

The Ethics of Offensive Speech

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Introduction

- We want to do two things today:
- (i) Consider the nature of “offensive speech”
 - Can words cause harm? How?
- (ii) Discuss the law and ethics concerning offensive speech
 - What’s legal?
 - What’s ethical?

Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics



Group Discussion (10 mins)

1. What do we mean by “offensive” speech?
 - Examples?
2. Does it matter if words cause offense? Do they cause real harm?
 - Do intentions matter? Context?
3. Should the N-word be banned?
 - Why? Why not?
4. Is there anything you shouldn't be allowed to say? (Legally? Ethically?)

Types of Offensive Speech

- Discriminatory speech, e.g.,
 - Racist, Sexist, Homophobic
- Hate Speech
 - Promotion of Genocide & Incitement to Violence
- Obscenity
- Blasphemy
- Satire, Mockery, Ridicule, etc...

The Effects of Offensive Speech

- Speech can cause real harm:
 - Hurt feelings
 - Loss of dignity, respect and self-respect
 - Marginalization, scapegoating, damage to reputation
- Extreme Cases:
 - Bullying to point of self-harm
 - Can lead to violence against targeted group or speaker

Offensive Speech in Practice

- Does context matter?
 - Is it different when we say offensive words with friends vs. strangers?
- Does intent matter?
 - Intent to harm
 - To report/inform
 - A joke
 - Political satire
 - Moral persuasion



Hooray for Offensive Speech?

- Is “offensive speech” always inappropriate?
- Are there topics that need to be addressed even if they are likely to cause offense?

The problem with
censorship is



What's legal? What's ethical?

- Free speech and the distinction between law and ethics.
- Is the scope of what we should be legally allowed to say wider than what it is ethical to say?



Hate Speech and the Law

- Canadian Criminal Code Prohibits:
 - Wilful promotion of genocide (Section 318)
 - Public incitement of hatred; wilful promotion of hatred [Section 319(1)]
- Alberta's Human Rights Act Prohibits:
 - Publications, signs, etc “likely to expose a person or a class of persons to hatred or contempt” because of race, religious beliefs, colour, etc.

Cartoons: Not just the funny



The answer to offensive speech? More speech.





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