

5-14-2020

The New York Times Surrendered to an Outrage Mob. Journalism Will Suffer For It.

Pamela Paresky

Jonathan Haidt

Nadine Strossen

Steven Pinker

OPINION | MEDIA

The New York Times Surrendered to an Outrage Mob. Journalism Will Suffer For It.



Getty Images

By PAMELA PARESKY, JONATHAN HAIDT, NADINE STROSSEN and STEVEN PINKER
05/14/2020 05:58 AM EDT



Pamela Paresky writes for Psychology Today and is a visiting lecturer at the University of Chicago. She served as primary researcher and in-house editor for The Coddling of the American Mind. Her current project is Habits of a Free Mind: Psychology for Democracy.

Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University Stern School of Business. He is the author of The Coddling of the American Mind (with Greg Lukianoff).

Nadine Strossen is the John Marshall Harlan II Professor of Law Emerita at New York Law School and is the immediate past-president of the ACLU. She is the author of HATE: Why We Should Resist It With Free Speech, Not Censorship.

Steven Pinker is the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. He is the

author of *Enlightenment Now*.

In a time in which even a virus has become the subject of partisan disinformation and myth-making, it's essential that mainstream journalistic institutions reaffirm their bona fides as disinterested purveyors of fact and honest brokers of controversy. In this regard, a recent course of action by the *New York Times* is cause for alarm.

On December 27, 2019, the *Times* published a column by their opinion journalist Bret Stephens, "[The Secrets of Jewish Genius](#)," and the ensuing controversy led to an extraordinary response by the editors.

Stephens took up the question of why Ashkenazi Jews are statistically overrepresented in intellectual and creative fields. This disparity has been documented for many years, such as in the 1995 book *Jews and the New American Scene* by the eminent sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab. In his *Times* column, Stephens cited statistics from a more recent peer-reviewed academic paper, coauthored by an elected member of the National Academy of Sciences. Though the authors of that paper advanced a genetic hypothesis for the overrepresentation, arguing that Ashkenazi Jews have the highest average IQ of any ethnic group because of inherited traits, Stephens did not take up that argument. In fact, his essay quickly set it aside and argued that the real roots of Jewish achievement are culturally and historically engendered habits of mind.

Nonetheless, the column incited a furious and ad hominem response. Detractors discovered that one of the authors of the paper Stephens had cited went on to express racist views, and falsely claimed that Stephens himself had advanced ideas that were "[genetic](#)" (he did not), "[racist](#)" (he made no remarks about any race) and "[eugenicist](#)" (alluding to the discredited political movement to improve the human species by selective breeding, which was not remotely related to anything Stephens wrote).

It would have been appropriate for the *New York Times* to acknowledge the controversy, to publish one or more replies, and to allow Stephens and his

critics to clarify the issues. Instead, the editors deleted parts of the column—not because anything in it had been shown to be factually incorrect but because it had become controversial.

Worse, the explanation for the deletions in the [Editors' Note](#) was not accurate about the edits the paper made after publication. The editors did not just remove “reference to the study.” They expurgated the article’s original subtitle (which explicitly stated “It’s not about having higher IQs”), two mentions of Jewish IQs, and a list of statistics about Jewish accomplishment: “During the 20th century, [Ashkenazi Jews] made up about 3 percent of the U.S. population but won 27 percent of the U.S. Nobel science prizes and 25 percent of the ACM Turing awards. They account for more than half of world chess champions.” These statistics about Jewish accomplishments were quoted directly from the study, but they originated in other studies. So, even if the *Times* editors wanted to disavow the paper Stephens referenced, the newspaper could have replaced the passage with quotes from the original sources.

The *Times*’ handling of this column sets three pernicious precedents for American journalism.

First, while we cannot know what drove the editors’ decision, the outward appearance is that they surrendered to an outrage mob, in the process giving an imprimatur of legitimacy to the false and ad hominem attacks against Stephens. The Editors’ Note explains that Stephens “was not endorsing the study or its authors’ views,” and that it was not his intent to “leave an impression with many readers that [he] was arguing that Jews are genetically superior.” The combination of the explanation and the post-publication revision implied that such an impression was reasonable. It was not.

Unless the *Times* reverses course, we can expect to see more such mobs, more retractions, and also preemptive rejections from editors fearful of having to make such retractions. Newspapers risk forfeiting decisions to air controversial

or unorthodox ideas to outrage mobs, which are driven by the passions of their most ideological police rather than the health of the intellectual commons.

Second, the *Times* redacted a published essay based on concerns about retroactive moral pollution, not about accuracy. While it is true that an author of the paper Stephens mentioned, the late anthropologist Henry Harpending, made some deplorable racist remarks, that does not mean that every point in every paper he ever coauthored must be deemed radioactive. Facts and arguments must be evaluated on their content. Will the *Times* and other newspapers now monitor the speech of scientists and scholars and censor articles that cite any of them who, years later, say something offensive? Will it crowdsource that job to Twitter and then redact its online editions whenever anyone quoted in the *Times* is later “canceled”?

Third, for the *Times* to “disappear” passages of a published article into an inaccessible memory hole is an Orwellian act that, thanks to the newspaper’s actions, might now be seen as acceptable journalistic practice. It is all the worse when the editors’ published account of what they deleted is itself inaccurate. This does a disservice to readers, historians and journalists, who are left unable to determine for themselves what the controversy was about, and to Stephens, who is left unable to defend himself against readers’ worst suspicions.

We strongly oppose racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry. And we believe that the best means of combating them is the open exchange of ideas. The *Times*’ retroactive censoring of passages of a published article appears to endorse a different view. And in doing so, it hands ammunition to the cynics and obfuscators who claim that every news source is merely an organ for its political coalition.