

Intellectual Freedom in the Age of Social Media

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For several years, I was an avid Twitter user. I had been an active blogger since the format took off in the early 2000s, and I had found a valuable intellectual community in that setting. As Facebook began to overtake blogs in popularity, I was resistant to joining, primarily because of the expectation that friends and acquaintances from all areas and periods of one's life would be part of one's network. By contrast, Twitter seemed to hearken back to the free-wheeling atmosphere of the early days of blogging. I found the 140-character format both challenging and appealing as an avenue for wit, and I cultivated an ironic, critical persona.

That rhetorical style was risky, since tone is very difficult to convey online in any case, much less with so little room for context and clarification. As my follower count slowly grew, however, it felt as though everyone was in on the joke. They must understand my general outlook and approach, I reasoned, or else they would be baffled by my Twitter feed and decide against following me.

That feeling of coziness began to break down after one of my tweets "went viral," reaching the furthest corners of the internet. It was a passing remark that I would not have singled out as among my best, but its message appealed to high school and college students and led to an explosion in my follower count. I gained more followers in a month than I had in all the previous years I had been on Twitter. This created a virtuous circle where my tweets had more and more reach, allowing me to attract more and more followers — ultimately reaching well over 8000.

That kind of exposure is difficult to come by, especially for a young academic. As I learned over the course of the last year, however, “exposure” is a particularly apt term to describe the double-edged sword of online notoriety. Along with its (relatively recent) positive connotations, “exposure” has the sense of vulnerability or defenselessness. In my specific case, the platform for spreading my ideas also became a vehicle for my right-wing fellow citizens to express their displeasure with my ideas — by the hundreds, if not thousands.

This harassment came in two separate waves, both as a result of tweets that I never expected to draw attention. In the first case, I deleted two poorly conceived tweets within minutes, but I was too late, because a right-wing blogger had screen-captured and disseminated them. In the second case, the offending remark was a response to a single individual, which would normally only be visible to people who followed both partners in the conversation. Yet I was presumably on the right-wing radar, leading to closer scrutiny of everything I posted.

This high level of “exposure” led to a huge number of stories in the right-wing media. One popular blogger dubbed me “America’s Stupidest College Professor” (a story that is still in the first page of my Google search results), and other right-wing media venues reported on my tweets as well. During the second wave, my story was even discussed on Rush Limbaugh’s radio show. Both incidents resulted in weeks of harassment online, along with phone calls to my institution demanding that I be fired.

Thankfully, Shimer College values academic freedom. But to spare myself and my colleagues the burden of dealing with hate-filled phone calls and e-mails, I ultimately deleted my account and replaced it with a more purely “professional” Twitter presence that would allow me to promote my publications. I have recently loosened up somewhat, mainly for the sake of remaining in dialogue with my closest Twitter friends, but I will almost certainly never be as active as I once was. It is simply not worth the risk.

My story is a relatively mild one among academics. It is clear that academics are a target for the radical right in America and that social media — above all Twitter, with its bite-sized, context-free format — is a primary site for harassment. Women, people of color, and other marginalized groups suffer much more intensely from online harassment, and as Steven Salaita’s experience shows us, not all of them can count on the support of their institutions when an overblown controversy erupts.

What makes the situation so difficult, though, is that we academics do need social media — particularly academics from marginalized groups. The intellectual community that it can create is far beyond what can be expected in even the healthiest academic department. The question is how to build that

community without increasing our “exposure.”

Much of the focus in discussions of academic freedom rightly focus on the institution of tenure, but another important factor is surely the existence of a semi-enclosed academic milieu. While the ideas in academic journals are in principle available to anyone, they are not immediately or automatically disseminated to the general public. This creates a safe space in which controversial or experimental ideas can be discussed and refined, without being subject to the hasty judgment of an impatient public. From this perspective, the much-maligned inaccessibility of the prose style in some humanities scholarship could even be viewed as positively beneficial, a feature rather than a bug.

I am not arguing for a totally hermetic academic community. Popularization has its place, and I have done my fair share of it. Yet not all ideas and arguments must be “popularized” in the sense of being made immediately available to the general public. We academics need a safe space to engage in open dialogue with sympathetic colleagues. Facebook, which offers a greater level of control over who can see what, may be the best social media option for creating that. I think it is clear, however, that Twitter is a particularly risky option for academics.

More broadly, we should acknowledge that few academics have the skills or disposition needed to deal effectively with the general public. Even those who do should know better than to expect much intellectual nourishment from those encounters. The public square is not where any of us do our best thinking, because the intellectual life requires authentic comrades, not just whoever happens to come along. It also requires solitude, for developing ideas at length without the need to respond to questions or criticism at every step. In short, intellectual freedom entails a space of freedom *from* the general public, and we need to be more intentional about creating such spaces.