

*FORUM*  
Conscience of a  
Conservative (Professor)

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In 1960 Republican Barry Goldwater published his well-known work, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, which provided a reasoned explication of basic conservative values. These values included freedom, restraint, individualism, limited government, opposition to the welfare state and strong foreign policy. With just a few changes, this book could easily describe conservatism today—and in fact many people still purchase and read this foundational treatise. As a student, I also encountered and read Goldwater’s work and quickly subscribed to the principles and values of conservatism. I did not expect this political philosophy to be met with disdain in academia, the supposed marketplace of ideas. Unfortunately, my experience has shown that many in the professoriate, intentionally and unintentionally, force compliance with liberalism and silence dissent to prevailing liberal ideas. I do not find the differences of opinion disturbing, but the manner in which many of the disputes manifest themselves and are “resolved” is both dangerous and antithetical to what the academy stands for, and most significantly, to the practice of our discipline.

In both the academy at large, and the area of communication studies, we profess freedom of speech and the existence of a marketplace of ideas. We teach our students, and in many cases students in all other majors through a general education course, about the dangers of logical fallacies such as *ad hominem* attacks and slippery slope arguments. We pride ourselves on our ability to be critical consumers of messages and to teach students how to do so as well. Unfortunately, we do not seem to practice what we preach when it comes to our own political predilections. In fact, we subtly and, perhaps, even subconsciously, denigrate conservative ideas using the very fallacies we tell students to avoid. We silence students who wish to explore, express or advocate ideas that are contrary to the dominant liberal perspective.

I do not cast these claims lightly. In fact I do so with great reluctance because of the risk that comes with flying a conservative flag so publicly in our field. There may be backlash in the workplace, the conference hallways and the publication process as I espouse beliefs that run counter to the norm on many campuses.

That is why I wish to be very clear from the start: my aim is not to chastise my liberal colleagues, nor is it to convert anyone to my point of view. My goal is to share my experiences as a conservative academic in the communication discipline in the hope that it opens a respectful dialogue about how we can create a truly authentic marketplace of ideas and practice what we preach with regard to freedom of speech. I know this cannot and will not happen overnight, especially given the aggressively nasty partisan climate currently in place in our society. It is my fervent hope that eventually those of us in our small acreage of academia can come to mutual respectful understanding of each side’s positions and not hold political beliefs against one another.

In this essay I shall recount personal, anecdotal and empirical examples of the prevailing biases shown towards conservatives in academia, and in some cases I shall point out active attempts to shun or silence those with conservative ideas and attitudes. This set of data, including both stories and more traditional evidence, will convey why I question the idea that the academy—and specifically communication studies as a discipline—is still not an open marketplace of ideas where the free exchange of differing viewpoints is valued and freedom of speech respected. I will discuss examples as they relate to the three areas on which faculty are generally evaluated: teaching, research and service. I hope to illustrate that this bias, whether intentional or not, manifests itself in all aspects of our work and must be counteracted for us to truly embody the values we profess.

## Bias in the Classroom

In our field it is impossible to ignore political issues and considerations. In fact, we should handle them head-on because public deliberation of issues is the backbone of a vibrant and strong democracy and respecting dissent is a hallmark of freedom of speech. That said, there are two different philosophies on how to handle one's politics in the classroom, and each is equally valid if it is consistently employed.

The first is the “doctrine of objectivity,” whereby instructors do not let students know their own politics, but rather play the role of devil’s advocate with student positions throughout the term. This approach, allows students to concentrate on developing their own point of view absent the pressures of feeling they need to parrot back “what the instructor wants them to hear.” This is often what experienced teachers tell novices to practice in the classroom. Unfortunately, holding back one’s politics does not mean that we actually practice objectivity and respect for views other than our own. For example, liberal instructors may find it easier to play devil’s advocate with a student who opposes increasing, or even establishing, minority scholarships for attending a university, than they would one who supports the policy. Not playing devil’s advocate with both students actually indicates an instructor’s political preference and turns the classroom from a laboratory for testing a student’s ability to defend their own ideas into a political meeting—one that’s uncomfortable for the student who disagrees with the instructor’s view. Playing devil’s advocate with students can be an effective means of teaching all of them how to defend their position, regardless of their political beliefs, but doing so on a selective and inconsistent basis serves only to push a political agenda.

The second available approach to handling politics in the classroom for a professor is the “doctrine of honesty and openness,” whereby instructors are open about their politics with their students from the start of the semester. Many students walk in to college classrooms across the country believing all of their instructors are liberal and that conservative ideas cannot be expressed. The fact that statistics illustrate a disparity between the number of liberal and conservative professors means that this approach potentially presents a skewed perception of political viewpoints to students. This creates a loaded deck, so to speak, and unless instructors are careful to separate their views from the academic study of communication and politics it can unduly influence students and not actually teach them the skills they need to become critical consumers of messages. The trick with this approach is making sure students understand that a professor may hold a particular political belief, but that does not mean it influences their teaching or, more critical, their grading.<sup>1</sup>

Let me illustrate the difficulty and danger of this latter approach to politics in the classroom. In the “doctrine of honesty and openness” classroom environment, students may feel either empowered or ostracized based on the instructor’s political preference. Students may very well feel they need to share the professor’s perspective in their assignments and comments because to do otherwise could hurt their grades. On the other hand, it may empower students to make comments because they share the instructor’s preferences, and then, when opportunities for comments in class arise, they may very well make statements that create an even more uncomfortable climate for those that disagree. As instructors, if we choose to make this admission, we must be fair to both sides in the classroom and still challenge our students to examine their own thoughts and critically consume political messages.

This risk in the “doctrine of honesty and openness” classroom can also manifest itself on the graduate level. In graduate school, a fellow doctoral student once told me that in the first year of their program they wrote a term paper that identified positive aspects of marketing in a capitalist society. This student was an ardent conservative—more so than I—but did not engage in political discussions in the classroom. Although they passed the assignment, the instructor told them, “I cannot understand how, after taking my class and listening to me the entire semester, you can actually believe capitalism and marketing can be capable of any good whatsoever. How can you still think this way after all I taught you?” The student responded, “I didn’t think your goal was to make a political point through the class.” The story serves as evidence of an instructor pushing a political agenda through their instruction. The infiltration and influence of liberal politics on teaching is only rarely this direct.

As a student and as a professor I have watched and listened as faculty make snide remarks in their classes that gratuitously and irrelevantly denigrate conservative political figures and ideas. I love humor in the classroom; it is one of the best tools we have for keeping students’ attention, but students are not oblivious to the targets of our jokes. When instructors consistently target people such as Sarah Palin, Michele Bachman, President George W. Bush, Rush Limbaugh and John Boehner—but never Hillary Clinton, President Barack Obama or Barney Frank—with their attempts at comedy, it comes across as nasty and political. Furthermore, it makes people who do want to listen to these individuals and construct and discuss their own opinions about them feel as though the decision has already been rendered. It effectively cuts off debate and makes students believe these people have nothing to say—a belief contrary to the principles we as communication scholars and teachers profess to value.

## Bias in Service

The caustic climate created for conservatives in communication extends from the classroom to the larger campus as well. Here again, we find attempts at humor significantly revealing. Secondly, in advice to students we also find unethical treatment of conservatives. Finally, there also is the issue of service that manifests itself through the NCA and more local campus initiatives. I will begin by discussing the general reactions by liberal professors to conservative colleagues who might take umbrage at some jokes offered on campus.

From *Saturday Night Live* to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, there is a great deal of humor directed at conservatives and liberals. On campuses, however, there is no such equanimity in the subjects of political jokes, as the preponderance of the comedy is directed at the expense of conservative ideas and spokespeople. Now, some of this humor is admittedly clever, and in some cases even deserved, so long as the standards are applied to liberal and progressive figures and ideas as well. In instances where jokes are made and conservatives try and respond, their liberal colleagues ask them to “be reasonable,” and just “admit those people are crazy.” As if in the quiet confines of the campus conservatives should actually admit they do not believe what they publicly profess.

More to the point is the “friendly” ribbing conservatives endure from colleagues throughout the country. Conservative friends recount the “friendly” ribbing they get when they are referred to as “the resident fascist,” a “Nazi,” a “Palinite” and a “disciple of evil” just to name a few monikers thrown their way. Simply because they are conservative they are compared to some of the greatest war criminals in history, such as Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini. In other instances, the “humorous” nom de guerres include derogatory references to the religious beliefs of some conservatives such as “Bible Thumper,” and being called members of the “God Squad.” There are two problems with this type of “humor.”

First, there is no real way to respond other than to laugh with those making the jokes because if a conservative stated how offensive those “jokes” were they most likely would be told they were too sensitive and that their colleagues were “just fooling about.” There is also hypocrisy in these labels, because any time anyone compares Democrats, including President Obama, to a socialist they are likely to be reprimanded. Humor is one thing, and an important element in a strong department and society, but to ridicule the holder of one philosophy and one philosophy only is simply wanton mockery of a colleague more akin to hazing than it is to humor.

This anticonservative bias manifests itself in a far less humorous way when colleagues engage in mentoring students, an important service aspect of our profession. One of these mentoring activities involves shepherding younger colleagues through the beginning of their professional careers, starting with how to prepare for a job interview. One would assume that since probing applicants for their political affiliations is against the law, there is strong protection for conservatives—so long as they stay quiet. In fact, students often engage in the common and logical practice of seeking out advice and counsel from mentors and friends in the discipline on how to handle this aspect of a job interview. Unfortunately, rather than embrace the idea that sharing your beliefs should not be a problem in a community that claims to embrace the marketplace of ideas and protect freedom of speech, we all too often advise conservative colleagues in communication departments to either not share their political views in any context, or outright lie about them. That’s right—lie. The reasoning offered for this advice is simple: no one likes, or would want to work with a conservative, so it is best to appear to at least agree with mainstream liberal academicians. The ethical emptiness of this advice should be both obvious and odious to anyone who espouses support for the marketplace of ideas and freedom of speech.

Bias against conservatives also manifests itself on a wider scale in the discipline. On CRTNET, the NCA Listserv, and at the NCA Annual Convention, the professional organization representing our discipline has often been hijacked to advance positions that are not within the purview of the organization and are also not reflective, one hopes, of the sentiments of the entire membership. NCA, at least theoretically, risks losing its status as a non-profit entity and professional organization if it continues to allow the advancement of a liberal agenda by certain members. These efforts include repeated attempts to pass a resolution in Legislative Assembly opposing “solitary confinement and torture;” using CRTNET to organize a boycott of the San Diego conference hotel in 2009 because the owner donated to the campaign to pass a state resolution outlawing gay marriage; and an attempt by members of NCA’s Nominating Committee to re-write rules (albeit unsuccessfully) for elections to NCA leadership positions so that prominent conservatives in our ranks could not run for office.

Now, I am not in favor of torture, but I also am not in favor of a professional organization stating a position on an issue not relevant to its membership’s career development or work. I also think members should be able to boycott whatever hotels they want to for whatever reason, but using the membership’s listserv as a political microphone is not the purpose of NCA. Serving on campus and in our discipline is increasingly difficult for conservatives and we are met with what borders on hostility whenever we voice dissent to these propagandist efforts. This climate guarantees groupthink, silences dissent and does significant damage to the discipline we profess to protect and promote. As scholars well attuned to the notion of communication climates, we would do well to pay closer attention to how we can create a more welcoming one in our own professional lives.

## Bias in Research and Scholarship

The third branch of work in academia is research and scholarly activity, and it too is subject to consistent censoring against conservatives, despite the protections promised by the peer review process. It is difficult enough to publish essays in journals, but it is nigh impossible to do so if your subject is a conservative idea, speech or speaker. It is also a Sisyphean task to attempt analyses that further a conservative theory. I will again illustrate these great challenges with examples.

Perhaps the most obvious examples are the lack of articles in our major journals praising conservative U.S. presidents as contrasting with the wealth of such articles praising liberal presidents. A similar ratio exists in convention panel papers and proposals, all subject to the blind review process.

Academics champion the blind review because it shields the identity of the author(s) and reviewers, ostensibly putting the focus on the quality of the analysis itself. In scholarly endeavors, if the work is good, an author's political predilections should not be identifiable by a reviewer and the same can be said of a good review. That said, I submitted an essay examining a speech by President George W. Bush and received the following comment in a review: "Now that Obama is in office and is trying to restore both the power of reason to governance and some respect to the English language, do those of you who publish books for a living still anticipate readers actually spending money to relive the Bush years?...Those of us who wrote books and essays about Bush back in the early, dangerous days of his presidency did so because we wanted to sway elections and change minds."

Two assumptions within this review are problematic. First, "those of us who wrote books and essays" includes me, and I did not do so to "sway elections and change minds." In fact, doing so would be antithetical to the traditional principles of scholarship. Our work is not, nor should it ever be, propaganda for either side of the political aisle. Secondly, inherent in the reviewer's comment is that the purpose of scholarship is primarily to shape society and be a social activist. If this reviewer actually discussed the scholarship, rather than the ideology of the subject analyzed in the work, I would not have had such a negative reaction, but apparently there is a belief in academia that everyone subscribes to the anti-Bush, anti-conservatism fan club. Not only is that just not the case, more importantly it *should have no bearing on evaluating scholarship*. This essay was rejected by this reviewer on ideological grounds, not because of the quality of the work. To be fair, the other reviews of the essay contained critical evaluations of the work but were nowhere near as hostile to the subject or philosophy under analysis. Social activism on behalf of liberalism in the academy is not a driver for everyone in the discipline.

One need not look simply at my own experiences for evidence of a silencing of work on conservative subjects in our discipline. One conservative scholar points out that when a liberal member was charged with creating a panel to examine liberal and conservative tension in academia, he loaded the panel with seven liberals against one conservative, and on another occasion provided not one conservative in the effort.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, take a brief look at the titles of essays in our field's journals over the past fifteen to twenty years and you will find a dearth of essays examining conservative ideas and speakers unless they are critical of that viewpoint. You will also find a treasure trove of essays lauding the merits of liberal ideas, individuals and policies. This imbalance is one that needs to be corrected. I have detailed one story and alluded to a few other examples, but they are just a handful of many I could recount from colleagues across the country. To do

so, though, would seem like an embittered attack on liberals in the academy and thus stray from my aim of trying to open a respectful dialogue about the climate in our field by reporting representative anecdotes of the conservative experience in the professoriate

## **Confronting Bias Against Conservatives in Communication**

It is easy to dismiss the stories I have related here as either isolated instances or, in some cases, sour grapes, but to do so would not only miss my point but actually make it as well. These stories are, in some cases, personal, but I assure you they are not isolated, nor unrepresentative. Prominent conservatives in our discipline have been discussing similar occurrences throughout our field in recent years. In fact, there has been a spate of articles in the popular press in recent years questioning why so few conservatives enter the academy.<sup>3</sup> We must remember that the protection of diversity does not simply apply to race, creed, religion and sexual orientation—but it applies to political thought as well. In fact, protection of diversity with regard to political views is perhaps the most important type of diversity, for without it we risk the tyranny of the majority.

There is no denying the fact that more liberal minded individuals than conservatives inhabit the academy, but that does not mean one should vilify or silence the other for their views. With this in mind I first ask that we recognize that there is an inherent bias against conservatives in the academy by members of our polity. Acknowledging the problem is the first step to resolving the suspicion conservative members have of their profession and its treatment of their ideas and political beliefs. It is foolhardy to believe the climate will change overnight, and in fact there have been efforts recently by the NCA leadership to allay concerns of conservative members of NCA. Continuing to engage each other about experiences and concerns will only help to create a more productive climate in the profession, and specifically the discipline.

I do not believe that every liberal member of our field or profession holds an anti-conservative bias or avoids dialogue with people who hold different ideas. In fact, I believe those who act on their biases are in the minority, but that minority is vocal. I am sincere when I say I wish to engage in a serious exchange of ideas between liberals and conservatives, not to encourage or illicit conversion, but to enhance our understanding of each other's perspectives and experiences. Through such an effort we can, and should, become models of the behaviors we seek to engender in our students and the public.

Such dialogues could become key components of a teaching, our research and our service. Rather than mocking ideas contrary to those we hold, perhaps we could incorporate classroom dialogues between students to try and help them gain an understanding of both—or all—sides of an issue before forming their own opinions. If we train them to think, and help them learn how to engage in civil dialogue, then they will invariably be able to come to good sound conclusions—those positions may be different from our own, but it that diversity of opinions upon which a democracy thrives. Incorporating respect for differing ideas in our teaching is perhaps the simplest of the three areas of teaching, research and service we need to confront and fix—though it is by no means easy for anyone. I, for one, would welcome a robust discussion of pedagogy that encourages students to engage differing ideas and learn how to process them to form solid reasoned opinions.

Confronting bias against conservatives in the areas of service and research may be more difficult, but equally important, for us as

a community. We must have a common understanding of the purpose of our professional organization, or we risk alienating members of NCA who would feel their professional community has been co-opted for political purposes. We must practice civility on the discussion boards of CRTNET and not assume everyone shares a similar political perspective. Ridicule is not a scholarly style, and sarcasm, as the saying goes, is the tool of a weak mind.

With regard to research, we should focus on the scholarship quality, not the subjects being analyzed. We should also recognize that our goal is not political activism that seeks to influence elections, but an intellectual aim that broadens the mind. Our personal agendas are important, but they must not unduly influence our professional purpose. It is not easy to hide one's bias, and an unfortunate side-effect of blind review is the opportunity to attack without attribution and silence dissenting opinions without cause. However, as professionals we must practice tolerance for different ideas and research agendas and welcome the production of good scholarship that may in fact challenge our own perspectives of the world and how it operates. An added advantage to this approach is that it enhances our authenticity in the marketplace of ideas.

In writing this essay in the climate that does exist I have taken some personal risk, but I do so believing that we are all professionals and people who are generally fair and willing to engage in a true dialogue. I do not want conservatives to hide their political perspectives for fear of retribution as liberals once had to do in the McCarthy era. I also do not seek pity for my experiences and am not expressing sour grapes. I only wish to open an honest dialogue about the different perspectives that exist in our field in the hopes we recognize them and begin to model the behaviors and skills we want our students to learn in our classes: simple respect for diversity of opinion.

It is our current president, a liberal Democrat, who stated (albeit in a different context), that "This cycle of suspicion and discord must end.....there must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another." This was true in Cairo, and it is true in the academy and our discipline. We must engage each other and our students in open and honest dialogue if we are ever truly going to model the communication climate, belief in democracy and respect for freedom of speech we hold so dear.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Earlier this year the *New York Times* reported on a study by Talia Barr and Asaf Zussman that examined grading patterns of Democratic and Republican professors. They reportedly found that Democratic professors were more egalitarian in their grading, awarding a higher number of “B’s” to students, while Republican professors awarded more “A’s” and “D’s” than their counterparts. This demonstrates what may be a difference in grading based on political affiliation and belief of instructors.

<sup>2</sup>Richard E. Vatz, *The Only Authentic Book of Persuasion*, (Kendall Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 2012): p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>For examples see: George Leaf, “Why are conservatives rare on college faculties?” *The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy*, (February 9, 2010). Available at: <http://www.popecenter.org/news/article.html?id=2302>; Michael Peppard, “Risky Business: Why so few conservatives become professors,” *Commonweal*, (May 6, 2011). Available at: <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/risky-business>; Robert Maranto, Richard Redding and Fredrick Hess, *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope and Reforms*, (AEI Press, 2009).