

Time to get rid of the pillory: Making Space for Civil Discourse:

Oxford Union
November 22 2021

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I especially welcome this opportunity because we have become so used to speaking via Zoom and Canvas during the pandemic. It is really delightful to be able to see your bright and lovely faces around me and register you responding in real time. It's so much more helpful than looking at my own face in the corner of a screen.

It's difficult, isn't it, to communicate with other people when you are simultaneously looking at your face in the mirror the whole time? I think the pandemic has reinforced the self-consciousness of the digital age: When we engage with others, we are also performing ourselves in public. We've become uncomfortably aware that, like the figures on playing cards, we also have a top half and a bottom half – and sometimes the bottom half is still wearing pyjamas, or in my case, leggings. That self-consciousness in the digital arena can make each conversational play seem like a poker game. Casual yet potentially high-stakes. Will our remark get a thumbs-up in the group chat or a thumbs down? Will our cat become an overnight celebrity?

Tonight, I would like to talk about civil discourse and how it has been affected by digital life. I would like to say at the outset that, though I have aspirations for what I would like to see in this realm, I'm not here to lecture, nor to preach. Instead, I am genuinely interested in soliciting your ideas about how we can create and maintain a space for civil discourse at Oxford that is genuinely open, inclusive, diverse, and lively. Where there is no room for hate-speech, for bullying or discrimination or ostracizing others on the basis of their beliefs, or their identity. Where we recognise that some of us will disagree profoundly with others in our community about fundamental issues. But where disagreement – and indeed uncertainty -- about what one believes can flourish safely, without fear or threat, or a toxic atmosphere in which intellectual risk becomes impossible.

I'd like to consider briefly the situation in which we find ourselves and then to talk a little about the future.

How, then, did we get here? The first point to acknowledge is that there is no halcyon past, no golden age in which people from all walks of life conversed civilly on equal terms. Oxford has to acknowledge that our history includes intolerance and exclusion. This university was slow to admit women, slow to award them degrees, and slow to advance them to positions where they had a public platform to speak. Although we are now making strenuous efforts to encourage and enlarge

the body of students and staff who are people of colour, these voices have historically been underrepresented, often unheard in debate.

Our university has not always been a bastion of free inquiry. There were four Royal Visitations in the 16th century and then three by Parliament during the Commonwealth in the 17th century and finally, one more by the restored Charles 11 in the 1660s. In the words of Oxford historian Professor Laurence Brockliss: *“It was impossible for a revolution in church or state to be effected without first establishing the loyalty of the Universities. Solid opponents of change had to be weeded out and persons of the right calibre intruded.”* The visitation of 1535 focused on getting rid of canon law and of the scholastic tradition. The Visitors reportedly rejoiced in seeing the front quad of New College covered in the pages of medieval texts, which were carted off for use as scarecrows by a Buckinghamshire farmer. Another Commission was sent to purge the Catholics. Indeed every year between 1559 and the 1590s a number of graduates were denied their BAs out of suspicion that they were too Catholic; only one in that time was similarly blocked for Calvinism.

In the first Visitation under the Commonwealth 10 of 12 Professors, 14 of 18 Heads of College, all the canons of Christ Church and the majority of college Fellows were replaced. The third Visitation abolished the use of gowns, caps and hoods as academic dress and sought to strip the powers of Congregation, Convocation and the Colleges in favour of a strong central executive of “godly and prudent” men. The Vice-Chancellor was personally appointed by Cromwell. Then, when the monarchy was restored, a new visitation essentially undid all the actions of the previous 13 years. All of which goes to show how important it is that Universities retain our intellectual freedom and not become the organs of any particular political philosophy or party.

There were, of course, advantages for my predecessors in these efforts to impose orthodoxy. In the late 16th century anybody who spoke against the VC’s view in Convocation would be “discountenanced for sauciness” then threatened with imprisonment for breach of the peace, or an inquiry into the orthodoxy of his theological views!

Oxford’s civic history was often bloodthirsty. We have all heard the tour guides describe the burning at the stake in the middle of Broad Street of Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer in 1556/6. Their crime being a refusal to admit to a belief in transubstantiation.

Oxford, like other towns, also had a pillory, a mediaeval form of punishment that was not fully outlawed in Britain until 1837. It was near the gallows at the crossroads where Holywell Street met St Cross Road and Longwall Street. The prisoner in the pillory had their head and arms locked into place, poked through holes in a wooden plank, and was forced to endure the insults of the mob. We

perhaps imagine rotten vegetables being thrown at perpetrators. But in fact those who suffered the pillory were often subjected to much worse: dead rats, cats and dogs were collected from the streets to be lobbed at them.

In 1780 a plasterer and a coachman accused of sodomy were pilloried in London; the coachman, William Smith, died. A stranger in the crowd flung a stone at his head that knocked him out; he never regained consciousness. Another man, accused of homosexual acts, took poison to commit suicide before he could be pilloried. **Being publicly reviled has always led to violence; it has always brought people to the brink of wishing themselves dead. In that sense, social media – where often all we see is a person’s head, posted for us to scorn– is simply the pillory of modern times.**

There is, however, something about digital life, and social media in particular, that presses our buttons differently. I’m sure most of us have noticed that we will type things in an email, or a tweet, that we wouldn’t say in person or over the phone. There is a sense of electronic distance in our digital communication, largely because we don’t see other peoples’ physical and emotional response to our words. We don’t adapt our body language and tone to the conversation, empathically, as most of us do without thinking when we see that we have hurt someone. It is as if we are all astronauts, shouting down the line from the vast and echoing chamber of space.

Then there is the speed of our digital reactions. The way that dead dogs from Oxford to Oman can be flung round the clock at people who are judged to have offended popular taste or opinion. The second-by-second ‘refreshing’ of our devices can give us all the anxious sense that we are living in a thriller and missing crucial clues. That’s potentially overwhelming and addictive. An iPhone is much the same size and shape as an old-fashioned pac of cigarettes. I’ve noticed people frequently play with their phones in much the same way that I used to watch people chain smoke, or turn a cigarette round and round between their fingers. I wonder if the satisfaction of the craving, and the stimulation of a new craving, may be one and the same, whether it’s nicotine or the digital pursuit of attention.

Of course, the Internet and digital communication have also opened vital new possibilities to us, of instant global interaction, knowledge-sharing, and friendship. I am no Luddite. Yet I can’t help wondering if the fact that we live in a digital world based around switches (for all computers are essentially banks of switches), has increased a danger that was always present in our intellectual life: the tendency to see the world in binary terms. Good or bad. Right or wrong. Thumbs up or thumbs down.

All digital life is based on switches that are on or off. Material is visible or hidden. Online communication, whether from friends or strangers, is presented to us as an

endless set of binary choices. We either 'like' a post or we don't. We buy a product or we don't. We follow or unfollow. Rather like the hands of the famous preacher in the film classic *Night of The Hunter*, where the right-hand knuckles spell out LOVE and the left-hand knuckles spell out HATE, our scrolling fingers are invited to swipe left or swipe right. To click or not to click. This is no accident. It is how companies aggregate data about us. As digital consumers – of ideas as much as of products – we are flickering constellations of desire, described as lights that are either turned on or turned off.

This is what enables corporations to market to us more of what we have already demonstrated that we like: in terms of political take-aways as well as pizza. It is how they know how to get our goat, and how to get our vote. But the more we allow ourselves unconsciously to be drawn into simplistic binary dispute, and binary models of intellectual choice, the more depleted we risk our intellectual lives becoming.

In a climate of instant, remote approval or disdain, there are also casualties. Female MPs, activists, journalists, and academics routinely receive threats of rape and other forms of physical violence and intimidation, in addition to the daily grind of being called 'a sour hag', 'a prize bitch' and worse. Anonymity emboldens trolls, as does the rarity of significant punishment for those who regularly overstep the bounds of decency that would be upheld by social norms in a real-life setting.

Amnesty International in a 2018 study found that a woman is abused on Twitter every 30 seconds. Their study also found that black women were more likely to be abused. In the run up to the 2017 UK general election, they found that the 20 female BAME MPs received over 40% of the abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study. The results can be devastating. We will never know what potential future female leaders we lost, who won't be captains on the bridge of politics because of the threatening trolls beneath it.

It is striking to me as an academic how often it is women who are at the receiving end of Media pile-ons and threatening online behavior. My own Wikipedia page has frequently been attacked and fake Facebook pages in my name created. Hélène Cixous famously wrote that: 'For woman speaking – even just opening her mouth – in public is something rash, a transgression'. It is an act that has been forbidden in many cultures, at different times in history. Although the 'threat displays' of men on social media often do not succeed intellectually in silencing women or dismissing their views, they may succeed in deterring women more widely from entering the public arena and expressing themselves freely. In that sense, the threat is effective. The result is a diminished public sphere.

Dog-whistling and cat-calling – the deliberate polarization of opinion, with provocation of opponents and intransigence toward any form of genuine

negotiation – also increasingly prevents bi-partisanship in politics. The filmmaker David Putnam, retiring from the House of Lords last month, noted that:

'I can't be the only member of the House of Lords who's become increasingly frustrated by the fact that in Parliament, as elsewhere, we no longer engage in serious "debate" – we simply trade assertions.

"Debate" as I have always understood it, is 'persuasion' based on competing interpretations of evidence; and the ability to form a compelling argument and, where necessary, seek compromise. Sadly, that's been substituted by...refusal to answer serious questions, or offer any well-thought-through arguments in defence of seemingly immutable positions.'

Binary thinking, of course, pre-dates the computer age. It is implied in every national or political statement that 'you're either with us or you're against us'. Even the construction of the Oxford Union building, this beautiful Victorian room in which we are gathered this evening, subliminally encourages us, with its 'aisle' and two sides – which is deliberately similar to the structure of the House of Commons and just like Convocation House – to think in terms of 'pro' and 'contra' debate, within a two-party system of government. One side wins and one side loses a debate, with people saying aye or nay. As the Irish novelist Sally Rooney, who was a competitive student debater, puts it: *'Competitive debating takes argument's essential features and reimagines them as a game. For the purposes of a game, the emotional or relational aspects of argument are superfluous, and at the end there are winners.'*

We do not routinely interrogate how exclusionary this model of debate can be and how many people are put off from participating in political discussion at Oxford and elsewhere – and quite possibly put off from entering politics in their later lives -- by the combative, team-sport dynamic that it imposes on collective discussion of complex issues. We respect the binary tradition. Perhaps we should respect it less.

My own years of work on terrorism taught me that terrorists - of every ideological hue - have one thing in common: they are Manichean in their world-view. They see the universe in binary, oppositional terms: my belief-system versus the rest of the world. It is this certainty that enables them to blow up their opponents, to cancel them in a chillingly literal sense. Far too often governments, even democratic ones, respond in the same Manichean terms of good and evil. They portray terrorists as one-dimensional bad guys and psychopaths with no effort made to understand how they came to be, or how they then win support from broader populations.

In my own view, one of the primary values of a university education is that it should rob us of our certainties. The word university comes from the Latin: *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*: a community of scholars and teachers. Implied in its 'universitas' is the concept of bringing together multitudes: diverse people, topics, ideas and seeing them collectively, as a whole. **That is the power of the university – to be an experimental zone where the subject is your own mind.**

How can you know what you think till you see what you say? How can you feel free to develop, alter, exchange your views, if you – or anyone else – is fearful of the social consequences of being deemed to hold an opinion that is beyond the pale?

So, I am wondering, how could we challenge ourselves to move beyond this binary model of thought that dominates us? To be non-binary thinkers? After all, when we consider our friends or colleagues, our opinions of them are complex: we might love their hair and hate their clothes; we might love their cooking, but have reservations about their taste in music; we might value them as a friend to go out with, but not so much as a friend to have a quiet night in with. People are complicated and when we know them, and share a room with them, we usually find that -- even when we disagree -- we can disagree without a fight in which glasses are thrown and the police are called.

Can we, in seeking a round table of civil discourse, then, take this social model of interaction and challenge ourselves to see issues and people in the round? Can we be intellectually fluid: passionate and angry where we need to be, free to protest civilly, and eager to use our democratic power to convince others, but slow to pile-on to a scrum on social media, cautious about allowing our buttons to be pressed, to just flick the 'off' switch and storm out? Could we also be warier of how social media influence our behaviour and in reading our data for their own ends (which favour antagonism) model us, rather than us shaping them? I would like to think that a calmer, more respectful and open approach to civil discourse is possible. I would like us to create a climate in which we can engage in an atmosphere of what Professor Timothy Garton Ash has called “robust civility.”

I am aware, however, that even as I make this appeal for tolerance in our community you may be trying to place my own agenda on a binary political model, is she left or right, is she pro or con? Is this is a coded message in support of recent government attempts to regulate freedom of speech in universities. I can assure you that it is not.

I do not support the recently-proposed government legislation that seeks to control University Unions and debating societies by imposing financial sanctions if it suspects that a proposed speaker has not been invited because students declined their visit or protested their views. I am troubled by the notion of a government-appointed Freedom of Speech Czar who would overlook University students and staff, deciding whether they had illegally ‘silenced’ a Minister from Israel or an academic apologist for the British Empire (these are the examples given on the government website) and determining that such a person ought to be issued with a mandate to lecture here.

Our history of Visitations teaches us how damaging and ultimately futile efforts to control speech in Universities have been. This legislation falls prey to the most common pitfall of legislators of Freedom of Speech – ceding freedom of speech only to those who agree with us. I opposed the Government’s Prevent legislation precisely because it sought to limit the expression of certain views, especially views antithetical to British values, at Universities. In my view the best place for these views to be heard is at a University in which they can be openly countered. For the same reason I am personally opposed to efforts to require universities to adopt a particular definition of antisemitism, or of anything else. Universities are the very places in which these definitions should be freely and openly debated.

I also worry that this recent legislation is disproportionate to the number of cases of ‘no-platforming’ in British universities, which is actually very small. It seems to me to bode ill for the intellectual independence of universities in general, when confronted with representatives of financial and fiscal power wielding a heavy stick. Too often, right now, Universities are being identified and represented in the Media as a problem. As hotbeds of intolerance, dominated by out-of-touch liberal elites who shut down anti-woke views that displease them. Culture wars; cancel culture, no-platforming. These Media slogans themselves frame debate in binary, combative terms, where the University is often painted as the aggressor. In fact, this deliberately divisive view is wildly inaccurate. Universities are, and have always been, havens of tolerance, trustworthy information and reasoned interpretation, rich ecosystems for thought that in fact are key to preserving society from propaganda, fake news, and polarisation. Education is the best key to an open mind. I’d like to protect students from government interference and to champion their own ability to manage the diversity of views in their community.

I’d also like to protect Oxford University staff. A good deal of my time has been taken up in the last few years by dealing with cases where researchers have been misrepresented or feel they have been subject to a Media witch-hunt. Older academics who worry that their careers have been ended; younger ones who worry that their future has been blighted because of a single story, where complexity was lacking and intellectual difference has been weaponised into disgust.

Once we begin to see intellectual analysis that produces verdicts we dislike as inimical to respecting the ‘will of the people’, we open the door to the kind of politicization that led in 2016 to the closure of fifteen universities in Turkey and that has driven new laws limiting the independence of the judiciary in Hungary and Poland. I have served on the Board of the Central European University in Budapest. President Orbán objected to the CEU’s outspoken liberal values and trenchant defense of an open society so he forced the university to either close or leave. We moved to Vienna. Orbán was once a student here. (Some would say that they were embarrassed that Orbán had studied at Oxford. I couldn’t possibly

comment.) This is happening, not in some distant place in some distant time, but in Europe, now.

So, I am here to appeal to your creativity and imagination. How might Oxford model a different way of being in the world? Both as individuals and as a community, what steps can we take not to rise to the clickbait that aims to hook us and land us in thick nets of discord, unable to move forward? Above all, how can we avoid being played – by those, in corporate or political life, who want to render Universities less independent and less powerful, dancing to a defensive tune? **How can we maintain strong opinions but be conscientious objectors who refuse to enter a ‘culture war’ that is being stoked by commercial and political forces that profit from conflict?**

I’d like to make this university a truly safe and welcoming yet vibrant space for everyone to explore, to find out who they are: in terms of their gender and sexuality, but also their ideas in every other area of life. How might we move towards non-binary thought – not us or them, yes or no, black or white, in a way that lets people and intellectual life flourish and develop in all its rich complexity? How can we create space for questioning ourselves; for thinking out loud? For being less intent on winning and spinning; more intent on sharing, deliberating, understanding and resolving?

That might mean organising debate differently. More roundtables. More events that are oriented toward a goal of participation and inclusion – of maximising the number of voices we hear and more flexible formats. It might mean, publicly and privately, deliberately seeking out contacts and conversations across a perceived cultural or political divide. It might mean choosing to manage our social media and digital discourse differently. I am open to your ideas. Indeed I welcome all of them.

Thank you for the time you have so generously given me to open my mind on this challenging topic. I look forward to hearing your questions and responses.