

Outrage, Dialogue, and Censorship: An Invitation to Difficult Discussions

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The goal of *The Tavern* is to enable a free intellectual discourse of ideas and opinions between students, by students, and for students. We strive to go beyond the soundbites of current events, and to unpack and freely discuss relevant issues and trends in the schools we attend. It seems very fitting then, to begin our first issue with a question about the expression of opinions and ideas, how those opinions and ideas are received by students, as well as faculty and administrators, and the response that follows. Is there an effort to pursue and discuss these thoughts and opinions, or do members of the school community refuse to engage and decide to censor themselves instead?

In *The Tavern*, we will thoroughly discuss controversial subjects, but the goal is not controversy itself. The mission of this paper is not to insult or tarnish the reputations of the schools we attend. As such, I think it would be inaccurate to say, as the question we respond to might suggest, that my school's administration deliberately censors student voice. Where I have seen censorship, however, is within the student community itself. This censorship often revolves around political identities and opinions, and is self-enforced by students' unwillingness to hold dialogues about difficult issues. Talking about highly charged current events, and encouraging students to speak up and have discussions about topics of race, identity, equity, and community has been a challenge at my school. In recent years, St. Mark's has started hosting "town halls," in which, after a central topic or theme of discussion has been posed, students are encouraged to get up and share their experiences and/or thoughts with the school. What often happens, however, is that the same small group of students end up speaking each time, and many students refuse to participate at all, either because they don't want to say anything controversial or because they think these discussions are a waste of time. Thus the self-censorship. Interestingly enough, however, what consistently happens after these events is that students find small groups of like-minded individuals and create their own echo chambers in which the same opinions and biases are never challenged. As a result, pockets of students form inside filters that censor out any opinion that they might disagree with.

So, how can we as students work to break down these ideological walls we've constructed? I don't think there's one easy answer, but there are at least a few things we can do in order to have more productive conversations. If a student hears something he disagrees with, for instance, or an idea that conflicts with his opinions and views, the last thing he should do is feel personally attacked. I was recently in a discussion with a few students about the protests, shootings, and tragedies which have hurt our country so deeply in recent months. What bothered me most about the response to many of these truly terrible situations was the mass indignation that ensued online. I remember being so frustrated specifically after the shootings in Minnesota and Louisiana. Almost immediately people began angrily posting about black lives matter versus blue lives matter and chose to fight instead of choosing empathy. An internet mob is eager to work itself up into a frenzy of outrage, yet nothing productive ever seems to come from an angry

tweet or Facebook post. The only thing left after hate and blame have been hurled left and right is just hurt, and no real progress.

I worry that this same quick-to-judge mentality seen online bleeds into our day to day interactions within the student body, especially when discussing politically charged topics. Self-censorship occurs—knowingly, or even unknowingly—when students don't want to risk offending those with different political viewpoints than their own. What better way to insulate from dissenting opinions and attacks than to simply shut out differing viewpoints and disengage? I think the best route to promoting honest engagement in difficult conversations is to find a way for students to feel comfortable sharing their ideas without being attacked by, or even unintentionally attacking, their peers. I'm not suggesting that students don't challenge their classmates' opinions in all areas, but there is undoubtedly a certain hesitance to challenge opinions that have the potential to politically offend. Having difficult conversations is, well, difficult, so not everyone will be willing to engage in these discussions at the same level. But as for students who are willing to take the first step, please reach out and make the connection. Let's do it with open minds, in the spirit of free discourse that inspires *The Tavern*.