OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

PENELOPE DAY

Our freedom of speech is next

It has been a tumultuous few weeks for free speech in America.

Two weeks ago, ABC News suspended popular late-night talk show "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" in response to pressure from the Federal Communications Commission — FCC — over comments Kimmel made about Charlie Kirk's murder during his Sept. 15 show. President Donald Trump encouraged the FCC's actions, asserting his belief that broadcasters should lose their licenses over hosts' criticisms of him and his administration. But after facing bipartisan backlash from politicians and the public alike, ABC retracted Kimmel's suspension last Monday.

While "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" may live to see its next show, the significance of this week's events should not be minimized. Whether or not you agreed with Kimmel's original statements, it is undeniable that the Trump administration's recent pressure on national media corporations threatens the sanctity of the First Amendment. And as students at a university that receives almost $900 million in federal funding annually, our freedom of speech is equally in peril.

This conversation is not new. Since Columbia University reached an agreement with the federal government in July, surrendering some of its autonomy over curriculum, admissions, hiring and regulating student protest, many Yalies, myself included, have feared that we would be the next target of the Trump administration's ultimatums. But when news of Kimmel's suspension reached campus last week, I heard classmates speaking in agreement with ABC's initial decision.

Here's the blunt truth: If we endorse the censorship of one American, we enable our own censorship. Anything other than unequivocal support for our freedom of speech makes it more likely that those in the halls of power could strip it away.

Just as the FCC had the power to threaten ABC's broadcasting license over Jimmy Kimmel's content, the current administration has demonstrated its ability to jeopardize a university's federal funding over student speech. At Columbia, student protesters have been targeted. I personally fear that the administration could go even further, threatening to withhold university funding or even accreditation over the free press of student publications. This may not be happening right now, but kneeling to political censorship has historically been a slippery slope.

The FCC's sway on national broadcasting corporations is just the latest example of federal efforts to push the boundaries of the First Amendment. Such instances have been numerous throughout American history, dating back to the implementation of the Sedition Act of 1798, an instrument of press censorship against those who publicly criticized the Federalist-controlled government at the time. Under the Sedition Act, Americans were arrested and fined for dissenting in the press.

In 1918, the Sedition Act was revived as an extension of the Espionage Act of 1917, the two laws criminalizing any public dissent of the US government and its activity during World War I. Though this new Sedition Act was repealed in 1920, The Cold War would later bring forth renewed federal overreach under the legislative efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy and his supporters in Congress conducted invasive investigations of Hollywood writers, as well as censored and burned communist "Red Books" which had been originally donated to US troops as educational examples of diversity in political thought.

In today's history classes, we are rightfully taught to view these acts as unconstitutional and prejudiced. But the administration's recent actions carry echoes of them.

This week, Trump also filed a joint lawsuit against the New York Times and Penguin Random House, accusing their publications of defamation during his 2024 campaign. This suit follows one filed against the Wall Street Journal in July over its publication of a letter that confirmed Trump's friendship with late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The Wall Street Journal has since filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit, holding that the letter published is real. Trump's attempts to silence both the Times and the Journal, as well as CBS News and Paramount in another settlement this year, reflect the level of government censorship that plagued the United States under the Sedition Acts.

If the nation's preeminent journalists cannot publish and speak the truth for fear of being sued by the President, freedom of the press can't live on. If these publications lose their voices, it is only a matter of time before our free speech as students and citizens is next. Moreover, if our generation fails to use our voices in the face of this censorship, we inch dangerously close to enabling a repeat of history.

Protecting free speech is an action. Across the aisle, we have the collective responsibility to denounce government censorship. If we fail to do so, we put our nation's founding principles at risk, and compromise our own rights to freely debate, exchange ideas and critically develop our voices.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

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No institutional neutrality under fascism

There has been much debate about the possibility of institutional neutrality, the duty of universities to take a stand, or not, on issues that deeply affect us. Yale recently had its own version with the administration opting for a limited "institutional voice." The debate envisions universities as respected institutions whose important role in democratic societies is not in question. This is not the world we currently find ourselves in.

Fascist regimes from Mussolini to Modi follow a simple playbook: they attack and destabilize the judiciary, the media and the educational system, three of the core pillars of society. They claim to be above the law, arrest judges, ignore and then abolish laws meant to protect democracy. They intimidate, censor and shut down news outlets. They demonize teachers and student activists, paint universities as hotbeds of leftist culture wars and gain control over curricula.

The result is called, in German, "Gleichschaltung," meaning there is no space left where one could legally and safely criticize the government. But before Gleichschaltung comes anticipatory obedience. Whether the motive is opportunism or the hope to protect many by sacrificing a few, the result, invariably, is the erosion of democracy.

A good part of the world is moving rapidly in this direction, the U.S. included. It is high time to turn the tide.

As a historian of modern Europe, I know that appeasement has never stopped fascism. Fascists have no interest in meeting in the middle. Every concession made moves them closer to power.

Yet appeasement is the overwhelming response chosen by both the mainstream media and university administrations. It has not slowed down anything but the collapse of the values we are supposedly committed to.

Columbia's decision to cave to blackmail — by agreeing, among other things, to hand over to the government information about disciplinary actions against student visa holders — did not end attacks on academic freedom. Instead, it paved the way for the University of California, Berkeley, to voluntarily hand over names of students, faculty and staff accused of Title VI violations before any inquiry has taken place. The University of Pennsylvania's choice to exchange withheld funding for the protection of transgender students likely made it easier for Yale New Haven Hospital to quietly end gender-affirming care for people younger than nineteen.

University administrations are wrong in thinking that making "reasonable" concessions to a movement that is not reasonable will slow down its radicalization. What we see instead is the opposite: the willingness to concede to unreasonable demands lowers the bar for what is considered acceptable.

There is no neutrality in this situation. Academics self-critically admitting to a lack of "viewpoint diversity" are not helping to save themselves or their institutions; they are helping to destroy them. Racism, censorship and anti-science bias are not viewpoints; they are key ingredients of fascism.

Most authoritarian regimes want their populace fearful and quiet. Fascism wants it fearful and angry. As a fundamentally modern movement, fascists use mass media to provoke mass anger that then can be turned into mass action. You could call them the original rage-baiters. The targets for this rage invariably are already marginalized groups within society — Jews, Muslims, transgender people, immigrants. They are framed as mortal threats to the very survival of the nation. They are accused of having disproportionate influence over the media, the law and education.

When DEI is considered racist identity politics but white supremacy is not, we have conceded territory to the extreme right that we should be defending with everything we have. The more fascist moves are rationalized by their opponents as "playing politics the right way," the more the limits of what is possible are pushed towards violence.

Speaking out is becoming more costly by the day and there are many reasons to remain silent. But we should not kid ourselves that this silence equals neutrality. I was born and raised in Germany. I've never forgotten something I read as a high school student: as soon as the Nazis gained power in January 1933, many schools started to expel Jewish students. There was no mandate yet to do so, but it was in keeping with the spirit of the times. It was being on the safe side.

This kind of anticipatory obedience was made possible by those who chose to remain silent, to let it happen while reassuring one another and the public that it surely wouldn't get worse, that the new system would collapse by itself, that the best one could do was to keep one's head down and stay quiet. With the luxury of hindsight, we should know that it is not the new moral order that is destroyed by this strategy; it is our own.

There are small but hopeful signs of a turning tide, from Harvard to the University of California.

Yale should add its weight to this effort. Defending our right to speak truth to power without fear of persecution should be the common ground we stand on — as it was 55 years ago when Yale found itself at the center of an equally tense political moment — the New Haven Black Panther trials. Rather than staying quiet, then president Kingman Brewster chose to affirm Yale's responsibility to its students, the larger community and society as whole. "On the fundamental matter of the fact and feeling of justice in our own community," Brewster wrote, "Yale cannot be neutral."

This institution has a voice and needs to use it.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

LEVIN LI

Yale should follow Wharton's lead on club recruitment

Over the summer, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School implemented significant updates to its guidelines for the recruitment processes of university-affiliated clubs. This follows years of student complaints about the process being stressful, unfair and discouraging. Notably, multi-stage application processes and other "activities that create barriers to access or impose undue stress" were banned.

As a first-year student here at Yale, I was also caught off guard when club applications quickly filled up my schedule in the first month. I hear similar complaints echoing through Old Campus on a daily basis, as the process has been stressful for many involved. The fact is, many clubs' application processes are more tedious than they need to be. Competitiveness alone does not justify their tedium, and it's time for Yale to step in and set limits.

Some examples of tedious application processes included those for Yale Alternative Investments — YAI — the Yale Undergraduate Consulting Group — YUCG — and several other organizations, including some clubs that had smaller applicant pools. YUCG, for example, asks for one 250-word essay, two 150-word essays and an 800-word case — an application longer than Yale's own admissions supplement — for the first round of its recruitment. Then, applicants must present another case in the second round and participate in an interview for technical and behavioral assessments. Some other clubs, including YAI and Yale Student Investment Group, have up to four rounds of applications in total.

That is not to say that clubs couldn't or shouldn't be selective. At the end of the day, most of these issues boil down to high demand and limited spots. Given the volume of applications some clubs receive, selectivity may be a necessity due to limited resources or to maintain their culture and identity. The need to manage application volume is often cited as the reason club application processes are stressful and tedious here at Yale, but having a long and tedious application process is not the only way to achieve selection.

Another common argument for difficult and time-consuming applications, aside from the fact that they provide recruiters with more information, is the inherent ability of a tedious application process to select candidates based on interest. The idea is that making the club application a significant commitment can help the clubs weed out the undetermined "throw-in-the-hat" applicants so that only the most interested and enthusiastic people will apply.

While selecting for interest is reasonable, using time as a constraining factor, especially when the majority of applicants, first years, are adapting to college, may not be the healthiest way to achieve that goal. A high-commitment application also doesn't necessarily select for interest, as anxiety, stress and a desire to fit in can compel many first-year students to overextend themselves on these applications without a significant interest in many of the clubs they are applying to. Furthermore, the assumption that a longer application equals a more informative one is also flawed, as tedium does not necessarily yield better results.

A club's recruitment process should better reflect what the club is selecting for. Whether or not clubs should be selecting based on professional experience is a separate debate, but if a club indeed chooses to select based on professional knowledge and experience, then that should be made clear in their application; if they are not, then perhaps a long or multi-round process designed to do so is tedious and unnecessary. Clubs are fundamentally different from companies, as while the need to maximize profit is the primary emphasis for companies and, to some extent, a necessity, clubs do not share the same concern. As a result, social and educational goals are more important in clubs than in companies, and their selection processes should therefore better reflect these values rather than simply mimicking corporate hiring practices.

More sustainable alternatives that are better suited for clubs exist. For instance, if a club wants to select members based on interest, a system evaluating participation or contribution could be a healthier approach. One such example is the "heeling" process at the News, where a prospective writer is invited to join as a staff writer if their contributions during that semester meet the requirements.

Questions about whether clubs should be competitive are subjects of another article. Needless to say, the excessive workload caused by many demanding applications is a real concern, and it brings significant stress to first-year students without convincing arguments for its necessity. Selectivity often prompts students to apply to numerous clubs in fear of rejection, and if club selectivity is non-negotiable, then something should be done about the workload the applications impose.

Yale should limit the length of written applications and the number of rounds allowed in club applications. This does not necessarily impede the clubs' ability to select their members, but simply demands that the clubs be more efficient and creative with their processes. A regulatory intervention similar to Wharton's will likely not make clubs any less selective, but it will push the student clubs that want to remain selective to redesign a more efficient recruitment process with less unnecessary stress or corporate-style hurdles for applicants.

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