



THE KENNEDY CENTER CONVERSATION TOOLKIT

INTRO

We know that the politicization of the arts and the takeover of national cultural institutions are calculated maneuvers by opponents of free expression and democratic values. Through coordinated efforts in media, political discourse, and public institutions, there is a growing attempt to instill fear and confusion about the role of the arts in a free society and to convince the public that only certain kinds of stories—and certain kinds of people—deserve to be seen and heard.

The Kennedy Center is more than a stage—it's a symbol of the freedom to express, the autonomy to create without permission, and the power of a diverse society to tell its own stories. When authoritarians take aim at the arts, they aren't just censoring content—they are attempting to strip a people of the power to define themselves.

It is essential that when we talk about artistic freedom and public institutions, we name what's truly at stake: not just performances or programming, but the right of a free people to imagine, express, and shape their own future—without state interference.



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TALKING POINTS

- Americans have the right to decide what shows to see, what music to listen to, and what art to experience—without interference from political agendas.
- The First Amendment protects artistic expression even when it challenges political or cultural norms.
- The political curation of the Kennedy Center's programming is a form of soft censorship and is an attempt to circumvent First Amendment protections and control the cultural narrative for political gain.
- Censoring creative expression limits the freedom of the American people to think and form opinions for themselves.
- Americans deserve access to a wide range of ideas, not just those that are approved by the government.
- The American people don't want to be controlled. It's not the government's place to curate acceptable art and culture.
- America's creative economy is globally renowned and supports millions of jobs, and creative work is one of our largest exports.
- When politicians attempt to censor and de-platform work that does not serve their political agenda, they create economic instability, threaten jobs, and limit economic prosperity.
- Bold, culturally rich American art is a reflection of our society and a cornerstone of American influence globally. Attempts to limit American creativity don't just limit our global power and influence, they threaten our very identity as Americans.
- American democracy depends on our freedom to imagine, question, and create without ideological vetting from the government or fear of political targeting.

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FAQS

The goal of these FAQs is to broadly cover common questions that are likely to come up when engaging in conversations about the Kennedy Center, not to debunk every false or misleading headline. Conversations should center on the high-level themes of power, freedom, and autonomy.

- **Trump just wants Kennedy Center’s programming to be of a high-enough caliber? Some of the programming he’s cut didn’t look very good to me anyway.**

The Kennedy Center already had a team of experienced curators and artistic partners—their Artistic Planning and Programming Department—that was responsible for curating a high-quality lineup of performances that aligned with the Kennedy Center’s mission of providing world-class programming to the broadest possible constituency. The government’s involvement is not about improving quality, it’s about social control.

- **The Kennedy Center is publicly funded, so it’s programming should be controlled by the administration in power.**

Over 85% of the Kennedy Center’s funding comes from ticket sales and private donations, 15% comes from government funding. The American people can decide for themselves what shows they want to see and support. It’s not the government’s place to limit access to ideas and art based on ideological or political preferences.



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FAQS (cont.)

- **Trump just wants the Kennedy Center’s programming to be more “traditional”.**

Authoritarian censorship of art is often geared toward enforcing “traditional” values, not because authoritarians actually care about “tradition” but because cultural shifts undermine the rigid social order that keeps them in power. Art promotes themes of individualism, exploration of new ideas or ways of thinking, and hope for the future—all of which are all a direct threats to authoritarian rule.

- **Certain programming just isn’t appropriate for a venue like the Kennedy Center.**

Almost all of America’s most iconic artistic work was once considered low-brow and unsavory, including jazz, rock n’ roll, Hollywood Westerns, hip hop. Creating bold, creative work is an important part of American culture.



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FAQS (cont.)

- **Given everything that's going on, this issue just doesn't seem that significant. We have bigger fish to fry.**

There is a reason the Kennedy Center takeover was one of Trump's first moves. Authoritarians need to capture cultural institutions to shape what people see as normal, desirable, or even possible. They know that culture shapes consciousness and when you control the narrative, you control society. Rejecting this takeover isn't just about the Kennedy Center, it's about the future of our country and whether we'll remain a free society.

- **We can't divert resources away from the Kennedy Center, I need to work there to support myself.**

It's true we need to survive today, but we should also start considering alternative venues and partners going forward. The government attempting to sanitize and de-platform work they don't deem to be politically agreeable is just the canary in the coal mine. When authoritarianism takes root in a society, creative economies stagnate and eventually die. Creative work ceases to exist.

Authoritarians don't tolerate creative work because it promotes autonomy, imagination, truth, and the power to question. The long term stability and prosperity of our industry, and our freedom to create, are at stake not just our next paycheck.

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DOs and DON'Ts

The goal of the DO's and DON'Ts guide is to provide some general guidance on navigating conversations about the Kennedy Center.

✅ Do's	❌ Dont's
DO focus on shared American values (e.g. free expression) and use party-neutral terms like "administration", "state", or "government".	DON'T focus on partisan politics, avoid naming specific politicians or political parties when possible.
DO focus conversations around broad themes and shared values (e.g. freedom , power , and autonomy).	DON'T play wack-a-mole trying to address every misleading or distracting Kennedy Center headline.
DO focus on the American identity of creative trailblazing and uncensored storytelling.	DON'T focus on defending the merits individual shows.
DO validate feelings of overwhelm while establishing shared moral clarity (e.g. this is what we must do, even if we don't know exactly how).	DON'T focus conversations on feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness.