



How the Google Memo Hysteria Punishes Openness and Innovation

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The tech press has been on fire with the recent publication of an internal memo on Google's diversity and labor policies by former engineer James Damore. Damore, who was quickly fired for "perpetuating gender stereotypes" in light of the ensuing media conflagration, penned the 10-page memo during a long flight to China after attending a Google diversity training seminar that he found to be ineffective, hostile to his cohorts, and factually incorrect. More fundamentally, in "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber," Damore argues that Google's corporate culture discourages criticism of company policies and leads employees to feel that they can't speak openly.

The article, which cited research and concepts from scientific disciplines in a well-reasoned and compassionate manner, was wildly misrepresented in the media and has served to further fan the anxious flames of social tensions in Silicon Valley. Such incidents are unfortunately encouraged by unproductive labor norms which divert companies' drives to create value and innovate towards futile social engineering endeavors that waste money and time while unnecessarily pitting groups against each other.

The bulk of the discussion on the so-called "Google Memo" so far has unfortunately been driven by the left-leaning media's sensationalist and downright incorrect characterizations of the document. *Gizmodo*, which originally published the memo, called it an "anti-diversity screed." *NBC News*' headline implied that the author blamed "women's 'neuroticism'" for the relative lack of female engineers. *Engadget* said the memo is evidence of tech's "toxic culture." Other outlets piled on, simply referring to the memo as "sexist" or "misogynist" without delving into the article's contents.

Given such alarming headlines, you might expect to find some kind of hateful, invective-filled rant about the innate inferiority of women and perhaps a sandwich joke or two thrown in for good measure. What you will instead find is a thoughtful, helpfully-categorized criticism of Google's alleged "ideological echo chamber" replete with citations and figures. (Curiously, *Gizmodo* decided to remove the academic citations and graphs from their version of the memo.) It's a thought-provoking and fascinating read, I highly recommend that you check out the unedited document if you haven't already.

Damore notes sources of both left- and right-wing bias before exploring potential "non-bias" contributors to gaps in representation among engineers. Like Larry Summers before him, Damore notes that slight differences in the average distribution of men's and women's talents, risk profiles, and preferences result in outcomes that are not exactly 50-50. This is not to say that any one sex is "better" or "worse" than the other, but that a slight preference on women's part to, say, take time off to raise their young children will have an effect on women's aggregate final career trajectory. Given this, Damore points out that any diversity initiative to "lower the bar" or provide special treatment to favored groups will be not only ineffective, but discriminatory and inefficient to boot.

What is most important to note is that Damore's memo was not "anti-diversity" at all. In fact, he directly states that he "value[s] diversity and inclusion, [does not deny] that sexism exists, and [does not] endorse using stereotypes." Rather, he maintains that if we can't have "an honest discussion" about diversity, then "we can never truly solve the problem" and provides several alternative suggestions to close the gaps that he believes would not cause issues like discrimination and lowered expectations.

We've got a real monster on our hands here, folks!

The disjoint between the quality of Damore's attempted conversation and the downright hysterics of the media reaction is greatly disturbing. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the state of the art in social psychology and neuroscience will know that the Google Memo's chief arguments are largely in line with much of the literature. But the few experts who have attempted to chime in and offer their support to Damore's theses have been unceremoniously drowned out by the tide of unhinged condemnations.

The always-excellent psychology- and sociology-focused *Quillette Magazine* featured a response by four leading scientists in sexual psychology expressing their agreement with many of Damore's core arguments. As evolutionary psychologist and author of *The Mating Mind* Geoffrey Miller notes, he has not encountered even one critic who "understands sexual selection theory, animal behavior, and sex differences research," opting instead to result to slurs and dismissal. (In a strange coincidence, *Quillette's* website was hit by a DDoS attack which took the article offline shortly after publication.) Elsewhere, sexual neuroscientist Debra Soh wrote that the Google memo wasn't "sexist or anti-diversity. It's science." Soh provides a helpful breakdown of the neurological research that sheds light on how different groups of people make decisions. She notes that none of the Google memo critics have provided sufficient evidence to cast doubt on these studies.

Yet the scientific accuracy of many of Damore's points did not matter when the mob caught wind of a possible heretic. Ironically, the tech community's blind condemnation of Damore provided some of the best evidence for his argument that the tech community stifles debate.

Some have argued that regardless of the memo's merits, it was an inappropriate topic to discuss at work, and Damore has no reason to expect his right to free expression to be protected at his place of employment. Yet this is unpersuasive precisely because Damore was critiquing workplace policies that affected his opportunities and output.

In an interview with the rogue libertarian firebrand Stefan Molyneux, Damore states that he found the diversity training to which he was subjected to be openly hostile to him as a white male and perhaps even illegal. (Damore is considering legal action against his former employer for improper dismissal due to criticizing internal procedures.) Indeed, a review of the internal feedback to the Google Memo suggests that many of Damore's coworkers shared his fear of critiquing company policy. A recent poll suggests that a majority of Google employees disagree with the decision to fire Damore.

One might wonder exactly why a powerful company like Google would immediately bow to the howls of a tantrum-throwing minority. It is no secret that many people in Silicon Valley tend to veer to the left. But Google's reaction was likely self-preserving more than anything else. Silicon Valley has been rocked by expensive, and sometimes questionable, discrimination lawsuits. Google itself is under investigation by the Department of Labor for pay inequality as I write. So it is easy to see why the company may be sensitive to the perception that "dude bro" engineers are to blame.

Importantly, this is not a new phenomenon. In an excellent essay for *USA Today*, legal expert and Cato Institute senior fellow Walter Olson points out that federal anti-discrimination laws function to compel corporations to censor speech that would be illegal for the government to do. It's a kind of dastardly First Amendment workaround that effectively penalizes certain speech in private settings. And the targeted speech is clearly political. For example, this perverse legal structure allows as much "feminist" speech as employees desire, yet when an employee engages in what can be construed as "anti-feminist" conversation, as Damore was, can be an offense under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was surely a factor in Google's calculations.

One of the greatest casualties in this situation will be the freedom to collaborate and innovate. When employees at one of the largest, most well-positioned and funded companies in the world feel too afraid to critique the direction that their firm is going, it does not bode well for the company's internal openness and productivity. Employees may feel the need to dedicate more time to saying the right things and assembling the "right" teams instead of making the best products and creating the most value. Culturally, employees will be pitted against each other in artificial wars of sexes and races that accomplish nothing but increasing animosity. And if even mighty the Google cannot navigate these tempestuous waters without sacrificing open innovation, how can smaller startups with a tiny fraction of Google's legal and reputational protection expect to survive these kinds of trials by public opinion?

The Google Memo hysteria is not just bad for free speech, it is downright dangerous for the future of innovation. To secure an open culture of dialogue and collaboration, both our laws and our norms must change in a more pro-liberty direction.