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Higher Ed and the Fragmentation of America

With everyone's liberty threatened by cancel culture, it's time to restore freedom to academia.

By Orrin G. Hatch | Monday, July 27, 2020

Some physicists believe the cosmos is home to an infinite number of bubble-shaped, parallel universes. The same theory could describe today's American politics.

Somewhere between the rise of cable news and social media, our shared sense of reality splintered. We live in an era of endless political narratives, in which the phrase "my truth" is supposed to be taken seriously. Algorithms built to confirm pre-existing biases shape our social media feeds and opinions. Living in our own bespoke information bubbles, Americans today cannot agree on the existence of facts, let alone what the facts are. All this has serious implications for public discourse on the most difficult issues facing society—from racial injustice to Covid-19.

We are living through an information revolution arguably more disruptive than Johannes Gutenberg's printing press. Before Gutenberg, one narrative of reality predominated Western society. By democratizing access to the written word, the press overthrew Rome's monopoly on ideas and allowed competing interpretations to proliferate. That took Europe from the Middle Ages to the modern era. It precipitated the Reformation, the Renaissance and the American Founding.

The internet gives nearly everyone his own virtual printing press. A single social-media post can reach millions in seconds. With so many competing sources of information, it's no wonder a shared reality has fractured.

Just as Gutenberg's invention threatened to undermine the religious authority of the time, the internet threatens to undermine our secular clerisy—the journalists, academics and policy makers who make up the expert class in America and elsewhere in the West. For decades, they have served an important gate-keeping role, wielding tremendous power over public opinion. But the internet makes it possible to circumvent the gate keepers. The gate keepers' desperate attempts to slow the unfolding revolution and keep control are proving downright draconian.

The spirit of the Inquisition is alive and well in today's cancel culture. The objective is not to root out nonbelievers in the church but ideological heretics in newsrooms and universities. These institutions are supposed to be bastions of free speech. But in 2020 any journalist or scholar who strays from progressive orthodoxy is ripe for cancellation.

Unlike Tyndale, no one is being burned at the stake, but plenty are being fired from their jobs. Take the forced resignation of New York Times editorial page editor James Bennet. Mr. Bennet's crime was not having the "wrong" opinion but allowing someone else to express his—a U.S. senator who, in suggesting the use of federal troops to prevent violence amid protests, articulated a position with which the majority of Americans agreed, according to polls at the time.

The situation is even direr in academia. Consider the case of Nathaniel Hiers, a math professor at the University of North Texas who ran afoul of the powers that be when he criticized the concept of "microaggressions," a core tenet of the woke gospel. Mr. Hiers argued that the concept inevitably "hurts diversity and tolerance" by encouraging people to see the worst in others. For this blasphemy, he was fired.

Through such strong-arm tactics, newsrooms and universities silence opposition within their own ranks—and in the process expose their own ideological corruption. Americans are waking up to the realization that most media organizations are more interested in advancing their own agenda than reporting the facts. According to a recent Gallup poll, only 41% of adults trust the media to report the news "fully, accurately, and fairly," and only 48% have confidence in higher education.

The press and the university are the institutions that are supposed to keep us tethered to an objective reality—to help identify truth and differentiate fact from fiction. By embracing political activism, many of these institutions have abandoned their teleological mission. Growing blurrier by the day is the line between news and propaganda, education and indoctrination. No longer trusting traditional information sources—with good reason—an alarming number of Americans turn to fake news and conspiracy theories, accelerating the breakdown of shared reality.

Is there any going back? Most likely not. The secular clerisy can no more turn back the wheels of innovation than Rome could more than five centuries ago. The answer today, as it was then, is reformation.

To address the politicization of our expert class, we need a complete reformation of the system that feeds it—the universities. That entails a radical overhaul of campus culture, including the elimination of safe spaces, trigger warnings, speaker boycotts and other practices meant to stifle debate and honest inquiry. It entails fostering a philosophical counterbalance to the postmodern ethic that has unseated truth as the academy's ultimate aim. And it entails a renewed commitment to intellectual diversity, which is critical to creating an environment where free speech and heterodox ideas can flourish.

We shouldn't be afraid to pull the levers of federal and state power to bring about these reforms. For decades, American taxpayers have subsidized public universities, including some whose humanities and social-sciences departments look like political re-education camps. No more.

Legislators control the purse strings, and they can fight back by withholding funds from schools that enforce unconstitutional speech codes. They can go a step further in strengthening academic freedom by tying federal financial support to a university's willingness to adopt some version of the Chicago Principles, which protect students and professors with divergent views.

Alumni and donors also play a role. They can push for change by targeting certain programs with their gifts and by using contractual requirements to demand a detailed accounting of how

their money is being used. They can also make their contributions contingent on a university's commitment to cultivating viewpoint diversity and upholding First Amendment freedoms.

Restoring intellectual honesty to our universities is key to rebuilding the credibility of the expert class and a semblance of a shared reality. We can debate the facts only when we can trust the institutions tasked to explain them. Until then, the political multiverse is here to stay.

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