

## [Free Speech: Who Gets to Decide?](#) [1]

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### TW Opinion by J.p. Lawrence

#### Why There Are Limits to the Free Market of Ideas

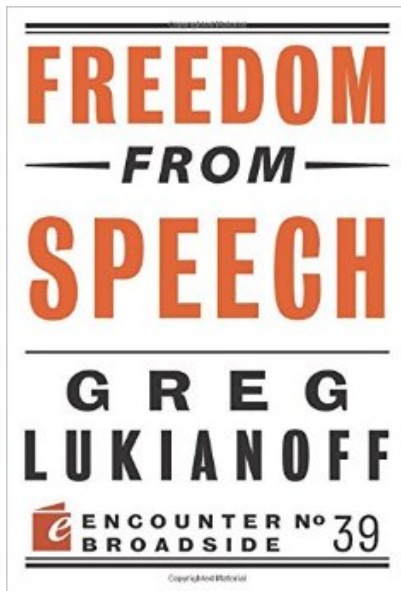


**Today's students are soft.** So says Greg Lukianoff, an attorney and president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). In his 2014 book *Freedom from Speech*, Lukianoff puts it this way:

A society in which people can avoid physical pain comparatively easily will produce people who are less prepared to deal with it. Similarly, an environment in which people can easily avoid emotional and intellectual pain will produce people who are less prepared to deal with and are more intolerant toward harsh disagreement, objectionable words, and differing perspectives.

He's not talking about the tragedy of *Charlie Hebdo* here, although his point of view has broad implications for how people learn tolerance for ideas they don't like. Lukianoff argues that American colleges are producing students who shy away from the discomfort of thorny intellectual challenges. For him, trigger warnings—disclaimers that a text may offend some readers—in classrooms and syllabi are symptoms of a disturbing trend away from free speech. And when student groups disinvite controversial speakers such as Condoleeza Rice, Charles Murray, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, they subvert the ideals of learning.

It's a passionate and convincing argument, on the surface, but I get the feeling what he really wants to say is this: *Won't these students shut the hell up?*



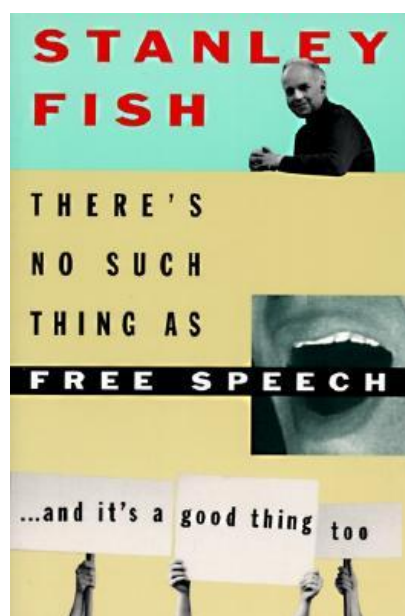
*Freedom from Speech* was published by Encounter Books as part of its “Broadside” series, which includes such conservative titles as *The Dependency Agenda*, *Obama and the Crash of 2013*, and *How the EPA’s Green Tyranny Is Stifling America*. Lukianoff’s short broadside draws on both ACLU arguments and a right-wing individual rights agenda, and he maintains the issue goes beyond the liberal-conservative divide.

Yet, it doesn’t take long for him to muse about the liberal preoccupation with care and empathy. He quotes the work of NYU business professor Jonathan Haidt, who concludes that political conservatives have multiple sources for moral norms—traditions, sacredness, loyalty—while American liberals are “largely one-dimensional, driven primarily by the care ethic,” in Lukianoff’s words.

Lukianoff emphasizes that this care ethic protects bad ideas in the intellectual marketplace. He and other laissez-faire thinkers say let all ideas grow—and let the strongest survive. The trouble is, a completely laissez-faire marketplace of ideas would be like a game of Monopoly: a lot of noise, followed by increasing domination of the board by the few loudest voices.

“Absolute free speech is only useful if all you want is noise,” writes legal theorist Stanley Fish in his 1994 book *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech—and It’s a Good Thing, Too*. A soapbox is a wide-open forum for speech (or should be), while lunchrooms need a few shared cultural restraints on yelling at the top of your lungs.

Classrooms need even more. No one would argue it’s acceptable for a teacher and one or two students to ramble on about their fantasy football teams in the middle of a math class; speech that doesn’t contribute to the purposes of teaching is often regulated. More to the point, in a marketplace of ideas, we sometimes need to be protectionists, especially if we’re in editorial or teaching positions.



This is something I learned during the three years I was editor of an entirely student-run college newspaper. I was the doorway between writers and the public, cutting stories—often childish and thinly veiled personal attacks—that I deemed unhelpful to campus debate or that would have prevented other, more timid voices from joining in. We did our best to protect unpopular ideas from those that would crowd them out.

Lukianoff objects to student demands because they spoil the purpose of the forum. But who gets to decide what the purpose is? He claims that since 2000, 257 speakers, many of them conservative, have been invited to speak on U.S. campuses by administrators, then disinvited through student activism. But he certainly misunderstands the purpose of a commencement speech. It's not about providing a chance for open debate and learning. No one's taking notes at his or her graduation. These speeches combine celebration of a personal achievement with PR for the particular college.

The trend in trigger warnings for hot-button texts does speak more directly to the main points of *Freedom from Speech*. Lukianoff refers, anecdotally, to one female student who objected to having to watch a film in class depicting rape. "The rules of political correctness," he writes, "seem to counsel against responding with the real answer: that college is where you are supposed to learn about the world as it truly is, which includes some horrific and dreadful topics."

Based on my own college experience, I've also been tempted to think the typical upper middle-class white student seems overly fearful of healthy intellectual debate. But much as fervent calls to respect the First Amendment do my heart good, Lukianoff doesn't address *why* students object to certain speakers or writers.

As Jacob Canfield, who cofounded Carleton College's comics journal, notes in a recent essay about *Charlie Hebdo*, freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom from criticism of your own speech. His pointed essay in the *Hooded Utilitarian* reprints some of the offensive anti-Muslim cartoons that appeared in the French paper—and he confronts what's meant by "political correctness" when the satirists are in the majority:

[T]he editorial staff of *Hebdo* consistently aimed to provoke Muslims. They ascribe to the same edgy-white-guy mentality that many American cartoonists do: nothing is sacred, sacred targets are funnier, lighten up, criticism is censorship. And just like American cartoonists, they and their supporters are wrong. White men punching down is not a recipe for good satire, and needs to be called out.

The rhetoric of free speech is often invoked by those who are, in fact, offended by the divisive ideas expressed by less powerful voices. The ironic—even horrific—result? Privileged writers and artists argue for free speech in order to silence criticism by a marginalized group.

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So, back at American campuses, the marginalized are finally getting to speak, criticizing their teachers, saying they don't like what they're hearing. Good for them! Yet, this clearly makes Lukianoff uneasy, and the way he reduces trigger warnings to cartoons does his argument no favors. Many of the student movements he describes can't be brushed away as the product of kids afraid to leave their intellectual comfort zones. Topics like sexism, racism, ableism, gender identity, and other divisive issues—yes, I mean religion—generate intense discussions on college campuses.

What Lukianoff really finds troubling, it seems, is the erosion of authority and the intellectual comfort of those on top. For him, college administrators should be able to hire any speaker they want, and teachers should be able to teach anything they want. Students are passive receptacles—meant to listen, not to speak. I'm all for presenting both sides of a serious debate, but today's students aren't soft—they're simply exercising their right to free speech.

Too bad Lukianoff and his colleagues aren't listening.

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### Publishing Information

- *Freedom from Speech* by Greg Lukianoff (Encounter Books, 2014).
- *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech—and It's a Good Thing, Too* by Stanley Fish (Oxford University Press, 1994).
- [“In the Wake of Charlie Hebdo, Free Speech Does Not Mean Freedom from Criticism”](#) [5] by Jacob Canfield, *Hooded Utilitarian*, January 7, 2015.

### Art Information

- [“Day 287: Saying Bad Things”](#) [6] © Ansy Wong; used by permission.



J.p. Lawrence is a writer, a first-generation Filipino immigrant, and an Iraq War vet. He's a TW contributing writer and has also been published in *Salon*, *Pacific Standard*, and the *American Interest*.

He currently studies at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City and has received an Overseas Press Club grant and a Regional Emmy Award.

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[3] <https://www.talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/books-and-authors>

[4] <https://www.talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/diversity>

[5] <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2015/01/in-the-wake-of-charlie-hebdo-free-speech-does-not-mean-freedom-from-criticism/>

[6] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ansy/2668663830/>