

# Silencing Milo: On the Mission and Culture of a University

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*Summary.* In this talk – which draws on my article on “The Relation Between Academic Freedom and Free Speech” – I argue that there’s a weaker case for universities providing platforms to trolls and provocateurs, than what is normally claimed by advocates of free speech on campus. The main reason to refrain from platforming such speakers isn’t that their speech is harmful or offensive, as defenders of no-platforming often argue, but rather that platforming trolls and provocateurs fails to promote, and is likely to inhibit or undermine in various ways, the achievement of the university’s defining intellectual aims.

Let me start by posing a question.

Is it wrong when people who hold hard-line reactionary political views, or who express overtly hostile views about oppressed groups, have their talks shut down on university campuses?

In order to be a question of any general ethical or philosophical significance, we have to interpret this as an inquiry after some kind of impartial, non-question begging *principle* – one which provides us with some sort of normative guidance about when it is forbidden, or permissible, or obligatory to shut down talks on university campuses.

Until such a principle is on the table, any debate over this kind of question will likely be little more than a verbal altercation, an exercise in political rhetoric and point-scoring: people who share these kinds of views will think that it is wrong

for them to be shut down, because they are the right views, and people who oppose these kinds of views will think that it *isn't* wrong for them to be shut down, because they are the *wrong* views.

It would be good if we could do better than this. And much of the argumentation that has happened in this debate has betrayed a notable optimism about our ability to do better. Many of the people who weigh in on this sort of question seem to believe that we can make informative generalisations in response to this question – moreover, informative generalisations which meet this methodological condition, of being ground-able in some kind of impartial, non-question-begging principle.



Much of what I say today will be sceptical, or perhaps even verging on *cynical*, about this prospect. I am very doubtful about whether it is the case that there are informative generalisations to be had here. If there are impartial, non-question-begging principles that can offer us guidance in these kinds of cases, then I'm as yet unsure what they might be.

I know what some people *think* the principles might be. And most of what I will be doing in this talk is explaining why I think the arguments given on behalf of those supposedly general principles are inadequate.

Still, let's not get too cynical or pessimistic too quickly. If we're hoping to find a general principle that will answer our question, I can think of a good place to start. There is one point that everyone on the different sides of this debate seems to agree about, in terms of the underlying normative framework that should guide our inquiry – and hence there's a viable starting point for an illuminating debate about this question, namely:

The idea is that the fundamental mission of the university is an epistemic one: it is about expanding and disseminating knowledge; and that the culture and practices of a given university should further this mission

Now, from the second of these points, people on opposing sides of this controversy might also be able to agree, tentatively, that public talks by visiting speakers are of enough significance, in terms of how they fit into the culture and practice of a university, that they are an object of legitimate concern, when we are thinking about how the university tries to achieve its mission.

But that – it seems to me – is where any substantive agreement about how we might adopt a principled and unbiased approach to this question more or less runs out. And as appealing as it is, this claim about the mission and culture of the university, by itself, is simply not enough to get us anywhere near a principled

settlement in response to our initial question, about whether it's wrong to shut down talks by reactionaries at universities.

In large part, that's because people who are differently politically situated, on this issue, disagree about what are the best or most effective ways to try to achieve these epistemic desiderata; they also sometimes hold different views about what *kinds* of knowledge the university ought to be chasing, or about what *counts* as knowledge. And they also disagree in all sorts of ways about how the pursuit of these epistemic desiderata should interact with our other legitimate ethical and political aims

These are all serious obstacles to overcome, if we are hoping for a principled answer to our initial question. But there is still another reason why this appealing thesis about the mission and the culture of the university, even if we all sign onto it, isn't enough to underpin any kind of principled ethical generalisation about whether it's wrong to no platform speakers with reactionary or prejudiced ideas. And that is that there is simply an enormous amount of *variation* in what is going on in these episodes of speakers being no platformed and silenced.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education – and some popular discourse – encourages us to think about this issue as if there is a general stance that we might take. But in fact, once we start trying to think about any particular instance of no platforming, we find we need to take a wide range of factors into account before we draw any ethical conclusions about what's gone on, for instance:

- Whether the speaker is formally disinvited – as opposed to simply being blocked from speaking or shouted down – and if they are disinvited, what procedural norms, if any, are followed in the process of disinvitation
- Whether the process by which the speaker is invited in the first place adheres to recognised procedures for inviting speakers at the relevant institution, and whether the procedures in question are sensible ones
- Whether the speaker was going to be talking about a topic related to their allegedly problematic views
- Whether the anticipated content of the talk would have involved any *explicit* encouragement of discriminatory or otherwise wrongful acts towards some target group
- Whether the platform at issue was a part of the university's educational activities, or entertainment, or pseudo-educative pageantry, or a special interest group event, or something of more symbolic significance in the culture of the institution, e.g. a commencement address
- Whether teaching and research work by the institution's own staff would be jeopardised – or, as the case may be, assisted – by shutting down the talk in question

- Whether the speaker is a practitioner of an academic discipline or cognate sphere of intellectual expertise
- If not, whether they have – like some ‘trolls’ and anti-science campaigners – expressed overt hostility vis-à-vis the integrity and legitimacy of the academic enterprise
- Whether the institution in question is currently addressing exigent circumstances that are jeopardising teaching activities, access to university facilities, or campus security
- Whether there is a systemic problem in the institution’s response to acts of violence or discrimination against members of a particular marginalised group

Moreover, any number of specific circumstantial details may have a bearing on whether the shutting down of a talk can be expected to do more harm than good, with respect to any of the aims or ideals implicated in the factors enumerated above. So this should be enough to indicate why I think generalisations are going to be difficult to come by in this area. I think the phenomena are too complex, and too varied, to admit of such generalisations.



Some commentators pay some lip service to the importance of some of the factors that I have mentioned here. Overwhelmingly, though, the commentary on this issue – both in popular political discourse and in the small amount of scholarly literature on this topic, in philosophy and political theory – treats the issue as if these factors, if they matter at all, are just subsidiary details. Overwhelmingly, people who have weighed in on this debate have argued as if they think *there are* informative, principled, normative generalisations that we can make in response to our opening question – which was:

*Is it wrong when people who hold hard-line reactionary political views, or who express overtly hostile views about oppressed groups, have their talks shut down on university campuses?*

In particular, three kinds of arguments in support of a general stance on this question appear regularly in debates on this topic.

1. No, it isn’t wrong when people who hold reactionary views are no platformed, because the airing of those views in universities is harmful, and hence we’re justified in silencing them in the name of harm-prevention.
2. Yes, it is wrong when people who hold reactionary views are no platformed, because this is incompatible with the university’s overriding (and much less easily defeasible) commitment to academic freedom and free speech.

3. Yes, it is wrong when people who hold reactionary views are no platformed, because the airing of those views in the university community ultimately contributes to the realisation of the university's epistemic mission.

I won't address the first argument here, expect to say that I believe it is predicated upon an unhelpfully expansive notion of harm – one which, applied generally, could be used to formulate justifications for restricting an extraordinarily wide variety of communicative activities.

I want to examine the second and third arguments.

Let me start with the second argument, and explain why – despite the fact that I am in general a defender of free speech – I find it unpersuasive.

The first thing to say here, by way of preamble, is that it is all too common, among authors who oppose no platforming, to conflate academic freedom and free speech – to talk about them as if they are simply the same thing, or as if academic freedom is nothing more than a situationally-specific application of a generic free speech principle.

For example, in an article in Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, John Ibbotson writes that “on university campuses across Canada, a cold war rages between two principles: the right to academic freedom of inquiry or, more broadly, to free speech, on the one hand; on the other, the right to be protected from harm”

The suggestion here – casual, and unremarked upon – is that the difference between academic freedom and free speech is simply a matter of *breadth*. They are ostensibly the same principle, only applied at different levels of granularity.

The fudging of this distinction sometimes occurs in scholarly discourse as well. In a paper that appears in an edited collection of scholarly papers on academic freedom, published by Columbia University Press in 2015, the literary theorist David Bromwich insists that academic freedom is simply the general political right to intellectual freedom, applied to people working in the academic profession. He explicitly rejects “the narrow and more profession-centered definitions of academic freedom” that are espoused in contemporary American jurisprudence on this topic, and says that “the way to uphold the principle of academic freedom is simply to treat it as part of the ordinary freedom that is the birthright of citizens in a democracy”.

This is a dubious and unfounded conflation of free speech and academic freedom, and it is important that we unravel it. For one thing, we can't give a precise account of the sense in which the university actually *has* an overriding commitment to academic freedom and free speech, if we're mistakenly construing them as being the same principle differentiated only by the scope of their application. But also: spelling out the particulars of these two principles gives us a foundation for

then explaining why neither principle is violated – necessarily, or even as a matter of course – by the no platforming of reactionary speakers at universities.

So, first, free speech. The normative theses and commitments that are bundled together under the name ‘free speech’ can be boiled down to two main principles. The first principle is that the government must treat speech as a form of human conduct that is distinctive, and specially privileged, *in some sense*, in our social institutions – first and foremost, in the law. More specifically, if the government wants to engage in action that restricts speech, via the law or some other more direct action, then the government must satisfy a higher threshold of justification than it normally would if it was merely engaging in action that restricts some other form of behaviour, besides speech. In short, speech is special.

That’s the first essential principle of free speech. Here is the second. The fact that some speech expresses an idea that’s bad, wrong, or offensive, is never by itself a sufficient justification for a government restricting speech. These are principles that limit the government’s power to restrict people’s speech, as well as the kinds of reasons the government can appeal to in order to justify the exercise of its already-constrained power in this arena.

Academic freedom applies more narrowly than this in two senses. First, it is only the speech of people involved in the teaching and research activities of a higher education institution that are protected by principles of academic freedom; it isn’t a norm that applies to the citizenry *per se*. Second, it is not the academic’s speech in general, but only her communicative practices in teaching, research, and so-called ‘extramural speech’ – public commentary on matters of general public concern – that are protected.

But at the risk of sounding like a broken record, the differences between academic freedom and free speech are not *just* a matter of these discrepancies in scope. First, academic freedom is customarily institutionalised by way of distinctive instruments in the employment conditions of academics – for example, tenure, and other kinds of rules, sometimes customary, sometimes contractually embedded – which make it more difficult for academics – compared to other professionals – to be disciplined or fired if their managers disapprove of their methods in carrying out their professional duties. There is simply nothing analogous to this when it comes to principles of free speech. Principles of free speech permit people to say what they want to say without fear of being persecuted by the authorities. They do not guarantee the much more radical freedom to say what one likes *and* to be specially immunised against losing one’s job if one wants to say things that one knows to be hostile or antagonistic towards one’s employer. In short, academic freedom confers a narrower, but at the same time much more radical suite of privileges and prerogatives upon the people who enjoy it, than does free speech.

Conversely, the profession-based nature of academic freedom also means that the freedom it accords to academics, in their professional duties, is caveated by various demands of professional competence. Academic freedom gives academics a right to teach and research as they see fit, but it doesn't deny that these activities, unlike public discourse *per se*, are "essentially subject to quality controls on the basis of general professional standards of accuracy and coherence". Such caveats have no recognisable analogue when it comes to the freedoms protected by free speech.

Free speech protects people's ability to say what they want to say, in public. Academic freedom permits academics to teach and research what they think is most suitable, regardless of what their bosses would like them to teach and research, but this is subject to the general caveat that their teaching and research meets some kind of demonstrable standards of professional competence. If and when it falls short of those standards, the prerogatives in question give way.



These might strike you as nit-picky differences. But there is one further difference between free speech and academic freedom which is more about the underlying spirit of the two principles. And while this difference is harder to articulate in a precise way, it is arguably the most important difference. The American legal theorist and philosopher Robert Post has done more than any other scholar to explain this point, and much of what I'm about to say is really just a paraphrase of Post's meticulous and to my mind persuasive jurisprudential arguments.

Academic practice is essentially about judgement, and the assessment of ideas. We assess undergraduate papers and exam, PhD theses, and journal papers for their intellectual merit and disciplinary competence. We dismiss work which is ill-informed, unevidenced, incoherent, or otherwise epistemically sub-par, relative to the intellectual and disciplinary standards that govern the relevant discursive context.

The practices that are protected by principles of academic freedom are thus of their essence concerned with distinguishing good ideas from bad ideas, and privileging the former over the latter. Principles of free speech, by contrast, are, of their essence, about *the refusal* to privilege good ideas over bad ideas, and to instead allow all ideas – however we judge their rational and other merits – to be heard on equal terms with one another. Free speech is about setting up a discursive space that operates as a *formally unhierarchical* playing field for the expression of ideas. Academic freedom is about creating a discursive space in which experts can rank and assess ideas, in order to *hierarchically elevate* the good ones over the bad.

So, now we know a bit about the difference between these two kinds of freedom. Is there any good reason to think that the no platforming of reactionary views on campuses infringes against either kind of freedom?

Well, in a limited but non-trivial range of cases, *yes*. No platforming can, in particular circumstances, infringe against academic freedom. Suppose an academic department invites a professor from another university to speak at their research seminar, and the professor accepts the invitation, but then the event is shut down by student protests, because the university management is unwilling to pay for the additional security that the agitation against the talk necessitates, and the department itself is not in a financial position to pay these security costs out of their own pocket.

Although there are liable to be any number of further circumstantial complications, this kind of case can plausibly be characterised as an abridgement of the freedom of the faculty in the relevant department to determine the content of their own research and teaching practices. It is open to debate whether we should say that their freedom has been abridged by the student protestors or by the university management. But however we end up spelling out that part of the analysis, their freedom is seemingly abridged, and it is an exercise of their scholarly research practices that has been inhibited as a result.

So yes, practices of no platforming can sometimes infringe upon academic freedom. But as the example helps us see, it is implausible to think that no platforming *in general* infringes upon academic freedom, because it is only in a limited range of cases that the speaking engagements that are shut down by no platforming are ones that are involved in the teaching or research practices of academics. In those cases, we have a *prima facie* strong academic-freedom-based argument against no platforming. But that case doesn't carry over to the practice of no platforming at large – that is, in all those cases where it is used to shut down talks that have no direct role in teaching and research, e.g. things like student society events, special visiting speaker events organised by university management, and commencement addresses.

It is also true that no platforming can, under particular circumstances, infringe against free speech. Suppose a university makes its rooms and facilities available for various clubs and societies to use, and provides various kinds of logistical support to that end, including advertising, security, insurance and other forms of legal indemnification in case of damages, and so on. But suppose that the university provides its facilities and support for most student groups, on equivalent terms, while selectively withholding this support for just some groups, because it disfavours their message. On a fairly orthodox jurisprudential interpretation, this is an infringement against free speech, because the fact that a certain viewpoint is judged to be bad, wrong, or offensive, is being used as a reason to restrict certain people's speech.



In fact, the kinds of cases in which this would qualify as a violation of free speech are restricted to just those instances in which the university is funded by the government. A private university, as far as free speech principles are concerned, is entirely at liberty to be selective in the kinds of viewpoints for which it provides resources and logistical support – or else we would find ourselves in the absurd (and arguably authoritarian) situation in which the government could compel a catholic university, for example, to provide resources and logistical support for a student-based society of Satanists bringing in guest speakers to blaspheme the Pope and the Virgin Mary.

Still, the point stands that there are some cases in which no platforming could qualify as a violation of free speech. But again, as the example helps us see, it is implausible to think that no platforming *in general* infringes upon free speech, because it is only in a limited range of cases that the speaking engagements that are shut down by no platforming are ones where the shutting down is carried out by a government actor, and underpinned by the government actor's selective, viewpoint-based discrimination against the content of the message in question.

In general, universities, even state universities, are under no ethical or political obligation to provide a speaking platform for the proponents of *any* messages, reactionary or otherwise. The university only infringes against free speech if it is already in the practice of providing speaking platforms on some impartial procedural terms, to advocates of different viewpoints, only to selectively rescind that provision for viewpoint-discriminatory reasons. It is only a narrow subset of cases of no platforming that can be characterised as fitting this pattern.

So it is only occasionally the case that no platforming can be judged wrong purely or primarily on account of the fact that it infringes against the university's distinct commitments – such as they are – to academic freedom and free speech. If there is a general, principled case to be made for the wrongness of no platforming the proponents of reactionary or conservative views, it will have to be formulated along different lines.



Let's turn to the third argument, then – the one that says: “Yes, it is wrong when people who hold reactionary views are no platformed, because the airing of those views in the university community ultimately contributes to the realisation of the university's epistemic mission”.

Why do I think this kind of argument is unsuccessful? Well, I think this kind of reasoning has better prospects than what we have just seen with the second argument. But still, I'm unimpressed overall by the attempts that I have seen to flesh out the details of this argument and defend its premises. My dissatisfaction with arguments of this kind can more or less be summed up with a sceptical question:

what reasons do we have to believe that having these kinds of speakers on campus will contribute to the realisation of the university's epistemic mission?

In their recent book *Free Speech on Campus*, Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman offer the closest thing that I know of, in the literature, to a serious answer. They talk about the importance of having a wide open marketplace of ideas on campus as a way of “nurturing a spirit of tolerance within the broader campus community that allows all ideas to be subjected to debate and assessment”. They claim that “the success of academic communities depends as much on continually reinvigorating this sentiment” – the sentiment that wrongheaded views are to be tolerated – as it relies on having formal protections for academic freedom.

The argument here bears a notable resemblance to the argument for broader principles of free speech which is offered in the classic free speech text *The Tolerant Society*, by Lee Bollinger. Bollinger thinks that by tolerating the most egregious examples of racist and undemocratic speech, for example, pride marches by neo-Nazis in Jewish neighbourhoods, an ethos of tolerance is inculcated within the community at large. The idea is that people see that the authorities are conspicuously refraining from exercising the power that they could be exercising in order to silence the speech of people with extremely objectionable views. And this somehow causes the population as a whole to be more tolerant. The government acts as a special exemplar for the ideal of toleration.

The most glaring shortcoming in Gilman and Chemerinsky's argument, about why we should have a wide open speech culture on campus – one that reserves a space for reactionaries and extremists, alongside everyone else – is exactly the same as the shortcoming in Bollinger's conjecture about how the government can inculcate an ethos of tolerance in the population at large. The problem is that this is just speculative, armchair sociology. So far as the debate on this topic is going to be hashed out via the methods of speculative armchair sociology, then we can come up with *prima facie* credible conjectures on the other side of the argument that are just as methodologically legitimate.

For instance, at universities that give speaking platforms to reactionary figures, academics – and indeed, some or many students – might start to feel cynical and disenchanted at the administration pandering to special-interest groups, or to the appetites of a student body that is more interested in debate-as-theatrical-quarrelling than debate-as-serious-inquiry-and-analysis. They might come to believe that their university's attempt to cultivate a tolerant ethos is little more than a flimsy, *post hoc* pretext for hosting ‘buzzy’ events that make the institution more marketable to prospective students. They may resent the fact that serious intellectual standards at university are being sacrificed to make space for speakers who contribute nothing of intellectual substance to the life of the university, and who are merely good at stirring up acrimony. They may, in short, become jaded,

hardened, and indeed *less* tolerant of unorthodox views than they were beforehand – back when some semblance of intellectual credibility and basic decorum were regarded a prerequisites for someone being given a speaking gig at a serious university.

In fact, I said this was just speculative armchair sociology, but in fact I'm describing the attitude of a number of academics I have spoken to about these issues. Anecdota aside, the point is that we don't yet have a good argument against no platforming reactionaries, if our argument is grounded in nothing more than contestable guesses about the way in which talks by reactionaries at universities might positively affect the culture of the institution, and thus conduce to the realisation of the university's defining epistemic aims. This is not an argument, it's just hand-wavy prognostication.



There is a further reason to be doubtful about the idea that nesting the disciplines in a campus-wide free speech climate aids in the cultivation of a tolerant ethos in academic study. Academic disciplines are made up of individuals who are *already* acculturated into an ethos of tolerance, one which is grounded in the procedurally-defined intellectual standards of the discipline they are trained in. Professors and faculty in a given discipline hold their posts only by virtue of having abided by impartial principles dictating how evidence can be used to defend ideas, and how the strength of one's conclusions must be apportioned to the quality of the evidence and arguments adduced in their support. The leaders and standard-bearers of academic communities have an ongoing professional investment in the idea that theses should only be assessed on the quality of reasons that can be enlisted in their support, and not on the basis of how they align with prevailing opinion. It is difficult to see the benefit in a university giving a platform to reactionary speakers as a symbolic gesture – one which is ambiguous at best – in order to nurture an ethos among its academics which is already in place.

And even if we grant that the symbolic gesture could have *some* benefit of the kind we're interested in, it doesn't follow that the type of tolerance that the gesture aims to engender is the type that's of real benefit, relative to the epistemic ideals in question. It is important here to distinguish two different kinds of spirits of tolerance, and correspondingly, two views about how a spirit of tolerance might be fostered. One straightforward way try to move from dogmatism to tolerance, in a communicative arena, is to just let every idea be heard. But part of what characterises academic communities of inquiry, as a special kind of communicative arena, is that they seek to overcome the hazards of dogmatism in a different way – one which is harder to institute, but which has corresponding benefits. Academic communities purport to overcome dogmatism through *methodological discipline*.

There are other things that characterise academic disciplines, including their valuing of technical virtuosity and innovation in the study of their subjects. But in addition to these typifying features, part of what constitutes a field of study as an academic discipline is that it establishes methodological standards as regulative ideals for its work, while viewing these standards themselves as part of the discipline's proper sphere of inquiry. In short: an academic discipline has principles for assessing the quality of claims and arguments, and a meta-methodological concern with the critical appraisal of those same principles. In a well-administered discipline, these methodological ideals are implemented via institutional practices like anonymous review and external examination, and other anti-corruption measures. These are ways of seeking to ensure that in the assessment of work – both in the evaluation of original research by scholars, and where applicable, the assessment of student learning – the discipline's methodological standards are the main basis for assessments of quality, and that the influence of other factors is minimised or cabined.

The point, to put it another way, is that academic disciplines have their own distinctive approach to cultivating and enacting a tolerant, anti-dogmatic intellectual ethos. Granted, this approach isn't tolerant to the same degree as a *laissez-faire* bazaar, which welcomes the airing of ideas and arguments regardless of *either* their substantive conclusions *or* the methodological competence that they evince. But still, it seems like the sensible way to put an anti-dogmatic ethos into practice in an institution whose *purpose for being* is inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge.

Again, the success of academic communities depends on them being willing to hear and consider any subject-relevant idea or viewpoint, but with the caveat that they should not adopt an uncritical stance towards work which demonstrates ignorance or incompetence relative to the local disciplinary standards. That is the distinctive mode of tolerance that universities need to be continually reinvigorating among their teachers and researchers. The gesture of opening up a platform to speakers like Milo Yiannopoulos doesn't merely fail to reinvigorate the ethos in question, it positively undermines it.



Finally, if our argument about the general wrongness of no platforming reactionaries rests on claims about the kinds of social conditions that conduce to the effective functioning of communities of inquiry, then it is important for us to bear in mind that communities of inquiry often work in surprisingly weird ways. And our intuitive guesses about what kinds of institutional structures will yield the epistemic results we are hoping to achieve must therefore be taken with a grain of salt.

For example, suppose a community of researchers is interested in some *prima facie* promising hypothesis, H, which conflicts with a currently accepted theory in their field, but which is – unbeknownst to the researchers – true, and capable of being strongly evidentially confirmed. Suppose, then, that an initial body of evidence, unearthed and digested in one corner of the research community, strongly (but misleadingly) indicates that H is false. If it is the case that all the researchers in this community have a close working knowledge of what all the other researchers in the community are finding, then, under these circumstances, the whole community will be strongly disincentivised from researching a true hypothesis. However, if the community is in a relatively ‘siloeed’ state, then the misleading evidential disincentives for further investigating H won’t afflict all the researchers, and hence it is more likely that the community as a whole will learn of H’s merits. Based on a formal modelling of this kind of case, the game theorists and philosopher of science Kevin Zollman, in his paper “The communication structure of epistemic communities”, has defended the counterintuitive idea that a research community can be more successful in making discoveries if it is in a communicatively balkanised state, where sub-groups operate with little knowledge of the experimental results of other sub-groups.

In sum, then, I don’t think it is the case that no platforming can be adjudged wrong on account of the fact that it tends to inhibit the realisation of the university’s epistemic aims. Or more modestly, I don’t think the arguments in the literature to that effect have much going for them. It remains to be seen whether a better argument can be developed – perhaps one partly backed by empirical support for its conjectures about how the clash of ideas brought about by having reactionaries on campus results in epistemically good outcomes.

By way of conclusion, I suppose I should lay my cards on the table a little bit more than I have up to this point. I’ve said that I don’t think there’s any general principled stance to be had on the question of whether it’s wrong or bad to no platform reactionaries at universities. I think it depends on many different factors in any given case. And I’ve tried to explain what I see as the shortcomings in the two most prominent arguments that have been offered for adopting a less particularist, more principled stance on this question.

But let’s go back to where we began. If the mission of the university is an epistemic one – if it is about expanding and disseminating knowledge – and if the culture and practices of a given university should further this mission, then how could it ever be a sensible or worthwhile thing to allow reactionary speakers to be no platformed or disinvited. What contribution could this possibly make to the mission and culture of a university?

It’s useful to bring an example to bear in reflecting on this question. In 2009, the writer, actor, and lawyer Ben Stein had been invited to deliver a commencement address at the University of Vermont, or UVM. After this invitation was publicised there was a concerted letter-writing campaign – involving faculty at UVM,

but also high-profile academic figures elsewhere, including Richard Dawkins and P. Z. Myers – aimed at persuading UVM’s president, Daniel Fogel, to rescind Stein’s invitation. The main concern motivating this outcry was that Stein had denigrated the integrity of the scientific academy and been an outspoken advocate of intelligent design creationism. Myers, one of the main agitators in this episode, expressed his sentiments about Stein’s invitation in a post addressed to UVM’s students. He said

I don’t know what the administrators at your school were thinking; this is a man with no qualifications other than a droning monotone and a stint on a game show. It’s an expression of profound disrespect... And I’m really sorry for the biology department at UVM — it’s a real slap in the face for the university to drag in this disgrace who has been a figurehead for a movement that is trying to replace science with superstition.

On Fogel’s account of the matter, Stein voluntarily withdrew from the talk after Fogel raised the concerns that had been conveyed to him in the wake of the invitation. In an interview with the university’s student newspaper, Fogel explained his take on the issue as follows.

The fundamental concern of the people that wrote to me was that, while they are quite open to having a speaker with Mr. Stein’s views on campus, they felt that he should not be honored at the commencement ceremony when so many of his views seemed to be affronts to the basic premises of the academy, about scientific and scholarly inquiry.

Stein’s address would have fallen squarely in the university’s free speech zone, rather than its professional zone, to borrow a term used by Chemerinsky and Gillman. It would have been, to quote Keith Whittington’s defence of free speech on campus, part of the freewheeling debate of campus life – the chaos of public democratic argument – as opposed to the more rigorous and decorous practices of the seminar room. Nevertheless, at the urging of other academics, in his own institution and beyond, Fogel treated this as an occasion to be governed by something more like norms of academic freedom – which permit views to be marginalised because of their intellectual deficiencies – rather than the norms of free speech – on which dubious viewpoints are entitled to a full hearing, and are supposed to be answered with counter-speech instead of simply being muzzled. After at first flirting with a choice that would have, by Myers’s lights, expressed disrespect to its faculty and students, UVM ultimately demonstrated a deeper allegiance to upholding the biologists’ intellectual standards.

Did this stance further the university’s intellectual mission? Probably not in any immediate, ‘but-for’ causal fashion. The work of UVM’s biology professors wouldn’t have tangibly suffered if Stein had spoken. The learning outcomes for that year’s graduating class wouldn’t have been any different, one presumes.

But these points don't settle the matter. Consider: would research in biological science at large be held back if, once a year, a random bar-stool pontificator got to air his opinions on evolution in the pages of *Nature*? Would the education of a university's biology students be hurt if, every other year, the lectern was given to a young-earthier for ten minutes? Not according to the narrow counterfactual logic that these questions imply. But we allow epistemically dubious views to be excluded, in these domains, in part because we think that the purposes of biology are well-served, over the long-term, if its community of experts has venues in which the epistemic standards that define their discipline are unquestioned regulative ideals – venues in which their intellectual energy can be diverted away from trying to answer the frustrations of people who don't accept those standards, or value the knowledge they make available.

We can conceive of this as a certain form of rule consequentialism. Biologists exclude methodologically incompetent views in their scholarly journals, because the discipline of biology does better at achieving its epistemic aims by having contexts in which its practitioners can, as a rule, postpone some of the tasks involved in the pursuit of those aims, e.g. trying to defend the very enterprise against its staunchest opponents. The standards governing those spaces shouldn't, and at any rate couldn't, be applied to all public discourse on the relevant topics. But they could – and as far as our epistemic aims go, it isn't absurd to think they should – govern most public discourse in the institutional home of the professionals who bear responsibility for the effective pursuit of those epistemic aims, and who are custodians of those standards.

To say all this isn't yet to disagree with Donald Downs's and Chris Surprenant's statement, in the introduction to their recent collection of essays on academic freedom, that a healthy university is a kind of intellectual polis. The key question is: what sort of intellectual polis is it?

The vision that I'm gesturing towards is one on which the discursive atmosphere of the campus at large is characterised by similar kinds of rigour, thoughtfulness, and deference to academic standards as the lecture or faculty research seminar. People are expected to comport themselves in a way that befits their being participants in a serious project of collective inquiry, and – as is already the case in formal teaching and research contexts – this imposes standards on how they communicate with each other, and in certain contexts, on the actual substance of what they communicate. People like Stein who have repeatedly demonstrated a conspiratorial hostility to those standards, or who have otherwise revealed themselves as unwilling or unable to abide by them, aren't handed valuable speaking platforms.

The university is still a place for vigorous debate and disagreement. But the style and temper of disagreement is quite unlike debate in public discourse, not just in the sense of being more mannerly, but in being more serious about the actual aims of inquiry, and hence rising above mere altercation.

To return to our last question, then: if the mission of the university is an epistemic one – if it is about expanding and disseminating knowledge – and if the culture and practices of a given university should further this mission, then how could it ever be a sensible thing to allow reactionary speakers to be no platformed or dis-invited? What contribution could this possibly make to the mission and culture of a university?

My suggested answer is that no platforming reactionary speakers will sometimes be a sensible way to try to strengthen or maintain the intellectual culture of a university. Now, you might think I'm guilty of engaging in the same kind of armchair sociology that I criticised others for, above. Fair enough. It would be better for this debate if we had less armchair sociology, and more empirical sociology, to try to get a sense of how the various ways of navigating here – prioritising free speech, versus prioritising academic standards – actually impacts upon the research and teaching cultures of universities. For now my aim has been to cast some doubt on the confident assertions, which come from opponents of no platforming, that no platforming is – typically or necessarily – a threat to the university's institutional mission. The university's institutional mission is to promote knowledge. I've tried to give some indication as to why no platforming might in fact aid – rather than jeopardise – the promotion of knowledge in universities. Those who are convinced that the cultural impact of no platforming is in fact a manifestly negative one owe us a more convincing justification, than they have offered to date, as to why we should join them in that view.