

Let's deplatform the deplatformers

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When controversial Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson toured Australia and New Zealand in February, tickets sold out in days. In Brisbane, they sold out in minutes. But even though Peterson is a professor at the University of Toronto, he didn't speak at any universities. If he had, he would certainly have been 'deplatformed' by student protesters eager to shut him up.

Deplatforming is now the tactic of choice for the social justice warrior (SJW) cult. Deplatformers pressure organisations to refuse a platform to speakers they don't like. Universities are especially vulnerable to deplatforming because militant SJW students can threaten disruption, embarrassment, and even violence to silence people they don't want (others) to hear. They can even threaten self-harm, as when SJWs suggest that the presence of a politically incorrect speaker in an auditorium across campus could provoke an emotionally vulnerable student to suicide.

Peterson is now a global celebrity of such enormous fame that he is essentially immune from deplatforming. When New Zealand's Whitcoulls bookstore pulled his 12 Rules for Life from its shelves in the wake of the March 15 Christchurch mass murder, it was more embarrassing for Whitcoulls than for Peterson. After all, they were happy to continue selling Hitler's Mein Kampf, the Sayings of Vladimir Lenin, and the Collected Writings of Chairman Mao.

Other, less famous speakers are more vulnerable. When the American paediatrician Quentin Van Meter was deplatformed at the University of Western Australia, his hosts were notified less than 24 hours before the event was scheduled to take place and had to scramble to find an alternative venue. Politically incorrect speakers without strong organisational backing might just give up, or be discouraged from even trying to speak in the first place.

It's not just the universities that are susceptible to (and complicit in) deplatforming. Australia's public broadcaster, the ABC, dismissed Van Meter with the claim that he 'has denied proven science about transgender people'. The professional association he leads, the American College of Paediatricians, has been labelled a 'hate group' by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a major American civil rights organisation. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has called it a 'fringe group of anti-LGBTQ doctors' peddling 'misinformation' to parents and schools.

If you actually go to a Van Meter lecture, you will hear a sensitive practising doctor with decades of clinical experience criticise a medical establishment that has lowered scientific standards of evidence in order to mollify transgender activists both inside and outside the profession. He may be right. He may be wrong. But he is certainly not hateful, and his ideas are certainly not anti-LGBTQ. He opposes transgender activists, not the people they claim to represent.

None of this matters to the deplatformers. They prefer to draw grotesque caricatures of their victims that leverage suggestive accusations into authoritative insults. The ACLU attacks a group for opposing its legal case. The SPLC defines that opposition as hateful. The ABC readily takes the SPLC's word for it. And what university vice-chancellor wants to host a recognised hate group?

If an undesired speaker does somehow make it onto campus, the deplatforming tactics shift up a gear into demonstration and disruption. That's what happened to Spectator columnist and sex therapist (and last-generation feminist) Bettina Arndt last year at the University of Sydney. Things can get even worse off campus. Professional provocateurs riots at every appearance by, well, professional provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos and Lauren Southern have gotten them banned from entire countries on public security grounds – the so-called heckler's veto or thug's veto.

Deplatforming has even spread to the biggest platform of all: the internet. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter all use the 'community standards' in their terms and conditions as an excuse to block users when SJWs cause a fuss. Self-described thought criminal Alex Jones has been proscribed as an actual criminal by all three – plus iTunes, Spotify, PayPal, etc.

If deplatforming is so powerful, what's a lover of free speech to do? Heavy-handed government intervention like Donald Trump's plan to tie university funding to campus speech policies will only create new compliance bureaucracies. The Australian government review led by University of Western Australia chancellor Robert French will fare no better. You can force universities to host controversial speakers, but you can't force deplatformers to respect free speech.

You can, however, use your own freedom of speech to ridicule them. A few committed free speech activists could march into a gender studies class banging symbols and drums to 'deplatform' a professor lecturing on gender fluidity. Christian students could demand safe spaces to protect them from Marxist atheists. Liberals and conservatives could temporarily put aside their differences and join forces to deplatform otherwise uncontroversial progressive speakers.

Most effective of all might be a campaign to deplatform innocent bystanders as a way to bring them into the debate. A creative group of students could deplatform physicists for upholding the aristocracy of the 'noble' gases. They could deplatform mathematicians for oppressing the innumerate. And they could charge climate scientists with racism for discriminating against black and brown coal.

Why allow the neocolonial teaching of English to go undisturbed at Australian and American universities? Shouldn't all of the world's 7,000 languages get equal billing? In a multicultural twenty-first century world, it may be time to deplatform the entire discipline.

Inviting controversial speakers to assert freedom of speech is a lot like flag burning or an anti-Islam cartoon: it attracts a lot of attention, but it doesn't change any minds. The SJWs have already cornered the market on righteous indignation. Free speech protests should counter with humour. When someone publishes a hilarious mashup of confused mathematicians wondering why protesters are marching through their classes, we might get some progress on free speech. If not, at least we'll get a good laugh!