

# BuzzFeedNEWS

## Dear College Students: Free Speech Is Your Friend

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September 10, 2018

These are difficult times for free speech in America.

On a near daily basis, the president condemns the media, occasionally descending to the Stalinist-Hitlerite insult “enemy of the people” to attack the press. Such rhetoric is having clear downstream effects: A recent poll found a large plurality of Republicans — 43% — believe the president should have the right to “close news outlets engaged in bad behavior,” whatever that means.

On the other side of the partisan divide, according to a 2017 CATO Institute poll, 74% of Democrats say colleges should cancel controversial speakers if students threaten violence. Fifty-two percent believe the government should ban so-called hate speech, a legally undefinable and inherently nebulous thing.

Especially worrisome to me are the views expressed by the younger members of the so-called millennial generation, of which I am at the tail end. A recent Brookings Institution poll found that that 19% of college students support the use of violence to prevent a “very controversial” individual from speaking on campus, 51% agree that students should be able to disrupt said speakers so that others “cannot hear” what they have to say — the “heckler’s veto” — and less than half are aware that so-called hate speech is protected by the First Amendment.

I know what it looks like when you hear old(er) white guys complaining about college students and their supposed intolerance for alternative viewpoints on campus. We have, according to the New York Times, “weaponized the First Amendment” on behalf of racists like Richard Spencer, trolls such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Ann Coulter, and other controversial right-wing figures like the sociologist Charles Murray, all for the purpose of “triggering the libs” and furthering a right-wing agenda. Having been on the receiving end of several alt-right, pro-Trump social media mobs where the label “free speech activist” could be found under many an abusive Twitter handle, I am aware of the ways in which some people pledging devotion to the cause of “free speech” do so not to elevate the conversation but to be an asshole.

But to the college students reading this piece: I’m not here to trigger you, own you, or call you snowflakes. I’ve been in your shoes, confronted by speakers whose views I absolutely abhor. I agree with you that many of the people whose speaking engagements you’ve disrupted have absolutely nothing of value to say, and I would love it if they weren’t invited to campus in the first place. (Though I’d love it even more if instead of trying to shout them down, you deprived them of the ability to play victim and did something that actually pissed them off: Greet them with an empty lecture hall.)

But here’s the thing about free speech: If you revoke it for one individual or group of people you don’t like, then there’s nothing to stop college administrators from revoking platforms for Ta-

Nehisi Coates, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or any other left-of-center figure who might conceivably cause some conservative, somewhere, offense. At the evangelical Christian Liberty University, for instance, president Jerry Falwell Jr. has tried to censor the campus newspaper's criticism of Trump. Once one kind of argument succeeds in convincing administrators to cancel a speaking event — “he's hateful” or “she makes X group feel unsafe” — it's much more likely that the same argument will be successfully deployed in the future against other, less incendiary types. It might make you feel righteous to defend only the speech you like, but you'll sound no better than the president's evangelical Christian supporters, who moralize about family values while defending the rectitude of a self-described pussy-grabber.

I don't blame you entirely for your skepticism toward the concept of free speech. You've shrewdly recognized a profound change in attitude among influential sectors of the American elite, where hostility toward the traditional, classically liberal defense of free speech is gaining ground. This emergent consensus holds that freedom of speech is not a foundational American principle to be defended to the hilt, no matter the views of the speaker, but rather a tool, the defense of which depends upon who's doing the speaking. A recent piece in the New Yorker gives respectful attention to a Berkeley law professor who insists that free speech be contrasted with “equality” as “conflicting values” rather than complementary ones. Likening speech to violence, he asked why “the right to speech is recognized but the harm caused by that speech is not.”

The New Yorker faced another speech drama this week, as some of the magazine's staffers demanded that an invitation to former Trump senior strategist Steve Bannon to be interviewed by their editor David Remnick at the upcoming New Yorker festival be rescinded. Subjecting Bannon to Remnick's sharp questions would have, according to these journalists, “normalized” him.

I hate to break it to the self-appointed intellectual gatekeepers of the New Yorker, but the ideas of Steve Bannon, odious as I believe them to be, are already “normal,” in the sense that they have been used to win democratic elections from Washington to Budapest. They will not be defeated by sticking our collective fingers in our ears and wishing them to disappear. Journalists are supposed to be committed to discovering the truth, but all these people have done with their Twitter temper tantrum is deprive the New Yorker readership (highly unlikely to be “redpilled” by the likes of Bannon, by the way) and the wider public of a necessary conversation, one in which Bannon would very likely have been bested and exposed as the bloviating pseudo-intellectual he is.

Meanwhile the ACLU, purportedly the country's foremost defender of the First Amendment, is undergoing a slow takeover by a younger generation of activists who consider its traditional defense of free speech a form of harm against marginalized communities. According to this view, free speech is not a right all Americans enjoy but one that the powerful “weaponize” against the powerless. (Other Americans who, by the lights of our paper of record, “weaponized the First Amendment” include Thomas Paine, Martin Luther King Jr., Lenny Bruce, Katharine Graham, and the righteously outraged members of the AIDS activist group ACT UP, to name a few.) The degree to which, or even whether, an individual should have a right to express their views should be contingent upon how much “power” he or she supposedly holds.

There's a word for what campus protesters, indulged by spineless administrators, are doing, and it isn't used often enough in these perennial controversies: censorship. “The censorship

movement has picked up its share of admirers in the polite left-wing media — a disturbing fresh ingredient in the mix,” Yale professor David Bromwich, a man very much of the left, observed last year in the Chronicle of Higher Education. “For in every previous generation of liberals, the defense of free speech was an article of faith; men and women of the left carried a vivid memory of the persecution of opinions like theirs. But students and young professors in college have no such memory. They cannot recall a time when most of the people they meet did not think as they think, or when opinions like theirs were vulnerable to persecution.”

But throughout American history, it has more often than not been people on the left whose free speech rights have been abrogated. From World War I pacifists and anarchists to McCarthyism to the 1960s Free Speech Movement and the Reagan- and Bush-era fights over controversial art exhibitions, progressives and radicals have repeatedly been forced to invoke their First Amendment rights against societal efforts to shut them up or lock them away. Every movement for social justice in this country — from abolitionism to civil rights, women’s liberation to gay liberation — has depended upon the freedom of speech and association guaranteed by the First Amendment to advance its cause. Considering the censorious proclivities of the president and his supporters, it is all the more important that those who oppose him be consistent in defending the principle that freedom of speech is sacrosanct, for all of us.

In recent years, the rise of explicitly racist movements across the Western world, combined with the exploitation of huge online platforms by authoritarian foreign actors, fake news disseminators, and malevolent charlatans like Alex Jones, has shaped the debate over free speech. It is now common to hear calls for fairly extensive moderation and even government oversight of Twitter and Facebook, and an increasing number of people believe that there are certain kinds of speech that should be banned outright. Tech platforms are private companies, of course, and can therefore choose to prohibit whatever content they like. But to whom would we, as a public, ensure the authority and powers of a "Censor-master General," and where would their injunctions end? It’s easy for most people to agree that Richard Spencer is a vile racist. But what about the Bernie Sanders–supporting former Evergreen State College professor Bret Weinstein, who was denounced by a student mob and physically threatened simply for refusing to participate in a “day of absence” wherein white people were told not to show up on campus?

Our legal system already penalizes libel and slander in such a way that, according to writer and attorney David French, “respects the marketplace of ideas, avoids the politically charged battle over ever-shifting norms in language and culture and provides protection for aggrieved parties.” Beyond these two narrowly defined legal categories, there is simply no way for a democratic citizenry, composed of hundreds of millions of free-thinking, autonomous, disputatious individuals, to decide what content is allowable and what is not.

Please don’t assume that I fail to appreciate the value of protest. A few years ago, I hijacked a live broadcast on the Russian government’s propaganda TV channel to expose the Putin regime’s anti-gay laws. I’ve seen people in Belarus beaten senseless by military police just for peacefully demonstrating against a stolen election. In my work as a journalist, I have interviewed countless political dissidents from around the world. Protest is the lifeblood of American democracy.

But unlike the campus administrators who all too often cave into pressure and cancel speaking engagements for controversial figures, I actually respect you. I think you’re adults capable of hearing things with which you might disagree, or that might cause you to be — that dread word — “offended.” I think you possess the maturity, or at least you should, to hear ideas that make

you uncomfortable, and I believe your fellow students or peers should not have a veto on what you get to hear. I am running a petition campaign to earn a spot on the Yale Corporation, the university's board of trustees, precisely because my alma mater has failed to defend these principles.

There's a lot of injustice in the world and I share your desire to make it a more inclusive, equitable place. But stifling the individual rights of people with whom you disagree, even those you sincerely believe to be evil, is not the way to fix it. More speech is.