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Bursting the partisan bubble: A culture of respect in discussions

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There are many different ways of looking at humanity's history, though this author has a clear favourite: Any graph showing the total human population will indicate that about 150 years ago, something changed drastically. Throughout humanity's existence, the population had increased and decreased in a relatively smooth line over time, until there was a sudden explosion in the number of people around the world. There were many different advances in the fields of medicine, industry and science which allowed for this exponential growth in population, and in truth, each of these are deserving of an essay on their own about how their legacy enabled the world we live in today. There is one legacy in particular, however, which deserves the most credit for enabling the progress from which we reap the benefits to this day. The ability to work together, to allow for a competition of ideas, and most importantly, to achieve a culture which tolerated people with different ideas. It is the opinion of the author that the culture of free expression is to this day one of the best legacies the previous generations cultivated and passed onto us, and one which is being challenged today. This essay aims to explore how the idea of free expression is the best legacy we inherited from previous generations, how it is challenged today, and how we must try to preserve it.

The necessity for an open exchange and its merits is best explained by drawing a parallel to the scientific method: After making an observation about the world, one can make a hypothesis on whether this phenomenon has an underlying rule it follows. After setting up predictions based on the hypothesis these are tested against the observed reality. If the predictions based on the hypothesis turn out to be true, one can assume the

hypothesis to be correct. This process is best repeated ad infinitum: The understanding of diseases like cholera did not reach its full potential right after John Snow built his first hypothesis[1]. Much rather, hypotheses build a basis for understanding complex phenomena and drawing ever more precise conclusions from them. The open exchange of ideas has a similar function: Everyone is allowed to make hypothesis from their observations, and the predictions of these hypotheses are then compared against each other to see which one gives the best understanding of the world. Instead of having one person with their limits on time and energy try to solve complex problems that face a society, a whole society partakes in the process of formulating a solution. This use of distributed brain power allows us to bring forth marvellous solutions and ideas – like the theories of Nils Bohr in physics, Nelson Mandela's rejection of apartheid as a viable method to run South Africa and many others. The mechanism for people to find solutions works only when everyone is allowed to participate, and when there is no systematic backlash. One need only think back on Galileo's argument with the Catholic church on whether the sun revolves around the earth and his subsequent punishment to see the limits of a system where there is a clear orthodoxy of ideas that are right and ideas that are wrong. Perhaps this is why the right to free expression was enshrined in many different constitutions around the world as an integral part of democracy[2,3,4]. Indeed, the idea of free expression has been defended doggedly in many different instances in different countries, despite popular opinion leaning towards restricting this right in some cases[5,6,7].Though free speech allows for many unpopular opinions to spread, sometimes precisely those unpopular opinions prove to be the new popular ideas of the future. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches would not have been allowed had it not been for the idea of free expression, nor would many of the gay civil rights activists have made any of their progress if their ideas had been censored by the past majority who did not support their proposals.

The culture surrounding free expression as an undeniable right only to be limited in the most severe cases has allowed the societies who adapted this principle to flourish and prosper by allowing all participants of the society to partake in the method of formulating their opinions based on their observations. The culture protecting these laws, in the opinion of this author, is the most single precious mechanism that allows for the formulation of humanity's best, brightest and most brilliant ideas.

The culture supporting the idea of free expression has been attacked in recent times. Everywhere we look we can read about a rise in the idea of no-platforming, the phenomenon of "Cancel Culture". Perhaps one of the most worrying indicators is that a recent survey of US university students found that 63.5% of students agreed with the statement that "The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive"[8]. Additionally, in a different survey of students, "Two thirds of students (66%) say it is acceptable to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus, and almost one in four (23%) say it is acceptable to use violence to stop a campus speech"[9]. This hesitation to freely express what one is thinking, coupled with the attitude that it is justified to use violence to stop someone from holding a speech on campus is a worrying sign that freedom of expression is not respected as a universal good. While the direct causes of this

phenomenon are hard to pin-point, we can examine some initiatives which challenge the idea of free speech and free expression. For example, there has been an increasing tendency to shun, disinvite or outright ban speakers by universities. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression has tracked disinvitation attempts since the year 2000, writing: "One worrisome trend undermining open discourse in the academy is the increased push by some students and faculty to "disinvite" speakers with whom they disagree from campus appearances. While most noticeable around commencement season due to the high-profile status of many commencement speakers, disinvitations occur all year—and have been steadily increasing over the past 15 years"[10]. While the individual reasons for disinvitation cannot be dissected in this paper, there is nevertheless a shared underlying implication: Some people are simply not allowed to express their ideas openly, because they cause hurt, offense and other negative experiences. This view is incompatible with the idea of free expression and the culture surrounding it. In a speech at the Oxford Union, Anne Widdecombe highlighted the need to engage with ideas that are wrong and misguided, instead of trying to suppress them: "In the immediate post-war period, when people had lost sons, husbands and fathers to the Nazis, when they had lost limbs and faced a lifetime of disability, when they had lost homes to a vile regime called National Socialism... and yet, Oswald Mosley and Colin Jordan... were allowed in law to hold their rallies in this country. Now think about how much hurt, how much insult that caused to people who had made such major sacrifices? But the devotion to free speech, and the recognition that we had fought six years for liberty, led us to believe that it was preferable to have free speech than not to be offended"[11]. When talking about no-platforming extremist views, and how a culture of free speech would counter the harmful ideas spread by different agitators, her retort was "Let's hear it! And by hearing it we can destroy it."[11]. This highlights the mechanism by which a culture of free expression deals with hateful ideologies: By discussion them. Merely wishing away your opposition on a topic undermines a vital structure of finding the truth. If there are things which cannot be discussed, then we run the risk on missing out on the best ideas surrounding these topics.

This undermining of the belief in free expression as a universal good may have been aided by the rise of social media. Though large-scale studies have not yet been performed on the subject, attention spans seem to have gotten incredibly short among younger generations. This coupled with feedback loops that thrive on bonding over negative emotions[12] and form political online bubbles makes it increasingly easy not engage with other thoughts than your own, and to be applauded for it. Perhaps this explains the previously mentioned statistic of people stating the opinion that violence is permissible towards people who have different viewpoints: In a political bubble, this statement is more likely to gain support and acclaim than alarm people about what is actually being said, namely to physically injure people based on their opinion. This theory of shorter attention spans would also support the move to "cancel" people who were accused of committing a moral wrong, or who have reportedly said something objectionable – even if the accusation isn't true or turns out to be a misinterpretation of what was said, like in the case of environmentalists like Michael Shellenberger[13]. Why should people bother to dig at the facts or listen to lengthy discussions or read the books

if they can simply be the first ones to lump onto the accusations, express their disgust, and get lauded for it in the forms of likes and re-tweets? This shortening of attention to discussing important topics poses the danger of undermining the culture of free expression. If we tend to only consume media that gives us our opinions in bite-sized short videos, how can a society hope to grapple with complex issues such as climate change or the effects of tax laws? Or how can people try to find a compromise when they belong to partisan political bubbles from which they would pay a big price if they deviated? These new pressures are another worrying sign that the culture of free expression is under threat of being replaced by polarized political groups that refuse to engage with each other.

In conclusion, the culture of free expression is in danger of reverting back to a culture of socially approved orthodoxy. Polarization is said to be growing in the world, and since it is questionable whether we could force social media to expose users to longer content or stop grouping people based on political affiliation, the bottom line is that these are not the solutions that we should count on. In the opinion of this author, this problem can only be addressed by people taking responsibility in ensuring that the culture of free expression which has gifted mankind many of its best ideas does not wither away. Fortunately, many different people have been working on a concrete framework for facilitating difficult discussions with people we disagree with, such as Peter Boghossian[14] We must assume the intention of a dialectic discourse. The aim is to find the truth and the other person may have information that you do not possess. Trying to understand each other, and how other people derived at their conclusions is the key to the process of a culture of free expression. This allows for a more conducive environment where people can “agree to disagree”, or where people can be wrong, and have their minds changed instead of being immediately berated for “having the wrong opinion”. We must respect the differences in our opinions, and to see our fellow man as an ally in finding the truth. The diary of Fukuzawa Yukichi gives us a good example, from when he was visiting England in the 19th century: “A perplexing institution was representative government...I learned that there were different political parties, the ‘liberal’ and the ‘conservative’... this man and that man are “enemies in the house” they would tell me, but these “enemies” were to be seen at the same table, eating and drinking with each other!”[15] Just like the “enemies” of a hundred years ago, it is time that we united in the common aim of finding the truth, forgiving each other for being wrong, and holding in high regard the culture in which people are free to state their opinions. Our ancestors gave us a marvellous legacy with the culture of free expression. Let us preserve it by doing our best to understand each other as much as we possibly can.

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