

Why You Should Talk To People You Hate

Want to be someone smarter? Greg Lukianoff talks about the importance of the First Amendment as the first and most basic right, why censorship on social media can do more harm than good, and how talking to someone you dislike or disagree with can make you both smarter and more persuasive to the other.

This transcript is edited and condensed.

John Matze, Host of 'Greater Perspectives'

Hello and welcome to another episode of Greater Perspectives. We have Greg Lukianoff from FIRE – a free speech advocate, lawyer, and really – an expert on the topic.

John Matze

When you get people talking to each other, you can go, well, really, all of this boils down to not the fact that you're a horrible person or that you believe this or that, but on you and I disagreeing on the basis of one or two small facts that compounded together will lead us to our radically opposite positions on the outcome.

It doesn't mean either party's wrong.

Greg Lukianoff

Yeah, and it's the John Stuart Mill – what I call [Mill's Trident](#). Sometimes the Invincible Trident because no one's ever defeated it.

It means three things.

Either you're wrong and you benefit from freedom of speech because people can point out that you're wrong.

John Matze

You'll never learn if you don't have free speech.

Two, you're partially right and partially wrong. And free speech is how you actually come to understand that.

By the way, that's most of life – you're partially right and partially wrong. And a lot of what you're talking about is the situation in which it's like, you're right on some stuff and I'm right on some stuff. And sometimes we have factual disagreements or sometimes just definitional disagreements.

In the incredibly unlikely position that you're 100% correct – you still benefit from freedom of speech because then you actually start to understand why you are right. That's really important

for our flawed human brains. You don't really get something until you're challenged in it, and you have to explain it yourself.

I'm left-of-center myself. If you watch people on campus have to explain why, for example, they believe in affirmative action, why they support it – partially [it's] because a lot of these people have not actually meaningfully had arguments with people they disagree with.

If they're not very good at defending their positions, they just come to something much more primitive – well, bad people disagree with it.

John Matze

That's the ad hominem argument, which I think festers on social media. It's become popular, I think, even more because of social media in general.

Highly confident people say something they know almost nothing about and [content] going absolutely viral because it makes people feel good is actually becoming the building blocks of discussion or debate now. Until people break away from that, we're not going to see much discussion on a lot of these topics that are fruitful.

Greg Lukianoff

In *Canceling of the American Mind*, one of the things that we spend a lot of time on, and I think it's some of the more fun chapters to read, are actually about what we call the rhetorical fortresses – the way that we actually are taught in higher education to insulate ourselves from having to adjust the substance of our opponent's arguments.

We start by talking about what we first call the obstacle course, which are the standard sort of logical fallacies that people engage in when they argue.

Then we go over to the minefield, which is more of the techniques that both the left and right use to sort of just discredit the speaker.

But then we get to what we call, on the right, the efficient rhetorical fortress. And then what we call on the left, the perfect rhetorical fortress. The perfect rhetorical fortress is just layer after layer after layer of excuses for why I don't actually need to listen to you.

Layer number one, and it's the same thing on the right, is just magically declaring someone as being, if you're on the left, a fascist or a right winger. Oh, you're conservative. I don't have to listen to you anymore. It doesn't matter if you are. You just have to say that they are. And that means you're disconnected.

John Matze

It's the implied outcome and meaning of that. It's like – this is what they stand for. Let's just attack their character, even if it's not true. Therefore, the discussion is over.

I wanted to also say – I hope I don't give off the impression that I'm particularly skewed [politically] one way or another. I don't describe myself as being political almost like on any political spectrum.

As long as we have free speech, freedom of privacy, all these kind of issues, that's what's important to me.

I don't know if you've seen what's happened in the past in my background, particularly with Parler and everything that's happened there. I get the presumptive assumption that I'm somehow right-leaning because I was building a platform that believed in free speech. Therefore, everything I say must be bad. So I personally very much understand the implied action of what you just described.

Greg Lukianoff

It's also the way a child would argue, essentially. You're a baddie and therefore people shouldn't listen to baddies.

It's unworthy of intelligent people but higher ed and K-12 do actually teach people to argue this way and that's just stage one of the perfect rhetorical fortress.

One of the more fun parts in that chapter is just taking people down what we call the demographic filter. People sometimes, on social media, get dismissed for being white or for being straight or for being cisgendered.

By the time you get down to the bottom of the demographic funnel, you've been able to eliminate maybe 99.1% of the entire population of the country and an even larger percentage of the rest of the world.

But here's the funny thing. If you are a non-white, transgender person and you have a wrong opinion, then you're especially evil. You have internalized transphobia. You have an internalized misogyny. You have internalized racism.

All of these things are there and we call them perfect because it's like, wow, there's there's literally no way around this.

John Matze

I don't want to give off the impression that it's just a left-leaning thing because people on the right boil people down to communism. 'Oh, I really like that I have a government health care plan,' 'Well everything you said is wrong now because you're a communist, you're a socialist' and, you know, whatever.

Greg Lukianoff

When we talk about the historical fortress, that's what we're talking about. It's like magically declaring someone left-wing and also kind of letting yourself off the hook to listen to journalists or other kinds of experts.

Particularly on the MAGA right we've definitely seen a lot of people that, you know, if you disagree with [former President Donald] Trump, then I don't have to listen to you anymore

John Matze

Yeah. 'If you don't share my views on him, then everything you say is evil.'

The nice thing about those arguments that you're describing, this rhetorical fortress, is it's super easy to justify with about anything. Yeah. So it's not a difficult way to justify your argument. And I think that's why it's so popular.

Greg Lukianoff

It's a lazy way to argue that we should never have taken seriously in the first place. Eventually we can stop taking it seriously at all, and we should. It will never get you to truth. It will actually actively waste your time and never get you to truth.

John Matze

It puts the person on defense instantly. So now they've got to defend themselves against a completely irrelevant allegation that has nothing to do with the substance of the argument. It's already lost. The whole thing is lost.

John Matze

When it comes to free speech online – do you at FIRE also talk about what's going on online, with online culture wars and censorship?

Greg Lukianoff

Absolutely. One of the things where I was kind of embarrassed for my fellow First Amendment lawyers was – there's a case called [Murthy v. Missouri](#), but it was once called Missouri v. Biden – in which the question was whether or not there was any limit to how much the government can browbeat social media companies to engage in censorship that the government itself would be forbidden from engaging in under the First Amendment.

The sensible answer is: of course, there would have to be! You can't have the government leaning on private actors to do their dirty work for them. That's a big, major problem.

It was a messy opinion [at the district court level], the way it came down. It was probably too broad.

But you ended up having people who were otherwise supposed to be First Amendment defenders saying, well, this really limits the free speech right of the government to pressure social media companies to engage in censorship.

John Matze

I could be completely stepping in a pile of dog dirt right now by saying this, but I don't think the government has free speech rights compared to that of the citizens.

Greg Lukianoff

There's debate about whether or not the government is entitled to some viewpoint. There's debate on what that actually means.

But do they have free speech rights to pressure groups to be censors in their stead? No. You got to do some line drawing. ‘

The CIA telling Twitter, by the way, we're actually seeing a big uptick in actual terrorist coordination using your website. Fine. You can absolutely tell them that.

John Matze

I can tell you from firsthand experience, they do do that.

Greg Lukianoff

But if what you're saying is like ... we want people to take the vaccines and there are people questioning the safety of the vaccines. You better go kick them off your website or else you'll be in some kind of trouble or imply that you'll be in some kind of trouble.

John Matze

You don't need to even say a consequence when the FBI or the government, anybody from a government agency, calls and says, hey, would you look into this? You know that the expectation is, look into this or you're going to be in a congressional hearing. Look into this or, you know, we're going to investigate you for something irrelevant.

The threat doesn't need to be said because it's automatically applied the minute they contact you.

Greg Lukianoff

The Murthy case, you know, it's going in front of the Supreme Court and – FIRE really believes that we can get some clarity on what's called, euphemistically, “government jawboning.” If that's okay. And we think it's not.

John Matze

Social media has become overly cautious, to the point where conversations are heavily monitored, curated and censored, especially when it comes to their “algorithms for you.”

It's all very heavily curated and censored and monitored because I think a lot of it has to do with this implied government risk.

Greg Lukianoff

I feel like I've seen some improvement on what used to be known as Twitter over the past couple years.

Not that it's perfect or anything but certainly you know other just the utter hostility directed at x even just from initially mentioning the idea that it was going to be friendlier to [the ideals of] freedom of speech.

John Matze

I think X gets a lot of...they have a lot of bad publicity because they claimed to want to defend free speech, and that's scary. I think everybody universally should have supported them for that.

Granted, I don't think X is a free speech platform by any means, but at least saying it should be something that the world supports.

Greg Lukianoff

Even saying it was greeted with such horror. It's like the forces that we've been fighting on campuses are everywhere now.

People were raised just assuming that free speech is the argument of the bully, the bigot and the robber baron. And I was having to explain...I know that you've been taught that free speech is the bad guy's argument, but – explaining – that if the bully and the bigot have 51% of the vote in a democracy, they can silence [the minority] unless you have a First Amendment or freedom of speech. You only need freedom of speech to protect minority viewpoints.

The wealthy and powerful historically have done just fine because they're wealthy and powerful, democracy or not.

John Matze

It's also worth mentioning, too, that free speech is there to protect minority groups. Many minority groups are worthy of fighting for, and many of them are, well, probably not. That's everyone's own opinion.

If you don't like something someone's saying, the answer is not censorship. It's more speech.

Greg Lukianoff

That's believing in human freedom. The other alternative is the idea that power should make these decisions.

John Matze

"I'm just going to screw my head off, stick it in a jar over there. They can make decisions for me." That's totally contrarian with what I would be accepting.

Greg Lukianoff

Growing up, people would say truisms. "Since the dawn of time, man has longed to be free." Let's clarify a couple of things here.

One, they've had to long to be free because there were some other human beings repressing them and oppressing them. The other is there were probably people who were kind of like, oh, you know, I'd rather have someone else make my decisions for me.

Freedom is fragile. If you take away speech, you're taking away the weight of every other right that comes out of that.

John Matze

When we talked earlier, we spoke about the idea that there's this hidden, government-implied pressure to censor [content] online for social media companies. Doesn't that make sense during the McCarthy era as well?

This implied pressure – that the government isn't a fan of communism, therefore it's [a popular sentiment], therefore – get rid of these professors.

Greg Lukianoff

Sometimes we pat ourselves on the back by not taking previous historical moments very seriously. You've got to put yourself into the shoes of the people who are around at the time.

After World War II we became aware of the fact that American citizens and British citizens actually helped give someone – who had arguably murdered more people than even Hitler – the bomb. And people freaked out because it actually turned out there were spies in the United States.

This is all extremely well established now. You would be pretty freaked out under those circumstances too.

We haven't been in a national security crisis since 2014. We're not in a situation where we think that it's not justified under the idea that these are people who are helping, you know, give super Hitler the bomb.

We're still seeing more people getting canceled over smaller and smaller slights.

John Matze

Yeah, it's terrifying. It's still not excusable, no matter how much you're in fear – to jeopardize your morality and the entire basis of your country.

COVID was a good example of that, when we could see that a lot of people were really happy to give up their freedoms to feel safe. And then the people they were giving their freedoms to were wishy-washy and unclear of what the actual answer was week after week.

If [people] would have stuck to their underlying principles of respecting people's rights and freedoms, I think we would have been better off.

Greg Lukianoff

To be clear, it doesn't mean that nothing bad happened during McCarthyism. I absolutely think a lot of innocent people really, really suffered under it.

Understanding the historical era in which things happen helps us understand how weird the precedent is even more.

John Matze

This leads us into an election year. Although I'll have to say, I think this year is not one that a majority of Americans are really kind of happy with their choices for. But all of these attack strategies to bury the other person in debate and discourse, that seems to be prevalent and it's going to continue to be prevalent this year. Do you have any thoughts on what's coming up?

Greg Lukianoff

It's going to be a rough year. I think no matter how the election goes it's going to be a rough, ugly year, and I think cancel culture will probably get worse.

I think the situation on campus is going to get worse. It's an unstable geopolitical moment as well and I think that the likelihood of things just ending in Gaza without some additional flare-up happening somewhere in the world is low

I get people saying 'well, Mr. First Amendment guy, this is--' and I get this both from the right and the left – 'This is all stakes. This is really serious. And at times like this, we can't afford your First Amendment.'

No. No. No. When the political sides are at each other's throats, the rules of the game become more important, not less important.

More people are going to hate FIRE and more people are going to need FIRE.

John Matze

'This is the most important one ever' – both of these candidates have been president before. I think we can safely say neither one has completely destroyed the country as we know it and we're all still alive. So maybe it's not -the- most important thing, ever, the world has ever seen. Maybe we can tone that down.

Greg Lukianoff

I unfortunately made the mistake of reading *The Fourth Turning is Coming* by Neil Howe. I thought it was going to be some kind of mystical read on history about historical cycles. I read it and it was predicting something revolutionary, like right around now, something kind of big beginning around 2008.

It got so many things right that it was kind of creepy. It was based on theories of historical cycles going back to the ancient Romans and based on pretty sound ideas.

[For example], parenting strategies tend to change and they follow a somewhat predictable format. You have protection of kids, which is normal. Over-protection of kids. Then hyper over-protection of kids. Then neglect.

Spiritual cycles that tend to repeat major catastrophes, cycles that repeat on an 80-to-a hundred year basis. We might be overdue for a big change and nobody knows what that's actually going to look like.

So I'm a little nervous going into this, going into the next couple of years.

John Matze

I'm nervous too.

I think that the most important thing we could really do right now is have somebody who wants to take the conversation from like, up here, and bring it down a little bit. Let's turn the burner down a bit and bring the country to a point where we can talk to each other again. That, for me, would be my number one most important issue and I don't see a candidate out there who's capable of that.

I also unfortunately don't see a social media landscape that's incentivizing any of it. And so much of our politics today is driven by social media.

Did you happen to remember where [current generations are in] that parenting cycle, by the way? Because that seemed interesting to me. What did it say about the parenting cycles?

Greg Lukianoff

It nailed Gen X as being the children of neglect. It was like, yep, pretty much. [Gen-X] think of ourselves as tough and resilient for all these, you know, not necessarily positive reasons. We and boomers tend to, therefore, be overprotective [as parents].

Now, I have a six- and an eight-year-old. My instincts are over-protection. I have to be reminded to keep my own anxiety under check and that I don't hobble the kids. And I do try to live that. But I always try to be clear. I don't find that easy. So we're definitely in an overprotected stage. Actually, sorry, hyper overprotected-stage when it comes to gender.

John Matze

And what comes after hyper over-protection?

Greg Lukianoff

It goes back to just sort of like normal protected.

There's a new documentary of *Coddling of the American Mind* that came out that I was heavily involved in. I am glad I got to get this line out which is like, listen, I don't recommend my childhood to anyone.

Rather than just two Gen-Xers – me and John Haight – arguing that we're teaching young people the mental habits of anxious and depressed people, it [documents] minority students themselves saying, 'yeah no I was a pretty happy person, and then I got to college and they tell me that everyone's against me and that if people say things that hurt my feelings, I'm going to be permanently damaged by them. It made me paranoid, it made me sad, it made me feel powerless, and it absolutely devastated my mental health.'

I'm really proud of how it came out. It's on Substack in part because a lot of the platforms were too scared of it. I really recommend it. I'm very proud of the final product. I think it's a very compassionate film.

John Matze

Is there anything that we should, that we should know about from your perspective?

Greg Lukianoff

The fact that FIRE is really becoming the nation's premier defender of freedom of speech is something that I would really want [people] to know about, because we need your help.

And we need people who aren't the 'free speech for me, but not for thee' type. The ones who are kind of like, you know what? If someone thinks something I hate, they have every right to that just as much as I do. And by the way, it's actually probably pretty useful for me to know that, what they actually think, rather than taking it on the basis of what the New York Times tells me this person actually thinks.

So we would love your support at FIRE. We'd love you to check out *The Coddling the American Mind*. And of course, *The Canceling the American Mind*, my book with Ricky Schlott.

John Matze

It's more important now than ever that people are taking the topic of free speech – real free speech – seriously. It's being used so much, I think, today to justify different political agendas.

Freedom of speech is something everybody should universally respect and enjoy. It's kind of the foundation of our country. And, you know, Greg Lukianoff and the team at FIRE, I think are an excellent place that we can focus our energy on to ensure that we're protecting free speech for the most people where it matters.