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# The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics

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# Editor's Preface to the Spring Edition

Here at Elon University, we are extremely grateful to host *The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics*. We are proud to present the Spring 2022 issue and congratulate all authors published in this issue for their high achievement.

This publication seeks to highlight the intellectual curiosity that leads to innovative scholarship in all subfields of political science, scholarship that addresses timely questions, is carefully crafted, and utilizes diverse methodologies. We are committed to intellectual integrity, a fair and objective review process, and a high standard of scholarship as we showcase the work of undergraduate scholars, some of whom pursue questions that have been traditionally ignored in scholarship but that drive our discipline forward.

Following the lead of the American Political Science Review (APSR) Editorial Board, we are excited to publish research in the areas of “American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, public law and policy, racial and ethnic politics, the politics of gender and sexuality and qualitative and quantitative research methods.” This publication also values the relationships formed through student-faculty collaboration and aims to build a culture of scholarship that expands beyond the college campus. We hope to encourage and empower students to seek out knowledge and pursue their potential, contributing to scholarship in a variety of disciplines.

This year, we thank our advisors Dr. Baris Kesgin and Dr. Aaron Sparks for their support, without which the issue would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the entirety of the Political Science and Policy Studies Department at Elon University, especially Dr. Laura Roselle; our Faculty Advisory Board; and all the students who shared their exceptional work with us this semester.

We are excited to present the Spring 2022 edition of the *Journal*. Thank you for your continued support and readership of our publication; we hope you enjoy the edition.

Sincerely,

*The Editorial Board at Elon University*

# Submission of Manuscripts

The *Journal* accepts manuscripts from undergraduates of any class and major. Members of Pi Sigma Alpha are especially encouraged to submit their work. We strive to publish papers of the highest quality in all areas of political science.

Generally, selected manuscripts have been well-written works with a fully developed thesis and strong argumentation stemming from original analysis. Authors may be asked to revise their work before being accepted for publication.

Submission deadlines are September 15th for the Fall edition and February 15th for the Spring edition. Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis; therefore, early submissions are strongly encouraged.

Students may submit their work through Elon University's submission portal, found here: <https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/arts-and-sciences/political-science/psa-journal/>

Alternatively, students may email [psajournalelon@gmail.com](mailto:psajournalelon@gmail.com) with an attached Word document of the manuscript. In the body of the email, students are asked to include their name and university, the title of the manuscript, and the closest subfield of political science to which their manuscript pertains (American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, or policy studies). Due to the time committed to the manuscript review process, we ask students to submit only one manuscript per submission cycle.

Submitted manuscripts must include a short abstract (approximately 150 words) and citations/references that follow the *APSA Style Manual for Political Science*. Please do not exceed the maximum page length of 35 double-spaced pages, which includes references, tables, figures, and appendices.

The *Journal* is a student-run enterprise with editors and an Editorial Board that are undergraduate students and Pi Sigma Alpha members at Elon University. The Editorial Board relies heavily on the help of our Faculty Advisory Board, which consists of political science faculty from across the nation, including members of the Pi Sigma Alpha Executive Council.

Please direct any questions about submissions or the Journal's upcoming editions to the editors at Elon University: [psajournalelon@gmail.com](mailto:psajournalelon@gmail.com).

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# 280 Characters of Unfreedom: A Tocquevillian Examination of the Power & Danger of Social Media

Finn B Johnson, St. Olaf College

*This paper is an attempt to better understand the power, potential, and danger of social media—particularly its danger to freedom of expression—by looking to Alexis De Tocqueville’s famous concept of the tyranny of the majority. The first section of this paper will unwrap and contextualize Tocqueville’s concept of the tyranny of the majority. The second will investigate the way social media exercises power in society. The third section will examine the idea of rising intellectual unfreedom through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The fourth section will connect the rise of intellectual unfreedom to the power of social media. Finally, the conclusion will attempt to contextualize intellectual unfreedom while also noting the validity and complexity of the moral power of the majority. This final section will also offer a brief prescriptive argument for the creation and protection of spheres of free inquiry within academic institutions.*

*The freedom to speak one’s mind is a physical necessity, not a political and intellectual piece of good luck; to a thinking person, the need seems to be almost as natural as breathing.*

David Bromwich (2016)

## INTRODUCTION

**O**n January 26th, 2021, Harvard canceled one of its courses. The class, an examination of the efficacy of a controversial style of policing, was removed from Harvard course offerings following the circulation of a petition condemning it. The petition eventually received 879 signatures from individuals affiliated with Harvard. Perhaps more interesting, however, was how much external support the petition received. In addition to the Harvard signatures, the petition received over 330 signatures from external supporters and received backing from 20 external organizations. The course was a study of a specific style of policing, called Counter-Criminal Continuum Policing (C3) that was being employed in Springfield, Massachusetts (Goode 2012). The style of policing was developed by two Green Berets, Michael Cutone and Thomas Sarrouf, who, upon returning to the states from Afghanistan, noticed worrying parallels between the New England city and the war-torn villages they had seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. This comparison was not hugely unfair; residents of the Brightwood neighborhood of Springfield, MA lived in fear. According to the *New York Times*, “Gang members and drug dealers cruised the streets on motor scooters carrying SKS semiautomatic rifles in broad daylight. Gunfire erupted almost daily,” (Goode 2012). Traditional police recourse, however, did not seem to be a viable solution.

Residents distrusted the police, and the police, in turn, had done little to change this sentiment, only coming into the community to make arrests.

Cutone and Sarrouf recognized that the situation in Springfield, particularly the drug and gang violence, was like the insurgencies they had seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. They developed a plan to “work by, with and through the local population” and “detect, degrade, disrupt and dismantle criminal activity” (Goode 2012). It was the efficacy of this tactic that Harvard professor Kevin Parker wanted to study. The petition against the course was rooted in multiple complaints: that such a study was unethical; that the course might “naturalize policies and practices that have disparate impacts on black and brown communities” (Joint Letter & Demands to Harvard SEAS regarding ENG-SCI 298r n.d.); and that students in the course were being taken advantage of for unpaid research. It is not apparent that any of these claims were substantiated. The official goal of the course was to contribute “to an understanding of an impoverished community” that had “made some very courageous decisions about taking the control of their fate from violent criminal gangs” (Reilly 2021). It seemed, by standard accounts, to be a legitimate academic subject. The course’s study also had an intended positive real-world impact. Many community leaders in areas that had adopted C3 were supportive and, additionally, many neighborhood residents reported that C3 had improved their neighborhoods (Goode 2012). Parker’s goal of giving students a chance to engage in knowledge-building and getting them “in the trenches on social reforms and...drag hard problems back to Harvard to work with students to solve them” (Reilly 2021), was seemingly made in good faith.

This was not the way his work was received. While there was student outrage at Harvard, the controversy extended onto social media. One tweet received almost 1,000 retweets and 1,700 likes—the tweet cited the petition and stated, “So apparently Harvard is offering a course on the merits of counterinsurgency tactics used to police black and brown neighborhoods???? Not surprised but still disgusted” (Avriel Epps-Darling 2021). The college responded within six days of the tweet, acquiescing to demands to pull the plug on the course. Parker’s hope that Harvard’s administration would “display the moral courage to support its faculty who endeavor to lead such projects...and their academic freedom” (Reilly 2021) was not realized.

This case is notable for a few reasons. The first is that the content of study, C3 Policing, was *newly* unacceptable as a topic of study. For example, it was noted that “neither the use of C3 techniques in Springfield nor Parker’s interest in the method are new” (Reilly 2021). The Harvard SEAS website includes multiple articles on the topic, including 2012 stories from the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Harvard Gazette*, and *Nature*. The cancellation of the class represented a previously acceptable topic being deemed unacceptable following public outcry. The scope of the response to the course was also interesting. The large number of signatories on the petition not affiliated with Harvard were most likely drawn from the ranks of social media. The specific engagement on social media was notable because while it happened outside both the general context of academia and the specific context of Harvard, it determined the perimeters of free thought within those contexts. Finally, the speed at which Harvard canceled the course pointed to the power social media has when it comes to influencing institutional policy regarding intellectual freedom.

The writings of Alexis De Tocqueville provide a compelling analytical framework for understanding this case and others. American media has long been a molder of public opinion and has had a, in Tocqueville’s view, singular capacity for creating social unanimity. It is this idea specifically that this paper will address. If the traditional American press was worrisome because it could drop “the same thought into a thousand minds” (Tocqueville 2009, 987) as Tocqueville seemed to think, then social media represents a new dimension of that power. If traditional media, like newspapers, can “set the public mind” and form “political questions” (Tocqueville and Beaumont 2010, pt. 2, 24; pt. I, s64) in a way that could, according to Boesche (1987), cause people to “embrace a subtle self-censorship...reflecting the dominant values and repeating them ceaselessly until no one dreamed of questioning them,” (250) it seems, at the very least, worth spending a few pages analyzing the danger of a new and very powerful kind of press, one capable of putting the same idea into the heads of a million or more people at the click of a button.

The example of Harvard canceling Parker’s course offers an instance of public outrage curtailing intellectual freedom.

But perhaps more interestingly, it offers a picture of social media as the amplifier and disseminator of that outrage, and finally, as the catalyst for the course’s cancellation. Digital communication, and particularly social media, seems to be particularly powerful in determining and enforcing limits on intellectual thought. This paper will take the advice of Boesche and analyze the “enormous new capacities of the electronic age” (250) as they relate to Tocqueville’s warnings; it will argue that his writings, at once brilliant and cautionary, offer a framework for analyzing the danger to intellectual unfreedom that social media presents. Probing into why social media as a primary arbiter in determining the sphere of acceptable discourse ought to be considered problematic will help cement this understanding. The first section of this paper will deal with understanding Tocqueville’s framework. The second section will shift to social media and will examine its distinction. The third section will identify and analyze trends in perceived intellectual unfreedom and will look at empirical research on trends in academic freedom. Moving from these trends, the fifth section will connect social media to intellectual unfreedom. The final concluding discussion will connect Tocqueville’s theory to an understanding of the power and danger of social media in our world.

Fundamentally, Tocqueville’s work will be used to analyze the power social media holds in society, the shrinking sphere of intellectual freedom in the academy and the way the two can be understood as intimately and importantly connected. This paper will argue that Alexis De Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority offers a uniquely compelling framework for analyzing the danger social media poses to freedom of thought.

### **Tyranny of the Majority**

Within the body of American political thought, Alexis De Tocqueville’s three volume *Democracy in America* stands as an enduring tract on the possibility and limitations of liberal democracy. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville describes a particular danger found in governments that seek rule by the people. This danger is what he calls the ‘tyranny of the majority.’ A two-pronged analysis of the danger of ‘popular will’ as translated into popular power, Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority identified both the obvious danger of a “direct majoritarian dominance of government” (Maletz 2002, 741), as well as a novel and more innovative argument that democracies are at risk of imposing a softer majoritarian tyranny on the minds and thoughts of their citizens.

The first type of tyranny is a straightforward account of power; all it highlights is the danger of abuse of power by those in power. Tocqueville argues that “one social power must always predominate over the others” (Tocqueville 2009, 482) and that this sort of predomination, though inevitable in kind, might be mitigated in degree by institutional checks. While, for Tocqueville, political liberty is compatible with a majoritarian society, it is endangered so long as majoritarian power is “checked by no obstacles which may retard its course and force



it to moderate its own vehemence” (Tocqueville 2009, 482). Furthermore, he notes that the rights of the minority will be in doubt so long as redress is arbitrated by the majority. Let one be wronged by the majority, and they will find no help from a legislature, executive branch, military, jury of peers or even elected judges insofar as the majority occupies those posts (Tocqueville 2009, 483). Injustice perpetuated by the majority will be judged not by an impartial third party, but by the majority itself.

Tocqueville’s account of the political danger of the majority, however, is largely theoretical. Maletz (2002) notes that Tocqueville provides only “two real examples of majority tyranny...one involving mob violence in Baltimore, the other a discouragement of the political activity of racial minorities in Pennsylvania” (754). Though Maletz concedes that more examples could have potentially been found, he is suspicious of the universal claim Tocqueville makes, citing its thin empirical support (Maletz 2002, 754).

However, this first ‘tyranny of the majority’ is not the primary concern of this paper. The theoretical banality and potential inaccuracy of a *political* tyranny of the majority stands in contrast to Tocqueville’s more interesting and innovative theory regarding the power of the majority over *public opinion*. Where political tyranny of the majority involves the capture and corruption of political institutions in service of the democratic majority, a tyranny of public opinion involves policing social norms. This second tyranny is the softer, but highly invasive, tyranny that the majority might hold over the minds and thoughts of citizens. This is the ‘moral power of the majority.’

This second form of tyranny, for Tocqueville, highlights both the raw power and the radical uniqueness of democracy. While “the authority of the king is purely physical,” a democratic majority, for Tocqueville, possesses “a power that is physical and moral at the same time” (Tocqueville 2009, 487). The sphere of acceptable thought and ideas is dictated by a sole power, the power of the majority. Tocqueville theorizes that a true majority’s monopoly over public opinion allows it to demand fealty to its own conclusions. The result is a social sphere of inquiry open only so long as “the majority is still undecided...as soon as its decision is irrevocably pronounced, a submissive silence is observed” (Tocqueville 2009, 486). This silence constitutes obedience to the majority, paid by all factions in society. In Tocqueville’s Europe, power factionalism provided shelter for dissenters: a European dissenter of the monarchy was sheltered by the common people (who were opposed to the monarch), or a monarchist that offended the common people was to be protected by the aristocracy (who opposed the common people).

In Tocqueville’s America, there was no such protection. In other places, the fractured nature of groups allowed individuals attacked by one group to find protection in others. However, in America there existed only the “one sole authority” (Tocqueville 2009, 487) of the majority. Tocqueville

argues that the majority had unlimited power over deciding which ideas were acceptable and which were not. An author could write what they pleased only so long as it was within the boundaries decided upon by the majority, but as soon as one transgressed the set boundaries they were subjected to a sort of social castigation. A dissenter might “retain [their] life, [their] property, and all that [they] possess” (Tocqueville 2009, 489) but the majority would ensure that they lost their social standing, “tormented by the slights and persecutions of daily obloquy” (Tocqueville 2009, 488). What Tocqueville describes was the hammer of public opinion. Those who inspired its ire would be subjected to loud censure by “overbearing opponents” (Tocqueville 2009, 488). Once on their heels, they would find themselves abandoned by any former allies who chose self-censorship over similar ridicule. While there may be vigorous and interesting discussion within the sphere of acceptable discourse, true freedom of opinion, in Tocqueville’s estimation, was dearly limited.

Tocqueville’s notion of tyranny of thought, or the moral power of the majority, was in some ways a responding salvo to a *Federalist* or Madisonian account of democratic power. According to the historian Rory Schacter, Tocqueville did share Madison’s “concern that a *state* legislature [could] become hostile to local liberties” (Boettke and Martin 2020, 17-18, italics added). But the *Federalist’s* bigger concern was that a “deep or permanent divide between minority and majority factions in the United States” (Boettke and Martin 2020, 20) would emerge, creating the conditions for institutionalized majoritarian oppression of the minority group. Their solution was to design institutions so as to “render government invulnerable to the onslaughts of the impassioned majority” (Horwitz 1966, 299). Tocqueville, in contrast, rejected the idea that factions and division were of chief concern, arguing instead that society, or the public, was itself the undivided majority that all parties paid fealty to. As such, democracy’s institutional design could never be strong enough to account for societal problems (Horwitz 1966, 306). In this understanding, “institutional checks alone would not suffice” (Boettke and Martin 2020, 20). Horwitz (1966) described this as Tocqueville’s innovative leap, arguing that “Madison’s was a numerical or political” tyranny whereas Tocqueville’s was a “more subtle and intangible tyranny of unanimity and uniformity; that is, tyranny of society itself” (302).

This is the most important turn Tocqueville made. According to Horwitz (1966), Tocqueville “shifted the entire object of thought about the majority problem *from government to society*” (305, italics added). Society constituted the informal social norms and practices of a community. Government, in contrast, was concerned with the more formal institutions of political power. The importance of this shift comes from its understanding that freedom was both a social and a political concept. Insofar as *society* was capable of tyranny over its inhabitant, it constituted a danger to freedom. Freedom, in other words, depends not only on the restraint and moderation

of government, but also on the restraint and moderation of society *writ large*. No longer was freedom “a matter of restraining governors or making government ultimately responsible for the people,” but thanks to Tocqueville’s analysis, it also “depended on the habits and traditions of the people” (Horwitz 1966, 305). This social tyranny can be understood as the moral power of the majority.

This description, Horwitz notes, was a challenge to the conventional narrative of freedom. Coercive government oppression was less of a threat to free intellectual thought than the moral power the majority exercised over the minds of citizens. This was “despotism at a new stage of perfection” (Horwitz 1966, 303), as it concerned the manipulation of individuals’ wills instead of bodies. Coercion needed to be reevaluated because the majority’s power was “physical and moral at the same time” and acted “upon the will as much as the actions” (Tocqueville 2009, 487). There was no terminology for this moral coercion in Tocqueville’s time because, in a classical liberal sense which saw coercion as physical force, it did not look like coercion at all. Horwitz (1966) notes that this sort of unfreedom furthermore did not look coercive because it “transformed the very nature of individuals so that, because the source of restraint appeared to be dictated by the individuals own desires” (303). It appeared to be voluntary. Yet the end result of *intellectual unfreedom* was real. To Tocqueville (2009), the full effect of this subversive moral coercion was he knew of “no country in which there is so little independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America” (487).

While interesting and persuasive, Tocqueville’s theory may seem out of touch. For those who saw the democratic election of Donald Trump, for instance, as a threat to liberalism<sup>1</sup>, the Madisonian concerns seem much more relevant. The Madisonian idea was that well-designed institutions could protect democracy from illiberal tendencies. Do or die partisan battles to control the court system (Hananel 2016) and infringements on voting rights and districting fairness (Associated Press 2021) seem like the tactics of a partisan faction in a Madisonian nightmare.

The idea of an impassioned faction threatening political institutions, however, is not enough to deny that Tocqueville’s work is still important for understanding the danger of the moral power of the majority. Indeed, his illuminating placement of the problems of democracy in society rather than institutions seems like a prescient warning of the same kind that intellectuals offered *ex post facto* (but certainly not prior to) the growing power of anti-liberal factions in the United States. Only after democratic institutions were strained by the 2020 election, for instance, was consensus reached on the Tocquevillian idea that even the best institutions are not enough to check a society bent on their subversion (Horwitz 1966, 296). For this and other reasons, Tocqueville’s concern about the moral power of the majority is highly relevant.

## The Power of Social Media

Social media is, without doubt, enormously powerful and influential. In the last thirty years, since the beginning of the popular acceptance of the internet, billions of individuals across the globe have become digitally connected (Shirky 2011, 28). This digital connection has allowed for an explosion of new ideas, has given the politically disenfranchised a new shared voice, and has radically democratized information distribution and creation. Yet, even as “the Internet and social media are omnipresent,” their “political roles...are not yet fully understood” (Shirky 2011, 28). This analysis will focus on one of social media’s *potential* political roles: its ability to coordinate majority opinion sentiments with revolutionary speed and reach. This next section will be devoted to developing an understanding of the potential and danger of social media.

The jumping off point for an understanding of the role, practice, and power of social media is to situate it within the larger landscape of news media. At its broadest, news media might be understood as any sort of large distributor of information about current events or political happenings (Graber 2003, 140). Yet, while categorically accurate, this sort of definition does not capture the defining features of social media. Indeed, as “there are vast differences in content, framing, and mode of presentation among various types of news venues and within each venue” (Graber 2003, 140), it is important to highlight the unique form and function of social media. There are two distinctive characteristics of social media: its reliance on user-generated content and its low barriers to entry (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020, 416). These characteristics combined offer a platform that is less gate-kept, more organic, and more responsive to trends than traditional media. The analytical work of this paper, however, is to determine how social media is shaping discourse and action, and whether it is doing so in a way that would be red flagged by Tocqueville.

Social media is sometimes analogized as a modern printing-press—both were revolutionary forms of media that worked to circumvent political gatekeepers and democratize both information production and dissemination (Shirky 2011, 34). This sort of democratization, however, is not necessarily a good thing. For example, the low barriers to content creation followed by the widespread ability to share content may serve to undermine gatekeepers<sup>2</sup> working in the interest of vibrant public discourse. While removing gatekeeping can certainly have good consequences, like making it “difficult for political or business actors to hide potentially harmful information” (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020, 416), it is also the case that many traditional media gatekeepers are also responsible for the high quality and factual correctness of traditional news media. A prime example of this tradeoff can be observed in the low fact-checking standards of social media. User-based content and the viral capacity of social media are eminently compatible with the spread of misinformation or fake news, “ultimately increasing political misperceptions” (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020, 417). This process, furthermore, may be abetted by a psychological

inclination to share information that evokes a stronger immediate reaction—as fake news is more designed to trigger fear or anger—than real news. Because of this psychological tendency, fake news often spreads faster than real news on social media (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020, 417). In general, the design of social media rewards “shorter, simpler, and more emotionally charged messages” (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020, 417).

Social media has also contributed to the rise of partisan echo-chambers, spheres of discourse that reinforce contestable political opinions by removing them from the broader arena of contestability. Its low barrier to entry has increased the number of media choices that individuals can consume, which in turn allows for users to preferentially follow news that confirms their own biases and predilections (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020, 417). The way in which social media influences opinions is one important reason why it holds so much power.

More so than traditional media, social media is uniquely designed to change and/or harden people’s opinions. As the sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955) demonstrated in 1948, mass media in isolation is not enough to change someone’s opinion; a second step, that of social conversation—which is often informed by mass media—is required to form new opinions. Social media is uniquely capable of filling these two roles as “it allows people to privately and publicly articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views” (Shirky 2011, 34). Social media, like traditional media, provides individuals with an opinion landscape. What it does uniquely, though, is *also* offer the second step: a forum for engaging with the opinions of friends and family members—the people you trust. It is this second role that makes social media uniquely able to both offer ideas and pull individuals into allegiance to those ideas. The danger is that while social media does seem to encourage social conversation, it does so in a fragmented way. One of the reasons why a huge amount of varied information—of the kind accessible on social media—is a problem is that “with audiences dividing their attention among more news venues, the bond of shared information that ties communities together may be vanishing” (Graber 2003, 153). Social media then seems paradoxical; it both creates a sphere for social conversation and undermines the broader sphere of public discourse. This paradox is only reconciled by the recognition that social media’s strength is in creating spheres of *like-minded* discourse at the expense of a broader cross-factional public discourse<sup>3</sup>.

A social media that excels at creating impassioned factions seems much more consistent with a Madisonian diagnosis. It does not seem to be the case that social media is capable of building one common majoritarian consensus like the one Tocqueville describes. In fact, it seems to be doing the opposite. According to the above sources, social media is best at doing the thing the *Federalists*, not Tocqueville, feared—that is, creating a “deep or permanent divide between minority and majority factions in the United States” (Boettke and Martin 2020, 20).

While this interpretation no doubt seems to support a Madisonian concept of tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville’s writing offers an important insight into the power of social media. Even if Tocqueville’s (2009) description of the predominance of the majority may be called into question, his fear that oppression in democratic republics will come as “entirely an affair of the mind...which it is intended to coerce” (487) seems strikingly relevant in a discussion on the power of social media. The vocal individuals on social media do not necessarily reflect a true majority’s thought; however, social media offers a tool of amplification that allows those thoughts to appear dominantly majoritarian. Tocqueville’s majoritarian tyranny does not need to be understood as one single strain of discourse blanketing society; instead, it need only occupy the majority of thought in any particular sphere of discourse. The unique reality of social media is that it can allow a relatively small contingent to present as the majority within some context. What’s important is not the actual number of people articulating any given view relative to the total number of people in society, but the perception that the articulated view is that of the dominant majority—particularly by those on the receiving end. Thus, a relatively small group can occupy an outsized space within a particular sphere of discourse (like the influence social media exerted on Harvard’s decision to cancel Parker’s course). This comes to bear in academic settings particularly. What is considered acceptable or unacceptable is not decided nationally by a national majority, but instead reflects the dominant view in a particular context.

Academic intellectual unfreedom may be thought of as one example of contextualized tyranny of the majority. It is exactly the sort of socially incentivized censorship that Tocqueville described. To recall, this censorship worked through threatening the loss of one’s social standing through “the slights and persecutions of daily obloquy” as a social punishment for opining outside of society’s “formidable barriers” (Tocqueville 2009, 488) of acceptable discourse. This definition is striking in that it is almost identical to the definition of “cancel culture” provided by Harvard political scientist Pippa Norris. Norris (2020) wrote that “cancel culture” can be defined broadly as attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms” (2). Cancel culture, as a social punishment inflicted for violating social norms, is the most obvious realization of Tocqueville’s warnings about tyranny of thought. This next section will look closer into whether this phenomenon can be reasonably connected to Tocqueville’s fear of majoritarian domination and whether its ascendance is due to social media.

### Intellectual Unfreedom in Practice

While pressure to be politically correct is certainly a form of the intellectual tyranny Tocqueville described, a more exact study of his theory is found in the perceived change in academic freedom. Evaluating anything empirically as ‘soft coercion’ is difficult. For instance, identifying and studying

intellectual unfreedom is empirically difficult because self-censorship is essentially a non-event. In other words, it is difficult to show that something may have happened but did not. That said, there are cases that point towards such a *disincentivization* as well as empirical evidence suggesting that academics, as one of the few studied demographics on free intellectual thought, are *perceiving* more intellectual boundaries in their own work.

Understanding the scope of intellectual freedom requires identifying limits of expression. That, in turn, requires looking to cases that generate “controversy, opposition and pressures on the institution to engage in censorship” (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 52). Redstone and Villasenor (2020), in a book called *Unassailable Ideas*, have noted that research “on politically charged topics is subject to indiscriminate attack on social media” (52) and for that reason provides a perimeter for understanding what is acceptable discourse. The highly public nature of these controversies, due to the highly public and viral nature of social media, then places pressure on school administrators “to subvert established norms regarding the protection of free academic inquiry” (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 53). Because of the unwillingness of the university to shield its idea forums from social media, “it’s unsurprising that most members of the campus community avoid testing boundaries, and instead engage in discourse, teaching, and research within a much narrower range than is theoretically permitted by a university’s official policies” (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 54). This is strikingly close to the contraction of acceptable discourse theorized by Tocqueville. The empirical landscape on free intellectual thought largely bears out this theory.

A more systematic approach to understanding the sphere of acceptable discourse shows a modern tendency towards free-thought contraction. A recent survey, *The World of Political Science*, 2019, attempted to fill the gap between case studies and quantitative analysis of intellectual unfreedom in academia. Involving 2,446 political scientists in 102 countries and 1,245 from 23 affluent post-industrial societies (Norris 2020, 9), the survey provided a comprehensive study of *perceived* intellectual freedom among social scientists. The survey’s results showed “growing restrictions of academic freedom of speech, pressures for ideological conformity, and the enforcement of politically correct speech” (15) within academic institutions.

The actual social pressures to conform to the majority can be witnessed in both the survey’s results regarding “*Experience of pressure to be politically correct*” (14) and “*Experience of academic freedom*” (14). When asked specifically about political correctness, 39% of respondents reported experiencing no change over time regarding pressure to be politically correct, over one third of respondents (36%) experienced ‘somewhat/a lot’ of an increase in pressure to be politically correct. This second group was much larger than those who had felt the pressure to be politically correct had gotten ‘somewhat/a lot’ better (15%). Further illumination

was provided by an ideological breakdown of respondents; while 42% of professors on the left had ‘experienced no change in the pressure to conform,’ only 20% of professors on the right responded similarly (13). But most importantly, the largest plurality (47%) of respondents in the survey reported that academic freedom, in their experience, had deteriorated ‘somewhat/a lot.’ This conclusion is supported elsewhere as well. A recent report drawing on a YouGov survey of 820 academics in the UK, for example, found that 32% of those who identified as ‘fairly right’ or ‘right’ reported having self-censored and refrained from presenting their own ideas and views in both teaching and research (Adekoya et al. 2020, 8). Self-censorship, the report further noted, was not just because of a fear of being uncomfortable or out of step with the prevailing social views but was oftentimes a “rational response—particularly for younger academics—to a workplace in which expressing such views may have a negative impact on their careers” (Adekoya et al. 2020, 8). What these studies identify is an empirical trend towards intellectual unfreedom.

Disparity in perceived intellectual unfreedom can be explained by examining who is thinking at the perimeter of acceptable thought; those operating at the margin of acceptable social discourse experience the pressures exerted by the majority when the margin contracts. Right-wing professors, often a minority within their institutions<sup>4</sup>, may feel more pressure precisely because their views do not conform to the views of the majority. Within academic communities at least, the majoritarian pressure is coming from the left. This pressure makes sense, as Norris (2020) notes that “public opinion on a wide range of issues has gradually shifted in a more socially liberal and progressive direction to become the majority view in public opinion in many affluent post-industrial societies in western Europe and North America” (14). Thus, the increased pressure to be politically correct may be an effect of public opinion that has shifted the sphere of acceptable discourse away from the right. The result is that many rightwing professors are likely to feel “growing pressures to conform with evolving informal social values both in the academy and broadly in postindustrial societies” (Norris 2020, 17).

What these studies identify is an empirical trend towards intellectual unfreedom. This trend, though analyzed here only in academic environments due to empirical accessibility, is starkly in line with Tocqueville’s thought on majoritarian moral pressure.

### **Social Media & Intellectual Unfreedom**

One explanation for the trend towards intellectual unfreedom is the intuitive idea that individuals will not explore controversial ideas when they have nothing to gain from doing so and everything to lose. The threat of cancel culture, particularly, seems to be a driving force in disincentivizing the exchange of ideas outside the sphere of acceptable discourse. Ilana Redstone and John Villasenor directed their attention to this phenomenon, what they call call-out culture. Call-out



culture, they argue, is “one of the most visible changes to public discourse in the social media age”; it essentially is “the use of social media to build a wave of public indignation regarding behavior deemed transgressive” (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 36). This sort of process is often legitimately pointed at individuals who have acted in harmful or unpardonable ways, but it also has invaded the sphere of open inquiry within academia. The pursuit of intellectual knowledge has always been linked to “broader political, social and religious currents” (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 43). However, it has also been historically insulated from those currents. Social media is important because it provides “a new feedback mechanism through which those currents can shape and be shaped by what happens on campus” (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 43). Not only is social media a new tool, but it also seems to be an incredibly effective way to publicly shame people into behavior modification. In other words,

*Individuals who have been targeted by call out campaigns highlighting real or perceived transgressions will be less likely to do anything in the future that might once again attract online wrath. Even people who have not been targets of call-out campaigns see what happens to those who have and will modify their behavior as well to avoid becoming targets themselves* (Redstone and Villasenor 2020, 43).

This sort of targeting, especially when academic institutions fail to protect the academic sphere of free inquiry, leads to the sort of academic unfreedom that seems to be on the rise in universities around the world. Social media’s abilities to quickly notice transgression, make that notice visible to a much larger audience, and find and target the transgressor all are factors that have made the moral power of the majority uniquely able determine and dictate acceptable discourse.

## CONCLUSIONS TO DRAW

If intellectual freedom *has* diminished, is it not immediately apparent that we ought to consider that a bad thing. Norris notes that public shaming has often been dealt out for reasons that are not vindictive or done in poor faith. For example, public shaming has helped victims achieve social justice when they are unable to obtain legal restitution or public apology. Public shaming on social media was also integral to the #MeToo movement, which targeted powerful sexual predators, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which used social media to call out racist textbooks, instances of police abuse and violence in communities of color, and organizations lacking diversity (Norris 2020, 2). In other words, there are certainly *reasons*, and they can often be quite good, for why social media ought to be used as a mechanism to publicly shame or call-out. Having boundaries on what is considered socially acceptable to say and believe also makes sense in a more interpersonal way. Talking offensively or without regard

to others often is carelessly or intentionally hurtful. If social etiquette was completely ignored, it would be hard to imagine any conversation ending productively or positively; it is even harder to imagine a functioning democracy with such a toxic public forum. And finally, even if the forums of social media *do* produce unjustified or harmful mob mentalities, how ought one to limit them? It seems like the intellectual freedom proponent does not win by censoring social media, as that itself is a form of intellectual unfreedom.

These are the difficult realities of social media and its power. This nuanced reality is where a careful reading of Tocqueville’s warning of the power of the majority provides clarity. The power held by social media is the moral power of the majority. It is a mechanism that demonizes and socially ostracizes those individuals whose views transgress the boundaries of acceptable discourse. It is not physical coercion, but as Tocqueville rightly noted, the power of the moral majority is great enough to not need to stoop to physical violence. Moral coercion *is* coercive in the sense that it is a threat: that one might lose their job, friends, privacy, or social status. It is not necessarily the case that everyone who crosses those boundaries ought to be defended for doing so, but it *is* the case that channeling the social power of the majority ought to be treated with a suspicion proportional to its capacity to control and subtly coerce.

Academia, in particular, may be served by Tocqueville’s analysis. What academia aspires toward is the generation of knowledge and genius. Premised in this manner, Tocqueville offers insight into the way that social tyranny leads to intellectual failure. “There is no literary genius without freedom of opinion, and freedom of opinion does not exist in America” (Tocqueville 2009, 490). This is a broad thrust to be sure, and Tocqueville did come before the time of Dickinson, Kerouac, and Foster-Wallace, but pushing the frontier of knowledge requires a certain disregard of conformity—and institutions like universities, so long as their commitment is to knowledge, ought to create space for that nonconformity. Tocqueville attributes the power of social tyranny to the isolation it levels at the target, and this is perhaps where his warning can be prescriptive. For academia, in particular, free inquiry is institutional. It is when academics are placed outside of the sphere of free inquiry and into the public sphere that their work becomes subject to the power of the moral majority. Creating and protecting this sphere of open inquiry, then, may be the place to start.

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## NOTES

- 1 Liberalism is defined here using Yascha Mounk's (2018) definition: Liberalism is an ideological commitment "to basic values like freedom of speech, the separation of powers, or the protection of individual rights" (26).
- 2 In this case, journalistic professionals who get to decide which stories get run and which don't.
- 3 That this *like-minded* discourse is emotionally charged is another important point.
- 4 Only 27% and 2% of global respondents in the *World of Political Science*, 2019, Survey self-identified as 'moderately-right' and 'far-right,' respectively (Norris 2020, 14)