of significant political events, like Brexit and Trump's election, on public attitudes towards speech and trust in the media.*
- The speakers express hope for a revival of shared American values rooted in the principles of freedom and tolerance, as articulated by the Founding Fathers.*

there is a widespread consensus uh or there was under the Biden administration that we need to move people in a certain direction away from certain thoughts towards other thoughts, right? And um and this is a first step towards something that I would think of as being like a dystopian understanding of um [snorts] of thought control, right? like the it's a complete misunderstanding of the first amendment and American principles. In the United States, we assume that citizens are adults and that they can handle truth and information, right? Uh this is the opposite assumption. This is we can't let people see certain things. We need them to think a certain way, so uh they must not see certain materials. And it's a fundamental like turning upside down of of how we do things in this country. And somewhere that happened in the middle of the 2010s maybe and we're still trying to figure that out. I um one of the things that I think has gotten hard to find is a notion of being an American that that more or less every American regardless of our radically different politics, backgrounds, religions, races, could all get around and be like, you know what, I this is my Americanism.

Like, I'm an American. I'm proud to be an American even though I hate my neighbor, right? Whatever. even

though they're putting up yard signs that make me angry, but we're all Americans. And it feels to me like the First Amendment, the Bill of Rights more broadly, but certainly the First Amendment is about the most American sort of statement of [snorts] shared values that we've got. It's like the country was founded very much by people who were fleeing to be like religious weirdos in the new world. Hence like the protections for practice of religion is right there in the first amendment and then to have freedom from this you know tyranny. But still the funny thing is I talked to this historian Gordon Wood and the way he put our lineage was um that the British were sort of like radical in Europe for being pro- individual liberty.

>> Mhm. >> And then Americans were like this second order even more radical version. >> Mhm. >> And that that is our founding moment. That is like the the DNA of the country's origin was like no no no you can't tell me what to say, think or do. Leave me alone. Let me hold my beliefs. Let me share them with others. Uh just keep the French or the Spanish or whoever from invading us and otherwise leave me alone. Like do do you agree with that? How do you think about like the opportunity to make the first amendment something that we can all get behind?

>> Well, we did all get behind it. That's what's so fascinating about this is that something changed, right? Um we now have a very different America where um there are completely different feelings about the freedom of speech. Um even among people who you know age-wise are in the same place as me uh and grew up you know with the same kind of liberal politics uh they no longer believe the same things about uh freedom of speech. It's fascinating to go back and look at movies like The American President by Rob Reiner, right? Uh the the late Rob Reiner. And then that's a very sad story, but if you go back and watch that movie, you'll see this >> fulminating passionate declaration about what >> the you know the freedom of speech is, how it's okay to burn the flag and all this stuff, right? Um and now those exact same people believe something completely different.

What do they believe from your perspective? Like what um is the animating force behind that change? >> If you go back historically, I think there were two huge incidents that that impacted thinking in Europe and America about uh speech. In Europe, it was Brexit. Um, and that's not because um, there is such an overwhelming consensus that Brexit was the wrong way to vote. It's because the powers that be, the people who who serve in governments were so completely appalled uh, that people would vote to overturn their vision of the European community.

In America, it was Trump's election. Right? When Trump got elected, something fundamental happened in the brains of people who had grown up, you know, listening to Fresh Air with Terry Gross and, you know, all the the sort of liberal uh, you know, iconography. Um, [clears throat] they suddenly believe that uh there are some people who are just cannot be trusted with intellectual autonomy because they will make the wrong decisions. So we have to help them make the right decisions and that's essentially what this is all about >> which to me is horrifying. I'm sorry to interrupt you but >> no no I mean I guess like at the most basic level these are people who are theoretically tend to be higher IQ higher credential more schooling all that stuff. Um, a in a lot of complicated topics, maybe most, what is the right decision? What is the what is the what is correct?

You at least have to acknowledge like I could be wrong, right? Like the notion that there's a known truth that's

not accessible to the rubes, but we know it. And we know it like I guess I guess climate change has had this sort of this sort of sloganering of like the settled science like this fundamentally anti-science settled science idea seems to be like what that is like oh no there's a settled opinion that's right and it never needs to be revisited again right >> shut up history of science >> like where's that coming from >> uh elitism um it's interesting because that uh your example about climate change is the one that's always brought up when we when people talk about this transformation that happened in journalism right now.

We used to in reporting the way it used to be done and the way my dad did it um and I grew up watching him was you go out, you ask some questions. You find out some stuff. You try your best to get to what you think happened. You tell the public. Uh then you go home, crack a beer, forget about it, move on to the next thing, right? Um but somewhere uh in between uh this idea and by the way there there's some humility involved with that approach which is if I'm coming to a subject for the first time today the best I can do by Wednesday or Thursday is give you a little bit of something that might be true right um and so you try hard to get it right but you don't have the arrogance to be absolutely sure right?

Who could be sure in that short amount of time? So, you it's a job like plumbing or being a janitor, you're you're just that's why people who were in journalism uh for a long time, they didn't go to college. They were the sons and daughters of plumbers and carpenters and you know that that sort of thing because it's not that hard uh to just find some stuff, give it to people, and forget about it. Now what they want you to do is to assume a uh this great ideological importance have uh a feeling of certainty about what you're doing. Um the the term they use is moral clarity journalism, right? So we must be certain about um uh what we're telling people.

We must be uh absolutely certain about how we want them to think about things. You know, some of the big proponents of this are reporters like Wesley Lowry, right? Who uh who talks about how well we shouldn't um we shouldn't include the uh points of view of police spokespersons in uh police involved shootings because they always lie, right? Well, they do lie a lot. I mean, I wrote a couple of books about that subject, but you have to include it. You know, that's part of the job. the part the the big part of this job is you don't want to be wrong, right? So, just put all this stuff out there, take a step back and let people figure it out themselves. But they don't trust people to figure it out themselves. They want they want to figure it out for you. And that's why it's it's changed.

>> I think uh there was an interview that went sort of mildly viral or whatever. I don't even know what it means to go viral anymore these days, [laughter] but there used to be this thing in like the 2010s where going viral was like a big deal, right? >> But there was a a clip from Steven Colbear in an interview in which he described his job, which is to run a comedy show >> as essentially like reading all the news and distilling it for the public so that they don't so that they know what how to think basically. I'm paraphrasing, but that does seem to be what the job is now seen as.

I don't think that started in 2016, though. So, like like did or or maybe it maybe it got supercharged, but like take me back to >> All right. I'm I'm technically a communications major. I got went to film school. >> I remember the journalism people. So you got young people, they're at some crazy college and being taught by

people who are, you know, four derivations further to the left than the median American. What are they being taught? Do you have a sense of what's happening there? Like are the headarters of journalism as corrupted by this sort of postmodern the truth is what we think and feel or whatever as everything else in academia?

I think what you're describing um is a very important change just in American culture generally. But let's look at journalism. Uh in the 50s and 60s, if you pulled most of the people who worked as reporters in America, they came from workingass uh roots, right? Because it was considered an um you know an undignified profession. Uh there's there was a great >> muck breakers and >> yeah Walter Winshell once said um yeah I'm a reporter but don't tell my mother she still thinks I'm a piano player in a house right uh that was kind of the way it was thought of back then but after all the president's men um being a journalist suddenly became a very sexy thing with upper class people right and I know this because I was one of them I I went to you know an overpriced liberal arts school uh Bard college in New York.

And what do they teach in journalism school? Uh first of all, you don't need to go to journalism school. Unfortunately, I say that with all affection for people who work uh as journalism professors, but you can learn the job in like a day and a half. Um what they teach you though mostly in places like the Columbia Journalism School, um is a series of elite assumptions, right? Um you know, what kinds of sources are good sources? what kinds of sources are bad sources. Um how you get information? Uh how you how you assess the veracity of things.

Old school reporters who spent most of their times on uh time on the street or interviewing real people, they would see through most of what they're taught uh what you would teach in a in a big journalism school. But a lot of these kids don't, right? They come out of these schools and they and they're they're packed full of, you know, silly academic ideas. Uh, and that was already bad. You know, that was the kind of thing that that was described by people like Nam Chosky in the late8s. But there was an additional thing that happened in the in this century that had to do with kind of uniformity of thought. um you know the transformation of uh journalism from a factf finding job to an ideological a fully ideological job like if you hung out in a newsroom in early in 2005 it was like a comedy club people joked around nobody cared what your politics were right like the what it wasn't even discussed now if you have the wrong view about anything you're out like that there will be an HR complaint against you um >> I mean we've seen that we saw that with pushing out of Barry Weiss and others from the New York Times and >> all kinds. I mean, there's countless stories along those lines >> and and several of them were ended up being Twitter files reporters, oddly enough. Um, but yeah, absolutely right.

And it's become something else. It's become government propaganda. And part of the reason I know this is because I lived in Russia. I worked in the Pra Pravda building. Um, and in the '90s as a foreign correspondent, I got to know all those people who actually did government propaganda for a living at newspapers. And it's indistinguishable from what goes on in American journalism. Now, >> there is a I mean that the the All the President's Men I I rewatched that movie in the past year and this is Watergate.

This is the the backdrop of the Vietnam War. So you have this thing that we've come to be told was like the the the like the best part of the American left that's connected to the civil rights movement. Oh, you you know, you

had this like 60s civil rights movement, free speech on college campuses, you know, being opposed to the Vietnam War, which is this horrendous meat grinder, and then like Nixon is corrupt and the great journalists like expose it. All of that is essentially the press being like the what is it the fifth estate or the fourth estate fourth estate. I was [laughter] >> I was getting fifth column and fourth estate combined in my head. But so you got the fourth estate.

>> Yeah. >> Opposing power. >> Mhm. >> Like can I scoop to get bad guys in the government fired is exciting. >> Oh, it's thrilling if you're a young person. the the the optics of that, right? Like I can be a guy in a corduroy sports coat who who gets uh Nixon out of the White House. That's amazing. Just by being kind of like a a private detective who who works in a newsroom. Like how cool is that? That's amazing, right? Um but uh it it was a little flawed in its understanding of what journalism is supposed to be. And um and I think a lot of people took it to mean uh they were paying more attention to the politics of the situation than the mechanics of what the job is, right?

Which is what I took out of it, which is that this is really cool the way they do this stuff, right? uh you know the phone calls, the going through the library like that sounds like a lot of fun like you know but but yeah >> so you have this moment now where the so-called professionals in like corporate press the like well-established media brands maybe they oppose politics when when Republicans in office but in general there's like a broader towing the line of the government right is Is that a fair way to see what the like the main line mainstream whatever you want to call it of the press has become? It certainly feels like it in response to the Twitter files.

>> Yeah. And the the press had already become identified in the public's mind uh long before the Twitter files. They they had become uh seen as basically tools of uh the American elite. Uh, I think the worst uh images there are like the the correspondents dinner, right, where you see all these people who are supposedly like gritty, harded reporters and they're wearing tuxedos and they've got, you know, Hollywood actresses on their arm and they're and they're laughing at unfunny jokes by every president, right? Um, and that's what people see and then they they put two and two together and they think, well, those same people are also telling us lies about thing like things like the Iraq war, right? Um, [clears throat] later on Russia gate, you know, uh, and so they're not really truth tellers.

They're they're cordier. They they're people who sit at the side of uh, people in power and they help them spread a message. Now, with the with the Twitter files, it was very graphic that people in the media, the the so-called corporate media, they didn't even look at the material that we put out. They just spent all their time assassinating the characters of people like me and Michael Shelonburgger and Barry Weiss, which is what you would expect from, you know, a propaganda organ, not from journalists, [clears throat] >> from stooges, from like basically mercenaries for the state, >> right? Yeah. Exactly.

It seems like there is very much a fundamental ideological belief that's baked into the history of progressivism that the public's too stupid. There's sort of two branches of um of progressive thought as I think about it. one is sort of a William Jennings Bryant kind of populism >> that is a is a kind is a bottomup kind of thing and is and is a power to the people skeptic like I'd put Upton Sinclair in this in this category people who were skeptical of

concentrations of power they did think government could be used to counter private power like corporate power and I think they often made the mistake there because then they just team up and it gets worse. But it's like an honestly held attempt to defend the the the power and and like sort of sovereignty of the individual more or less.

And then you have the Woodro Wilson types. You have the credentialed scientific uh elite who believe that look we now a we are in this modern age and we need to um have people that understand the technical details and the average Rube just doesn't have the knowledge or doesn't have the credentials to understand when something's a lie and therefore we need to filter the information. It seems to me like it what might be the case and why there seems to be a very lopsided it's not balanced. It's not like bad guys on both left and right when it comes to speech. It's now the case that broadly the left is way way worse. Can that be changed? was like the 60s like an aberration of the left because they were anti-war and stuff because it's like the whole of the credentialed class has bought into this idea that you can't let people just deal with things.

>> It's sad. Um, you know, again, I grew up in kind of left-leaning politics. I wouldn't say I was particularly left-leaning, but so one of my heroes growing up was Ira Glasser, who was the head of the ACLU for a long time. >> Yeah. Mighty Ira. >> Mighty Ira, right? Uh intimately involved with the uh you know the the Skoi marching Nazis case. And people forget that the whole idea behind that case was based on the civil rights movement. Um, if we allow this little town in Illinois to deny a permit for Nazis today, right, tomorrow you're going to get every southern town with every, you know, Buford Pusser mayor or whatever that you know you you think they're going to outlaw the NAACP.

They're going to outlaw civil right civil rights marchers. And that's not what this country is about. This country is about letting everybody talk, right? Um and that whole view uh as you say that whole populist concept of speech has died right it's been replaced by this new um sort of collegebred Wilsonian thing one of the the little noticed facets of both the Twitter files and this entire issue is that the people who do the checking and the reviewing um of speech. They are not workingclass people. They are all college graduates.

They're all or even uh sort of graduate degree holders. So, it's the rich censoring the poor for the most part. And that does not appear to be a concern of today's left. I'm shocked by that, but it's sad uh but true. This fight feels more essential to our identity as Americans to me because whatever wars we're fighting, whatever it is that we're fighting for that I mean that is the question like what should we be fighting for as Americans and how do you how has this whole effort this whole grueling thing of the Twitter files and reporting on these issues and standing on the outside of the consensus view on so many topics, you know, where where do you stand on the the the the idea that we could have some shared values? Because that's the hardest part when I hear about what's happened with such a large percentage of very important, influential people that are all in a group think, and I've got my own group think. I'm I'm just as guilty about that.

>> We all are. I mean, I I don't remember that you particularly ascribed to group think, but >> we all, you know, we have our we have our teams. We have our people that we're more comfortable with, our ways of thinking that make us more comfortable. Um, do you think there's a path to some kind of shared vision of being

American? >> I hope so. I mean, I think one of the one of the things that I had to do as part of this story that was so unusual um was that I had to go back and read uh lots about American history, but also like primary documents about American attitudes towards speech. I needed to understand um where all this fit in and whether it was far out of bounds or just a little or whatever. And in the process of doing that, I found myself feeling like intensely proud uh to have come from this culture, which is not something that was normal for me. Like I'm not a flag waving type generally, but these ideas are beautiful ideas. They're hopeful. Um you know, they they're in a way like um sort of spiritually uh important. uh you know people like Madison and Jefferson they they had tremendous faith in the creativity of the human spirit, the ability of people to behave um kindly towards each other and to take in difficult information and to get through crisis and to do all these things to to have the foresight to see all this uh you know so long ago and to see that little tiny things like you Madison, for instance, had had the opportunity to use the term toleration of religion um in the Virginia Declaration of Rights and had the foresight to use the term freedom of religion and that was a big difference because toleration means it's conferred by the government, right? Freedom means that it just it inherently is. We we are free people, right? Um, we have free thoughts, we have free beliefs. Um, that it was an incredibly profound thing that these guys hit on. Um, and it's it would be a tragic if we lost it uh because of stupid partisan arguments that we're having right now. So, I hope that people come back to appreciating um some of these ideas because when you look at them up close, if you dust it off a little bit and take a look, uh it's really inspiring.

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