

Harvard B School Club's "Free Speech" Series Censors Itself

By John O'Donnell

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In a burst of irony to which it seems oblivious, the Harvard Business School Club of New York (HBSCNY), the largest HBS alumni club in the world, has censored the first two webinars in its "Complexity of Free Speech" series. The Club is refusing to make the video recordings available for viewing by club members, alumni and the general public.

Speakers for the two censored webinars from Feb. 8 and March 29, 2022 include former ACLU President Nadine Strossen, PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) Executive Director Robert Shibley, Regnery Publishing CEO Thomas Spence, professors Peter Boghossian and Dorian Abbot, as well as physicians Dr. Lisa Littman and Dr. Julia Mason. They were speaking on the topics, "Misinformation and Hate Speech: Who Gets to Decide?" and "Crisis in Academia: Free Speech Under Attack."

On April 15, 2022, HBSCNY President Clare Peeters, and Board Chair Mark Tatum emailed alumnus, Club volunteer and "Free Speech" series co-producer John O'Donnell that "the videos for the first two free speech events will not be posted, because ... they do not meet the quality standard set by the Club." The reason the two Club executives gave for not meeting these "standards" was that the panels were not conducted "in accordance with the Club's pre-determined format and the agreements reached during the pre-panel communications."

(The "pre-panel communications" refers to a zoom call during which the school and Club's "community values" were stressed, something to which O'Donnell readily agreed.)

In actuality, it is believed by many involved in the situation, the webinar videos are being embargoed because they discussed the management's previous censorship activity last spring, when HBSCNY cancelled a March 2021 presentation to the Club's book discussion group by James Lindsay, author of "Cynical Theories."

Lindsay was scheduled to speak to over 120 registered attendees on March 11, 2021. The Club's management team cancelled his presentation after an alumna of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government wrote an inflammatory email, calling Lindsay's views "racist" and "white supremacist," without offering any evidence to back her charges.

The complainer is a consultant in the field of "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion." In what might be viewed as a clear case of professional conflict of interest, her website at the time was promoting her upcoming book on DEI. Rather than offer to debate Lindsay on the merits of his criticism of "Critical Theory," the complainer strongly recommended that the club "cancel it altogether."

Evidently panicked by these unfounded and easily repudiated claims, the Club submitted, and cancelled the Lindsay presentation. When outraged Club members demanded to know how this decision was made, by whom, and in accordance to which Club by-laws, rules or guidelines, management refused to provide the details concerning who voted to cancel him, show any minutes of any meeting to discuss the issue, or to state a rationale for their action, other than:

In evaluating the "Cynical Theories" program, we concluded that the event was not consistent with our Club's programming principles and community values. The author has submitted at least 20 hoax (i.e., fake) papers to peer-reviewed journals in the guise of research in order to attempt to make his point... In addition, the author's use of dismissive language that belittles those with contrary points of view is another serious concern.

The "hoax" papers mentioned were drafted by Lindsay and others for submission to professional journals as part of a bona fide research project to prove their point that prevailing academic ideologies fail the test of common sense, and pursue progressive agendas to the point of absurdity. These "hoax" papers have been cited by other authors who agree that academic free speech is under attack, and that universities and professional journals are veering far to the left in terms of censoring any speech not in accordance with the prevailing progressive narrative.

The Club's two Co-Vice Presidents of Programming, Barrie Moskowitz and Lockie Andrews, were reported to be livid because O'Donnell's PowerPoint introduction to the Feb. 8 event mentioned this cancellation as the reason for holding the "Complexity of Free Speech" series in the first place. His prepared remarks included a question from other Club members about the propriety of any organization cancelling an invited speaker due to individual complaints. As a result,

he was ordered to submit his introduction for the March 29 webinar for prior Club review. He was then told he could not use it, but instead had to read from a prepared script provided by Moskowitz and Andrews. Neither Club exec seemed to be cognizant of the incongruity of censoring an introduction to a Free Speech panel.

When the panel began, one of the speakers asked what happened to the introduction they had previously been given for their preparation. O'Donnell suggested that Moskowitz respond and explain. She told the panel that "we do 100 [events] a year, so we need to have a procedure and a format... We don't censor people, we just have a standard format, otherwise we would not be able to run 100 events a year." Moskowitz did not explain how using the original introduction would negatively impact the number of programming events organized by the club, or how using the "party line" introduction she provided would allow more events to take place.

The club's newly - and affectionately - nicknamed "Gang of Four," in memory of Mao's wife and henchmen, have confirmed their closure on the matter:

"From the Club's perspective, the above resolves the outstanding issues and we consider the matter closed."

For his part, O'Donnell - who was informed his volunteer services were no longer needed, thank you kindly - finds himself amused by the comedic nature of the situation. "Censoring your own Free Speech panels? It's one of those 'You can't make this stuff up' stories," he laughs. "I might have expected something like this from the undergrads, but we Business School grads are supposed to be the grownups in the room. This just makes us look silly."