

*The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution confirms three fundamental rights: the right to exercise one's religion, freedom of speech and the press, and the right to peacefully assemble. Infringements of these rights is permitted when the unreasonable exercise of said rights can cause imminent danger and harm to the public interest. (To cite a well-known example of this "balancing": The First Amendment does not permit a person to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater.) With the growth of social media, many people rely on social media as a primary news source. Do you believe that the growth of social media has threatened or impaired any of the rights granted by the First Amendment? How will you go about being a champion for free speech during your college years? What rationale and facts are/will be persuasive to you and your friends regarding free speech?*

As I watched the evening news, I read a cluster of bold letters near the bottom of the television: "Barron Trump will be this country's first homeschool shooter". The barbaric phrase on the screen became the first and only thought on my mind. I listened as a news anchor recited the gut-wrenching words of a 2017 Twitter post from Saturday Night Live's sketch writer Katie Rich regarding her opinion on President Donald Trump's ten-year-old son.

As a teenager in a world surrounded by screens, social media powerhouses such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter are inevitable forces that hypnotize modern users to put out such brutal threats towards innocent figures such as Barron. In reality, it's easy for media organizations and social networking platforms to not only fabricate stories but mislead the population in a deceitful game of "he said, she said", abusing our First Amendment rights. With the tumultuous relationship between people and technology, what happens when freedom of speech turns threatening, when freedom of the press morphs into fictitious lies, and when freedom of "peaceful" assembly becomes hysterical?

Social media platforms can be a potentially beneficial news experience when leaders such as President Trump are able to use sites like Twitter to post unfiltered information without other sources tampering with his ideas. On his social media, these are his words—not taken out of context or hidden from the public eye. This gives opportunities for people of any political party to directly read his statements (if desired) without any outsiders altering his words.

On the other hand, in regards to freedom of speech, our First Amendment doesn't pertain to "private, non-governmental entities". This means social media sites, which are private organizations, can censor what they don't want to be viewed and publicize what they desire to display. Therefore, they can limit certain individuals or groups' spread of information and ideas, something that seems most evident with conservative viewpoints.

In addition to freedom of speech, social media in the free press can be just as dangerous. Most often, the press is not impaired by the growth of social media. Instead, they are able to exploit their power by spreading inaccurate information or falsifying stories altogether. Once these faulty details are released like a disease across the World Wide Web, it can trigger a chain of detrimental thoughts and beliefs as people repost or share it through their social media accounts. Influencers or companies with exceptional amounts of followers can do excessive damage in a matter of a few keystrokes and minutes. Not only is this damaging to reputations and truth itself, but once it has become an established thought on the web, it becomes virtually impossible to remove. At the same time, sites with accurate information to publish are sometimes not as popular as ones flooded with incorrect stories and will not be the first thing to be viewed or shared, adding to the escalating deception online. Social media and the internet can be a useful tool, but also a dangerous weapon. The spread of fake news or words taken out of context can have an explosive effect, like pouring gasoline on a wildfire. For instance, celebrities have taken advantage of escalating political tensions by nonchalantly making comments about “blowing up the White House” or posting pictures representing a decapitated President. These morbid attempts at shock or humor are another distressing action seen on social media. Not only do they draw a fine line between freedom of speech and actual threats, but they also become a way for desperate degenerates to gain attention on their social media feed. With the care-free nature of social networks, scare tactics are a prime method used to capture the attention of the uninformed, with several extremist politicians joining in on the celebration by stating with smiling certainty on Instagram that “the world is going to end in 12 years”. Unfortunately, to people unaware of the actual facts (especially young users that may look to such leaders as role models) their tricks seem realistic and devastating.

Then, there are the cases of these websites not only affecting freedom of speech, but also the right to peacefully assemble by challenging these rights through the use of online organizations of riots. Social media sites are being used as a way to reach out to assemble these groups and get the word out that they are planning a rebellion against unwanted speech and assembly. This is frequently being seen as conservative speakers’ appearances, such as Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos, have been canceled at university campuses due to security issues arising from violent threats. By hiding behind a screen and working people like puppets through online forums, freedoms can be compromised, corrupted, and virtually snatched away from citizens. Personally, I do not use social media as a reliable news source. Social media is a form of entertainment that I solely use as a way to share pictures and stay in touch with friends. The best way for me to stay updated on current events is through more reliable news

sources, such as Fox News or other credible sites that tend to analyze and compare details before establishing something as completely factual. I look carefully at articles and their sources, not just the headline, which can be used as so-called “clickbait” to grab a reader’s attention through misrepresentation.

As a passionate political science major, I intend to join a “Young Republican” group in college as well as an on-campus activism club to advocate for issues I am enthusiastic about. Additionally, I hope I can enhance my fact-checking skills by becoming a correspondent for “Campus Reform”, a conservative-based website run by college students who expose liberal bias in national news media. By staying involved and using my voice, I hope to act as a source of optimism for my fellow university students and patriots to restore the world of journalism and escape from the toxicity of technology. I know I’ll think before I post, what about you?