



## The Economics of Culture War Commentary

*Why I (sometimes) buck the trend*

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The United States is riven with seemingly endless disputes over cultural issues. From encoded presidential insults to drag queen story hour, Netflix comedy specials to baby books, Americans publicly disagree with each other to an incredible degree about relatively low stakes cultural issues. Or at least that's the impression you get when you read the writings of commentators, listen to their podcasts, and scroll through elite Twitter. But it wasn't always this way. What explains this recent surge in cultural debate among the most educated people and their readers?

Cultural policy issues seem rather small today compared to the past, but you wouldn't get that sense from talking to people or paying attention to what the media covers. Not only is homosexuality legal everywhere in the United States, same-sex marriage is as well. Some drugs are slowly being legalized, and racial segregation is a fading memory. Literal lynch mobs aren't a problem like they used to be in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Compared to those concerns, pronoun usage, believing in the wrong theory of racism, or standing for the national anthem are so trivial that disagreements over them shouldn't even merit a mention on page six let alone dominate the headlines as they currently do.

What is responsible for the ballooning quantity of cultural commentary? How much can be explained by increased demand? And how have technological developments affected the supply of it?

The boost in demand is obvious and can explain much of this surge, but the effects of an expanded supply side are more interesting and important for predicting the future of cultural commentary.

Changes in the supply side can be glimpsed by looking at the change in specific occupations. The number of proofreaders has declined by a factor of seven while the number of non-TV reporters and editors has halved since 1980. Publications also used to be bundled goods. A newspaper would have a mix of sports, news, and commentary and consumers would have to buy everything to read one individual section. No more—now the products are unbundled and readers can choose what they want to consume. There are fewer editors that are less choosy overall who also have to fill more space, all of which boosts publications' demand for writings.

Supply reacts to this surge in demand as more people are tempted to try their hand at writing because the compensation is greater, including through reputation, fame, and other non-

pecuniary benefits called compensating differentials. It's much easier for writers to *rapidly* gain a following and attention than it used to be and that's valuable compensation to many writers, so monetary wages don't necessarily have to rise much or at all to attract many new workers who produce cultural commentary. In addition, those writers frequently act as entrepreneurs by writing on topics that were previously more niche and thereby tap into a market that was being underserved.

As a result, the number and share of writers and authors has more than doubled since 1980. Few of these writers have the knowledge or expertise to write about many topics. Fortunately for them, writing about cultural issues doesn't require expertise—it's based on the ability to churn out hot takes laced with outrage, which is why so many are crowding into that space.

Ditching the expertise requirement means that the cost for writers to produce cultural takes is small compared to other forms of writing, resulting in a huge increase in the supply of such pieces even more than the general increase in the supply of written work. Writing about science, economics, and politics usually requires expertise. Science journalism is scarce, and what does exist in that field is frequently bad because science is hard. There are some excellent science writers, but they are the exception.

It's also hard to write an economics column without knowing well the basics of the supply-and-demand model or other economic theories. Political writing requires knowing something about the topic—like what the Senate is, and how a bill becomes a law.

Writing about cultural issues requires less knowledge than those topics, and any requisite understanding can usually be acquired with a small amount of frantic googling. Publishing on science, economics, and politics, on the other hand, usually exposes the writer to making an error and the resulting embarrassment. This speaks to why the cost of writing about those topics is higher.

A writer in one of these fields has a high chance of making a factual error that will force him to make an embarrassing and costly correction, one that will reduce his reputation and, hence, future readership. That chance diminishes investment in expertise and production.

The fact checking industry isn't in great shape and is partly captured by ideological interests, and writers are rarely held to extremely high standards, but they sometimes are, which increases the cost of writing on substantive subjects.

Culture writers are rarely proven wrong about anything because they're mostly discussing competing feelings. Have you ever tried to fact check a feeling?

Many criticized *Intercept* journalist Lee Fang, including one of his colleagues, for challenging a reinterpretation of a quote by Martin Luther King Jr. The criticism was of the "read the room" variety based on feelings of being offended. Additionally, most of it took place on the largest publishing website in history: Twitter.

Add in the common feature that much cultural commentary is practically a write-by-numbers formula that is mass producible, and suddenly the supply increases dramatically. At some point, many of the writers who specialize in this formula will be just be replaced by artificial intelligence.

George Orwell wrote of English writing in his time that

As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.

Cultural commentary, filled with the same analogies to Mao's China or Nazi Germany, segregation, racism, pronouns, or *1984*, is the local minimum of the quality of English writing first noticed by Orwell. A cheap production process has resulted in a vast supply of culture war writings to meet massively larger demand.

As a result, cultural commentary is cheap to produce, easy to share, and therefore abundant. Large draft animals can produce manure in abundance just as many mediocre writers can produce reams of cultural commentary. This is why the internet and publications are well-fertilized with articles about culture. Writing once was a more highly skilled occupation, but now it's much lower skilled with a substantially larger pool of potential workers.

In the language of economics, the barriers to entry for writers have substantially lowered. "Wages" aren't necessarily lower because demand is relatively elastic so the marginal value product is high online due to greater readership, but the type of writing produced will be more of the cultural commentary variety than any other. What happened with the recent relative increase in the production of self-published novels for Amazon Kindle is happening with writing and media of all types. In fiction and online, the quality of the median writer has declined.

Culture war pieces also thrive on anecdotes. Data or other forms of systematic evidence rarely make it into discussions about the latest Halloween-costume related controversy at an Ivy League university. But without data and models to interpret them, it's difficult to say anything intelligent about cultural phenomena—to say nothing of the problems with collecting cultural data. Anecdote-driven writing is a story about individual occurrences that may be correlated with broader trends—but how would you know?

The result is called information overload whereby individuals have a harder time making effective decisions when they have too much information. There are readily available anecdotes to support any opinion, feeling, or position just a Google search away. Just about any opinion is written up somewhere online. The range of possible positions is much larger, but it's harder for people to figure out what's broadly true as a result—especially on cultural issues that are less meaningful in one's own life but may affect a person's worldview. So understanding what's true and what isn't is more difficult.

Science or economics writing usually requires at least vague gestures toward data like prices, unemployment rates, the effectiveness of N95 masks, or the mass of black holes. Much of economics and science writing is terrible, and writers in those professions make plenty of errors—but there are errors to make. There's almost no data on culture. If you think wokeness is spreading and lots of people are being canceled, you must rely on a litany of anecdotes that all must be confirmed, but there's no index or dataset that measures wokeness.

Sure, wokeness and cancel culture sure seem like rising problems, but I can't measure them in the way that economists attempt to measure inflation or unemployment. Some have tried to compile lists of deplatformings, but it's not like wheat prices, how many electrons are in a

hydrogen atom, or figuring out how many votes the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act received in the Senate. Survivorship bias and our cognitive biases skew the data.

It's possible that the large supply of cultural commentary certainly incentivizes some writers to push for more cancellations. For instance, *The New York Times* canceled its contract with Razib Khan (full disclosure, Razib is a friend of mine) because he wrote for publications where *others* had written racist articles. In other words, Razib was punished because he wrote for a publication where others wrote objectionable pieces. A commentary piece on Gawker resulted in his contract being cancelled. David Shor lost his job because he tweeted an academic article arguing that non-violent protest was more politically effective than violent protests during the 2020 riots—but the article's findings weren't rebutted in those pieces criticizing Shor.

Journalism and commentary also thrive on unconventional narratives that cultural commentary is well suited to produce. "This culturally innocuous thing is actually evil" is so ubiquitous that it should be its own genre with a specialized name. Turns out, articles with some unconventional elements or conclusions are popular because they are more memorable. Ordinary stories are forgettable.

An article about how violence in an oil-rich country restricts its production and results in subsequently higher prices confirms a model of supply and demand that most readers already somewhat understand. It's therefore true, banal, and totally forgettable. This comports with the anecdotal nature of cultural commentary—rare events happen and make for interesting stories—but reporting on statistically unlikely anecdotes collides with availability bias and makes readers think the anecdote they are reading about is very common when little or no evidence has been presented to justify that belief.

But an article about how conservatives who aren't vaccinated don't want to be *because* liberals want them to get vaccinated is memorable because it is unconventional. Making medical decisions based on what one's political opponents say is extremely weird. An article about how the real threat of illiberalism comes from the most liberal people in society certainly sticks out in one's mind. Immigrants harm America because they assimilate to our bad national culture is a unique take. And these all have three things in common. They are popular, unconventional, and it's very difficult or impossible to show that the author is wrong.

Unconventional takes are also popular because they can be used to defend or attack any position. If progressives accuse conservatives of being bad on cultural topic X, conservative writers can flip it around to show that progressives are the real baddies—and vice versa. Many liberals argue that conservatives are racist, and some conservatives respond that liberals are the real racists because the Democratic Party was the party of segregation in the post-bellum South. Checkmate, maybe?

The flexibility of cultural commentary reduces the ability to pin writers down on any particular topic even though they are overwhelmingly on one side or the other. As a result, producers of cultural commentary get the benefits of being a recognizable member of a tribe without having to defend substantive positions that can be falsified. This dynamic has always existed, but the economics of cultural commentary make it a larger issue than before.

Because the problems that cultural commentators highlight are often vague and, thus, the solutions to them are also frequently vague, there's little chance of anyone acting on them. When

culture warriors do make headway, the resulting laws are frequently poorly thought out and often difficult to enforce. The lack of any action resulting from culture war commentary, except for exhortations to cancel someone or raising general awareness, means that there are few wider costs that can draw attention to the errors of commentators.

Even if there are errors, such as in many of the cancellations based on bad premises, the costs are concentrated on a handful of individuals and rarely widespread enough to gain opposition. Unlike a tax bill, culture war debates don't have the ability to create tens of millions of winners and losers. In other words, the unlikelihood of culture war pieces being translated into actual policy insulates the writers from having to face public humiliation for being wrong. Other public commentators already face small punishments, if any at all, for being incorrect—but cultural commentators face about zero.

This perverse incentive to write about issues where one can't be fact checked also extends to politics. Complaining about culture wars is easy for politicians because there's little for them to do so they can't be blamed for inaction. When Congress was debating the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion spending bill, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) were busy reading Dr. Seuss because of a controversy over some of his books being racist and the publisher deciding not to publish them anymore. Writing mean tweets or hosting podcasts filled with culture war commentary counts as a substitute for “doing something,” whereas legislators used to be judged based on their lawmaking.

Senators and members of Congress are debating less about legislation like the Affordable Care Act or welfare reform, which could affect their chances of winning reelection, and are instead spending more time complaining about cultural issues they have no control over. Even when they can affect culture with legal changes, they rarely do with the exception of abortion and gun laws—which are different debates because they are about well-defined issues rather than “the culture.” Culture wars are perfect for legislators whose main goal is to get elected: They get to look like they're earning votes without actually passing laws.

The late conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart wrote that “politics is downstream from culture.” Maybe, to the extent that politics is run by the demand-side. Certainly, what voters want is an important part of which politicians get elected and which policies are enacted. But it's also likely that “culture is downstream of politics” to some extent.

The supply-side of politics, the political entrepreneurs who can convince large numbers of voters to adopt a position, is important. Mike Huckabee, Scott Walker, and Rick Santorum all had anti-legal immigration positions like Donald J. Trump—but none of them took off and Trump very rapidly consolidated support. He eventually convinced most conservatives through his entrepreneurial persuasion. It's impossible to imagine Trump convincing people to change their minds with a different style of commentary.

That personal and petty nature of cultural commentary also lowers the cost of production. Cultural commentary is usually very angry and personal. Writers will tell you that writing while mad results in the piece being completed more quickly, controlling for quality. Thunderbolts fill the page when anger is the writer's muse. The result is a deluge of poison pen pieces that mock, ridicule, and make fun of people on the “wrong” side of a cultural dispute. The other side can easily be cast as a bunch of woke snowflake soy boy cucks or a cult of basement-dwelling bigoted incels.

Related to the petty and personal nature of most culture war commentary is how the writer's own side is always victimized. Often, the offender is the other side of the culture war, or big nefarious institutions that are in league with the wrong people.

A recent paper published by political scientist Omer Yair in *Public Opinion Quarterly* found that both Republicans and Democrats perceived Facebook to be biased against their side. Facebook could be neutral to everyone's annoyance, both sides could be basing their opinions on anecdotes, Republicans could be upset at the liberal staff at Facebook, and liberals are upset that conservative content is so popular on the website. In other words, both sides can be right and wrong at the same time but we don't know—so it attracts a lot of cultural commentary.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the internet has drastically increased the supply of cultural commentary pieces by reducing the cost of "printing." There are a multitude of websites that will publish just about anything, social media encourages the most ignorant and angry to comment the loudest, there are huge numbers of podcasts, and these entrepreneurs need something interesting to talk about to attract readers and listeners.

Before, newspapers or radio shows had to be discerning about whom they published, because their space or airtime was limited, but that is no longer a constraint—at least not in the online publishing space. Most people who work in this industry don't have any expertise or knowledge in specialized topics, so they gravitate toward commentary that doesn't require expertise *and* can earn a huge audience. Hence, large numbers of ignorant people talking about cultural anecdotes.

The increase in the quantity of cultural commentary is partly a response to increased demand, but the removal of supply-side constraints to producing this type of commentary is a bigger factor in explaining its near ubiquity online. The "democratization" of media means that we'll be exposed to never-ending culture wars. When talk is cheap, we get a lot more talk about what people are interested in talking about—which is increasingly cultural commentary.

George Orwell's *1984* contains the line of dialogue: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face— forever." A more apt line for our age would be: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a never-ending stack of hot takes assaulting the human mind— forever." Or if not forever then at least until the economics of cultural commentary change.

If all of this is true, why do I still usually write detailed empirical pieces about economics, public policy, and immigration? Why haven't I given in totally to this culture-war temptation (except on Twitter), with rare exceptions like this current piece?

First, it's partly shame—I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I produced cultural commentary for a living because I think the quality is generally very low for the reasons I explained above. The second is that I'm terrified of making errors, and I want to be relevant. The net effect of my fear is that this prompts me to be more careful empirically rather than to shy away from contentious debates. The third is that staying largely aloof allows me to comment better on culture war issues from an economic perspective. The last reason is specialization and the division of labor. Even though the market for empirical writing about rigorous topics is relatively smaller, it is still large and there are enormous opportunities for writers like me to find an audience.

It's true that this analysis appears pessimistic, but readers should adjust their expectations on the relevant margins. Yes, the supply of culture war commentary will continue to be large so long as

the economics of commentary are similar to what they are now. But the size of the overall market for commentary is vast, growing, and diverse.

There's room enough for writers and researchers like me and anecdote-obsessed culture war writers. A hypothetical market that produced 99 percent culture war commentary still produces 1 percent of content not within that genre—and the economics of online publications have produced an amazing variety of writings from a number of viewpoints that we would never have been exposed to without the economic forces that also increased cultural commentary. And given how large the entire market is, that's enough new non-culture war commentary to fill many lifetimes—just don't expect cultural commentary to stop growing.

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