

Journal to provide pseudonyms for academics

Lily Robertson investigates the announcement of a new controversial academic journal

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Chris Chabot

An International group of university researchers is planning a new journal which will allow articles on sensitive debates to be written under pseudonyms. The plans were revealed for the publication on *University Unchallenged*, a BBC Radio 4 documentary about viewpoint diversity in academia. The group believe that open intellectual debate on tough issues is being curtailed by a culture of fear and self-censorship. On the programme, Jeff McMahan, Professor of Moral Philosophy at University of Oxford, and one of the organisers of the journal reasoned: “The need for more open discussion is really very acute. There’s greater inhibition on university campuses about taking certain positions for fear of what will happen.” The fear comes from opposition both on the left and the right. The threats from outside the university tend to be more from the right. The threats to free speech and academic freedom that come from within the university tend to be more from the left.” McMahan gave the example of a fellow Oxford academic, Professor Nigel Biggar, being targeted after he suggested that British people should have “pride” about aspects of their imperialist past.

Over 50 professors, lecturers and researchers signed an open letter expressing their “firm rejection” of his views. Prof Biggar later revealed that young academics are afraid of damaging their careers if they are seen with him. Last month a group of over 100 academics from British universities raised concerns

about what they called: “the suppression of proper academic analysis and discussion of the social phenomenon of transgenderism.” The Journal of Controversial Ideas will be launched early next year. Prof McMahan said: “It would enable people whose ideas might get them in trouble either with the left or right, or with their own university administration, to publish under a pseudonym.” Prof McMahon has stressed that the journal will be peer-reviewed in line with standard academic practices. He and his colleagues are establishing an intellectually diverse international editorial board with representation from the left wing and the far right, as well as religious and secular thinkers, to ensure the journal is not identified with a specific viewpoint.

They will soon issue a request for articles. They said that members of their group have experienced campus protests, calls for dismissal in the press, harassment, foiled plots to bring about dismissal, no-platforming, and attempts to censor academic research and publications. Other academics involved with the project include the prominent Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, who specialises in applied ethics and approaches ethical issues from a secular, utilitarian perspective, and Francesca Minerva, a bio-ethicist at the University of Ghent in Belgium. Prof McMahan said the team behind the journal see it as a much needed response to the backlash against freedom of speech, noting that: “I think all of us will be very happy if, and when, the need for such a journal disappears, and the sooner the better. But right now in current conditions, something like this is needed.”



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