

As ideas go, hiding behind an alias is as false as they come

Publishing anonymous academic work to avoid the 'cancellers' diminishes the quality of debate

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Is Peter Singer right about cancel culture or is his plan to publish big ideas under pseudonyms only going to polarise us further?

Singer, who is one of the world's leading moral philosophers, has announced a journal designed to protect academics and others whose ideas run foul of the twitterati or their own university col-

leagues and bosses. The suggestion is the campuses are now so woke and left wing that ideas which challenge that side of politics or social thought are at risk because their advocates are either relentlessly trolled or driven out of university departments, and are denied the promotion and careers they seek.

For journalists who understand that bylines are about accountability as much as ego, the idea of people voicing their opinions under false names is not immediately attractive. It also raises an obvious question: what would we all think if the left launched a journal for

ideas to be published under pseudonyms?

Not much, is my answer. Standing by your view is surely a basic requirement of being taken seriously in our society. It's not false names we need but more people putting their names to truly dangerous ideas, whether from the left or the right, and a society that is prepared to have complex conversations about complex ideas.

Instead, we're having a very messy moment around what various groups will allow to be canvassed.

Obviously it's far from pleasant to be targeted or vilified for suggesting that you want to call people she or he, not they; or for arguing against children being allowed gender surgery; or for defending the work of a dead white male misogynistic, but brilliant, writer. But if the answer is to invent a name to protect yourself



Moral philosopher, and now publisher, Peter Singer

from robust debate, count me out.

It's a surprise to see Singer, one of the most controversial academics Australia has bred, backing the use of the pseudonym. Singer, who holds a professorship at Princeton University in the US, has been hard to pigeon hole, having upset the right and the left with some of his ideas over the years.

He has, for example, made the case for parents' right to selective

ethanasia of their disabled new born babies; the equal rights of animals; and more recently a style of philanthropy called "effective altruism" in which money is spent on the most fixable problems, not necessarily the most inhuman or dreadful.

That's quite a range, but a level of bravery too that has helped him withstand attacks and seriously shifted the debate on profound

issues, and not necessarily towards his view. His are seriously dangerous ideas, ones we need to contemplate and challenge if we want to evolve as social beings. But they have been influential, at least in part, because it is Singer — this well-known and respected man — who has been making them.

Clearly they would never have drawn much attention if he'd used a pseudonym. That's part of the problem with hiding behind a false name: the likelihood that a fresh and different idea will actually spark a conversation is reduced when it's put forward by someone who cannot be seen, who is not known, and who has no profile to Google or CV to check.

Some critics of the Singer-backed journal have suggested that when there's no direct accountability, it's easier to peddle wild and woolly conspiracy theories, for example.

That's unlikely. The internet is awash with conspiracy theories perpetrated by individuals using false names or no names. We are rightly worried by those who take to Twitter or other platforms anonymously in order to bully or defame others, but it's not fair to

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equate Singer's *The Journal of Controversial Ideas* with the wild, uncurated material sloshing around the internet.

The journal will follow normal academic peer review processes and standards. The ideas may be dangerous but the research and arguments will be as solid and credible as any similarly published academic work.

Even so, this is not the answer to cancel culture.

We are certainly losing the ability to listen to different views, but launching a journal with these rules elevates a problem that needs to be tackled by leaders standing by their ideas without demonising those who oppose them.

There's such heaviness in many of our debates. In a recently posted podcast, *The Lock In*, British intel-

lectual David Runciman told broadcaster Jeremy Paxman that children should be given the vote. Runciman made a solid case for broadening the franchise in order to shake up a model of representative democracy that has become predictable and sclerotic.

He suggested we have nothing to fear from the kids' votes. Paxman was deeply unimpressed, especially when Runciman suggested children as young as six could be enfranchised. Then Runciman confessed he was not being entirely serious, that he knew this would never happen, but that his "playful" suggestion was really about starting a conversation about how to change the way we've always done this — especially when our systems are not as innovative and effective as they should be.

Talking about a vote for children is, of course, nowhere as inflammatory as suggesting that you can not only choose your own gender but choose your own race. But Runciman makes a good point about the value of keeping a sense of perspective and humour even as we toss around serious ideas about the way we organise the world.