

Outrage over Google memo is misplaced

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CNN —

Over the weekend, a Google employee wrote what has been described as a 10-page “manifesto against diversity.” Boiling down 10 pages into a short column, and then commenting on it, is impossible.

But, the long and the short of his opinion seems to be that women are underrepresented in tech because of psychological differences between women and men, not because of bias, and women are underrepresented in the top tiers of leadership because of their own preferences, not discrimination. Ultimately, he believes that “diversity” initiatives should focus more on ideological diversity, and less on immutable characteristics like race and gender.

Cue the outrage and applause machines – depending on which political tribe you belong to. Of course, the outrage machine is calling for him to be tracked down and fired. I take the opposite view, but not because I agree with him. In fact, I mostly disagree with him, though I think he makes some good arguments – but that is beside the point. I categorically oppose the notion that if you have an opinion that deviates too far from that which is considered to be “politically correct,” then the appropriate punishment is that you should lose your job – and preferably not be hired anywhere else, either.

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courtesy of the author

Some are tempted to call this a “First Amendment” issue. Let me be clear, it is not. The government is not involved, and thus this is not a violation of anyone’s constitutional rights. But, one of the pillars that holds up our First Amendment is the “marketplace of ideas” theory – that ideas should compete in the free market, and that through wide-open and robust debate, we will advance.



In ideology-driven authoritarian regimes, locking someone out of the labor market because you don't like their ideas is a common approach. Behind the Iron Curtain, for instance, if you weren't sufficiently Marxist, it didn't necessarily mean a trip to the gulag. You would just find that you were out of a job. Of course, the blowback against this Google employee is not top-down authoritarianism or orthodoxy enforced by the state. No, in America when you violate the PC code of conduct, a small cadre of people will dust off the outrage machine – and millions of people will fuel it.

The result of such a lynch-mob mentality fueled by intolerance for different points of view is twofold. First, it winnows out those who might disagree, making the cone of tolerance and ideological pluralism ever-more narrow. Second, it drives holders of minority viewpoints or people with differing ideas underground, and causes them to seek out and communicate only those who agree with them – which can push them to radicalization.

These results destroy our marketplace of ideas – replacing it with a melee of venom.

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Today, that melee is largely a left-spinning gyre – but let us not forget that the right does this, too. During the Red Scare and the McCarthy era, for example. Or, even during the Bush years, when being anti-war meant being anti-American. Or, even recently when Trump supporters considered a particular production of a Shakespeare play to be too (supposedly) offensive.



With respect to the substance of the manifesto, I see it as almost irrelevant. To me, if you read it and are completely outraged or uniformly in favor, then you are part of the problem. If you can read anyone's opinion, spread out over 10 pages, and find nothing with which you agree, then you're almost certainly not thinking. Similarly, if you can read this guy's entire memo and find yourself blindly nodding, then you probably aren't using your brain either.

But, if we are to boil down his view, it is this: that we do need diversity but it should be focused on diversity of thought, not simply diversity that looks good to some in a group photo. In that regard, I agree with him. Meanwhile, I find the claim dubious that women are somehow genetically predisposed away from engineering. But I agree that it isn't sexism that dissuades them from it, but more likely simply preferences they may have.

Nevertheless, I think that it is completely valid for a company to believe that adding more gender and ethnic diversity to its pool of talent is better business. And if that's the case, then in the marketplace they should be able to make that decision. I just also happen to think that the company that looks for diversity of intellectual thought is, in the end, going to be the company that has greater success.

I will not call for someone to be fired because he disagrees with me on a social issue – and I implore you to join me in taking that position. Join me in the marketplace of ideas.

Because the alternative is increasing nastiness, and increasing division, and increasing radicalization on both sides of the debate. The grownups are shopping in the marketplace of ideas. Where are you shopping?