

Academic Fragility

by G. Tod Slone



I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. Every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right. I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways. –Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson's suggestion seems to have become the antithesis of higher education today. Censors sometimes attempt to justify their censorship of "rude truth in all ways," but their justifications tend always to fall out of the realm of reason and serve to counter openness, as well as democracy in general. Censors also seem to have a facility for not telling the truth. Scott Jaschik and Doug Lederman, co-editors of *Inside Higher Ed*, serve as an example. In their "[An End to Reader Comments](#)" editorial, they declare,

We did so [published reader comments] as part of our core belief that good journalism depends on building a sense of community in which readers are able to share their voices. We wanted to ensure that everyone in

higher education, regardless of their position or institution, had an opportunity to contribute their perspectives.

And yet my perspectives were inevitably censored (removed from the comments section) a number of times! After all, my perspectives were largely critical of the co-editors and the opinions they published. Both editors refused to respond to my criticism of their move to restrict comments in 2018. See “To Censor or Not to Censor: An Examination of Inside Higher Education’s ‘Comment Policy’,” published in the Fall 2018 issue of the *Journal of Information Ethics*. and a year later on the American Dissident blog site (see www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2019/04/scott-jaschik-and-doug-lederman-inside.html). I’d also depicted the two editors in a satirical sketch on the front cover of issue #34 (2017) of *The American Dissident*, a 501 c3 nonprofit journal of literature, democracy, and dissidence (www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2017/11/scott-jaschik-and-doug-lederman.html). Instances of my comments being censored by the co-editors are reported in the following blog posts:
www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2017/08/doug-lederman-and-scott-jaschik.html,
www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2017/08/scott-jaschik-and-doug-lederman.html,
www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2009/06/on-newsame-old-same-oldneh-leadership.html,
www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2009/05/as-tenured-academics-weep-crocodile.html, and
www.theamericandissident.org.blogspot.com/2020/01/eboo-patel.html.

Jaschik and Lederman argue that “The comments sections have come to be dominated by a small number of readers.” And so because the number of readers who comment is small, the co-editors should eliminate the comments sections? “[...] our

comments reflect the coarsening of interpersonal discourse, especially when people communicate anonymously, as the majority of our commenters do," continue the co-editors in their justification of censorship, failing however to define precisely what constitutes the highly subjective term, "coarseness." Might any criticism of the editors themselves fall into that category? Might any criticism of a college president or dean or advertiser also fall into that undefined realm?

Jaschik and Lederman state, "(We allowed anonymous comments to protect vulnerable adjunct professors and staff members who might legitimately fear for their jobs if they were identified)." Perhaps they still shouldn't have permitted anonymity. Democracy can only exist when citizens have spine. College instructors who choose to place TRUTH far behind their job careers do not fall into that category. Perhaps the co-editors ought to examine the recipe that I espouse, as an editor: brook criticism, encourage criticism, and publish criticism. Unfortunately, few editors and few college presidents will adopt such a recipe.

"The comments have become a deterrent for a significant number of our readers and have lost much of their value," argue the co-editors without stipulating precisely how or why comments deter readers. Well, perhaps Academic Fragility is the only explanation. Over the past three decades, I have criticized academics, and almost never will they respond to my criticism. Jaschik and Lederman certainly never responded to my criticisms. Why encourage Academic Fragility? Again, democracy demands a citizenry with backbone! Higher education demands a faculty with backbone! Otherwise, it becomes higher indoctrination. Why not highlight that evident thought below the title, *Inside Higher Ed*? Well, evidently, that thought/that reality is insufficiently PC, which has replaced democracy in higher education.

The co-editors continue their aberrant justification for

editorship, "We have previously done our best to tame the worst elements of our comments while sustaining their original promise." Now, what does that even mean? Well, I suppose it simply means censorship. Note how the co-editors never use that term. Moderation has replaced it. They admit a failed previous censorship effort: "Several years ago, we asked readers for feedback and imposed new rules that we hoped would deter those who mistreat others while continuing to provide an open forum for the exchange of perspectives. Unfortunately, those changes were not effective at improving the relevance and civility of comments." But again the use of a convenient, highly subjective term, "mistreat," is employed to support the elimination of likely unwanted opinions.

Each sentence issued by the co-editors is ineluctably faulty. "Unfortunately, those changes were not effective at improving the relevance and civility of comments," they conclude. Highly subjective terms like "relevance" and "civility" constitute the arsenal of censors. The co-editors come up with a solution to the problem of some academics feeling uncomfortable by certain criticism, tones of voice, and probably vocabulary (otherwise known as freedom of expression): "We remain committed to sharing reader perspectives and are excited to announce that we are replacing comments with letters to the editor effective next week, July 1, 2020." And thus only a select few, chosen by the highly biased co-editors, will now be permitted to comment. Perhaps advertisers have been pressuring Jaschik and Lederman?

"It is our hope that the significance of letters to the editor will encourage thoughtful and civil submissions," note the co-editors. "Civil submissions." Now that sounds interesting. But with such intrinsic subjectivity, "civility" will always serve as a powerful weapon by those in power who wish to censor uncomfortable truths. "We also hope they (letters to the editor, as opposed to comments sections) will provide a more civil platform for discussion and debate," argue the co-

editors. But the reality is more limited discussion and more limited debate. The editors are simply copying big tech censors (Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and their pitiful attempts to rationalize censorship, or moderation in their terms. Google's "[The Good Censor](#)" serves as an 85-page justification! In that document, Google argues "free speech becomes a social, economic, and political weapon."

"Special efforts will be made to publish letters that disagree with the perspective taken by *Inside Higher Ed* articles or opinions," proclaim Jaschik and Lederman. But can one really believe that assertion? Would this critical essay constitute far too much disagreement with "the perspective taken by *Inside Higher Ed*" and those the co-editors sanction, and thus be prohibited? "As always, you are welcome to communicate with the editors," state Jaschik and Lederman. But will they even bother to respond? In my case, certainly not! "*Inside Higher Ed* continues to believe that our talented journalists and thoughtful contributors do not own collectively the knowledge and wisdom about what's happening in higher education and that our readers need to participate in the conversation," they declare. Yet "what's happening in higher education" today is absolutely horrendous: rejection of debate, cancelling speakers, bureaucratic bloat, propagation of PC-ideology at the expense of reason and facts, firing of professors who do not comply, widespread Orwellian diversity/inclusion indoctrination, and, of course, increased general student and academic fragility! Democracy has been pushed on to the precipice! How can the co-editors not care about that? Jack Kerouac had written: "The woods are full of wardens." And Juvenal wrote "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?"

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