

Can Things Be Both Popular And Silenced?

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The *New York Times* recently reported on various anti-PC thinkers as [“the intellectual dark web”](#), sparking various annoying discussion.

The first talking point – that the term is silly – is surely true. So is the second point – that it awkwardly combines careful and important thinkers like Eric Weinstein with awful demagogues like Ben Shapiro. So is the third – that people have been complaining about political correctness for decades, so anything that portrays this as a sudden revolt is ahistorical. There are probably more good points buried within the chaff.

But I want to focus on one of the main arguments that’s been emphasized in pretty much every article: can a movement really claim it’s being silenced if it’s actually pretty popular?

“Silenced” is the term a lot of these articles use, and it’s a good one. “Censored” awkwardly suggests government involvement, which nobody is claiming. “Silenced” just suggests that there’s a lot of social pressure on its members to shut up. But shutting up

is of course is the exact opposite of what the people involved are doing – as the *Times* points out, several IDW members have audiences in the millions, monthly Patreon revenue in the five to six figures, and (with a big enough security detail) regular college speaking engagements.

So, from *New Statesman*, [If The “Intellectual Dark Web” Are Being Silenced, Why Do We Need To Keep Hearing About Them?:](#)

The main problem with the whole profile is that it struggles because of a fundamental inherent contradiction in its premise, which is that this group of renegades has been shunned but are also incredibly popular. Either they are persecuted victims standing outside of society or they are not. Joe Rogan “hosts one of the most popular podcasts in the country”, Ben Shapiro’s podcast “gets 15 million downloads a month”. Sam Harris “estimates that his Waking Up podcast gets one million listeners an episode”. Dave Rubin’s YouTube show has “more than 700,000 subscribers”, Jordan Peterson’s latest book is a bestseller on Amazon [...]

On that basis alone, should this piece have been written at all? The marketplace of ideas that these folk are always banging on about is working. They have found their audience, and are not only popular but raking it in via Patreon accounts and book deals and tours to sold-out venues. Why are they not content with that? They are not content with that because they want everybody to listen, and they do not want to be challenged.

In the absence of that, they have made currency of the claim of being silenced, which is why we are in this ludicrous position where several people with columns in mainstream newspapers and publishing deals are going around with a loud-hailer, bawling that we are not listening to them.

[Reason](#)'s article is better and makes a lot of good points, but it still emphasizes this same question, particularly in their subtitle: "The leading figures of the 'Intellectual Dark Web' are incredibly popular. So why do they still feel so aggrieved?". From the piece:

They can be found gracing high-profile cable-news shows, magazine opinion pages, and college speaking tours. They've racked up hundreds of thousands of followers. And yet the ragtag band of academics, journalists, and political pundits that make up the "Intellectual Dark Web" (IDW)—think of it as an Island of Misfit Ideologues—declare themselves, Trump-like, to be underdogs and outsiders. [...]

[I'm not convinced] they're actually so taboo these days. As Weiss points out, this is a crowd that has built followings on new-media platforms like YouTube and Twitter rather than relying solely on legacy media, academic publishing, and other traditional routes to getting opinions heard. (There isn't much that's new about this except the media involved. Conservatives have long been building large audiences using outside-the-elite-media platforms such as talk radio, speaking tours, and blogs.) In doing so, they've amassed tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of followers. What they

are saying might not be embraced, or even endured, by legacy media institutions or certain social media precincts, but it's certainly not out of tune with or heretical to many Americans.

The bottom line is there's no denying most of these people are very popular. Yet one of the few unifying threads among them is a feeling or posture of being marginalized, too taboo for liberal millennial snowflakes and the folks who cater to them.

The basic argument – that you can't be both silenced and popular at the same time – sounds plausible. But I want to make a couple points that examine it in more detail.

1. There are lots of other cases where we would agree there's some form of silencing going on, even as a group has many supporters and rich, famous spokespeople

I know a lot of closeted transgender people. They're afraid to come out as trans, they talk about trans people being stigmatized and silenced, and they clearly have a point. Does anyone disagree that it can be dangerous to be a trans person even in the First World, let alone anywhere else?

On the other hand, Caitlyn Jenner is on the cover of every magazine, won Woman Of The Year, got her own documentary and reality TV show, and earns [up to \\$100,000](#) per public appearance, with a

total net worth rumored to be around \$100 million. She is probably one of the most famous and popular people in the world.

Only a moron would make an argument like “Caitlyn Jenner is doing very well, therefore there’s not really a stigma around transgender”. For one thing, your success is a function of how many people like you, not your net (likers – haters) total. For another, Hollywood is its own world and probably doesn’t correlate with any particular person’s social sphere. And for another, Jenner is popular partly because of how surprising and controversial her transition was – her story is at least partly a function of “look how brave this person is to defy social stigma this way”.

Transgender people complain of social shaming, silencing, and stigma. Some transgender people can become very famous celebrities who everyone agrees are rich and popular. And nobody finds this at all surprising or thinks that these two claims contradict each other.

(No, Twitter, I’m not making the claim “Sam Harris is exactly as marginalized as transgender people”. I’m saying that even groups who we all agree are more marginalized than the IDW can have very successful and famous spokespeople.)

Or what about the early US labor movement? They were faced with everything from Pinkerton goon squads, to industry blacklists, to constantly getting arrested on trumped-up charges; nobody seriously denies that government and private industry put a lot of effort into silencing them.

Yet they were very popular with their core demographic, and their most charismatic spokespeople remained famous and widely-liked. Emma Goldman would go around the country lecturing to packed halls, collecting far more energy and interest than Sam Harris gets nowadays when he does the same. If the papers of the time had said “Emma Goldman sure is popular for someone who says her movement is being silenced”, well, screw you and your dumb [gotchas](#), that’s just a 100% accurate description of the state of affairs.

2. In fact, taboo opinions seem to promote a culture of celebrity

From [Current Affairs](#):

There are dozens of well-known critics of social justice activists: Harris, Shapiro, Peterson, Brooks, Stephens, Hoff Sommers, Weinstein, Weinstein, Murray, Murray, Rogan, Chait, Haidt, Pinker, Rubin, Sullivan, Weiss, Williamson, Yiannopoulos, Dreger, Hirsi Ali. Who are their equivalents among the Social Justice Types? Who has their reach or prominence?

A few people have tried to answer the question – and certainly a few names like Ta-Nehisi Coates belong in any such list. But I think the overall point is basically correct. If so, what does that mean?

Consider this: how many neo-Nazi/white supremacist activists are famous enough that the average news junkie would know their names? Maybe two: David Duke and Richard Spencer. Okay. How many low-tax activists are equally famous? I think just one: Grover Norquist. There are some important people who happen to support low taxes among many other causes (eg Paul Ryan) but they don't count – if they did, our list of famous “social justice types” would have to include Hillary Clinton and a hundred others.

Presumably we shouldn't conclude that neo-Nazism is twice as common/popular/acceptable as tax cuts. But that means you can't always measure how popular an ideology is by counting its famous advocates.

I'd go further and say that more taboo ideas are more likely to generate famous spokespeople. If you can't think of any modern feminists with star power, you can always go back to the 1970s and find people like Gloria Steinem and Andrea Dworkin – who made waves by being at least as outrageous then as the IDW is now. If Ta-Nehisi Coates isn't famous enough for you, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X certainly will be. Malcolm X didn't get more famous than Ta-Nehisi Coates by being *more well-liked*, he got famous by being as controversial and threatening and feared as Coates is accepted. So the implication of the *Current Affairs* article – we mostly hear about well-liked people, and really controversial people never get famous – seems questionable at best and backwards at worse.

But why would more taboo causes generate more celebrity? Here are some ways I think this could work:

1. Controversy sells in general. Caitlyn Jenner is more famous than Bruce Jenner not because transgender is less stigmatized than running, but because it's more likely to [provoke debate](#).
2. All else being equal, if an ideology is taboo, it should have fewer loud open activists per covert believer than an orthodox ideology. But that means the field is less crowded. If feminism has 1 loud activist per 10 believers, and the IDW has 1 loud activist per 1000 believers, then the feminist activist will generally be speaking to a college club, and the IDW activist to a crowded lecture hall. This will catapult the IDW activists to greater celebrity.
3. Activists for taboo views need a skill that activists for orthodox views don't – that of surfing controversy. The insult "edgelord" is basically correct – they thrive by being on the edge of what is acceptable. If you go completely beyond the bounds of what is acceptable, you fall from grace – either into literal ruin, or just having your fan base shift entirely to being weird alt-right people whom you hate and don't want to be associated with. Only people who can continually surf that boundary – edgy enough to be interesting, restrained enough to get the *New York Times* to write basically positive editorials about you – are really able to make it. Most people correctly assume they would screw up and end up totally taboo rather than delightfully edgy. Once again, this makes

the field less crowded, giving everyone who comes in more star power per person.

4. Orthodox ideologies tend to be well-represented within institutions, meaning that the ideologies' leaders are more likely to be institutionally prestigious people. Taboo views are unrepresented within institutions, meaning their spokespeople kind of just arise naturally by being really good at getting attention and acclaim. The natural "leaders of feminism" might be Women's Studies professors, Planned Parenthood directors, and whoever the most feminist person at the *New York Times* is. These people might be very good at what they do, they might even be very effective at promoting feminism, but they're probably less good at getting attention than people who have been specifically selected for that trait. And with the institutional leaders sucking up all the status, it might be harder for some woman who's just a very good writer and really in-touch with the zeitgeist to say "Yes, I am the leader of feminism, everyone please care about me now".
5. Generic famous people will support orthodox causes, but not taboo causes. The absence of people famous for feminism is counterbalanced by a glut of famous people who happen to be feminists. Here is a [list of actors who say they are proud to call themselves feminist](#), also just known as "a list of actors". Famous people who are against feminism are more likely to keep quiet about it, creating a void for specific anti-feminist celebrities can fill.

6. Celebrity helps launder taboo ideology. If you believe Muslim immigration is threatening, you might not be willing to say that aloud – especially if you’re an ordinary person who often trips on their tongue, and the precise words you use are the difference between “mainstream conservative belief” and “evil bigot who must be fired immediately”. Saying “I am really into Sam Harris” both leaves a lot of ambiguity, and lets you outsource the not-saying-the-wrong-word-and-getting-fired work to a professional who’s good at it. In contrast, if your belief is orthodox and you expect it to win you social approval, you want to be as direct as possible.

I don’t know if these six points really explain the phenomenon. But I think there’s definitely a phenomenon to be explained, and I think “crowded field” is a big part of it. In my own experience, my blog posts promoting orthodox opinions are generally ignored; my blog posts promoting controversial opinions go viral and win me lots of praise. I assume this is because my orthodox blog posts are trying to outcompete the people at Vox (highly-polished, Ivy-League-educated mutants grown in vats by a DARPA project to engineer the perfect thinkpiece writer), and my controversial blog posts are trying to outcompete three randos with blogs that consistently confuse “there” and “their”. Winning one competition is much easier than winning the other – and the prize for winning either is “the attention of about 50% of the population”.

3. Fame lets people avoid social repercussions, but that doesn’t mean those repercussions don’t exist for ordinary people

Caitlyn Jenner can be as visibly and fabulously transgender as she wants, because being transgender is a big part of her job. She's organized a lot of her life around being a transgender person. Any friends she was going to lose for being transgender have already been written off as losses. Anybody who wants to harm her for being transgender is going to get stopped by her bodyguards or kept out of her giant gated mansion. When she argues that transgender people face a lot of stigma, fear, and discrimination, she mostly isn't talking about herself. She's talking about every transgender person who isn't Caitlyn Jenner.

Likewise, Sam Harris is pretty invincible. As a professional edgelord, he is not going to lose his job for being edgy. Whatever friends he's going to lose for being Sam Harris, he's already written off as losses. I assume he has some kind of security or at least chooses not to live in Berkeley. So when he's talking about his ideas being taboo, he means *taboo for everybody who isn't Sam Harris*.

I worry that this conversation is being conducted mostly by media personalities who write controversial takes for a living. They work for ideologically-aligned publications, and everyone knows that a few crazies hating and harassing you is a common part of the job. If you didn't propose the death penalty for abortion and then get a job at *The Atlantic*, you'll probably be fine.

Out in the rest of the world, if a rando on social media calls your company and tells them you're a Nazi because [out of context tweet], the complaint is going straight to a humorless 60-year-old

HR drone whose job is minimizing the risk of PR blowups, and who has never heard of Twitter except as a vague legend of a place where everything is terrible all the time. So if you write for a webzine, consider that you may have no idea how silenced or living-in-fear anyone else is or isn't, and that you may be the wrong person to speculate about it.

Out in the rest of the world, if someone sends you a death threat, you might not be such an experienced consumer of Internet vitriol that you know it usually doesn't pan out. You might not be so thick-skinned that "Go to hell, you fucking Nazi scum" no longer has any effect on you. You might not live in an bubble of intellectualism where people appreciate subtle positions. You might have friends and family who are very nice people but somewhat literal-minded, who have heard that only rapists oppose feminism so many times that they have no ability to create a mental category for someone who opposes feminism but isn't pro-rape. And you might not really relish the idea of having to have a conversation with your sweet elderly great-aunt about how no, you *really* don't think raping people is good. Seriously, imagine having to explain *any* of what you write on the Internet to your sweet elderly great-aunt, and now imagine it's something that society has spent years telling her is equivalent to rape apologism.

(my father recently implied I had brought dishonor upon our family by getting quoted approvingly in *National Review*. I am 90% sure he was joking, but only 90%.)

Or maybe I'm wrong about this. Part of how silencing works is that [nobody really knows](#) how strong it is or isn't. I had a patient who agonized for years over whether to come out to his family, only to have his parents say "Yes, obviously" when he finally got up the nerve. The point, is *Sam Harris no longer has to worry about any of these things*. So if your line of reasoning is "well, Sam Harris seems to do pretty well for himself, so I guess you can't get in trouble for being controversial", I don't know what to tell you.

4. If you spend decades inventing a powerful decentralized network to allow unpopular voices to be heard, sometimes you end up with unpopular voices being heard

Sam Harris' business model is a podcast with a Patreon, advertised by Internet word-of-mouth. This is pretty typical for the "intellectual dark web" figures.

The Internet promised to take power away from [media gatekeepers](#) and make censorship near-impossible. In discussing the many ways in which this promise has admittedly failed, we tend to overlook the degree to which it's succeeded. One of the most common historical tropes is "local government and/or lynch mob [destroys marginalized group's printing press](#) to prevent them from spreading their ideas". The Internet has since made people basically uncensorable, not for lack of trying. More recently, crowdfunding has added the final part to this machine – semi-decentralized cash flow.

So, after hundreds of engineers and activists and entrepreneurs work for decades to create a new near-impossible-to-censor system, and some people who would never have gotten heard on any other channel are able to use it to get heard – well, it’s pretty weird to turn around and say “Aha, you got popular, that proves nobody is trying to silence you!”

I think this also explains why, even though people have been talking about these issues forever, it’s only becoming a “big deal” now. Before, people would either watch their mouths to avoid getting kicked out by major gatekeeper institutions – or they would go to explicitly right-coded spaces like talk radio where the gatekeepers already agreed with them.

What’s new is that there’s a third route in between “tame enough to be on CNN” and “conservative enough to be a guest on Rush Limbaugh”. The new brand of IDW thinkers are interesting precisely because – excluding Ben Shapiro (always a good life choice) – they’re *not* traditional conservatives. The thing that’s new and exciting enough to get *New York Times* articles written about it is that the anti-PC movement has spread to friendly coastal liberals. From the Democrats’ perspective, the [IDW aren’t infidels, they’re heretics.](#)

5. When the IDW claims they are threatened, harassed, and blacklisted, people should at least consider that they are referring to the actual well-known incidents of threats, harassment, and blacklisting against them rather

than imagining this is code for “they demand to be universally liked”

Here are some of the stories in Weiss’ original IDW editorial:

A year ago, Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying were respected tenured professors at Evergreen State College, where their Occupy Wall Street-sympathetic politics were well in tune with the school’s progressive ethos. Today they have left their jobs, lost many of their friends and endangered their reputations. All this because they opposed a “Day of Absence,” in which white students were asked to leave campus for the day. For questioning a day of racial segregation cloaked in progressivism, the pair was smeared as racist. Following threats, they left town for a time with their children and ultimately resigned their jobs.

And:

Mr. Peterson has endured no small amount of online hatred and some real-life physical threats: In March, during a lecture at Queen’s University in Ontario, a woman showed up with a garrote.

And:

Dr. Soh said that she started “waking up” in the last two years of her doctorate program. “It was clear that the environment was inhospitable to conducting research,” she said. “If you produce findings that the public doesn’t like, you can lose your job.”

When she wrote an op-ed in 2015 titled “Why Transgender Kids Should Wait to Transition,” citing research that found that a majority of gender dysphoric children outgrow their dysphoria, she said her colleagues warned her, “Even if you stay in academia and express this view, tenure won’t protect you.”

And:

The University of California, Berkeley, had to spend \$600,000 on security for Mr. Shapiro’s speech there.

So. Threats against a professor and his family forcing him to leave town. Another professor told that she would lose her job if she communicated research to the public. A guy needing \$600,000 worth of security just to be able to give a speech without getting mobbed. Someone showing up to a lecture with a garrote. And Reason Magazine reads all this and thinks “I know what’s going on! These people’s only possible complaint is that they feel entitled to have everyone agree with them!”

Maybe I'm being mean here? But how else do I interpret paragraphs like this one?

The supposed ostracism they suffer because of their views ultimately comes down to a complaint not about censorship or exclusion but being attacked, challenged, or denied very particular opportunities. They want to say the things they are saying and have the marketplace of ideas and attention not only reward them with followers and freelance writing gigs but universal acceptance from those that matter in the academy and chattering classes.

I am nowhere near these people either in fame or controversialness, but I have gotten enough threats and harassment both to be pretty sure that these people are telling the truth, and to expect that the stuff that fits in one article is probably just the tip of the iceberg.

(Do other groups face similar pressures? Absolutely. Would people who wrote similar articles using those groups' complaints to make fun of them also be antisocial? Absolutely.)

On a related note, what does the article mean by contrasting "excluded" vs. "denied very particular opportunities"? I understand the meaning of the words, but I am not sure the people writing about them have a principled distinction in mind. When Debra Soh faced pressure to quit academia, was she being "excluded" or "denied a very particular opportunity"? Would the 1950s version of

Reason describe communist sympathizers as being “excluded”, or as “denied very particular opportunities” in the film industry? If, [as the surveys suggest](#), 20% of philosophers would refuse to hire transgender professors to their department, are transgender people facing “exclusion”, or just being “denied very particular opportunities”?

[My position – if you decide not to hire someone based on any characteristic not related to job performance (very broadly defined, including things like company fit and fun to work with), you’re trying to exclude people. If you make up a really strained dumb argument for why some characteristic relates to job performance when it obviously doesn’t (“communist actors could try to hold a revolution on the set, thus making our other employees feel unsafe”), then you’re trying to exclude people *and* lying about it. You can say, as many throughout history have “I’m proud to be part of the effort to fight the Communist menace by denying them positions of influence”, and then you get points for honesty and (if the Communists were really as menacing as you thought) maybe utilitarianism points as well. But don’t say “What? Me exclude Communists? We’re just denying them very particular opportunities! Sure are a whiny bunch, those commies!” See also [Is It Possible To Have Coherent Principles Around Free Speech Norms?](#)]

6. The IDW probably still censor themselves

Another common point in this discussion has been that the IDW copies the worst parts of social justice – intense focus on the latest outrage, shoddy science, its own set of insults (“snowflake!

triggered millennial!”), us-vs-them dichotomy, et cetera. And Despite Their Supposed Interest In Rational Discussion Actually They Are Very Bad At Supporting Their Points Rationally.

Here’s a site that hasn’t been in any “intellectual dark web” editorials and never will be: Human Varieties. You can Google it if you want, but I won’t direct-link them for the same way I wouldn’t build a giant superhighway to some remote forest village enjoying its peaceful isolation. Here’s an excerpt from a typical Human Varieties article:

I did look through the PING survey (age 3-21, N ~ 1,500) – which might not be very informative owing to the age structure. Going by this, Greg [Cochran] seems to be more or less correct about some of the endo[phenotypic] differences and probably about their origins. As an example, Figure 1 & 2 show the [black/white] diff[erences] for intracranial and total brain volume by age. ([African-Americans] are picked out for illustration since they are the largest non-White ethnic group, showing the biggest deviation from Whites.) And Figure 3 shows the relation between brain volume and ancestry in the self-identified [African-American] group; the results were basically the same for intracranial volume, etc. — and so not shown.

Read Human Varieties for a while, and you notice a few things:

1. They're much more taboo and openly racist (in the Charles Murray [sense](#)) than almost anyone in the “intellectual dark web”
2. They are much less annoying and less likely to shout “TRIGGERED! SNOWFLAKE!” than almost anyone in the “intellectual dark web”
3. Nobody pays any attention to them at all

I think all three of these are correlated.

If you want to be Human Varieties, you can talk about the evidence for and against various taboo subjects. But nobody wants to be them, for two reasons.

First, somebody is going to have to present the evidence for the taboo subject, not just in an edgy “what if... perhaps this should not be suppressed?? or did i blow your mind??” way, but in a “here’s exactly what I believe and why I believe it” way. This isn’t just Sam Harris level edgy, this is way off the edge into the void below.

Second, if you do even a moderately good job, it’s probably going to sound exactly like the quote above, stuff like “this survey of intracranial volume endophenotypes might not be very informative, owing to the age structure” – and everyone will fall asleep by minute two. People will do lots of things to own the libs, but reading an analysis of the age structure of endophenotype data probably isn’t one of them.

“TRIGGERED! SNOWFLAKE!” solves both these problems. You avoid the object-level debate about whether taboo subjects are true, and it’s automatically interesting to a wide range of people. “That other monkey has status that should be *my* status!” – nobody ever went broke peddling that.

I think this model knocks down a few reasonable-sounding but on-reflection-wrong critiques of the way these issues are discussed:

“The IDW demands rational debate, but they never engage in it”. Somewhat true. If they engaged in it, they would move beyond the bounds of acceptable edginess. “We wish we were allowed to talk about X without massive risk to our reputations and safety” and “We are definitely not going to talk about X right now” are hardly contradictory; they follow naturally from each other. And I think this is more subtle than people expect – somebody may feel they can get away with making some arguments but not others, giving them the appearance of a skeletal but flimsy ideology that falls down on close examination. Or people might be willing to talk about these issues in some low-exposure spaces but not other higher-exposure spaces, giving them the appearance of backing down once challenged.

“The IDW focuses too much on triggered snowflakes.” Somewhat true – even independent of this being popular and lucrative. This is the least taboo thing you can do while still getting a reputation for being edgy. And winning the free speech wars makes it easier to talk about other stuff.

“The IDW says they’re being silenced, but actually they’re popular”. Somewhat true, even independent of all the arguments above. The things they complain about not being able to say, aren’t the things they’re saying.

7. Nobody in this discussion seems to really understand how silencing works

If you say “We know a movement isn’t being silenced because it’s got lots of supporters, is widely discussed, and has popular leaders” – then you’re mixing up the numerator and the denominator.

Gandhi’s Indian independence movement had lots of supporters, was widely discussed, and had popular leaders. So did a half dozen Irish revolts against British rule. And the early US labor movement. And Eastern Bloc countries’ resistance to Soviet domination. And Aung San Suu Kyi. And every medieval peasants’ revolt ever. And... well, every other movement that’s been suppressed. Really, what sort of moron wastes their time suppressing a leaderless movement that nobody believes in or cares about?

Popular support and frequent discussion go in the numerator when you’re calculating silencing. Silencing is when *even though* a movement has lots of supporters, none of them will admit to it publicly under their real name. *Even though* a movement is widely discussed, its ideas never penetrate to anywhere they might actually have power. *Even though* it has charismatic leaders, they have to resort to low-prestige decentralized people-power to get their mes-

sage across, while their opponents preach against them from the airwaves and pulpits and universities.

Scott Aaronson [writes about](#) the game theoretic idea of “common knowledge” as it applies to society:

If you read accounts of Nazi Germany, or the USSR, or North Korea or other despotic regimes today, you can easily be overwhelmed by this sense of, “so why didn’t all the sane people just rise up and overthrow the totalitarian monsters? Surely there were more sane people than crazy, evil ones. And probably the sane people even knew, from experience, that many of their neighbors were sane—so why this cowardice?” Once again, it could be argued that common knowledge is the key. Even if everyone knows the emperor is naked; indeed, even if everyone knows everyone knows he’s naked, still, if it’s not common knowledge, then anyone who says the emperor’s naked is knowingly assuming a massive personal risk. That’s why, in the story, it took a child to shift the equilibrium. Likewise, even if you know that 90% of the populace will join your democratic revolt provided they themselves know 90% will join it, if you can’t make your revolt’s popularity common knowledge, everyone will be stuck second-guessing each other, worried that if they revolt they’ll be an easily-crushed minority. And because of that very worry, they’ll be correct!

(My favorite Soviet joke involves a man standing in the Moscow train station, handing out leaflets to everyone who pass-

es by. Eventually, of course, the KGB arrests him—but they discover to their surprise that the leaflets are just blank pieces of paper. “What’s the meaning of this?” they demand. “What is there to write?” replies the man. “It’s so obvious!” Note that this is precisely a situation where the man is trying to make common knowledge something he assumes his “readers” already know.)

The kicker is that, to prevent something from becoming common knowledge, all you need to do is censor the common-knowledge-producing mechanisms: the press, the Internet, public meetings. This nicely explains why despots throughout history have been so obsessed with controlling the press, and also explains how it’s possible for 10% of a population to murder and enslave the other 90% (as has happened again and again in our species’ sorry history), even though the 90% could easily overwhelm the 10% by acting in concert. Finally, it explains why believers in the Enlightenment project tend to be such fanatical absolutists about free speech.

One can [take this further](#):

Bostrom makes an offhanded reference of the possibility of a dictatorless dystopia, one that every single citizen including the leadership hates but which nevertheless endures unconquered. It’s easy enough to imagine such a state. Imagine a country with two rules: first, every person must spend eight hours a day giving themselves strong electric shocks.

Second, if anyone fails to follow a rule (including this one), or speaks out against it, or fails to enforce it, all citizens must unite to kill that person. Suppose these rules were well-enough established by tradition that everyone expected them to be enforced. So you shock yourself for eight hours a day, because you know if you don't everyone else will kill you, because if they don't, everyone else will kill them, and so on.

Suppose in the dictatorless dystopia, one guy becomes immortal for some reason. He goes around saying "Maybe we shouldn't all shock ourselves all the time." Everyone tries to kill him and fails. But if anybody else starts agreeing with him – "Yeah, that guy has a point!" – then everybody kills that other guy.

The don't-shock-ists have 100% popular support. And they have charismatic leaders who get their points out well. But they're still being silenced, and they're still the losing side. Social censorship isn't about your support or your leaders. It's about creating systems of common knowledge that favor your side and handicap your opponents. Censorship = support / common knowledge of support.

Bret Weinstein said of his conflicts with Evergreen State: "I've received... quite a bit of support privately from within the college. Publicly, only one other professor has come forward to say he supports my position." Freddie deBoer [writes about](#) how his own conflicts with callout culture have ended the same way: an outpouring of private emails voicing agreement, plus an outpouring of public

comments voicing hostility, *sometimes from the same people privately admitting they agree with him* This provides context for interpreting the *Reason* article's last paragraph:

They want not so much any particular policy platform, political idea, or candidate to catch on as for more people to acknowledge that they are right. And that will always be a proposition that winds up making one feel aggrieved, because it's an impossible one. To the extent that they are spouting marginalized or unpopular ideas, the only way to spread these into the mainstream is to put in the hard work of winning people over.

This is the equivalent of going to communist Czechoslovakia and thinking “Look at all those [greengrocers](#) with communist slogans in their shop windows! Clearly communists have won the war of ideas, and anti-communists are just too aggrieved to do the hard work of convincing people”. The other interpretation is that lots of people are already convinced and afraid to say so, and that convincing more people is less productive than building common knowledge of everyone's convictions (maybe you should hand out blank leaflets). I'm not saying convincing people isn't good and necessary, just that assessing how convinced people are is harder than it looks.

Here is a story I heard from a friend, which I will alter slightly to protect the innocent. A prestigious psychology professor signed an open letter in which psychologists condemned belief in innate sex

differences. My friend knew that this professor believed such differences existed, and asked him why he signed the letter. He said that he expected everyone else in his department would sign it, so it would look really bad if he didn't. My friend asked why he expected everyone else in his department to sign it, and he said "Probably for the same reason I did".

This is the denominator of silencing in a nutshell. I think it's a heck of a lot more relevant to this discussion than how many Patreon followers Sam Harris has, and I'm happy there are people speaking out against it and trying to make common knowledge a little bit more common.