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Whither Goes Free Speech at Harvard?

A recent incident suggests administrators might be more concerned about ugly words than the underlying problems they were intending to satirize

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACChristakis | Dec. 04, 2012

Is a satirical flyer distributed a few days ago at Harvard with joking references to anti-semitism, “coloreds,” and sexual assault worth defending? We think so. The protection of free speech is meaningless if what we really mean is “free speech we find appropriate.” When we prohibit or punish certain kinds of statements, even vile ones, then we are protecting speech only insofar as we agree with it or it does not offend us. This is not only a logically inconsistent position, but it is also one that harms our students.

The incident illustrates how badly well-intended policies and actions regarding free speech can lead us away from our core values. The flyer in question was a mock invitation to one of Harvard’s infamous all-male ‘final’ clubs that was distributed under room doors in nine different dorms. Announcing the arrival of a new fictional club emphasizing inclusion, diversity and love (and aptly named “The Pigeon”), the invitation **warned**: “Jews need not apply. Seriously, no f--- Jews. Coloreds okay.” It also referred to the date rape drug, Rohypnol. Despite the fact that it was satirizing the social clubs’ reputation for exclusivity and abuse of women, a firestorm erupted and an investigation was initiated to find the **anonymous** authors.

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We tend to think of the 1990s as the height of political correctness on college campuses. But as a new book argues, college students today are more insulated from offensive or unpopular speech, ostensibly for their own and the



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greater good, than they were twenty years ago. In *Unlearning Liberty*, author Greg Lukianoff describes a perfect storm of highly-tuned cultural sensitivity, bureaucratic bloat, and fear of litigation that has created a stultifying atmosphere on campuses nationwide where unpopular ideas and offensive language are policed to an absurd extent. Lukianoff's organization, [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#), (which includes a number of Harvard faculty on its board) rates campuses that curtail free speech and Harvard currently has the [worst rating](#).

After the flyer incident, the administration issued a statement deploring the use of the “deeply disturbing” language and reminding the community that the invitations did not “demonstrate the level of thoughtfulness and respect we expect at Harvard when engaging difficult issues within our community.” Residential staff were enlisted to ferret out the identity of the satirists and to reach out to students who might have been hurt or offended by the crude statements. National media picked up the story, too, with headlines describing the investigation of “[anti-semitic flyers](#).” Readers posted comments suggesting this was only what was to be expected from bigoted elitists at [schools](#) like Harvard.

Astoundingly, there was no public recognition from the university administration that the authors of the fake invitation might have been attempting a stinging rebuke to the very institutional bigotry and sexism that they were taken to task for promoting – a satirical strategy as old as the ancient Greeks and found in virtually every *Onion* headline on serious topics ranging from [child rape](#) to the [holocaust](#). But this is the problem of living in a free-speech surveillance state: otherwise sensible people tie themselves in knots trying to define which speech is acceptable and which is not.

Some students know better. Several commentators on the *Harvard Crimson* website noted the deep irony of watching an administration that has been silent about the abuses of the all-male clubs (which have included life-threatening drinking games, hazing, and sexual assault) suddenly so concerned about ugly words. To some, it seemed almost Kafkaesque to think that the satirists (who might actually be Jews, blacks, or women, though that shouldn't matter) were to be “investigated” when the social ills that motivated the crude satire were being ignored. It seemed like people were contemplating the senseless action of shooting the messenger, all in the name of keeping students safe.

Our hyper-vigilance about campus speech does the opposite of ensuring “safety.” It infantilizes students and tells them that any time they hear something that makes them uncomfortable, no matter how distasteful it may be, they have reason not only to be offended, but also to restrict the speech of others so that they can avoid their unpleasant feelings. This is not good pedagogy.

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For one thing, it denies students the opportunity to learn to think for themselves — an essential life skill without which most humans would be adrift. In the recent Harvard case, it also literally blinds authorities to more pressing problems for our students, such as the sexist and dangerous behaviors that still go unchecked behind closed doors.

Unfortunately, many well-intentioned policies to foster “civility” are counter-productive. Leaving aside the fact

that some unpopular ideas may, in fact, be good ones, the real problem is that colleges are increasingly mistrustful that students have the analytic skills and moral character to decide for themselves. Paradoxically, this mistrust is the opposite of educational because it strips students of their own agency in vetting ideas in the public sphere. Even worse, when we get bogged down in concerns about safeguarding people's feelings, we can lose sight of much more important values that protect all of us, first among them the right to think and speak freely.

If our brightest and most capable young adults can't be trusted to think for themselves, who can? And if our greatest American universities won't protect words, who will?

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