**Dissecting Political Correctness**

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To resist the manipulative forces of political correctness, we must speak out and overcome the social isolation that breeds silence.

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Victory in the war of ideas often hinges more on the conditions of battle than on the quality of arguments. You know this instinctively if you’ve ever been shouted down, smeared, or ignored when you were simply trying to state a point. Truly civil public discourse becomes much harder when our dialogue is hijacked by thought policing—euphemistically referred to as “political correctness,” or PC.

Political correctness has cultivated an illusion of support for laws that undermine fundamental institutions of society, including marriage and family. The only way to dispel this illusion, and to reverse the damage these laws will do, is to revive true civil discourse. To do this, we must motivate ourselves and others to overcome the reticence to speak our minds. It is a process that has to begin one-on-one and face-to-face. As people feel less alone in their views, they will be more inclined to speak out.

Political correctness feeds on the fear of speaking views that diverge from PC “truth.” Although the primary forces behind political correctness are those who develop and convey ideas—college professors and administrators, Hollywood producers and directors, celebrities, mainstream news anchors, and so on—we all perpetuate political correctness when we succumb to the fear of contradicting PC “truth.”

**So where does this fear come from? And what is the source of the prevailing opinions that we fear to contradict? Public opinion is often molded through a calculated process of psychological manipulation that takes two main forms: saturation and suppression.**

Saturation is the practice of repeating a deception relentlessly and injecting it into every corner of public life so that it becomes accepted as truth. Saturation usually requires the control of most communications outlets. For example, PC forces were only able to tease out public “approval” for the idea of genderless marriage by simultaneously saturating us with the idea through Hollywood, the media, academia, K-12 public education, local community activists, and various religious organizations.

Suppression is the flip side of the PC coin. We know it as the practice of quashing ideas that compete with the PC message, usually through speech codes, shout-downs, or smears. The process of suppression creates the conditions essential to the survival of the PC message. If we think of PC as bacteria, suppression is like the dark room and the culture required for the bacteria’s growth and replication.

No matter how implausible an idea may seem, it can gain acceptance in the minds of the citizens as the forces of PC relentlessly hype the idea in the public square. Simultaneously, the voices that might challenge and analyze the idea must be suppressed—accusations of bigotry and hatred often do the trick—so that the PC idea has a chance to incubate and then affect public opinion. The twin processes of saturation and suppression, if diligently applied, can produce the illusion of a huge public opinion shift, or a “cascade.”

To understand the mechanics of an opinion cascade, consider the effect of “preference falsification,” a term coined by economist Timur Kuran in his 1995 book [*Private Truths, Public Lies.*](http://www.amazon.com/Private-Truths-Public-Lies-Falsification/dp/0674707583)Kuran defines preference falsification as “the act of misrepresenting one’s wants under perceived social pressures.” This results in “the regulation of others’ perceptions,” and has an extremely powerful ripple effect that influences both the shape of public opinion and the political process.

In 1999, Kuran teamed up with Cass Sunstein, who served as President Obama’s regulatory czar from 2009 to 2012, to publish a *Stanford Law Review* [article](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=138144) on a related concept known as the “availability cascade.” They define it as “a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation whereby an expressed perception triggers reactions that make that perception seem increasingly plausible through its rising availability in public discourse.”

**The availability cascade has two complementary mechanisms:** “information cascades,” in which uninformed people base their own beliefs on the apparent beliefs of others; and “reputational cascades,” in which earning social approval or avoiding social disapproval affects how personal opinions are expressed or withheld. Availability cascades are fragile, but they can potentially cause huge and unpredicted swings in public opinion and policy.

When a free society falls under the sway of these manufactured cascades, many people stop behaving as free thinkers. People become less focused on truth and more focused on their social survival. And once people perceive the PC view as dominant, many with opposing views remain silent out of fear of social isolation. This creates a reverse bandwagon effect in which self-imposed silence has a multiplier effect, as Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann observes in her 1984 book [*The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Spiral-Silence-Public-Opinion-Our/dp/0226589366).

**Human beings tend to comply very quickly when threatened with labels of vilification—i.e., “bigot” or “hater”—that serve to get one socially labeled as a non-person. That’s because we know and fear social ostracism as a death trap**. We have a primal, hard-wired response to this risk that is especially hard to resist when our public discourse is commandeered by thought policing.

There’s nothing new about the process of “the manufacture of consent” in public opinion. Walter Lippmann wrote about it a hundred years ago. And from time immemorial, tyrants have been manipulating this fear of isolation to drive us ever farther apart from each other. Unfortunately, in our culture, only the elites who work to stifle free speech seem to have been keenly tuned into the mechanics of these phenomena of social psychology. Champions of free speech not so much. Hence our points cannot be heard or understood because our interlocutors are increasingly distracted and deafened to us by the PC messages that punish purveyors of dissenting views.

Sunstein, the PC maven of social psychology mentioned above, has written at length about how to change the general public’s patterns of thought and behavior. His focus is not on any particular policy *per se*, but on the process of getting those power-consolidating policies passed.

In his 2009 book [*On Rumors*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0809094738), for example, Sunstein highly recommends the use of a “[chilling effect](http://www.americanthinker.com/2009/10/czar_seeks_chilling_effect_on.html)” that can combat unwanted viewpoints. In illustration of this tactic, he wrote a [recent article](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-07-09/news-flash-obamacare-haters-hate-obamacare.html) ostensibly combating the “rumor” going around that Obamacare is not necessarily a good thing. He mocked opponents of Obamacare, calling them “haters.” So much for “civil” society.

Another of Sunstein’s books, [*Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*](http://www.amazon.com/Nudge-Improving-Decisions-Health-Happiness/dp/014311526X) (co-authored with behavioral economist [Richard Thaler](http://www.chicagobooth.edu/faculty/directory/t/richard-h-thaler)) is a treatise on “[choice architecture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choice_architecture),” or nudging people toward agreeing with new and “better” public policies. In other words, it is an **exposition on the psychological manipulation of the masses—for their own good, of course**.

Sunstein understands that ideas are best delivered by those with whom the listener can identify. “What matters most,” he has [written](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/18/opinion/balanced-news-reports-may-only-inflame.html?_r=1&) for the *New York Times*, “may be not what is said, but who, exactly, is saying it.” Indeed, the more a speaker is stereotyped and caricatured in the eyes of the beholder, the less likely the message will be accepted. But the more an individual can identify with a messenger, the more likely the message will be embraced.

Very critical in all of this, according to Sunstein, **is the role of the “surprising validator**:” a person who expresses an opinion contrary to the views expected. For example, if a climate change advocate changes course and becomes a skeptic, those who might go along with climate change are more likely to take notice and reconsider. Indeed, “surprising validators”—whether privately or publicly known—play a pivotal role. Among recent “surprising validators” who have expedited the illusion of public support for genderless marriage are conservative pundit [Michael Barone](http://washingtonexaminer.com/article/796646) and erstwhile champion of fatherhood and traditional marriage, [David Blankenhorn](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/23/us/david-blankenhorn-drops-opposition-to-gay-marriage.html). (Both were influenced—and very likely cultivated—by mild-mannered LGBT activist [Jonathan Rauch](http://www.jonathanrauch.com/about.html).)

So how can we begin to resist the mavens of PC and recapture the gift of free and civil discourse? **First, remember that free speech is a use-it-or-lose-it proposition**. Second, understand that manufactured cascades are actually very unstable, especially wherever individuals are intent on reaching out to others and sharing their real beliefs. Political correctness is highly vulnerable—otherwise the PC machine wouldn’t be so intent on suppressing competing ideas.

Most importantly, we must understand that the primary battleground is our daily interaction with neighbors, colleagues, co-workers, classmates, and acquaintances. Each person influences the perceptions of others simply through conversation. We all have the power to embolden others and create ripple effects, and reverse-ripple effects, merely by identifying our views to those who know us, trust us, like us, or identify with us.

Civil society cannot be reborn as long as those of us who hold non-PC views remain isolated. We need friends who help us realize that we are not alone so that we can be emboldened. The simple act of self-identifying in one’s sphere of influence goes a long way toward influencing an interlocutor or watering down a stereotype.

If enough people come out of isolation and shed the fear of speaking their minds, a genuine cascade of truth will ensue. Then civil society can be rebuilt, and real public discourse based on reason and logic can flourish. And the game will be over for PC pushers.

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