

Ten arguments for - and against - 'no-platforming'

Eric Heinze sets out the flaws in the commonly heard arguments for no-platforming.



“Universities should prioritise the voices of the most vulnerable”. So ran a 2015 [petition](#) on change.org. More than 3,000 strong, the signatories demanded that universities “not invite speakers who seek to further marginalise” under-represented groups. The petitioners’ goal was to ban — to “no-platform” — Germaine Greer, who had been set to speak on “Women and Power”. Greer, they claimed, had “demonstrated . . . misogynistic views towards trans women”. She had denied “the existence of transphobia altogether.”

“The real root of no-platforming”, observed [Zoe Williams](#), is “modern absolutism. It was devised for racists and fascists.” Williams noted: “There is very little to be gained from including a BNP [British National Party] supporter in a debate about, say, multiculturalism: if they state their views frankly, you have to go back to first principles and have an argument about how people’s qualities aren’t

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determined by their skin colour.” But Williams opts for Greer to speak. We “progress from A to B — from saying homosexuality is aberrant, for instance, towards homosexuality is normal — not by shutting down homophobes but by argument, persuasion, rage and ridicule, openness and candour.”

Which works best then — categorical exclusion or argument and persuasion? As part of a [broader](#) examination of provocative speech, I would propose a series of arguments for, but matched with stronger arguments against, [censoring](#) speakers.

1. The “state affiliation” argument. As organs of a democracy, universities maintain a duty to promote civic inclusion and pluralism. European universities are mostly managed and funded as public institutions. It is not the state’s role to promote all values equally. It is appropriate for the state to promote messages advertising, for example, shelters for battered women or combating heroin abuse. But the state does not then become bound to provide equal time or space for messages endorsing wife-beating or drug addiction. The same goes for discrimination. The public university may speak against it unequivocally by excluding intolerant speakers.

Response: A democratic state may and certainly ought to dominate certain public forums with messages of social pluralism. Primary-level education, for example, is not principally an arena of open-ended discussion. It is ordinarily a state-monopolised forum designed to inculcate civic values, setting curricular requirements, even for private schools. The university, too, must maintain arenas of controlled and selective speech. Students loudly agitating for socio-political revolution will do little to advance a lecture on lunar rock formations or bacterial mitosis. The university, however, is a community of adults attending by choice, not children still being formed as citizens. The university can never degenerate into a sheer platform for propagation of the views favoured either by the government or through a state authority devolved upon student unions, however enlightened those views may be.

2. The “non-facilitation” argument. There is a big difference between freedom of speech and facilitating speech. None of the campaigners have called for Greer to be arrested or imprisoned. They do not demand that Greer be punished for expressing transphobic views. Greer’s freedom of speech does not, however, equate to anyone else’s affirmative duty to promote her views. She suffers no detriment from losing a forum to which neither she nor any guest has any inherent entitlement.

Response: Guests are invited by members of the university community. The detriment is incurred not by the guest, but by staff or students wishing to issue an invitation. At a 2015 debate at Oxford University, one British Asian student asked some no-platformers why she should be deprived of the opportunity to face and to interrogate intolerant speakers in person, as part of the university’s commitment to critical thought. No-platformers do not speak for all minority groups. Any assumption that they do so only fortifies the identity-based essentialism that no-platformers claim to reject. The primary interest at stake for that student was not the outside speakers’ abstract

freedoms of expression. It was her own pursuit of political awareness, undertaken more broadly with those members of subordinated groups who desire to assume power over their own social status rather than being shielded in a paternalist, infantilising vein. That situational empowerment of subordinated groups is called “counter-speech”, as Judith Butler and others have described.

3. The “marketplace scepticism” argument. The celebrated “marketplace of ideas” is a modernist fairytale. There is no evidence that populations will generally choose more enlightened ideas over bigoted ones. History indeed reveals frightening precedents to the contrary. In the economic marketplace, we can expect consumers to make the best choices — the tedium of broccoli instead of the joys of chocolate — only when they are sufficiently informed. Yet the public is no more reliably educated about social facts than about nutritional ones. “A lie gets halfway around the world,” Churchill famously growled, “before the truth has a chance to put its pants on”.

Response: Historical evidence about intolerant ideas demonstrably snowballing into harmful action comes from “on paper” or deeply debilitated democracies, such as US segregationist states or the German Weimar Republic of the 1920s-30s. Over decades, thousands of books and articles have warned about the dangerous effects of such ideas, yet not a single author has ever documented any such causal effects within what I have elsewhere identified as the longstanding, stable, and prosperous democracies which have emerged since the 1960s. The US Supreme Court began to promote the rights of minorities most comprehensively at the very time it was strengthening protections for provocative speech. But let’s put that problem aside and accept that people indeed do not always choose pluralist ideas. There may not be many marketplaces of ideas outside the university, but a marketplace of ideas is what — of all institutions — the university is designed to be. The university’s mission is not to construct a production line for delivering pre-packaged parcels containing tidy selections of the [best ideas](#). Its mission is to foster the cacophonous marketplace of ideas.

4. The “model community” argument. Universities are not random social institutions. They serve no purpose at all except in enhancing society through sciences, arts, and humanities. Their role is not to “play” with ideas but to contemplate the effective power and influence of ideas. The campus is therefore sometimes described as a “laboratory” or “micro-community”. Its raison d’être entails a duty to the public to aim for a better society. We explore ideas not as seminar-room abstractions for leisurely musing, but rather with a view towards contributing to and improving the world beyond the lecture hall.

Response: Some might doubt whether a university should play any such civic leadership role, but let’s assume that it should do so. The no-platformers start with the right premise, but draw the wrong conclusion. There is a difference between responsive leadership and pre-determined engineering. If universities are leaders, it must first and foremost be in the practice of critical thinking.

5. The “levelling” argument. No-platformers aim not to impose arbitrary power but, to the contrary,

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to challenge and to balance it. Speech, as Stanley Fish along with many post-Marxist and other critical theorists remind us, is never “free”. It never ambles about in a leisurely salon of “pure” ideas. It emerges within the concrete social realities of core inequalities of power and wealth which are realms not of freedom but rather of limits and constraints for the socially subordinated. It is the no-platformers who defend liberty, while their opponents cater to the “liberty” of powerful voices at the expense of groups at the bottom. Less freedom sometimes creates more freedom: less freedom for powerful voices does not diminish but expands overall freedom by levelling the field — creating more opportunities for the unheard.

Response: Be it Karl Marx on the revolutionary left or Carl Schmitt on the totalitarian right, radical critics of democracy have long shared a common theme, namely, that democratic norms and institutions intrinsically operate as a façade, as a sheer ideological “superstructure” (*Überbau*). On that view, democracy promises — even with sincerity and with the best of intentions — to progress towards equal citizenship while it in fact systemically entrenches privilege. Democracy is always ultimately hijacked, then, by behind-the-scenes forces. Democratic values and practices always pledge to correct those imbalances while remaining already rigged to recapitulate them. To be sure, today’s no-platformers are committed to democracy in principle. They do not seek its overthrow. It is by no means clear, however, that powerful voices do in fact so blithely disseminate themselves through academic forums expressly designed to challenge them. Whether or not they succeed in doing so is indeed the very purpose of vigilant academic debate. Corporate executives constantly avoid speaking in open university forums precisely because of the rigour they fear.

6. The “anti-legitimation” argument. University platforms are not value-neutral. Their prestige, if not substantively endorsing, nevertheless institutionally legitimates the views of guest speakers. Another audience member at the 2015 Oxford debate chided opponents of no-platforming for their “parochialism”. Controversial western figures, he insisted, might well face the full force of public scrutiny, but once non-western hate-mongers have bathed in the limelight of a well-reputed western academic forum, they then exploit such speaking invitations to bolster their image at home.

Response: In a world of global media, communications in the west travel fast and far. Images of scantily-clad European women or of gay people revelling or kissing in public actively spur non-western regimes from Saudi Arabia to Malaysia to Russia to crack down ever harder on women or on sexual minorities at home. Repressed persons in those countries are paying, in that sense, both with their freedom and with their lives for the expressive license we in the west so giddily flaunt. It by no means follows, however, that western women must therefore start buttoning up, or that gay people must take flight back into the closet, simply because people elsewhere will use such communications oppressively. Nor, by extension, should open campus dialogue be curtailed inside Europe in order to avoid bad effects outside Europe.

7. The “anti-extremism” argument. Universities have become hotbeds of extremism. They now rightly ban speakers who would push such ideologies as racism, antisemitism or hetero-normative patriarchy. Hate preachers, for example, have often been invited to meetings or rallies off the

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radars of university officials, leading to dangerous extremism and fanaticism. It is not only the universities' prerogative but their duty to quell such dangers.

Response: An impediment in our debates about free speech is our constant relapse into the closed-circuit of balancing freedoms against their supposed harms. That habit is enhanced by the influence of John Stuart Mill's "harm principle" as set forth in his classic 1859 tract *On Liberty*. Even radicals purporting to challenge that classical liberal paradigm end up recapitulating it, merely offering alternative formulations of "freedom" and "harm". The question we must pose is not how much free speech "we" should "give" people. The question is not how much we ought to liberalise speech, but how much we ought to democratise it. Instead of measuring out calibrated quanta of expressive freedom for staff and students as abstract individuals, universities should adopt rules for them as democratic citizens. Accordingly, instead of banning speakers, individuals and organisations who invite outside speakers should identify themselves and their affiliations along with their university contact details. They should adequately announce such events to the entire academic or general community with open access to all. The most dangerous speech is likely to vanish not through coercive bans, which is merely classical liberalism's age-old principle of limiting freedoms in order to avert unacceptable risks. When the US Supreme Court Justice William O. [Douglas](#) condemned bans on communist organisations at the height of McCarthyist witch-hunts, he rightly prophesied that such ideas weaken through open and relentless exposure.

8. The "dignitarian" (or "equal respect") argument. Democratise speech? By all means! But democracy requires that all citizens must be respected and none of them denied their equal dignity.

Response: Elsewhere I have described what I call the "denial fallacy" which runs as follows. From public discourse denying, or being perceived to deny the equal integrity of all citizens through expressions of hatred or disdain, no-platformers then extrapolate some literal or material "denial" of the full exercise of citizenship. Whether any such mechanism can in fact be documented even within the broader social or political contexts of longstanding, stable and prosperous democracies is already highly debatable as a factual matter. But within university contexts it is borderline absurd. Never has a single case been cited of anyone "denied" full prerogatives of membership in the university community solely on grounds that a controversial speaker had spoken in "denial" of any such individual's equal human integrity.

9. The "minimal impact" argument. No-platformers are not Stalinists seeking root-and-branch ideological purges. In comparison to the massive amounts of controversial speech which can still take place on campuses, no-platform campaigns have been extremely few and carefully selected, seeking solely to promote some ethical minimum.

Response: Controversies about the core values of an academic community cannot be evaluated in quantitative terms. It would be unacceptable for a university to justify invasions of privacy, for example, by claiming they are undertaken only seldom. The value of ideas scrutinised in an

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academic environment is categorical, not cumulative.

10. The “safe space” argument. A central aim of no-platforming is to render the academic environment safe for persons who have experienced a trauma, or who wish to express empathy towards a trauma linked to some systemic pattern of social subordination, such as racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia.

It has long been institutional within campus life that in-house security and support staff must be trained and resourced to meet the needs of any students feeling physically or psychologically threatened by any actions of any members of the academic community. The concept of “safety” cannot, however, sweep so widely as to include situations in which a student objects to ideas being uttered without having in any way being specifically targeted.

Within Western democracies, the university as a forum for the unhindered scrutiny of ideas follows as a tautology, not as a sheer policy preference. Universities have in the past practiced discrimination and class privilege, but to cast them as eternally frozen into that history, eternally doomed to reductionist ideas about countering it, amounts to wilful blindness. No member of our universities today is in any sense rendered ‘unsafe’ through the discussion of ideas, however much discomfort some ideas may - rightly - cause.

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Update 28 March 2016: Oxford University's new vice-chancellor, Louise Richardson, has argued that [extremist groups must be allowed to preach on British campuses](#).

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