

Harper's Bizarre

In its July 2020 issue, *Harper's Magazine* published an open letter, cautioning that “the free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted” by a set of “moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity.”¹ *Harper's* “Letter on Justice and Open Debate” was signed by 153 public figures and leaders from various sectors and walks of life. Among them were such varied signatories as journalist Fareed Zakaria, dystopian novelist Margaret Atwood, popular historian Malcolm Gladwell, early feminist icon Gloria Steinem, and J.K. Rowling of *Harry Potter* fame. The letter condemns the rise of a social climate characterized, according to the writer Thomas Chatterton Williams, by the stifling of dissenting voices, the suppression of unpopular ideas, and social ostracism “for perceived transgressions of speech and thought.”

Worries about so-called “callout” or “cancel culture” are not new to American social and political life. Treatments of the issue have seemingly emerged from all political quarters in the last few years. *Rolling Stone* editor Matt Taibbi, *New York Magazine* columnist Andrew Sullivan, and *The Atlantic's* Yascha Mounk have all recently penned statements expressing similar worries. The premise is a reasonable one on its face, given unprecedented attacks on the free press in the U.S., the proliferation of anti-democratic autocracy around the world, and the persistence of a convoluted information environment filled with fake news and conspiracy theories. Signatories of the *Harper's* letter contend that free speech, thought, and expression are the cornerstone of a democratic society and its professed aims, going as far to suggest that the restriction of unbridled debate will only harm those who would seek to bring about justice, and undermine democratic participation for all. In a contemporary deployment of John Stuart Mill's views on the freedom of speech², they argue that no-holds-barred debate is a key tool in defeating ideas which threaten human dignity and equality. Others worry about the practical effects of “cancellation” for those who are targeted for their purportedly divergent views: from online shaming and abuse³ to social ostracism, to lost followers, business, and careers.⁴

On the other hand, some argue that there are ideas which are so wrong or harmful that they should never be voiced. If and when they are, such an argument might go, the consequences for doing so should be so severe as to deter their continued expression. Calling out these ideas and addressing their criticism accordingly, some argue, is central to changing social and political norms.⁵ As one writer puts it, such a culture “might seem harsh, especially to those who have fallen foul of it, but it's a necessary part of creating the best possible spaces we can.”⁶ Others worry that ‘absolutist’ defenses of free speech and expression often emerge where those in power seek to shield themselves against criticism and the consequences of real-life harms their speech may cause. It is no accident, they say, that signatories of the *Harper's* letter are among the most powerful and advantaged in their respective fields.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If we take seriously the idea that some ideas are beyond the pale of reasonable expression, how do we distinguish those ideas? What ideas are worthy of “cancellation?” Who decides?
2. Is the freedom of speech intrinsically valuable? Can it be overridden by other competing values?

¹ Harper's Magazine, "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate"

² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

³ The Atlantic, "The Destructiveness of Call-Out Culture on Campus"

⁴ The New York Times, "Everyone Is Canceled"

⁵ Vice, "In Defense of Cancel Culture"

⁶ The Huffington Post UK, "In Defence of Callout Culture"

