



Forced examination: How the free speech of others benefits us all

Kevin Dickinson

November 14, 2018

In a recent interview with *Big Think*, moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that children are "anti-fragile." By this, he means that they won't necessarily be damaged irreparably by unpleasantness, insults, exclusion and the like. They are instead strengthened by adversities, a process Haidt likens to how the immune system strengthens itself, not from avoiding pathogens but by overcoming them. In fact, an immune system kept in a sterile environment is one rendered ineffective.

Haidt's argument has implications beyond children. Our ideas and ideologies also require adversarial forces to thrive. But counterarguments like these are only possible in a society that values free expression for all people, and some evidence suggests that America may be backsliding on our tolerance for free speech.

How the free expression of others benefits us

Nadine Strossen, former president of the ACLU, called the process by which we strengthen our ideas through the opposition of others "forced examination."

"I wouldn't have enriched my own understanding of my long-standing position had I not been forced to grapple with the exact opposition contention," Strossen told *Big Think*. "So, one possibility is that we will realize that our original ideas were wrong or at least could be improved, refined. And another possibility is that we will be reaffirmed in our adherence to our pre-existing ideas, but we will do so, we will understand them and appreciate them and articulate them with much more depth and vibrancy."

As we improve our ideas through forced examination, we in turn improve ourselves by forming self-identities that are anti-fragile and stronger bonds with those who grow with us.

Many democratic institutions, such as universities, are designed around this principle. Students enter the university with worldviews learned at mother's knee, but through reading history's great thinkers, discussing difficult subjects with their classmates, and exploring new ideas through writing, they put their beliefs to the test, break them, and reforge them.

According to a survey by Gallup and the Knight Foundation: "Majorities of [college] students believe in protecting free speech rights (56%) and promoting a diverse and inclusive society

(52%) are extremely important for democracy." That's great news, not only for democracy but also their own growth during their college years.

Free expression in practice

Unfortunately, the survey's authors wonder if students may favor free expression more as an ideal than in practice. Sixty-one percent of students surveyed agreed with the statement that "the climate on their campus prevents some students from expressing their views because others might take offense" and 57 percent believe this has pushed discussion of social and political issues off campus and on to social media.

Another survey, conducted by the Cato Institute, found that 58 percent of Americans believe "the political climate prevents them from sharing their own political beliefs." When people are unable to express their ideas, they are unable to engage in forced examination, which can have some unpleasant social impacts.

Consider the alt-right. Harvard professor Steven Pinker connects the movement's rise in part due to the lack of free expression in public forums such as universities. (Note: Pinker is referring to the alt-right in the sense of tech-savvy youths who found each other online to form far-right ideological groups, though the term has significantly broadened.)

"Many of [these young people] are highly intelligent, highly analytic but felt that they were ostracized, kept from certain truths by the taboos and conventions of mainstream intellectual life, particularly in universities," Pinker examines. "And when they stumbled across scientific or statistical facts that were undiscussable in the universities, they felt this enormous sense of empowerment that they discovered a truth that the mainstream couldn't handle. [...] And because they then were able to share these facts in their own discussion groups without any kind of push back or debate or refutation from the rest of intellectual life, they could develop into toxic forms."

Pinker's argument aligns with what the surveys found about youths feeling unable to express themselves in public forums. Taking their ideas online, echo chambers and personalized search algorithms prevented the intrusion of corrective counterarguments. In their more pernicious forms, these echo chambers resulted in social networks like Gab, an online home for identitarians that *WIRED* called the "ultimate filter bubble."

Free speech is the cure for bad ideas

Some may worry free expression merely provides a veiled cover for those who hold noxious beliefs. In a survey on American tribalism from *More in Common*, 67 percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, "We need to protect people from dangerous and hateful speech." The result is various policies designed to protect people against deleterious concepts, such as campus speech codes. The Gallup/Knight Foundation survey found that nearly two-thirds of students support such policies.

But as Pinker's argument illuminates, speech codes do not expunge these ideas. Rather, they push them to the fringes where their acrimony can quietly grow. The combination of free expression and forced examination may be a bitter pill, but its medicine is far more robust than the alternative.

"A more effective response to any idea we hate, or consider hateful or dangerous is not to silence it, but to refute it, to explain why," Strossen told the *Atlantic*. She points out that while social media disseminates hate speech easily, it easily spreads counterarguments, too.

Sarah Ruger, the director of free expression at the Charles Koch Institute, agrees. As she told *Big Think*, "So often when people are rejecting speech or rejecting ideas, they're rejecting things that don't have a place in society like bigotry and prejudice [...]. Unfortunately, censoring the ideas just moves them to the basement, to the dark corners of the internet where they fester, where they mobilize with like-minded thinkers and erupt later in uglier ways.

"So, I believe that sunshine is the best disinfectant and the best thing that we can be doing is [to] teach students in a safe productive environment how to deal with those difficult encounters, to deal with them productively, to deal with them safely and in a way that doesn't cause a catastrophic moment if they encounter it in real life later."

Ruger's view synthesizes those of Pinker, Strossen, and Haidt. By preserving free expression, we not only disinfect our society of poor ideas; we also strengthen our resolve against them, growing as individuals and creating a type of conceptual herd immunity. Censorship, like the sterile environment Haidt mentions, merely ensures we will not have the intellectual antibodies to fight such ideas when they inevitably fester in our cultural wounds.