

Open Letter: Let's free our thinking from the stranglehold

(www.idw-europe.org, engl. version)

Cancel, delete, censor: for some years now a negative spirit has been spreading, putting the free exchange of ideas in a stranglehold and undermining the principles of free speech. The opinion corridor is narrowing, branches of knowledge are being cut off, public and cultural figures are being stigmatized and made invisible.

We are currently experiencing the victory of opinions over facts. It's not the better argument that counts, but the correct attitude one adopts in order show off one's morals. Tribalism and herd mentality are spreading. Thinking in terms of identities and group affiliations often sets the tone of debates - and thus prevents real discussions, genuine encounters and the acquisition of knowledge. Vociferous minorities and activists are increasingly determining which topics are allowed to be discussed - and even if there is a discussion at all. What began at universities and educational institutions has now reached art, culture, comedy and the editorial board.

Increasingly, the foundation for democracy itself is threatened. Free access to open and public debate is essential for all artistic, scientific, and journalistic work. It is also the principle by which every citizen acquires the ability to make judgements and wield influence. Without free debate and free speech, democracy cannot function properly. How do we want to deal with questions of public interest in the future? Inhibited and constrained - or free?

The deliberate defamation of intellectuals, artists, authors, and anyone else who deviates from the prevailing public opinion is unacceptable. Free speech and free access to information – the prerequisites for genuine artistic expression and the pursuit of scientific knowledge - are rights and not privileges. They can neither be given to like-minded people nor taken away from dissenting voices by a forceful and opinionated group. Where these forceful groups stand politically is ultimately irrelevant. It does not matter whether they are religiously, ideologically or morally motivated - an attack on democracy is an attack on democracy.

We call on all organizers, producers, and platform operators to withstand the pressure and refuse to let loud activists decide whether events take place or not.

We express our solidarity with those who have been disinvited, deplatformed, censored, or otherwise rendered invisible. We do not express our solidarity because we share their opinions. We may even outright oppose their opinions. We do this because we need to hear their opinions in order to form our own.

We want to end the unfortunate attribution of guilt by association. Without guilt by association, a culture of fear is not possible. Merely being in contact with other people does not imply complicity. The use of a shared platform or stage does not change the fact that everyone speaks for themselves and is responsible for what they say.

The signatories of this appeal also only speak for themselves. Perhaps nothing unites us but a shared longing for engaging and mutually enlightening conversations as well as for diverse cultural offerings, whatever each and every one of us may understand by that.