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## Science and Expertise under Fire : Political Control, Online Harassment and Freedom of Expression

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# Science and Expertise under Fire: Political Control, Online Harassment and Freedom of Expression

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In the last decade, restrictions on the freedom of inquiry and the public expression of scientific researchers have become prominent topics of global debate. Recent changes in politics, such as the rise of right-wing populist parties and changes in the media landscape, have also fuelled this phenomenon throughout the world.

These issues, often connected with the increasing public criticism against expertise, are sometimes discussed in the context of fake news and the so-called post-truth era. I find the concept of post-truth rather ambivalent and problematic, so instead I contextualise these issues within the concept of authoritarian populism as was briefly discussed by Barbie Zelizer (2019) in the last Winter School.

Before going to authoritarian populism, let me briefly describe some recent trends related to academic freedom and the freedom of expression of scientific experts. Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international organisation that monitors violations of academic freedom and freedom of expression around the world. According to its recent report,

**(A)round the world, attacks on scholars, students, staff, and their institutions occur with alarming frequency. These attacks are carried out by both state and non-state actors, in open and closed societies, using a range of methods. Ultimately, these attacks not only harm the individuals and institutions directly targeted; they undermine entire higher education systems and shrink everyone's space to think, question, and share ideas freely and safely. (SAR, 2018, p. 3)**

Scholars at Risk are mainly concerned with the most severe violations against scientists and experts, such as arrests and wrongful imprisonment, violent attacks, travel restrictions etc. Many of these violations take place in authoritarian countries like Afghanistan, Turkey, Sudan and China, but in the last 10–20 years, there have also been problems in democratic societies, such as the United States, Canada, Hungary and the Czech Republic (Väliverronen, 2020).

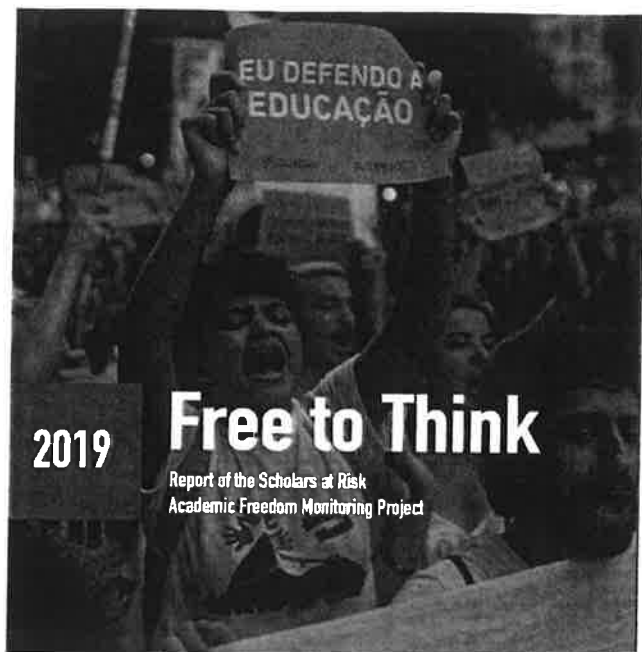


Figure 1 | International Scholars at Risk network publishes an annual report *Free to Think*

Columbia University hosts a website called the Silencing Science Tracker that gathers data from 'action that has the effect of restricting or prohibiting scientific research, education, or discussion, or the publication or use of scientific information' (Columbia Law School, 2019). The website contains data on government censorship, the self-censorship of scientists, research cuts, restricted publications and the misrepresentation or disregard of scientific research in policymaking.

The Silencing Science Tracker focuses mainly on environmental research. This is not surprising, since there are strong political and economic interests around environmental research and the application of research data putting environmental researchers under pressure. There may be straightforward use of political power by the government or lobbying by energy companies or think tanks. Types of suppression include defamation, false accusations, lawsuits and unjustified claims of scientific misconduct (Kuehn, 2004).

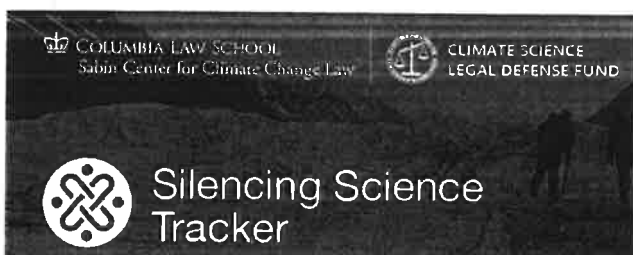


Figure 2 | Sabine Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University publishes *Silencing Science Tracker*.

The presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2009) was an era when environmental research was particularly under attack (Cole, 2005; 2017). For example, the well-known climate scientist James Hansen accused his employer, NASA, of violating his freedom of expression and of censorship. According to Hansen, his e-mail was monitored, his writings were required to be pre-screened and his public appearances were managed (see e.g., Rich & Merrick, 2007).

In Canada, during Stephen Harper's government (2006–2015), environmental researchers faced similar problems. The government no longer wanted to commit itself to the Kyoto climate objectives and sought to promote Canadian industry by streamlining environmental legislation. The focus of the National Research Council's funding was transferred from basic research to applied research that served to develop industry and new innovations (Amend & Barney, 2016). At the same time, the freedom of expression of those working in state research institutions was restricted. In 2007, research institutes received new communication guidelines requiring researchers to ask for permission from the leadership before they could contact the media or publicise their research. This diminished the freedom of expression of the researchers (Magnuson-Ford & Gibbs, 2014).

In addition to its internal censorship, in recent years the Chinese government has also influenced the censorship of foreign scientific publications. In the fall of 2017, it was revealed that Cambridge University Press granted the Chinese government's demand to censor and remove 315 articles from the database of its journal *China Quarterly*. *China Quarterly* is one of the most respected international publications in the field. The censored articles dealt with topics sensitive to China, such as Taiwan independence, the status of Hong Kong, the situation in Tibet, the role of the Dalai Lama as leader of Tibet and the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square (Airaksinen, 2020).

The censorship of the *China Quarterly* caused a storm of widespread protests outside China. More than 1,200 researchers signed a petition against censorship, and many researchers stated that they would no longer publish their articles in *China Quarterly*. After these protests, the publisher cancelled the further removal of articles from the web archives, and the censored articles were returned.

At the same time, another major scientific publisher, Springer Nature, also decided to remove more than 1,000 articles from its Chinese database. The censored articles dealt with topics similar to those of the papers threatened with removal from the *China Quarterly*. According to the publisher, China would have shut down the entire SpringerLink site in the country if the politically sensitive articles had not been removed from the database. Springer Nature justified its decision on the grounds that it was merely adapting its publications to local laws. Scholars worldwide have criticised this decision and organised boycotts, such as refusing to peer review articles submitted to Springer or Palgrave Macmillan publications (Airaksinen, 2020).

In Europe, researchers had difficulties in the 2010s, especially in Hungary but occasionally in other Central Eastern European countries. In Hungary, the Central European University (CEU) has become a symbol of scientific freedom. The George Soros-funded university in Budapest has long been under the scrutiny of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In 2017, a new university law came into force in Hungary, specifically against the CEU. Since then, the university has tried to negotiate its position, but its operating conditions have further deteriorated. In December 2018, the university handed over its degree-leading education to Vienna, Austria.

In the summer of 2019, the government significantly reduced the independence of the Hungarian Academy

of Sciences by assigning to it a new administrative level. By appointing people of their choice to the new science administration, the prime minister and government were able to influence research funding and priorities.

Czech President Miloš Zeman has used his power to block the appointment of professors, often for political reasons. While the president of the Czech Republic has had the power to confirm the appointments of professors for many decades, past presidents have not used their power to block appointments. The largest university in the Czech Republic, in 2019 the internationally acclaimed Charles University, sued the president for abuse of power and violation of academic freedom. The council of rectors of the country has supported the university in this matter. University management justified the decision to sue the president on the grounds that it is not up to the president to decide who is eligible to become a professor.

## THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

The term *authoritarian populism* was first coined by Stuart Hall in 1979. With the concept, he aimed to explain and understand the emergence and success of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to Hall, Thatcher in particular was able to mobilise popular votes among the working class with the rhetoric and ideology that utilised 'moral panics', zero-tolerance policing and increased immigration control. Thatcher succeeded in gaining political hegemony by representing a moral leadership with her attacks against the 'corporatist state' and welfare programmes.

More recently, the term authoritarian populism was picked up by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in their book *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (2019). Norris and Inglehart do not refer to Hall and the origins of authoritarian populism, perhaps because they use the term in a somewhat different way: Norris and Inglehart refer more broadly to right-wing populist parties and leaders throughout the world who have gained popularity with their anti-immigration and anti-liberal policies and nativist ideologies. They argue that

**Authoritarian Populism favors policies where the state actively intervenes to restrict non-traditional lifestyles, typically by limiting same sex marriage, LGBTQ rights and gender equality, access to contraception and abortion, and affirmative action or quotas – unless, in some cases, these types of liberal policies are framed as a defense of national cultures against attacks by 'others.' Finally, in the public sphere, since liberal democracy has been delegitimized, authoritarian populists favor strong governance preserving order and security against perceived threat... even at the expense of democratic norms protecting judicial independence, freedom of the media, human rights and civil liberties. (Norris & Inglehart 2019, p. 9)**

The book is based on international social value surveys from the 1970s and the argument Inglehart made famous some time ago on the silent revolution. Norris and Inglehart briefly discuss the violations against press freedom and freedom of expression in relation to authoritarian populism, but

they do not address academic freedom as such. However, I think that the rise of authoritarian populism is a relevant context through which to understand the recent threats to academic freedom and freedom of expression. In countries such as Turkey, Hungary and Poland, the limitations imposed by authoritarian populist governments on freedom of the press and freedom of expression go hand in hand with restrictions to academic freedom. The same can be said for the attacks on the mainstream media, environmental science and academic experts in the United States.

When Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016, similar worries arose among environmental researchers as those that emerged during the era of George W. Bush (2001–2009). In the spring of 2017, the March for Science gathered an estimated one million people around the world in 600 cities (Ross et al., 2018). The event was organised mainly due to the concern of American environmental scientists over the undermining by Trump's administration of environmental research in order to promote the agenda of traditional industries.



Figure 3 | March for Science in Helsinki, Finland, March 2017. University of Helsinki archives.

Norris and Inglehart do not explicitly discuss the relation between authoritarian populism and trust in science, but recent studies show that in the United States, the cultural authority of science has lessened among conservatives. For instance, Gordon Gauchat (2012) explored public trust in science from 1974 to 2010 and concluded that 'conservatives clearly experienced group-specific declines in trust in science over the period'. Gauchat associates this public distrust in science with two cultural shifts, with the first shift occurring during the post-Reagan era of 1980 with the emergence of the new right. The second shift occurred after the Bush era with the suppression of environmental sciences. According to Gauchat, science has increasingly become politically contested and ideologically connected with government regulation, which contributes to the politicisation of science in the public sphere.

## ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN FINLAND

Let me now discuss academic freedom and researchers' freedom of expression in Finland.

The principle of academic freedom is enshrined in Finland's Constitution, which states that 'freedom of science, art and higher education is safeguarded' and is and is reflected in the autonomy of universities. Academic freedom includes the ability for researchers to determine the topics, methods and forms of publication of their research.

This applies not only to universities, but also to all other educational and research institutions. Academic freedom also includes the right of citizens to use research results.

However, over the last ten years, the debate on the freedom of science and the freedom of expression of researchers has emerged from time to time in Finland. Researchers' criticism of the narrowing of scientific freedom was clarified particularly well in the preparation of the new University Act.

The new University Act, which came into force in 2010, promised more freedom of science as well as financial and administrative autonomy for universities. Despite this, criticism of the narrowing of scientific freedom and autonomy has only increased. This was because the University Act made the university administration more hierarchical in accordance with the new public management ideology. Universities are now seen as competing units: To succeed, they must constantly step up their operations, sharpen their profile and demonstrate their effectiveness through various evaluations and indicators.

In the European comparison of academic freedom made in 2007, Finland ranked in the top position of 23 countries. In a comparison published in 2017, Finland had fallen to the European middle caste. The new university law that came into force in 2010 was identified as the main reason for Finland's descent (Karran et al., 2017).

2007

**Finland  
ranked in  
the top  
position**



The University Act of 2010, and subsequent reforms, forced universities to align with the new public management ideology. In the management of universities, there has been a shift to hierarchical practices instead of collegial ones. While in the past, quality assurance and control of operations were based on trust and internal evaluation, today they are increasingly 'external and mistrust-based' (Keränen, 2013, p. 68)



**FREEDOM  
OF SCIENCE**



**FREEDOM  
OF EXPRESSION**

Like in many other countries, market-driven elements have been implemented into Finnish universities and higher education institutions (Aarrevaara et al., 2009; Tuunainen & Knuutila, 2009), and the development of a national innovation system has been encouraged. Universities and state research institutes are regarded as nodes within innovation networks (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Thus, academic capitalism and the commodification of academic research (e.g., Hackett, 1990; Radder, 2010; Birch, 2020) have shaped academic organisations and academic work. In particular, the introduction of the Universities Act in 2010 strengthened the rise of new public management in Finnish universities. This has since encouraged the adoption of top-down quasi-entrepreneurial policies in management and communication activities at state research institutes (Karvonen, 2011, p. 173).

The critique against university politics intensified in 2015 when a new centre-right government took power in Finland. Following the parliamentary election of 2015, a coalition government consisting of Finland's three largest centre-right parties – the Centre Party, the National Coalition and the Finns Party – was formed. This marked the first time that the right-wing populist Finns Party had participated in a Finnish government. A controversial measure adopted by the centre-right government was to reduce public spending on education and research. This was something of a departure from the successful Finnish education system of which the country is so proud. These cuts involved merging educational units, closing down small disciplines and cutting financial aid to universities, polytechnics and the Academy of Finland. Because of this, it is not surprising that the government became unpopular in the world of Finnish academia. Discontent with the government caused public demonstrations by academics and a one-day strike at the University of Helsinki in 2018.

Critique of the government by academics was also fuelled by some reckless public statements made by cabinet members. First, the treasury minister and leader of the National Coalition, Alexander Stubb, made a joke about the academics who had criticised the cuts to education and research: 'If the professor once had three reasons to be a professor – June, July and August – then this is no longer the case'. After being subject to intense criticism from academics, Stubb apologised for his remark.

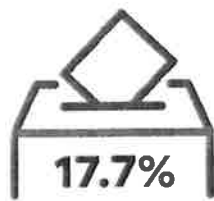
The most infamous gibe against academics in this regard came from Prime Minister Sipilä during a TV talk show: 'There are now too many of them [critics] in Finland to tell you what should not be done in this situation. There are all sorts of docents who say that this and this must not be

done'. This caused widespread displeasure among academics, and the phrase was turned into a meme that was widely disseminated in public discourse. In 2016, the Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists gave its annual Science Communication Award to 'all sorts of docents'.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, from 2015–2019, the centre-right government was highly unpopular among Finnish academics. A reason for this mistrust, aside from the curtailment of academic freedom, was the increasing political influence of the Finns Party, who had cultivated anti-immigration and anti-intellectual sentiment in Finland. Numerous academics have blamed the leaders of the Finns Party for encouraging racism and hate speech.

The Finns Party was founded in 1995. In the 2015 election, the party received 17.7 percent of the votes, making them the parliament's second-largest party. The roots of the party lie in Finnish agrarian populism, which has distinct anti-elitist and conservative tones. While the Finnish Rural Party and the Finns Party prior to 2010 occupied a centre-left political position, in the last ten years, the party has moved to the right and possesses numerous ideological characteristics that are similar to other radical-right parties in Europe (Jungar, 2016). Since the party left government in 2017, it has been the biggest or second biggest party in opinion polls. The leading figures of the Finns Party and some of its supporters are particularly active in social media, challenging established political parties, national institutions, mainstream media and academics (e.g., Hatakka, 2017; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). An important tool in this development was the website and discussion platform Hommaforum, established in 2008 by Jussi Halla-aho, the current leader of the Finns Party. According to Hatakka (2017, 2023) this online forum has significantly contributed to the 'normalization of far-right populism in the public sphere'.

**Making them  
the parliament's  
second-largest party.**



In spring 2015, the Public Committee of Scientific Information in Finland decided to conduct a survey of Finnish researchers regarding the feedback they received in their public role. The survey was conducted as an online questionnaire in 2015 and renewed in 2017. Based on these surveys, outlined below are some of the experiences of Finnish researchers related to the freedom of expression with a focus on researchers' responses related to populist politics that undermine science and the emergence of online hate aimed at researchers who communicate their expertise in public arenas. In many responses, this latter development was interpreted as a potential cause of self-censorship among scientists.

## SUPPRESSION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Some typical ways of controlling and suppressing academic freedom and the freedom of expression of researchers are political and economic control, organisational control in state research institutes and 'control from below', which refers to aggressive feedback and hate mail from activist groups or ordinary people intended to intimidate (Väliverronen & Saikkonen, 2020).



Political and economic control



Organisational control (in state research institutes)



Control from below (aggressive feedback, trolling, 'hate speech')

### **Political and organisational control**

The economic and political control of research manifests in several ways, which in turn affects how these issues limit researchers' freedom of inquiry and expression. In science and technology studies, the close interplay between companies, businesses and universities is defined by the concept of the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz, 2002). The entrepreneurial university transforms universities and research so that research and development seamlessly work together.

Political and economic control can also indirectly limit freedom of expression and the publication of research. Sometimes politicians and government officials scrutinise and attempt to adjust the public spread of research data and results so that they can fulfil predetermined policy goals. In the surveys and interviews, some researchers felt that economic and political efforts were made to direct funding to fit pre-established goals.

The freedom of expression for researchers in Finland is relatively good, at least for those working in universities. However, those working in state research institutes have reported occasional problems with the leadership of the institutes. For those working in state research institutions, freedom of expression has historically been narrower than it has for university researchers. Finnish state research institutes are owned and run by ministries, and their primary responsibilities are to output research into specific topics, produce knowledge and support decision-making.

For instance, in 2010, a number of researchers working in the Technological Research Centre VTT accused the leadership of the research institute of silencing its researchers. VTT is a state research institute operating under the mandate of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy. One researcher working in VTT received a warning from his employer after

<sup>1</sup> Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists: Science communication award to all sorts of docents" <http://www.tiedetoimittajat.fi/tiedetoimittaja/tiedeviestintapalkinto-kaiken-maailman-dokentille/> (Accessed 7 July 2019)



show, there are also other, more subtle, forms of power that influence the public communication of science. New promotional practices for managing visibility are not purely instrumental to science or science communication: they are also part of the marketisation of research and the higher education system in general (Väliverronen, 2021).

The concept of promotional culture provides a wider perspective to science–media relations. The term promotional culture was first introduced by Andrew Wernick (1991) in the early 1990s. Wernick's book included a chapter on the rise of "the promotional university", in which he analysed the ways in which universities had been drawn into promotional logic, especially in student and staff recruitment and academic publishing.

Later, Aeron Davis (2013) extended the argument by demonstrating the ways in which promotional practices, not just advertising, shape society, organisations and individuals. He argued that society and its institutions have become more promotionally oriented and that individuals and organisations have grown to accommodate promotional discourse as a normal part of work and daily practices. The increasing market orientation of universities and research organisations has been discussed and analysed by many scholars (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2013; Cronin, 2016; Hearn, 2010, 2015; Williams & Gajevic, 2014).

Sociologist Graig Calhoun (2006, 2009) analysed the role of universities as public institutions and producers of 'public good'. Calhoun (2006) summed up the transformation of universities in the early 2000s as a tension between "excellence" and "accessibility". He argued that both excellence and accessibility are, in many ways, ideological concepts that are often spoken of as aspirations without further specification. Excellence in the language of higher education has become synonymous with quality. When it comes to universities and research, it has become customary to use the terms "top university", "top research" or "top researcher". These terms emerged from the ideology of competition and the proliferation of rankings and ratings.

For Calhoun, the accessibility of a university refers specifically to two objectives. The first is the drive to disseminate scientific knowledge as widely as possible so that the benefits of universities and research can be shared across society. The second objective refers to elite universities' efforts to become more open so that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds can also enter.

There is a tension between these two goals, and many of the practices adopted by the academic world actually work against accessibility. The paywalls of commercial publishers and the reluctance of researchers to speak or write to anyone other than their colleagues limits the transparency and accessibility of research.

Cronin (2016) studied promotional practices in UK universities and argued that managing media visibility has become an important part of the new "reputational capital" of universities, drawing from Bourdieu's (1986) symbolic capital, which is a representational form based on recognition and prestige that aims to secure a privileged position within the field. Core elements of reputational capital are media stories about research and universities and various metrics – not only research metrics

such as the H-index but also "softer" metrics of media coverage introduced after research impact gained more prominence in research evaluations. Universities adopt practices that are typical to market actors, thus changing the idea of university and research as a "public good".

Promotional practices and streamlined communication practices may also reduce academic freedom and the freedom of expression of researchers in public arenas. It seems that state research institutes are increasingly adopting quasi-entrepreneurial practices in science communication as one organisation and one voice, which limits the freedom of individual researchers to speak up. The leaderships of state research institutes adopt and implement more centralised communication policies for fear of losing important customers if individual researchers make public commentaries that are not 'politically correct' (Väliverronen & Saikkonen, 2020).

Recent studies have shown that universities, where researchers have traditionally enjoyed more freedom, are not immune to this development. New practices of branding and reputation management have introduced more streamlined corporate communication practices to universities (Hearn, 2015; Cronin, 2016; Davies & Horst, 2016), which poses a threat to academic freedom and freedom of expression. The adoption of the corporative style in science communication makes communication a strategic activity, where "every member of the organisation should internalise the house strategy so that all staff communicate the same basic message in harmony as a choir" (Karvonen, 2011, p. 173). Thus, promotional practices are not simply external or instrumental but also introduce ideological and cultural shifts to science communication practices and to the public role of science.

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