

If We Disagree, Should I Destroy Your Career?



By Alex Berezow, PhD — December 7, 2017



Credit: Robert Couse-Baker/Wikipedia

[1]

One of the predictable consequences of our tribalistic, hyperpartisan society is a collapse in basic decency.

Look at the way Republicans and Democrats treat each other. Look at the way so-called intellectuals and scholars treat each other. Look at the way we treat each other on social media. (Look at the names I'll be called in the comments section.)

There was a time, not all that long ago, when we regularly interacted with people with whom we strongly disagreed. Remember those goofy TV debate shows, like CNN's *Crossfire* and Fox News's *Hannity & Colmes*? Apparently, they represented the high-water mark of modern American political discourse and tolerance.

Today, we not only refuse to listen to opposing viewpoints, but we refuse to live in the same places with people who hold them. In his book [The Big Sort](#) [2], Bill Bishop argues that America has undergone a great transformation: People have moved into communities with other like-minded people. While that sounds nice, the result has had the unintended consequence of worsening political polarization. It is now entirely possible to live a life without ever having to hear an opinion or see a yard sign you don't like.

Isolating ourselves into self-contained bubbles and safe spaces has also exacerbated incivility. It is easy to demonize and dehumanize political opponents if you never have to see them at the coffee shop or chit-chat while the kids play soccer. Such ideological isolation explains why socialist Seattle City Councilwoman Kshama Sawant received enthusiastic applause after [declaring that she had no Republican friends](#) [3].

But why stop there? If we can tune out, move away from, and shun people with whom we disagree, why not put them out of a job, too?

You're Pro-GMO? I'm Telling Your Boss!

The next step in our cultural devolution was easy to see coming. Companies and advertisers for political talk shows have been boycotted, simply for the crime of existing and expressing opinions. (As ACSH President Hank Campbell likes to say, companies have to apologize simply for being in business.) It wasn't long before activists applied this tactic to individuals, as well.

Stephan Neidenbach, a middle school science teacher and the internet's most voracious pro-science warrior, [details](#) ^[4] the story of Michael Miles, an environmental scientist who works for the State of Maryland. Mr. Miles has run afoul of the Maryland Pesticide Network (MPN), an organization of anti-GMO environmental activists, because he said they were promoting false information. He wrote on Facebook:

"As an environmental scientist, I have major issues with this organization. I looked through their materials and it was littered with error, misinformation, and blatant lies. We should not be promoting false information as if it were true — and we should especially not be encouraging people to donate to an organization that has dubious credibility."

"We should not be promoting false information as if it were true." Making such a seemingly banal statement now takes an incredible act of bravery. His opponents have responded by trying to destroy Mr. Miles's career. Eric Gally, a lobbyist, has taken up MPN's cause. At the end of a tirade, he wrote, "The rest of my communications will be with your bosses so you can just have a nice day :)"

Though he fails at punctuation, at least he's polite enough to issue threats with a smiley face.

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Sadly, Mr. Miles isn't the only recipient of such cyberbullying. As Mr. Neidenbach correctly notes, harassing scientists is the latest tactic in the activist toolbox. The most famous target was Kevin Folta, a plant biotechnologist at the University of Florida, whose [life was turned into a living nightmare](#) ^[5] by severely unhinged anti-GMO activists.

The media, including those who somehow consider themselves science journalists, have multiplied the problem. Instead of reporting facts and debunking myths about GMOs and pesticides, most outlets -- like the [New York Times and Undark](#) ^[6] -- run loose with anti-Monsanto conspiracy theories. This anti-corporate ideology, which ironically seems to be held strongest by those journalists who work for large, corporate media, gives them an excuse to bash the *devil du jour*, science and reality be damned.

Where Does This End?

I'm often asked, "How do we fix this?" I haven't the foggiest clue. American culture has

fundamentally changed. We no longer respect or trust each other, let alone like each other. People we can't tune out we try to destroy. Instead of assuming that our ideological opponents are well-meaning but misguided, we choose to believe they are evil and conniving.

So, I don't know how this will end for our society. But my prediction is that it doesn't end well.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protest#/media/File:Angry_mob_of_four.jpg

[2] <https://www.amazon.com/Big-Sort-Clustering-Like-Minded-America/dp/0547237723>

[3] <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/in-seattle-is-it-now-taboo-to-be-friends-with-a-republican/>

[4] <https://medium.com/@welovegv/pr-firm-threatens-environmental-scientist-over-pro-gmo-views-f63f702bb71b>

[5] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/10/05/cyberbullying-strategy-destroy-scientists-10263>

[6] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/11/30/death-science-journalism-12221>