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Censorship is Art's Biggest Obstacle

Why it damages the profession



The New York mural by British graffiti artist Banksy protesting the imprisonment of Turkish artist Zehra Doğan. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

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Today, like at no time in human history, people live to vent their opinions. The wokest movie, the blingiest artwork, the most venal politician, the cutest Pikachu meme—all occupy equal billing. Together they amplify a cacophony of voices (among them 2.8 billion Facebook and 321 million Twitter users and counting) that, according to tech cheerleaders, are supposed to render culture less elitist. But what if everyone is busy shouting and nobody is really listening?

“When you give people too much information, they instantly resort to pattern recognition.” That’s communications theorist [Marshall McLuhan in 1968](#) predicting how the information glut would hurtle humanity back to an ancient tribalism. In failing to absorb every data point—as he explained decades before the adoption of the internet—people turn to discredited stereotypes. In such situations, common ground disappears faster than you can say “lock her up”. What proliferates, instead, are familiar know-nothing plagues: filter bubbles, confirmation bias, fake news and the aggrieved certainty of the militantly righteous.

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As we know, the information age has coincided with the age of Trump. For every 280 characters the President of the United States pecks out with his tiny fingers, the media flies into conniptions. Along with the world’s ascendant populist politics, technology, or at least its use, has also undergone a rightward swerve. If the early years of the worldwide web produced revolutions such as the Arab Spring, today’s information advances have begotten legions of disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories—among them, Birtherism, Pizzagate, QAnon and, more recently, the American government’s racist scapegoating of undocumented immigrants.

Yet, the greatest threat to critical thinking in this new media ecology comes not from the instability generated by the digital revolution, but from the gradual yielding of experts to the tsunami of outrages perpetrated against basic human rights and rational thought. In a context defined by the so-called death of expertise, to borrow the title of one book lamenting the era’s escape from science, many liberal intellectuals have dug in, in imitation of [Breitbart News](#) executives. The result is a confusion of categories and priorities that threatens to render criticism moot.



The 2016 watercolor by Zehra Doğan that led to her arrest. Courtesy the Voice Project

One direct byproduct of this silo mentality is an environment in which cultural commentators, art critics among them, can’t see past the tops of their professional parapets (or “in” groups). Fixated on the bogus virtue of progressive bromides (“good politics makes good art”), the fallacies of false equivalences (“good politics are a matter of identity”), and a gut fear of hot-button topics (the volatilities of identity politics), they frequently fail to speak out about fundamental assaults on freedom of expression—especially when these take place outside of the West.

Over the past several years hundreds of artists around the world have been harassed, imprisoned, beaten, tortured or worse simply for making art. According to [Freemuse](#), an independent advocacy group that monitors worldwide violations of artistic freedom, that number is on the rise thanks to a global uptick in government censorship. On average, the group estimates, one artist a week was prosecuted in 2017, the first time the organization published its yearly report, *The State of Artistic Freedom*. Altogether, Freemuse found some 48 artists were sentenced in 2017 to over 188 years of prison time. Among their violations: posting Facebook videos, publishing independent blogs, enacting art performances, and waving an LGBT+ rainbow flag.

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The most notable cases documented by Freemuse and [The Voice Project](#), a group that maintains a global database of artists imprisoned for the “crime” of free speech, featured governments that officially support the arts targeting artists directly. In 2015, Chinese performance artist [Chen Yunfei was arrested](#) for visiting the grave of a student killed in Tiananmen Square in 1989; he was later sentenced to four years in prison. In 2016, the artist and journalist [Zehra Doğan was imprisoned](#) by the Turkish government for posting a painting of a Kurdish town on social media (she was released in February after spending three years in jail but not before Banksy memorialized her plight in a 2018 New York City mural).



Portrait of Ai Wei Wei, taken at his studio in Beijing. Image Cavan / Alamy

In April, artist and activist [Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara was arrested](#) by Cuban officials for staging a performance during the 2019 Havana Biennial. He and artists Tania Bruguera, Amaury Pacheco, Michel Matos, the art historian Yannelis Núñez Leyva and the poet and art writer Katherine Bisquet, had voiced their [opposition to the government’s Decree 349](#), a draconian measure intended to outlaw independent artists that [PEN America has called](#) “an intolerable affront to free expression”. Since that time, all have been subject to government intimidation, threats, arrest and the possibility of expulsion from the island.

Closer to home, a similar script is playing out with visitors and immigrants to the US. In a move designed to bar government opponents from entering the country—among them, outspoken artists—the State Department recently outlined new visa requirements that obligate nearly all applicants to submit their social media profiles, email addresses and phone numbers from the past five years. The move has set off a worldwide round of self-censorship and lifestyle revisionism as artists and others scrub their social media accounts of everyday expressions of art, appreciation and opinion.

One frequent visitor to the US the policy will certainly affect is the artist [Ai Weiwei](#). A figure who has long used social media to amplify his art, he expertly diagnosed the government’s new action as authoritarian where most US arts and culture

outlets stayed silent. In a statement he gave *The Art Newspaper*, [Ai outlined](#) the dangers inherent in the current administration adopting the policies of openly autocratic countries: “The US State Department’s task is to prevent people that may harm the US from entering. However, they cannot extend their power to areas related to private thought and free speech. That is exactly what George Orwell warned of in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.”

According to Orwell, there are times when art needs to become political because anything else entails mental dishonesty. Arts writing and art criticism should aspire to that same honesty. This is why it’s imperative that assaults on artists’ most basic right—their ability to speak, to be heard and to make their art without fear of retaliation—be given precedence by cultural commentators above today’s media turmoil. All crises are global today, but they are not all equal.