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not up for debate? no-platforming and the censorship of 'tipping' issues

Wendy Xin

No-platforming refers to the practice of preventing, or attempting to prevent, an individual (or organisation) from using a platform to speak. This article examines no-platforming in the context of universities, focusing on epistemic considerations. Analysing the debate surrounding no-platforming in relation to whether an issue is epistemically settled, I draw attention to pro tanto epistemic considerations for no-platforming when an issue is epistemically unsettled, and pro tanto epistemic considerations against no-platforming when an issue is epistemically settled. In doing so, I urge discussions on the epistemic value/disvalue of no-platforming to go beyond debating whether an issue is epistemically settled, and to take into account the nuanced ways that no-platforming can promote or hinder various epistemic goals.

Keywords: free speech, higher education, no-platforming, social epistemology

Introduction

No-platforming generally refers to the practice of preventing, or attempting to prevent, an individual (or organisation) from using a platform to speak.[1] In the context of universities, platforms typically include academic talks, lectures, and seminars. Speakers who are targeted by no-platforming can hold a wide range of views. In the United States in the 1950s, communists were banned from speaking on campus (University of North Carolina Libraries, 2026). In more recent years, no-platforming has focused on issues like (alleged) racism, homophobia, and transphobia—with the last perhaps attracting the most public attention. In 2015, more than 3,000 people signed a petition urging Cardiff University to cancel Germaine Greer's lecture (Morris, 2015). In 2023, protestors sought to disrupt a talk by Kathleen Stock at Oxford Union (Dunkley et al., 2023). Both speakers were primarily targeted because of their refusal to include trans women within the category of women.

Much of the debate surrounding no-platforming has focused on moral considerations, especially on the (potential) harm that certain views can have on vulnerable or marginalised individuals. Despite the importance of such considerations, in this article, I will focus on epistemic reasons for/against no-platforming. Very roughly, we have an epistemic reason to support no-platforming if doing so promotes the pursuit of truth and the acquisition of knowledge. We have an epistemic reason against no-platforming if it impedes these goals. The kind of epistemic reasons I will provide are *pro tanto* ones. A *pro tanto* (meaning *to that extent*) reason for A is one that supports A to a certain extent, and can be *overridden* by other, strong, reasons. In the context of no-platforming, the epistemic reasons I will provide count in favour or against no-platforming, but they are not decisive: that can be overridden by other, stronger considerations.

I will focus on two widely held assumptions on no-platforming in relation to whether an issue is epistemically settled—that is, whether only one side of the debate has the support of empirical evidence and cogent arguments (Yacek, 2018). The assumptions are: (1) If an issue is epistemically settled, this is an *overriding* epistemic reason for no-platforming, since it requires no further debate; (2) If an issue is epistemically unsettled, this is an *overriding* epistemic reason against no-platforming, since the issue requires further debate.

While I do not aim to conclusively reject the two assumptions, I wish to draw attention to *pro tanto* epistemic considerations that might provide us with resources for doing so. Even when an issue is epistemically settled, we still have *pro tanto* epistemic reasons against no-platforming. Even when an issue is epistemically unsettled, we still have *pro tanto* epistemic reasons to support no-platforming. In either case, my aim is not to determine whether no-platforming is epistemically justified, all things considered. Rather, I wish to show that these *pro tanto* reasons ought to be considered when we make such decisions. In doing so, I urge discussions on the epistemic value/disvalue of no-platforming to go beyond debating on whether an issue is epistemically settled, and to take into account the nuanced ways that no-platforming can promote or hinder various epistemic goals.

"Tipping" Issues

One common justification for no-platforming is that certain issues are not up for debate. For example, protesters and activists often claim that the question of whether trans women are women is simply not up for debate. In the Harvard student newspaper, E. Matteo Diaz (2024) wrote: "To cast trans rights as a 'debate' suggests that the opinions of all parties—however ignorant of the reality of trans existence—are equally deserving of merit and consideration" (para. 5). Alexandra, a trans protestor at Stock's talk, said it "hurt" that students were "debating on questions like whether my fundamental rights are worth protecting" (Dunkley et al., 2023, n.p.).

One can understand such a stance in two ways. First, an issue is not *up for debate* for moral reasons. As Diaz (2024) argues, casting trans rights as a "debate" implies that "the right answer may indeed be denying us our rights and refusing to let us participate in society as our complete, authentic selves" (para. 5). Second, an issue is not *up for debate* for epistemic reasons. An issue is epistemically settled when only one side of the debate has the support of empirical evidence and cogent arguments (Yacek, 2018).[2] For some, because questions like whether trans women are women are epistemically settled, we should not debate about them further. For example, in an article on TransActual UK, Jeremiah Stephenson compares those campaigning against trans rights with those advocating for the Flat Earth Theory. Stephenson (2020) suggests that "there are no new ideas being suggested and tested, no scrutiny of evidence, nothing edifying or educational being added to public knowledge and attitudes" (para. 1) in the debate around trans rights.

While the moral reasons that an issue is not "up for debate" are certainly important, in this article, I will primarily focus on the epistemic reasons. Note that one may think that an issue is epistemically settled even when it is socially unsettled and controversial. For example, if a substantial number of people in our society are brainwashed into believing the Flat Earth theory, the question of the shape of the Earth remains epistemically settled due to overwhelming scientific evidence. Objections to no-platforming arise as some disagree that questions like whether trans women are women are epistemically settled. For example, Judith Suissa and Alice Sullivan (2021) argue that the question of "what a woman is" has not been settled, as settling it would require "a scientific revolution [to have] occurred, over-turning millennia of evolutionary data and a wealth of empirical evidence for

the physical and social relevance of biological sex" (p. 72). They further argue that the "no debate" approach silences debate on the question and therefore threatens academic freedom (pp. 60-63).

There are thus two kinds of disagreement on the question of whether trans women are women. First, there is a disagreement on how to answer the question itself. Second, there is disagreement around the nature of the question, about whether it is epistemically settled. Note that agreement on the first debate does not necessarily imply agreement on the second. Those who agree that trans women are women may nonetheless think that the question is still not settled. In this sense, this is what Diane Hess (2009) terms a "tipping issue" in education, as it vacillates between the status as an open question ("for which we want students to engage in deliberating multiple and competing answers") and a closed question ("for which we want students to build and believe a particular answer") (p. 125). We can think of other *tipping* issues that vacillate between being open and closed, such as the moral status of abortion and the legitimacy of same sex marriage.[3] Such debates are often polarising precisely because of their *tipping* nature. For those who think they are closed questions, people who support debates on these questions are bigoted, just as it is bigoted to support debates about the morality of slavery (even when one is against slavery). For those who think they are open questions, people who want to shut down these debates are close-minded, just as it is close-minded to shut down a debate on the trolley problem.

Against this background, the aim of this article is relatively modest. I do not wish to provide an answer to whether certain "tipping" issues are in fact unsettled/open or settled/closed. Instead, I will examine the normative (epistemic, in particular) implications that follow from each stance. At first glance, two assumptions seem intuitive: (1) If an issue is epistemically settled, this is an *overriding* epistemic reason for no-platforming, since it requires no further debate; (2) If an issue is epistemically unsettled, this is an *overriding* epistemic reason against no-platforming, since the issue requires further debate. In what follows, I wish to draw attention to *pro tanto* epistemic considerations that might provide us resources for challenging these two assumptions.

Epistemically Unsettled Issues

When an issue is epistemically unsettled, there are good epistemic reasons for allowing diverse opinions to be expressed and hearing all sides of a debate. As John Stuart Mill (2011) famously argues, "only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a chance of fair-play to all sides of the truth" (p. 65). In the context of academia, diversity of opinions has been widely considered epistemically beneficial for minimising bias toward a certain side of a debate (Longino, 1990; Haidt, 2020). This seems especially important when it comes to politically polarising issues, where debates on no-platforming often arise. As several studies have shown, our reasoning tends to be ideologically motivated: we tend to process information in a way that favours our existing ideological values or beliefs, rather than seeking accuracy (Kahan, 2013; Bolsen et al., 2014; Ludwig & Sommer, 2024). These considerations provide us with good reasons to oppose no-platforming, since allowing diverse viewpoints to be expressed within universities is conducive to our collective pursuit of truth.

To allow diverse viewpoints to be expressed in debates, individuals from different backgrounds and social groups need to participate in them. As many feminist epistemologists have emphasised, our knowledge is situated (Hekman, 1997; Harding, 2016). That is, "social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content" (Wylie, 2003, p.

31). This is especially the case when we consider differences in social power: marginalised individuals often possess knowledge that those in dominant social groups are ignorant of (Alcoff, 2007). One might suggest that these viewpoints can still be included in a debate if they can be represented by other individuals. However, note that our attempts to re-create views that we oppose, especially on politically polarising issues, are likely to distort them (Peters & Nottelmann, 2021). It follows that we cannot have genuinely diverse viewpoints in a debate if individuals from certain social groups do not participate in the debate.

Nonetheless, debates on issues like trans rights may risk silencing individuals from certain social groups.[4] I have noted elsewhere that hate speech can silence its target groups (Xin, 2024). Yet even when certain speech does not constitute hate speech, it can still contribute to the stigma and discrimination of certain social groups. For example, as Jennifer Saul (2020) argues, "an absolute key component" of the marginalisation and discrimination faced by trans women is "the denial of trans women's identity as women" (section 2; see also Kapusta, 2016). This remains the case even if such denial is not regarded as hate speech. Stigma and discrimination can, in turn, silence individuals like trans women in at least two senses. [5]

First, one is silenced in a locutionary sense when one is prevented from uttering certain words (West, 2016). Experiences of discrimination can often prevent one from expressing certain views. For example, in a national survey in the UK, "59% of trans women and 56% of trans men who responded to the survey said they had avoided expressing their gender identity for fear of a negative reaction from others" (Government Equalities Office, 2018). Following this, it is reasonable to expect that trans individuals may also feel reluctant to express certain views on issues related to gender identity. Within universities, both staff and students may experience discrimination on grounds such as gender, race, and disability (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024; Yang & Stolzenberg, 2025; Best, 2025). Experiences of discrimination may, in turn, prevent individuals from expressing certain views or participating in certain debates within universities. Since certain viewpoints within a debate, such as the denial of trans women's identity as women, contribute to stigma and discrimination, we seem to face a dilemma: by allowing all sides of a debate to speak up, we risk silencing one side of the debate.

Second, one is silenced in a perlocutionary sense when one is deprived of the ability "to use words to achieve certain effects" (West, 2016, p. 249). This includes instances where a speaker fails to persuade the audience as a result of testimonial injustice, "wherein a speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer's part" (Fricker, 2007, p. 9). If certain speakers in a debate are subject to testimonial injustice, the epistemic benefits of diverse viewpoints will likely be significantly diminished. That is, if we are already prejudiced against certain speakers, being exposed to their views may not effectively minimise our bias against these views. Discrimination and stigma against certain social groups often give rise to testimonial injustice. For example, as Fricker and Jenkins (2017) suggest in relation to trans experiences:

> the positioning of trans people as by definition experiencing a psychiatric disorder—"gender identity disorder"—made them vulnerable to having their reports of their own experience dismissed on the spurious grounds that mental health problems made them unreliable or even deceptive. (p. 272)

Since certain views in a debate can contribute to stigma and discrimination, they can also contribute to testimonial injustice against certain speakers. We again face a dilemma: by hearing all sides of

the debate, we risk not giving one side of the debate its due credibility.

Taken together, we have conflicting epistemic reasons both for and against no-platforming when we consider the issues at stake to be epistemically unsettled. Even though it is important to consider diverse viewpoints on these issues, such importance does not only provide us with reasons to oppose no-platforming. Rather, the importance of diverse viewpoints also provides us reason to support no-platforming to allow certain individuals to speak up, and for their views to be taken seriously. While these considerations seem to lead us to a dilemma, how we ought to proceed depends on factors like the extent of stigma and discrimination affecting certain social groups, and how likely certain views in a debate will contribute to them. It is also important to note that different kinds of platforms may carry different epistemic risks: some platforms, such as carefully moderated discussions, may be less likely than others to silence marginalised voices.

Epistemically Settled Issues

When an issue is epistemically settled, there are good epistemic reasons to support no-platforming. One reason to do so is to avoid providing misleading higher-order evidence. As Levy (2019) argues:

Provision of a platform provides higher-order evidence that the view being argued for is worth taking seriously. In refusing to offer bad views a platform, we therefore withhold misleading evidence, and to that extent, we treat the audience with the respect due to autonomous agents. (p. 487)

In epistemically settled issues, it is relatively clear that one side of the debate offers "bad views". Platforming such views may thus provide misleading evidence that they are worth taking seriously. Relatedly, another reason to support no-platforming involves preserving disciplinary standards. As Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) argue: "It is permissible for disciplinary gatekeepers to exclude cranks and shills from valuable communicative platforms in academic contexts, because effective teaching and research requires that communicative privileges be given to some and not others, based on people's disciplinary competence" (p. 196). When an issue is epistemically settled, it is, according to Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), a relatively "easy case": since certain views on the issue can be deemed indefensible, speakers who hold these views are not credible, and should not be provided with a platform (p. 200).

While one may reject these views by, for example, highlighting the fallibility of academic consensus and the epistemic benefits of debate even on epistemically settled issues, here I wish to draw attention to a different epistemic consideration against no-platforming in such cases. As mentioned in Section 1, an epistemically settled issue might nonetheless be socially unsettled. For example, even when there is scientific consensus and overwhelming scientific evidence that anthropogenic climate change is real, there might still be widespread debates and scepticism in a society about it. Here, it might seem especially important to support the no-platforming of climate change sceptics to avoid providing misleading higher-order evidence that their views are worth considering. Yet, we also need to consider what evidence is provided by no-platforming such speakers. While no-platforming might, in some cases, provide evidence that the speakers' views are not worth considering, it can also induce public distrust in higher education and academia. As Peters and Nottelmann (2021) note, no-platforming can feed into "lay people's suspicion that non-epistemic reasons such as political convictions guide academic theory-formation, -testing, and -acceptance" (p. 7240). This kind of scepticism can be "highly epistemically pernicious", as it leads

to a distrust in academic research and higher education (Peters & Nottelmann, 2021, p. 7240).

While empirical evidence on the direct effects of no-platforming is limited, scepticism toward academia is increasingly common in many countries (Turner, 2025; Gallup Inc., 2024). A perceived antagonism between *common sense* and the academic elite is an important contributing factor (Cologna et al., 2025). This antagonism has multiple sources, including politicians' portrayals of universities as sites of *woke* and biased indoctrination (Stanley, 2025). We might reasonably worry that refusing to engage with bad views can further exacerbate the perceived antagonism, as such refusals may be interpreted as expressions of elitist disdain toward the masses. This risk is especially salient in politically polarising issues (that are nonetheless epistemically settled), where our reasoning can often be ideologically motivated. When a speaker whose views align with one's existing ideological beliefs is subject to no-platforming, one might be more inclined to distrust universities instead of distrusting the speaker. These considerations provide a *pro tanto* epistemic reason against no-platforming: the potential epistemic harm lies in compromising the public knowledge and reasonable trust in academia on critical issues such as climate change.[6]

While it is true that governments and media are responsible for restoring trust in academic research and higher education, universities also bear such a responsibility. For universities, the duty in relation to knowledge goes beyond pursuing and disseminating knowledge internally through research and teaching. There is also an external duty for universities, as public institutions, to steer the public toward certain truths, especially those that are important for democracy. The former, internal task may compel us to support no-platforming to preserve disciplinary standards. The latter, external task, however, is sometimes better fulfilled by engaging with *bad* views and providing reasoned arguments against them, rather than refusing to engage with them altogether. Here, it is again important to consider the risk of distorting opposing views when attempting to re-create them. Such a risk means it often does not suffice to engage with bad views without engaging with individuals who hold such views, if we wish to provide our best arguments against these views (instead of reconstructed straw-person versions). At the same time, engagement should not be equated with unrestricted or "free and open" debate. As Kitcher (2011) argues, when audiences lack the capacity to assess technical claims or to identify reliable experts, such debates may undermine trust in genuine expertise. For this reason, careful framing and moderation may be required when engaging with bad views.

When an issue is epistemically settled, there are good epistemic reasons to support and oppose no-platforming. This is because such an issue might remain socially unsettled. If our goal is to eventually settle these issues socially, we need to consider our strategies carefully. In an ideal society where there is sufficient public trust in universities, no-platforming might indeed send the right message that certain views are not worth taking seriously. However, this is not the kind of society that many of us find ourselves in. In these non-ideal cases, for universities to regain public trust and to steer the public toward truth, we have reasons to be cautious against no-platforming. Attending to these non-ideal realities is, I suggest, essential for making progress toward the very ideal to which no-platforming is sometimes thought to contribute.

Conclusions

In this article, I have focused on a particular kind of argument—whether an issue is epistemically settled or unsettled—that is often deployed to support/oppose no-platforming. I have drawn attention to epistemic considerations that might enable us to challenge this kind of argument.

Specifically, when an issue is epistemically settled, there are still *pro tanto* epistemic reasons to oppose no-platforming, because such an issue might nonetheless remain socially unsettled. When an issue is epistemically unsettled, there are *pro tanto* epistemic reasons to support no-platforming, considering that one side of the debate might silence certain marginalised individuals. In either case, I have not argued conclusively for or against no-platforming. Rather, I have shown that discussions about its epistemic value or disvalue need to move beyond the question of whether an issue is epistemically settled, taking a wider range of epistemic considerations into account.

These insights also have important implications for how we engage with people who do not share our views on no-platforming. No-platforming on "tipping issues" can be particularly polarising, partly because we tend to think that disagreement on no-platforming implies disagreement on whether certain issues are epistemically settled. However, as I have shown, this is not necessarily the case. Two individuals who disagree on no-platforming might have more in common than they initially assume: they may both agree that the issue at stake is epistemically settled (or unsettled). This, I hope, can incline us to hear more about the opponent's case instead of quickly dismissing them as bigoted or close-minded.

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Wendy Xin

Wendy Xin received her PhD in Philosophy from the University of Sydney in 2025. Her research interests include the role of emotions in environmental ethics, social epistemology (especially on hate speech and misinformation), and environmental bioethics.

1. It is important to distinguish between efforts to cancel a speech and the act of protest itself. Not all acts of protest aim to cancel a speech; rather, some may only consider their demonstrations as a form of counter-speech, a way to express dissent without seeking to shut down the opposing views. Nevertheless, it is also clear that, in many instances, protestors do aim to prevent such speeches from taking place altogether.
2. One important question is who gets to decide whether an issue is epistemically settled or not. For example, it seems relatively uncontroversial to say that scientists should decide whether the existence of anthropogenic climate change is a settled issue. This becomes more complicated when we consider moral and political questions like whether abortion is morally permissible. It is less straightforward to determine who has the authority to decide whether they are epistemically settled. For my argument here, it suffices to note that some moral and political questions are epistemically settled, such as the immorality of slavery.

3. One might question whether we can epistemically settle normative issues in the same sense as how we settle empirical issues like the shape of the Earth. While it might be the case that the standards for "being epistemically settled" are different in empirical and normative cases, I think we should still accept that *at least som*e normative issues can be epistemically settled in the sense that only one side of them are supported by cogent normative arguments.
4. It is worth noting that this concern may apply only to certain types of debates. For example, debates about whether the Earth is flat likely do not risk silencing particular social groups—at least not in the sense that I am discussing here.
5. Note that there are also moral reasons to support no-platforming if it contributes to stigma, discrimination, and in turn, silencing. My focus below, however, is on epistemic reasons—on whether no-platforming is conducive to the collective pursuit of knowledge.
6. Note that there are also relevant moral and political considerations here. While public knowledge is a kind of epistemic good in itself, it can also be critical for democracy (see, for example: Kitcher, 2011).