

Relax, It's a Joke

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Residents of Sitka, Alaska awoke the morning of April 1, 1974 to see a plume of black smoke rising from the dormant volcano of Mount Edgecumbe. Residents were shocked, as the volcano had been dormant for more than 400 years. The Coast Guard sent a helicopter to investigate, only to discover a large pile of burning tires and the words "April Fool" spray painted in 50-foot letters in the snow.

According to Hoaxes.org, Oliver "Porky" Bickar waited three long years to pull this off; perhaps the most impressive April Fool's prank of all time.

The prank was executed responsibly to prevent the joke from going horribly awry, as Bickar notified the local police and Federal Aviation authorities.

One can hardly imagine a similar prank happening today, at least not without a public outcry and lawsuits. The outrage is easy to imagine – the fake eruption could have caused a heart attack. Local drivers involved in a fender bender would suggest the accident wouldn't have occurred without the terrorizing distraction.

Overreaction abounds: in a widely reported story last year, a 7-year-old Maryland boy was suspended from school for chewing a Pop Tart into the shape of a gun (in a court case the details are disputed, Reason magazine notes).

To be fair, practical jokes do have their dangers for victims and pranksters alike. In another case last year, an Arkansas man shot and killed a 15-year-old girl when he found his car being vandalized with eggs and toilet paper.

Caution and sensibility are paramount.

If our culture loses pranks, there is little enough to mourn, but the very rational worry that trying to pull even a safe and innocent prank at one's school or workplace might result in grave punishment is a symptom of a larger issue: group polarization.

A cavalcade of commentators agree: the political divide in America is startlingly stark. As our social media feeds continue to deliver an increasing glut of opinions of friends who more often than not agree with us, the problem grows.

Meanwhile, Millennials aren't learning the value of free speech and open debate.

First amendment lawyer Greg Lukianoff argues college censorship is worsening polarization in his book "Unlearning Liberty." Lukianoff believes that colleges are failing to give students the vital intellectual habit of seeking out intelligent people they disagree with. As president of The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, he witnessed the failure of free speech on campus in cases where a student was expelled without a trial for criticism of a parking garage, another student was not allowed to hand out copies of the Constitution on Constitution Day due to his college's extremely restrictive rules around its free speech zone, and even a case where a student government passed a sedition act forbidding that it be criticized.

Lukianoff is alarmed both at students' tepid responses to these incidents and the surveys that show an increasing number of college students believe that the first amendment "goes too far."

The benefits of free speech are not as intuitive as the desire to protect people from emotional injury. Few find it easy to defend the Westboro Baptist Church's efforts to picket military funerals, but beyond the risk inherent in giving any one individual or institution the power to censor, are the powerful benefits of open debate our country was founded upon.

The philosopher John Stewart Mill points out that debate benefits us whether we are right or wrong, causing us to correct false beliefs, refine true ones, and to learn to argue and to co-exist.

This April Fool's week, I implore you to prank your friends, family, and even yourself in the best way possible: challenge a deeply-held belief. I highly recommend one of the lively debates put on by Intelligence Squared US. More than 100 debates are archived with both video and audio at intelligencesquaredus.org with provocative topics ranging from "when it comes to politics, the Internet is closing our minds," to "embrace the Common Core," "the rich are taxed enough," "legalize assisted suicide," and "liberals are stifling intellectual diversity on campus."