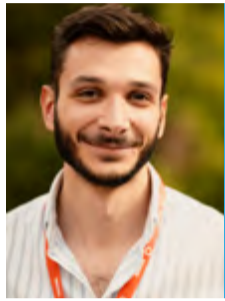


“Is Political Correctness Essential in Healthy Media Narratives and Political Discourse”

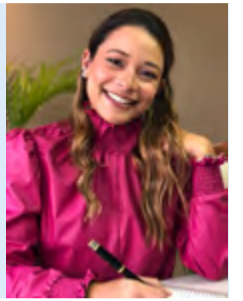


YES 63%*

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Look around! In today's world, misunderstandings, miscommunications, and conflicts have become alarmingly common. We barely adapt to new socio-political contexts before they change again, challenging us to stay equipped and responsive. It's true that we live in “liquid” times of uncertainty: sociopolitical upheavals shake the foundations of our societies, armed conflicts and their devastating consequences turn people from different sides into perceived enemies, the excessive and mindless consumption of media shapes our perceptions, often in divisive ways.

In these turbulent times, we must ask ourselves: how can we handle these complexities without harming and/or exacerbating existing disadvantages? The answer lies in political correctness, which is far more than a set of rules to avoid offense. It is a critical tool which prevents real harm and addresses profound disadvantages that marginalized groups face nowadays. Political correctness is about using language and behavior to ensure that our interactions do not harm our fellows or deepen existing divides. Take the example of racial minorities who face frequent microaggressions. Comments based on stereotypes and prejudices such as “You don't sound Asian!” or “Where are you really from?” are less overt forms of hate speech which, over time, contribute to hostile environments, impacting their mental health, social integration, etc. The road to violence is lined by what doesn't appear to be violent.

Our perception of reality is shaped by the language we use. Language is not passive; it actively molds our thoughts, directs our actions, and defines our interactions with the world. Imagine this: you're a member of a marginalized community constantly faced with derogatory terms and stereotypes. Consider the term “gypsy,” and the connotations it might carry. Its usage (including extensions such as ‘gyped’) has caused the Romani community much harm, to the extent that it is recognized as a slur.

Without political correctness in media narrative and political discourse, language can exacerbate disadvantages, fuel discrimination, and increase inequality. Its presence, therefore, ensures that everyone is treated with respect and dignity. This is not just an abstract concept; it has real consequences, as acknowledged by the American Psychological Association, in establishing an Inclusive Language Guide.

We live in a postmodern world, known for deconstructing overarching stories that claim to explain all aspects of reality (dominant metanarratives). In this context, political correctness becomes a way to break down the harmful language and practices which supported these dominant narratives. For instance, media narratives have traditionally framed immigration in a negative light, emphasizing themes of crime, economic burden, and cultural threat. Use of language such as ‘drain’ or ‘burden’ in political discourse sustains existing power dynamics and further ostracizes already marginalized communities. Therefore, political correctness is necessary as it promotes language and practices that respect and accurately represent the experiences of immigrants (and other groups). It promotes movement away from singularly focused narratives towards more inclusive narratives which also highlight the contributions of immigrants, recognize their struggles, and emphasize the value of diversity.

Along with this, we know that postmodernism challenges the idea of ‘objective truth’. What we consider to be true is often shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. This brings us to the importance of multiple viewpoints and voices, particularly those that have been marginalized. Since political correctness promotes inclusivity and respect towards diversity, it can be seen to ensure these perspectives are acknowledged and respected accordingly.

Great minds like I. Kant and M. Nussbaum assert that human life and dignity are of utmost importance, irrespective of an individual's background. When media narratives and political discourse fail to uphold political correctness, they undermine the dignity and respect of marginalized groups. Without political correctness, these individuals are continuously devalued. Therefore, this is not just a matter of polite language, but a moral imperative rooted in the fundamental respect for all humanity.

We know how to identify harm and assign responsibility. However, this paradigm collapses when we consider a world without political correctness. In such a world, no one would be held accountable for the harm and discrimination they propagate. So, just ask yourself: do you really want to live in such a world?

Political correctness tends to be portrayed as a positive virtue; but do you realize that it can also be used to protect, legitimize, and perpetuate biased narratives?

We all have biases, that come from our nationality, culture, academic background, professional occupation, life experiences, and so on. Political and media communications are produced by human beings, therefore, the biases of the producer (or the publisher) are reflected in the pieces. Even if they are generated with AI, AI tools, such as ChatGPT, also have biases themselves. So it is doubtful that you will ever read or watch a political or media narrative that is bias-free.

The existence of bias, per se, is not a problem. The problem is when the “political correctness” discourse is used to sustain the standard that a certain narrative is “neutral”, when, in fact, it is biased, just like any other narrative.

“Neutrality”...is there such a thing when it comes to media and politics?

I will offer you a very clear – and polemic – example to illustrate my point. Let's say that the two following headlines were used by two different news portals to communicate the same fact:

News portal A: “Israeli soldiers kill 19 children in Gaza”

News portal B: “Missile aimed for Hamas leaves civilian casualties”

The “politically correct” crew could argue against headline A, sustaining that it would be politically incorrect to take a side in the conflict and assume that the deaths were meant by the Israeli soldiers. That side would argue that a “politically correct” approach would neutrally convey the information, without making any assumptions. Thus, they would advocate for the political correctness of headline B.

However, headline B is not neutral either. The emphasis on the missile – instead of the people who sent it – and the assumption (or simple acceptance) that the missile was really aimed at Hamas, also means taking a side. The reference to “civilian casualties”, instead of “deaths”, and the omission of the fact that those who died were children, is also a political choice.

My point here is not to defend headline A or B, but to demonstrate that both present a political agenda and convey biases, and there is no “neutral” message. Therefore, none of those narratives should be shielded under the “politically correct” discourse. They are subjected to judgment and criticism, and may be challenged by other arguments, fuelling the debates that make our society evolve. Attempts to kill such debates under the “politically correct” discourse lack any intellectual sophistication and are not protected by law either.

Now you might wonder: ok, but if there is no “politically correct” standard, how will we be able to communicate in a respectful way as a society?

In highly politicized environments, the law aims to be a fair moderator of what we can and cannot do. The right to freedom of opinion and expression is established under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the European Convention of Human Rights, among other international legal texts.

According to the established case law of the European Court of Human Rights, freedom of expression is one of the essential foundations of a democratic society, one of the primary conditions for its progress and for the development of each individual. It applies not only to “information” and “ideas” that are favorably received, regarded as inoffensive, or which leave one indifferent, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb – it implies pluralism, tolerance and openness, without which there is no “democratic society”.¹

The Court has emphasized that freedom of expression is subject to exceptions, but these must be interpreted narrowly, as the need to restrict it must be convincingly established. This provision leaves little room for restrictions on freedom of expression in two areas: political speech and matters of public interest. Among the legitimate reasons to limit the freedom of expression, the Court highlights hate speech, negationism and revisionism, threat to the democratic order...but guess what, political incorrectness is not among them.

Legal standards aside, if you are still very concerned about the “politically correct” standard, I ask you: shouldn't you be more concerned about what is actually happening in the real world to give rise to the discourses that trigger you so much? Coming back to the previous example, what is more important: the fact that 19 children died, or the headline that will be used to convey the information that 19 children died?

On a final note, I leave this thought here for our reflection: is it unfair that non-politically correct actions are portrayed in a non-politically correct way?

* These are the results of an online poll on this topic that was conducted using only the question above and not the articles in this column.

¹ Council of Europe. Department for the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Thematic factsheet: Freedom of Expression. April 2021.