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THE REVIEW | OPINION

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Few national myths are as cherished or as enthusiastically exported as [America's devotion to free speech](#). It is one of the first stories international students like me learn growing up: that the United States is a place where diverse voices aren't just tolerated but welcomed.

That image fractured for me in the most unlikely setting: sitting in my flat in France, filing out my visa forms. Since June 2025, U.S. visa applicants have been required to [disclose and make public all social-media accounts](#) they have used in the past five years. What seemed like a simple data request suddenly felt like an audit of my entire digital life, made even more unsettling by how unclear the review process actually is. I found myself scrolling through years of posts, memes, and online comments, trying to guess how an automated system or a consular officer — someone whose decision I could not contest — might interpret them. A single online misstep could cost me my visa.

Many assume the real issue with these new visa procedures is [surveillance](#). But monitoring is only the surface problem

— the deeper danger is the policies’ vagueness. New visa policies offer no clear standards for what counts as “concerning” or “hostile” online behavior. There is no public list of red flags, [no transparent explanations](#) of how a dark joke is distinguished from a threat, and no insight into how human officers or automated systems make these judgments. That vagueness and opacity has real consequences. The risk is not just that we are being watched: It is that we do not know *what* is being judged or *how*.

When the boundaries are unknowable and the stakes are high, people don’t just comply — they overcomply. “I have deleted all social-media accounts,” one fellow international student explained to me, while another admitted, “I no longer like any publication online nor comment.” But don’t be mistaken: Though their actions may seem extreme, they are in fact a carefully calculated strategy for survival. Self-censorship often emerges not from fear of punishment but [from the uncertainty surrounding it](#). When the consequences could be visa

denial or deportation, silence becomes the most rational choice. In that sense, vagueness is not merely a bureaucratic flaw but a powerful tool of control. The government never has to punish dissent if students already preemptively discipline themselves.

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It would be tempting to treat the new visa procedures as just another reminder to be careful online, advice our generation has heard repeatedly. But this reading misses their real impact entirely. The [chilling effect spreads](#) into classrooms, seminars, friendships, and academic life. Hesitation to post, like, or comment is a symptom of broader self-censorship, shaping what students feel safe to say or do in real life. As a political-science student, I now find myself pausing before asking questions about U.S. politics because I fear how my curiosity could be read. I even chose not to attend political rallies during New York's mayoral elections, missing out on invaluable firsthand learning, simply because participating suddenly felt too

risky. What begins as digital caution becomes an intellectual quietude far removed from the ideals American colleges claim to uphold.

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When students speak less, challenge less, and participate less, the consequences extend far beyond them — they stifle the entire university ecosystem. U.S. campuses lose the global perspectives and critical conversations that fuel innovation. Professors lose students willing to ask challenging questions that make classes richer. American classmates lose peers who push them to think in broader ways.

Even more important, the country is losing a strategic advantage. International students are not merely visitors —

they often become researchers, diplomats, entrepreneurs, and allies. Their impressions of the United States travel far beyond campus walls. A system that quietly pressures them into silence is a system that weakens its own soft power, and a nation that allows this damages its own reputation as a place where ideas can be expressed boldly rather than whispered.

American students and instructors should help by recognizing the privilege of speaking without a visa at stake, and by using that remaining freedom to challenge the growing silences around them. Otherwise, free speech risks becoming a right defined not by principle but by immigration status.

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