



Students Unswayed by Free Speech Debate

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Before a nearly full auditorium at the Yale Repertory Theater Tuesday night, the NPR show “Intelligence Squared U.S.” hosted a debate on the motion that free speech is threatened on college campuses. But despite the robust turnout, most students’ opinions on the topic remained largely unchanged, with students stating that many of the arguments advanced at the debate were ideas they had already heard last fall.

The debate was held in response to the widespread protests surrounding racial justice and freedom of speech across college campuses that occurred last year in the United States. While Yale was one of the campuses where such protests occurred, the debate’s moderator, John Donovan, made sure to emphasize that the debate was not specific to Yale’s situation. In the end, the side arguing that free speech is threatened was declared the winner, garnering 66 percent of the audience vote.

The debate was conducted Oxford-style, where each side comprises two debaters and each debater is allotted two speeches to make their arguments in hopes of convincing the audience to vote for their side. Between the two speech periods is a moderated question period, during which the two teams engage each other.

The debate opened with author and lawyer Wendy Kaminer arguing for the motion that free speech is threatened on campus. Asserting that “speech policing of faculty, students and speakers has become routine,” Kaminer cited various examples at different universities, such as the University of South Carolina, where administrators investigated students who held signs protesting free-speech censorship after other students called the protest “offensive.” She also highlighted a case at Modesto Junior College in California, where a student was ordered to stop handing out copies of the Constitution on Constitution Day.

“Your right to speak may depend on the unpredictable, subjective responses of your audience,” Kaminer argued. “But free speech can’t consist simply of what people don’t mind hearing said.”

Yale philosophy professor Jason Stanley was next to speak. He strongly affirmed that “free speech is alive and well at American universities.” Stanley, citing the examples of previous Yale Political Union guests John Ashcroft ’64 and Robert A. Levy, said intellectual diversity abounds at Yale and at other

college campuses. Ashcroft is a conservative lawyer who served as U.S. attorney general under former President George W. Bush '68, and Levy is chairman of the right-leaning Cato Institute.

“Some cast today’s climate as tension between anti-racism and free speech. This is a false dichotomy,” Stanley stated.

John McWhorter, a professor of linguistics at Columbia University, rebutted Stanley’s statements shortly thereafter. McWhorter, adding to Kaminer’s statement, argued that what is occurring on college campuses is not open discourse, but “shaming people and shutting them down via ample abuse of buzzwords and slogans and sonorous cadence.”

The last speaker was Shaun Harper, executive director at the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. Harper offered an anecdote that had been told to him by a student during one of the studies his center performs, describing the experience of a lone black student in a 200-person lecture who had been emotionally hurt by his professor reacting in disbelief to him acing an exam.

After the opening statements were given, the debate transitioned into the second round, where the moderator asked questions to specific speakers, offering teams the opportunity to directly respond to each other and their points. Both sides continually made reference to a “disconnect” between their respective argumentative positions.

Kaminer and Harper’s disagreement centered on the use of “speech codes,” or restrictions on speech beyond legal limitations, which Harper argued were rare. Even when they do exist, he said, they are meant solely to guide people away from crossing the line to harassment or hate speech. Kaminer, however, contended that the codes are not enforced as guides, but rather as invasive policies that evidence a threat to free speech. When asked to give specific examples of such cases, Kaminer directed the moderator to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a free-speech advocacy group she said had recorded many such occurrences. Harper countered that he never heard students make a demand for speech codes throughout his studies.

Meanwhile, McWhorter engaged Stanley and Harper by arguing that even if there are no official policies governing speech, people still feel social pressure to censor themselves.

“When you call someone a racist in America in 2016, you’re effectively silencing all but the bravest people who most enjoy an argument,” he said. “When you call someone a racist, you shut them down.”

Harper responded by arguing that the person making the offensive remarks in the first place is shutting him or herself down. Stanley added that the conversation taking place across the country is not actually about free speech but is really about racism and anti-racism.

Audience members questioned both sides, with one asking the debaters whether there was a line beyond which professors can be so offensive that it is actually justified for students to demand their resignation. Kaminer argued that although students have a right to demand anything they want, the

broad and contested definition of hate speech makes it hard to come up with objective standards by which speech can be limited.

Each speaker then gave concluding remarks, and final audience votes were tallied. 9 percent of attendees remained undecided at the end of the event.

Student reactions were similar on both sides of the debate. Vasilije Dobrosavljevic '16, said that although he thought the debate was well-run and he enjoyed it, given the contentious nature of the topic, he would have liked to see more back and forth between the debaters, rather than moderated questions alone. Dobrosavljevic voted that free speech is not threatened. He added that although the debate did not change his opinion, it was good because it would promote further discussion.

However, he also noted the lack of diversity in arguments provided.

"The arguments tonight took me back to the same conversations I had on campus," Dobrosavljevic said. "I feel like the views have not evolved much."

Josh Mandell '16 agreed that the debate was well-run and lived up to his expectations, noting that although "there was disconnect at first, eventually there were some good exchanges." Mandell, who sympathized with the side arguing that free speech is endangered, also did not change his opinion throughout the debate.

Dana Wolfe, the executive producer of the show, said the debate has been in the works since student protests started to erupt last fall. She added that she hoped the spirit of civil debate would resonate across Yale's and other campuses.

"This debate affects millions of students at colleges and universities nationwide," she said. "Our message to the Yale student body is no different than our message to national radio audiences: We encourage students to attend the debate with an open mind, and listen to both sides with respect and civility."