



Freedom from Speech

Greg Lukianoff

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This is a surreal time for freedom of speech. While the legal protections of the First Amendment remain strong, the culture is obsessed with punishing individuals for allegedly offensive utterances. And academia – already an institution in which free speech is in decline – has grown still more intolerant, with high-profile “disinvitation” efforts against well-known speakers and demands for professors to provide “trigger warnings” in class.

In this Broadside, Greg Lukianoff argues that the threats to free speech go well beyond political correctness or liberal groupthink. As global populations increasingly expect not just physical comfort but also intellectual comfort, threats to freedom of speech are only going to become more intense. To fight back, we must understand this trend and see how students and average citizens alike are increasingly demanding freedom *from* speech.

Freedom from Speech Details

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From Reader Review Freedom from Speech for online ebook

Chris says

This short little book – board side is the correct term – is about speech today, in particular why it is important that upsetting speech be heard and not condemned. It is rather good and thought provoking, in particular the trigger warning section. I do wish, however, that something more had been done with the question of capitalism/marketing and freedom speech. For instance, I agree that people shouldn't be punished for voicing an unpopular opinion. But when dealing with a business, I'm more conflicted. For instance, if I, as a consumer, determine that for whatever reason I am not going to watch anything with Tom Cruise in it again (a position I currently hold) and if enough people agree with me. Doesn't the movie company or television channel, have the right (perhaps even the duty to shareholders) to fire the person who is costing them money? Isn't it my right not to watch or listen? I'm not sure what the answer is, and we need to be more open to opposing viewpoints, but I would like to see this question addressed more.

(BTW - a friend who is currently teaching a World Literature class was asked by a student not to use the s word. Said friend was confused because he hadn't used shit in class. He asked what the word was. The student said the word that describes what mom and dad do)

Jim Thompson says

A couple of weeks ago I accidentally wandered into a very conservative bookstore, the sort of place I didn't know actually existed. I was fascinated. I had to leave with something, some token of the experience, and so I bought this book and another in the same series, mostly because the store only took cash and I didn't have enough cash on me to buy much else in the place.

I got around to reading this tonight and am happy to say I didn't hate it. It's a very short book, so the author doesn't dig too deep on anything, but most of what he says is fair, more or less on the mark. He explores the trend of restricting speeches on American campuses. He talks about the "disinvitation" movement, wherein students and faculty protest to get speakers they don't like "disinvited" from the campus. And he tears into "trigger warnings" and the whole notion that college campuses are a place where students should feel intellectually comfortable.

His discussion of trigger warnings strikes me as mostly dead on. His discussion of "disinvitations" strikes me as a little less dead on; I'll have to say I agree with him that it can often go too far, but I also think that students and faculty have every right to make their opinions known and to speak out against using campus space for peddlers of hate. It seems perfectly fine to me to say that such and such campus shouldn't be used as a platform for people to showcase their hate speech. Maybe in a longer book the author would be more nuanced and say the same thing; here, he's limited in space, and is pointing to the overall trend, and I suppose he's close to the mark most of the time.

Where I disagree the most is in his contention that this is a new trend. He seems to think that this is mostly a recent phenomenon, that until recently campuses and the American public in a general sense were open to all kinds of ideas. To his credit, he makes an effort to say that this isn't only a problem of the left trying to

censor the right. But in spite of that acknowledgement, his vision here seems to be skewed by his own partisanship.

He laments the recent rise of freedom from speech, apparently forgetting the long history of those whose voices weren't allowed to be heard at all. The history of people on the left being jailed for their speech, beaten for their speech. He laments Brendan Eich being forced out of his job for donating money to groups pushing Proposition 8 in California, but doesn't seem terribly bothered that the voices of gay men and women were shut down for most of our country's history, that those who spoke up too loudly lost their jobs, and their families, and their pretty much everything else, often including their lives.

It's great that Lukianoff and other conservatives are championing free speech. As a group, though, they're late to the party. This isn't a new trend. What's new is simply the fact that the ugliness occasionally affects the people they like instead of the people they have counted as the "others" for so long. While what they are saying is more or less accurate, their timing is nauseating, makes it hard to swallow this stuff.

Jason Ross says

This compact volume makes an impassioned case against the trend to challenge the right to free speech on grounds that some find it offensive or hurtful. The author, Greg Lukianoff (a constitutional lawyer and president of Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), distinguishes between constitutional protections for free speech (which apply to individuals and groups against government actors) and the value of free speech.

Lukianoff contends that free speech is a fundamental pillar of modern society. Following Jonathan Rauch ("Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought"), Lukianoff sees modern society as depending upon the political institution of democracy, the economic institution of capitalism, and the intellectual institutions of free speech and open inquiry. Each of these institutions depends upon competition, and in this way, each of these institutions opens us up to discomfort.

Lukianoff sees that the advance of modern society has led to profound improvements in the degree of comfort that moderns enjoy; a subtext to his argument is that we have grown soft and weak. Undoubtedly there is truth to this. He also notes, following Jonathan Haidt ("The Righteous Mind: Why good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion") and George Lakoff ("The Political Mind"), that Progressives - who dominate our intellectual institutions - are deeply motivated by "the care ethic" and are deeply concerned with the needs of those they label as "victims". This suggests a kind of vicious circle in which young people, growing up coddled and soft, have a sense that their lives should be without challenge or strain; a belief that is confirmed by their (Progressive) teachers who steep them in the ideology of victimhood from their earliest years.

Those who challenge either the sense of emotional entitlement that has been instilled into young people, or the ideology of victimhood they have been given, are roundly criticized as either insensitive or as engaging in hate speech or bullying. Empowered by the success they have had in evacuating perceived threats to their intellectual and emotional comfort, the current generation of college students has sought to take advantage of Progressive university administrations, whether through disinvitations of campus speakers with unpopular (i.e. un-Progressive) views, through imposition of speech codes or the ghettoizing of free speech into special zones, or through demands for trigger warnings to protect them from words or ideas they may find unappealing.

Lukianoff is pessimistic about the future of free speech. Indeed, he concludes that higher education, which has previously played a foundational role in establishing the norm of free speech and open inquiry, and which has provided the most important space within which ideas have been debated and tried, is now the institution where opponents of free speech are having their greatest successes. This is perhaps the greatest threat we face to the future of liberal society.

Rachel Cheeseman says

The author makes some very interesting points and provides a useful update on the state of free speech on America's college campuses and in contemporary culture in general. It's thoughtful and makes its (very good) points powerfully and concisely. It takes a great deal of effort to say it all without saying too much, and that is the achievement of this broadside. Anyone familiar with FIRE's work will love this piece, and anyone unfamiliar will be curious to learn more.

Andrew Georgiadis says

“...she placed greater value on the emotional comfort of those with whom she identified than on the physical security of the women she assaulted.”

~Lukianoff, p47, on UCSB Professor Mireille Miller-Young assaulting a pro-life protester

Free speech, disinvitation, trigger warnings on campus.

In my view, this is the most pressing issue affecting the Academy. The American university system can be a bastion of free speech, inquiry, and intellectual growth, or it can be a westernized madrasa of stultifying political correctness and infantilism. Lukianoff and FIRE are doing a thankless and indispensable task.

Karla says

The subject of imperiled free speech on college campuses has been one of great interest to me since I work in one of said institutions. Luckily I am nowhere near the rarified air of the Faculty or Administrative tier, so I'm spared direct experience/damage (YMMV) from the controversies that flare up from time to time, as well as exempted from suffering from the daily, wary mental grind of interacting with perpetually butthurt students who may or may not have a trigger warning hair or microaggression hair across their ass on any given day.

The briefness of Lukianoff's broadside with either be enough to confirm your experiences or fears, or leave you wanting more details or context and exploration of the issue. Luckily, there are longer books out there to satisfy the shortcomings and dig down into the issue.

Kristen Cray says

Author claimed to be unbiased, but he was clearly conservative. Still recommend it for thoughtful

consideration of the unhealthy standards we now have for censorship.

Elliot de Vries says

An excellent pamphlet-length attack on the rising demands for "freedom from speech" — that is, demands to be protected from contrary or unpleasant ideas. Main topics include "disinvitation season" (college protests demanding the disinvitation of non-left wing speakers) and the abuse of "trigger warnings".

A highlight of the work is Lukianoff's claim that freedom of speech is not limited in extent to first amendment issues, but should be seen as a cultural value; punishing and silencing others for their opinions is not automatically blameless when it is legal.

Gary Sudeth says

I'm uncomfortable with the Goodreads rating system as most of the books I read, I read for the significance of their ideas. Accordingly, the "did not like" to the "it was amazing" range of choices do not truly fit what I would like to say. Thus, I am grateful for the comment section.

This is a short book, part of the Encounter Broadside series; but, important as it explains in a straight forward manner the threat to freedom of speech on the campuses of America's universities.

Dylan Horrocks says

I went into this broadly sympathetic with Lukianoff's stated aims, but was thoroughly disappointed. I've read significantly more in-depth, informative and insightful blog posts (and even Facebook comments) on the subject. There's nothing new in here for anyone with even a passing interest in the subject, and Lukianoff's analysis is shallow and trite. There are plenty of much better discussions of recent anti-free speech trends available for free online.
