The Academy’s New Favorite Hate-Read

Is ‘Quillette’ an island of sanity — or reactionary conservatism for the Ph.D. set?

By Tom Bartlett  May 22, 2019

The portrait of university life offered by the online journal Quillette is not a flattering one. Free speech stifled at every turn. Scholars with divergent views relentlessly mobbed. Entire disciplines ruined by left-wing activism. A leafy dystopia populated by irrationally furious undergraduates, pathetically craven administrators, and professors who peddle mindless ideology at the expense of scientific inquiry. It’s enough to make anyone question the mental health of the academy, if not run screaming through the quad.

That vision seems to resonate with a sizable readership. Quillette attracts more eyeballs than plenty of venerable publications with lengthier histories (according to the analytics service Alexa, the site gets more page views than Washington
Monthly, Commentary, or Harper’s). It’s been praised by the likes of Sam Harris, Cass Sunstein, and Christina Hoff Sommers, who celebrated it as "an island of sanity in a sea of madness."

Founded in 2015 by Claire Lehmann, an Australian writer and former graduate student in psychology, Quillette initially maintained a more straightforwardly scientific focus but later morphed into a vehicle for a distinctive brand of cultural critique. Its three most popular articles as of this writing are a story on a scholar drummed out of the University of Cambridge for writing about race and IQ, a think piece on the decline of elites, and an essay headlined "How Anti-Humanism Conquered the Left."

Quillette has also become the house journal of sorts for the Intellectual Dark Web, that highbrow variety pack of academics, journalists, and miscellaneous pundits who pride themselves on a clear-eyed commitment to evidence over emotion. It published multiple pieces by and about James Damore, author of the infamous "Google memo" that questioned the company’s diversity policies, and came down squarely on the side of the so-called grievance-studies hoax, in which three scholars punked humanities journals by submitting creative nonsense cloaked in social-justice buzzwords.

Merely writing for Quillette is like hoisting a flag and declaring your allegiance in the culture wars — as a tweet from Katja Thieme, an instructor in English at the University of British Columbia, made plain not long ago:

Katja Thieme
@Katja_Thieme

YES. If you’re an academic and you publish in Quillette, we see you. 👀 We fucking see you. 👀 And we are looking right at you. 👀
The thousand or more replies to that thrown gauntlet included cheeky requests to be included on the professor’s hypothetical blacklist. Geoffrey Miller, an associate professor of psychology at the University of New Mexico and Quillette contributor, shot back "We see you too. Your panopticon works both ways." The episode seemed to reinforce the view, held by those sympathetic to Quillette, that academics on the left are eager to shut down dissent, or at least stare disapprovingly at those expressing it.

In contrast, Quillette positions itself as the daring outlet where, as its slogan declares, "Free Thought Lives." But how free is that free thought, exactly? At times, it can feel pretty constrained. For instance, Quillette’s #MeToo coverages skews heavily in one direction: "The Dishonesty of #MeToo in Canada’s Literary Scene"; "Why I’m Uneasy With the #MeToo Movement"; "How the #MeToo Movement Helped Create a Script for False Accusers." It consistently favors accounts from men who say they’ve been wronged. One article asked, "Are Women Really Victims? Four Women Weigh In." Turns out the answer is essentially "no."

Likewise, you can often predict a Quillette writer’s take on a certain topic without reading the article. Transgender activists are rarely smiled upon ("The New Patriarchy: How Trans Radicalism Hurts Women, Children — and Trans People Themselves"). Western civilization is under attack and should be defended ("Is Western Civilization Uniquely Bad?"). Claims of systemic racism are greeted with
As suspicion ("The Racism Treadmill"). Universities stigmatize or ignore conservative voices ("The Dearth of Conservatives in Academic Philosophy"). One of Quillette’s article tags is "regressive left."

So you can see why detractors might peg Quillette as reactionary conservatism for the Ph.D. set — like Breitbart, only snootier. The Daily Beast chided the magazine for disseminating "right-wing talking points couched in grievance politics," while Slate deemed it "a soapbox for sustained self-pity."

And yet Quillette has lately shown a willingness to rankle its core constituency. Several recent pieces have questioned whether the Intellectual Dark Web is as politically diverse and resolutely fact-driven as those associated with it claim. "The IDW needs to make a choice," the writer, Uri Harris, argued. "Does it want to be a partisan organisation, where its members get together in front of an audience to iron out their differences and strategise on how to defeat the new left, or does it want to be genuinely nonpartisan?" Another essay, "Marx Deserves Better Critics," tweaked Jordan Peterson, suggesting that the IDW’s philosopher king and the most influential public intellectual in the West — at least according to Tyler Cowen — might be ill-informed about one of his go-to bogeymen.

Some of the magazine’s faithful reacted to the out-of-character commentary like they’d been stung. "One of the poorest pieces I’ve read on Quillette," wrote one, while another called it a "tired case for the validation of identity politics, which can be found anywhere in clown world." Dave Rubin, who hosts a popular YouTube talk show that’s a must-stop for IDW-adjacent figures like Niall Ferguson and Bret Weinstein, was singled out in that Quillette piece as an example of a strident right-winger pretending to be thoughtfully apolitical. Harris cited Rubin’s buddying up to the Fox News talking head Tucker Carlson as Exhibit A. The slam came as a
surprise because *The Rubin Report*, which boasts just shy of a million subscribers, is more or less the YouTube equivalent of *Quillette*: The Venn diagram of their fans likely resembles a total eclipse.

Rubin didn’t take kindly to the barbs. "OMG, I took a pic with Tucker!" Rubin tweeted. "Sad turn here, *Quillette*. This guy wants me to pay the price for being genuinely tolerant." Claire Lehmann, who has been a guest on Rubin’s show, poked back by putting Rubin’s "genuinely tolerant" self-praise in sarcastic quotes.

While it’s undeniable that *Quillette*’s mojo comes, at least in part, from riding the outrage wave, it does more than traffic in Twitter bait. For instance, while several outlets have made sport of Sonalee Rashatwar, a frequent campus speaker who calls herself "the fat sex therapist," *Quillette* published an essay that managed to take issue with some of Rashatwar’s views (including the idea that an emphasis on losing weight is connected to "white-settler colonialism"), while not resorting to the kind of snarky digs to which Rashatwar and those who agree with her have frequently been subjected. It also recently ran a 6,000-word essay by Doriane Lambelet Coleman, a law professor at Duke and a former competitive runner, on whether women with elevated testosterone levels should be permitted to participate in events like the 800-meter dash.

Coleman’s essay is an examination of the ethics, history, and science of a complex subject that doesn’t fit snugly into a political category. Though the fact that it appeared in *Quillette*, for many, is proof that the arguments are made in bad faith, the logic unsound, the conclusions tainted. When Malcolm Gladwell approvingly tweeted a link to Coleman’s story — "If you are at all curious about the debate in Track about intersex athletes, you need to read this," he wrote — he was
bombarded by hundreds of angry commenters promising to, among other things, throw away his books. The first comment: "People who retweet Quillette are actually human garbage."

*Quillette*'s contributors and editors seem to view the vitriol as a sign that they’re hitting a necessary nerve. One of those editors, Jonathan Kay, said in a message that the magazine’s passionate critics see themselves as a "rarefied priesthood" and that "when other priests criticize them, that is when they get out the pitchforks." What they really fear, he argues, is that if too many academics question the prevailing wisdom "the whole system will come crashing down."

*Tom Bartlett is a senior writer who covers science and ideas. Follow him on Twitter @tebartl.*

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1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037