

Raihan Alam

## **The Criteria for the Civilized Marketplace of Ideas**

People with extreme views, whether they represent the right or the left of the political spectrum, should be invited and paid to speak on campus. Clubs or departments that invite speakers are responsible groups capable of discerning the merit of these speakers. Limiting the set of ideas present at a university compromises its ability to serve students and society. Censorship also can lead to perceived martyrdom for people with extreme views. However, certain criteria must still be met when considering any speaker: they must not incite violence, and they must engage with those they disagree with respectfully. Finally, events with extreme speakers should be in an interactive format that enables true, public dialogue and dissent.

Speakers are usually invited by two university bodies: student clubs and academic departments. Clubs on campus require approval from the university. This approval process often necessitates that multiple students sign a form stating that they would like to be members of the club, and that the club passes an interview with the Club Affairs Committee of Student Senate. After the club is recognized, participants are able to apply for university funds and reserve spaces on campus. Ultimately, this approval process ensures that clubs meet two criteria: showing that there is significant interest in the club by the student body and demonstrating that club board members are trustworthy agents capable of making reasonable decisions about hosting events and activities. Academic departments also meet these criteria, as speaker invitations are agreed upon by a group of professors. University leaders, by employing them, trusts their decisions. Given that approved clubs and academic departments meet these two criteria, I believe they should generally have the freedom to invite speakers they see fit. The responsibility is then on students and faculty to counter-protest such views if they desire, and perhaps hold informational events that argue why such views are not to be endorsed.

There are several reasons that I believe we should invite speakers with extreme views to university campuses. Firstly, the mission of a university is to be a civilized marketplace of ideas. Imagine that one is enrolled in medical school. A student may have big dreams to study oncology. Yet, once that student arrives on campus, she or he is informed that the worst thing imaginable in the medical world, cancer, is off limits to study. Such an aspiring physician cannot put a stethoscope on a cancer patient, nor study the tumors that have caused cancer. This student simply cannot pursue her or his dream for the simple reality that it is just too horrible to study the problem of cancer. It is clear here how such a philosophy would impede our ability to create a cure for cancer. In a similar way, extremist views are a cancer on our community and in our society. Yet, to prevent such cancers from spreading, we must put them under a microscope to study them in a controlled environment. And that is exactly what a campus is in this context. It is our lab, where people can freely express their ideas, challenge one another on the merits of ideas, and try to make the world a better place through the process of dialogue. But to have such a system in place, everyone must be allowed to speak, no matter how extreme their views may be. Better and worse ideas will emerge, and this scrutiny of ideas can only be made possible through open and inclusive debate. By challenging fallacious arguments and ideas, students can sharpen their own counterarguments, and more importantly, change the beliefs of those who hold such extreme views.

Deplatforming speakers also creates an obstacle for students to reflect on their own worldviews and the origins of extreme beliefs. Imagine that a speaker is invited to campus who completely opposes immigration from non-white countries. When a speaker says something that

ridiculous it must have taken some effort for her or him to get to such a position. Such a person contradicts majoritarian sentiment, and such a statement is going to receive a lot of hatred and contempt from the campus community. This type of commentary does not hold up to scrutiny and is not particularly enlightening in and of itself. However, what should enlighten us is the ability to hear another human being offer a different conclusion than others may have. Another person interpreted information in a different manner and relied on different sources than mainstream public opinion. By having such speakers, we understand differential thought processes and the forces that pulled others toward a differential conclusion. Here, we can compare the reasoning process of others to our own. Is their process to get to the “truth” more accurate than my own? Is it more logically sound? Whose process is better at ascertaining the truth? Why did this extreme view emerge in our society? It is by analyzing this process that we can reflect on our conclusions and call speakers out on their faulty logic. We can show where in their reasoning process they failed publicly and learn from the experience.

Censorship also opens the door for martyrdom. When an extreme speaker is silenced, a person unwittingly helps their cause by making them a martyr for their extreme ideology. Is it better to silence speakers and let them valorize themselves for being silenced? Or is it better to allow them to try to defend themselves in public, where we can challenge and refute what they have to say. If a speaker is wrong to hold their extreme beliefs, let her or him speak so that individual can be proven wrong. This is how views change. This process is also preferable to the alternative, which is to let such extreme ideas grow in the shadows, and creep up on society.

There are still cases where speakers should not be allowed on campus. The criteria are not whether their views are extreme, but, first, whether they have called for violence and, second, the manner in which they have expressed their views historically. Firstly, under the imminent lawless action test, speech that aims to incite actions that violate the law, and that is imminent and likely, is not protected by the First Amendment right to free speech (Vile, 2009). Secondly, Lehigh University should accept people who have character, and can speak on their views without attacking the people they disagree with in an extreme manner. A university is not supposed to just be a marketplace of ideas, but a “civilized” marketplace of ideas. Speakers with a reputation for ad-hominem and inflammatory rhetoric do not belong in such an intellectual environment. Speakers who lack such decency and do not come to a university for good-faith discussion should not have the right to speak at a university with campus funds. Speaking to students at a university is a privilege, not a right.

Examine the case of Milo Yiannopolous. In the late 2010s, Milo was a popular right-wing public speaker that was invited to many universities. The problem with inviting Milo on campus was not his anti-immigration, anti-feminist, and anti-social justice views, but how he presented such views. He has been on the record for telling a Muslim woman in his audience, “You’re in America, what the hell are you wearing hijabs for? Tear that shit off, you’re a woman. You are a beautiful strong woman, you’re in America, tear that shit off your head and wake up” (Matthews, 2017). He has also singled out trans students during his speeches (Media Matters Staff, 2016). This is a clear-cut example of a bad-faith and indecent actor who should not be invited on campus given his conduct.

I propose that Lehigh University form a bipartisan committee that chooses the people allowed to speak on campus. There should be substantial evidence of hate speech to deny someone the right to speak on campus. A potential speaker should not be denied to speak because of her or his views, but the manner in which the views in question have been presented. I also believe that such events must also have a significant question and answer portion to them.

Lecture events platforming speakers with extreme views do not contribute to the civilized marketplace of ideas. The lecture format does not open itself to challenges and rebuttals, which would allow extreme views to be platformed without public scrutiny. Events with a discussion format better serve the ideal purpose of the university.

### **Bibliography**

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### **Biography**

Raihan Alam is a senior at Lehigh University double majoring in psychology and political science, with a minor in philosophy. He is the founder of the Douglass Dialogues, a speaker series and student discussion club devoted to dialogue about sociopolitical issues. He is also a researcher in the Blame Lab and the Stereotyping and Social Interactions Lab, where he studies interventions to reduce affective political polarization and the psychological drivers of opposition toward collective action movements. After he graduates, Raihan will pursue a Ph.D. in management at UC San Diego.

