

THE TYEE

Ezra Levant and Dave Rubin to School Canadian Journalists on ‘Fundamental Freedoms’

They’ll be helping train the next generation of ‘civil liberties’ reporters at a Toronto conference in May.

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In early May, one of the biggest names in U.S. right-wing media will speak at a conference for young Canadians who are “likely to make journalism a career.”

Dave Rubin is one of the marquee presenters listed for the Toronto event, during which attendees between the ages of 18 and 30 will be trained in how to create content for digital platforms and “learn about the civil liberties challenges facing Canada in 2022.”

Rubin hosts “The Rubin Report,” a show with nearly 1.7 million subscribers on YouTube.

In recent weeks the show has posted videos with titles such as “Truth About Woke Hollywood,” “Pathetic Biden Defense” and “AOC Getting Crazy?”

Last November, Rubin did an hour-long interview with Jordan Peterson, during which the best-selling Canadian author mocked the idea of wind energy going mainstream, discussed the plant-growing benefits of more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and claimed that “the biggest environmental issue that’s facing us isn’t global warming, it’s overfishing in the oceans.”

The student journalism conference that Rubin is speaking at is hosted by the Democracy Fund, a registered Canadian charity that has “worked extensively” with Rebel News, the far-right outlet founded by Ezra Levant.

During the anti-vax convoy in Ottawa, the Democracy Fund, which didn’t respond to a media request from The Tyee, sent two lawyers to an area near Parliament Hill to “ensure that peaceful protesters have access to justice.” One of the charity’s scholars is Julie Ponesse, author of the recently published *My Choice: The Ethical Case Against COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates*. Ponesse is presenting at the Toronto journalist event.

So is Levant, despite explaining to a judge while being sued for libel in 2014, “I don’t think in my entire life I’ve ever called myself a reporter.”

“At the time, I was an opinion writer, not a reporter. Both are forms of journalism, of course,” Levant wrote in an email to The Tyee. “Since then, I have spread my wings and I now do both opinion commentary and fact-based reporting (though I still do more commentary). More importantly, I run a news organization whose staff do many forms of journalism.”

So far, Rubin appears to be the only American that will be imparting wisdom to aspiring “civil liberties” journalists next month, and he brings star-power orders of magnitude greater than his Canadian co-presenters. He has been written about admiringly in outlets such as Playboy and the New York Times, and claims to host “the largest talk show about free speech and big ideas on YouTube.”

But for all Rubin’s talk of giving a platform to provocative voices and fighting political correctness, the “honest conversation” that he hosts these days tends to reflect the banal corporate imperatives of mainstream conservatives, according to critics as well as former fans who have followed his career.

Many of Rubin’s interview guests over the years have been supplied by Learn Liberty, an organization closely linked to Charles and David Koch, politically active oil industry billionaires.

And one of his most widely seen pieces of content, a YouTube video with more than 14 million views entitled “Why I Left the Left,” was made for PragerU, a conservative group financed in part by Texas fracking billionaires.

Among Rubin’s guests for segments on climate change is Alex Epstein, a fossil fuel proponent who has given speeches for “dozens of Fortune 500 energy companies, including ExxonMobil, Chevron, Phillips 66, Valero, Enbridge and TransCanada.”

“His show is no longer about deep discussion or interesting samples of heterodox thinking,” argues Joe Parrish, a previous fan of Rubin’s who moderates the Intellectual Dark Web community on Reddit, a forum for people to discuss the ideas of contrarian thinkers like atheist writer and philosopher Sam Harris.

Rubin now supports the narratives of the corporate right, Parrish said, while still posing as an outsider in media. *The Rubin Report* didn’t respond to a Tyee media request.

Similar observations have been made in Canada of Levant, who’s hosted Rubin on Rebel News over the years and has also appeared as a guest on *The Rubin Report*.

Levant’s media outlet says it’s “not afraid to champion people who have been forgotten by the establishment,” yet throughout his career, Levant has been a part of the Canadian corporate establishment, lobbying for the tobacco industry, writing a best-selling book supporting the oilsands and cultivating close connections with Conservative Party of Canada insiders.

“I have never seen it said that Rebel News is a mouthpiece for powerful conservative elites,” Levant wrote. “We routinely skewer conservative politicians, including premiers Jason Kenney and Doug Ford, and the federal Conservative party too.”

But to Aaron Freedman, a New York-based journalist who wrote about North America's "faux free speech warriors" for the American Prospect, "someone like Levant clearly has a political agenda."

He belongs to a cohort of pundits including Rubin who are aggressive these days in their defense of free speech and civil liberties, Freedman argues, but only when it applies to conservative viewpoints. "It's a very selective defense," he said. "The idea is to tip the scale and make sure that certain types of right-wing speech remain in the public discourse despite their increasing marginalization."

Rubin didn't take a traditional path to his current position. He started off on the Young Turks, a media outlet that made its name doing populist left-leaning takes on current events. But Rubin left to launch his own show in 2015, citing ideological differences.

"Today's progressivism has become a faux-moral movement," Rubin says in the PragerU video, focusing more on shallow identity politics and ideological disagreements than substantive policy ideas.

In the early years of his show, Rubin was hard to pin down politically. He notoriously did an extensive freewheeling interview with alt-right firebrand Milo Yiannopoulos, leading an analyst at the think tank Data & Society to conclude in the report "Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube" that Rubin's show was serving as a mainstream gateway to hate groups — a charge Rubin vehemently denied.

Parrish says that while he's not a Yiannopoulos supporter, he found value in this and other long-form interviews Rubin conducted with controversial figures during this period.

"What was interesting about that was you got to see what they believed, without it being an attack-mode style of exchange," Parrish told The Tyee. "Like, if you put a conservative on Rachel Maddow, I don't think she'd be interested in just having a conversation. Or if a Democrat went on Sean Hannity, it's a similar deal."

In those early days, Rubin was a supporter of the self-declared "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders. "If you guys know anything about me at this point, you know that I do like Bernie," Rubin said in a 2015 video. "Pretty much everything he says I pretty much agree with."

But as time went on, Rubin's conservative guests far outweighed anyone progressive. And in late 2016, Rubin began an official partnership with Learn Liberty, a project of the Institute for Humane Studies, a think tank whose board is chaired by fossil fuel billionaire Charles Koch.

"Most of the project's economics content features two common themes: vilify government, promote the free market," a Center for Public Integrity investigation explains.

As part of Rubin's partnership, he agreed to interview one Learn Liberty guest on his show every month. (Learn Liberty didn't respond to a Tyee media request asking about this partnership and whether it is ongoing).

“I quickly realized they were a great fit for our commitment to free speech and big ideas,” Rubin said at the time.

This arrangement, the Data & Society report argued, allowed Rubin “to position himself as a ‘free-thinker’ and an ‘outsider’ even as he is promoted by a well-funded organization with the explicit aim of promoting libertarian ideals on behalf of wealthy donors.”

Rubin’s takes on Sanders grew critical and indignant.

“Bernie, what right does the government have to take your money, which has been taxed throughout your lifetime, once you die? None, actually,” he tweeted in September 2017, after the Vermont senator criticized Donald Trump’s repeal of the estate tax for wealthy Americans.

In 2018, Rubin went on a 45-city tour with Peterson, who’d become famous for refusing to commit to using the correct pronouns for his students at the University of Toronto. Matt Sheedy, a religious and cultural scholar, attended a sold-out show of theirs at the Burton Cummings Theatre in Winnipeg, where Rubin did a five-minute comedy routine framing him and Peterson as free-speech crusaders willing to speak dangerous truths outside of the mainstream.

“[He] noted how Peterson continues to be attacked by media outlets like the New York Times,” Sheedy wrote in an account of the event on the blog Culture on the Edge.

Yet the duo apparently saw no irony in embracing a different sort of establishment. During the show, Peterson plugged the conservative website HumanProgress, which is a project of the Cato Institute, a think tank founded by Charles Koch.

“While it is not clear whether Peterson receives money directly from these or other groups, his association with Rubin reveals some rather clear affinities with powerful social actors who have a vested interest in... libertarian ideology,” Sheedy wrote.

Levant also has connections to the Kochs. Long before he founded Rebel News, Levant did a fellowship with the Koch Foundation in Washington, D.C., during which he worked at a libertarian organization called Citizens for Sound Economy.

“I spent a wonderful few weeks as Koch summer student intern 30 years ago, but I don’t think I’m in synch with their politics these days,” he explained to The Tyee.

Decades later, members of Levant’s network mock the idea that they are doing the bidding of U.S. billionaires.

Rebel News contributor Sheila Gunn Reid, who is also set to speak at the Democracy Fund conference in Toronto, called the Koch brothers a “boogeyman” in a 2015 tweet. Last December, she replied to a tweet claiming that her outlet is “a mouthpiece for the Koch Bros’ propaganda” by replying, “I’m only a foreign agent if you consider Alberta a foreign country. And these days, I’m pretty willing to hear that argument.”

It doesn’t appear that Rebel News is receiving Koch funding — instead, as Vice news reported in 2017, the site most likely receives a large chunk of its funding from paying subscribers and frequent fundraising requests from readers and viewers.

But even if there isn't a literal Koch connection, there is sometimes an ideological one. Not long before her tweet dismissing billionaire influence, Gunn Reid authored a Rebel News story keying off the "Economic Freedom of North America" report, a publication released by the Fraser Institute, a Koch-supported think tank in Vancouver — it has reportedly received nearly \$1.7 million from the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation — that employed Levant after his 1994 internship in Washington.

"The key to understanding the Rebel is that while Ezra Levant, a gesticulating and manic figure who likes to style himself as the Rebel Commander, might seem like a sinister goofball, he is ultimately embedded in mainstream Canadian conservatism," Jeet Heer has argued in the New Republic. "From his university days to his work as a pundit and political adviser, Levant has been noted for his stridency, but he's always been carrying out the agenda of elite conservative figures, such as trying to unite various fractured right-wing parties or defending the oilsands of Alberta from environmental critique."

One of former prime minister Stephen Harper's political mentors, University of Calgary political science professor Tom Flanagan, said of Levant in 2017 that he "has been, at one time or another, connected to almost everybody on the right side of politics in Canada."

But that is not how Rebel News — "the fearless source of news, opinion and activism that you won't find anywhere else" — presents itself to viewers.

And that is not how the Democracy Fund pitched its upcoming student journalism conference to potential applicants. Apply, it suggested, and be part of a freedom-loving vanguard fighting the establishment.

This is not freedom in a universal sense though. It doesn't seem to apply to people who want their health guarded by vaccine mandates, their gender identity safe from discrimination or a natural environment with stronger protections against oil and gas pollution. It doesn't even guarantee free speech, given that Levant has targeted individual journalists with litigation.

"Today many journalists, they're really just advocates for woke ideology. They don't report the facts and they simply don't care about our fundamental freedoms. Well we're doing something about that," Ponesse says in a video promoting the event.

"I'm glad students will be taught the proper way to do journalism," one Rebel News commenter wrote on Facebook. "We don't need any more fake journalists writing propaganda."

Instead, the implication is that those students will learn to become real journalists — free thinkers who refuse to take their cues from the powerful, just like Levant and Rubin.

Unfortunately, as Aaron Freedman points out, it seems likely the upcoming Student Journalism Conference will have little to do with following the facts, reporting impartially or even defending fundamental universal freedoms.

Instead, it's an opportunity for pundits like Rubin and Levant to impress their ideology on an incoming class of conservative cultural warriors.

