

Elisa Littin

Bard Center for the Study of Hate

Internship with PEN America

October 2022

PEN America and the Right to Expression

PEN America is an organization that aims to protect free expression in the United States and around the globe by exploring issues that relate to both literature and human rights. Founded in 1922, PEN shifted from being an international writers club to an established nonprofit organization with chapters across many regions of the country. Besides its literary work, which involves several programs such as Writers at Risk, Literary Awards, Prison and Justice Writing, Writers Emergency Fund, to name a few, PEN regularly publishes reports surveying major issues affecting or restricting individual or collective freedom of expression. When these reports are published, they serve as a tool to combat the widespread crisis of misinformation we face today.

My Involvement

During the months of June and July, I worked alongside Research Department's Director James Tager on two reports: *Reading Between the Lines: Diversity, Equity, and Books*, and *Reporting on Right-Wing Extremism and Mainstream Politics* (unofficial title). Although both reports touched upon vastly different topics, one focused on the literary aspect of PEN while the other focused on the more journalistic facet of the organization, they find commonalities in the issue of

expression. How does the structure of the publishing industry uplift certain voices while others struggle to get past systemic hurdles? How should the media report on issues related to political extremism, which might inspire people who might not be familiar with issues related to hate or might also amplify hateful messages, without actively censoring or denying the right to express oneself? Questions of this kind fueled my research during my time at PEN.

While doing research for the first report, concerning diversity and equity within the publishing industry, I was able to understand the structural problems that affect this overwhelmingly white industry and how social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, are generating and inciting necessary changes. The report is primarily drawn from more than 60 interviews with authors and publishing industry professionals, revealing under-explored institutional and financial factors that enhance the under-representation and marginalization of publishing professionals, authors, and booksellers of color. Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf, Senior Director of Literary Programs, clarifies the greater importance of representation within the publishing industry beyond the notion of equity: “The power of literature is that it reduces geographical distance but also differences. You can see yourself in the shoes of another person who might come from a radically different culture, and then in a very simplistic way, what happens is that you then meet people who are from different cultural backgrounds that were represented in these stories and you might look at them differently, you might find a way to connect with them because you connected with their stories through the means of literature.” PEN believes that literature can be used as a mechanism to counter hate in the sense that it allows for people to connect to individual stories, characters, and situations that will defy the typical divisive elements in communities across the globe.

Despite the organization's overarching view on literature as a method of connection, they respect inclusivity of all kinds, even if this means providing a platform for those who might have divisive ideas. Navigating this is not an easy task; Clarisse touched upon this topic when I interviewed her for this report, saying that although PEN wants to showcase a multiplicity of voices, "Our primary goal is not to go find these people who are divisive, ... it's more about finding people who can hopefully contribute to a larger canon of American literature".

The second report I participated in provided thorough research regarding the role of journalists in the coverage of issues related to political extremism in the form of far-right and white supremacy demonstrations. In the report, PEN clarifies their stance regarding freedom of expression: "As a free speech organization, PEN America supports the right of all individuals – regardless of political persuasion – to assemble, protest and freely express their political views. However, the right to free speech does not protect incitement to violence or criminal activity, or the imminent threat of violence in the exercise of free speech". With this statement at hand, it was easier to understand that the ultimate focus of the report, and PEN's overall work, was how to discern when extremists are actively threatening the rights of others, and whether their actions are newsworthy or if their coverage will lead to a further negative impact in their communities.

The report built on the work of journalists and experts in the journalism field to examine how the news media has grappled with the challenges of reporting on rising far-right extremism in the United States post the Charlottesville car attack and the 2016 presidential elections. The research points out the influence of right-wing groups in playing a prominent role in U.S politics, and how extremism has morphed beyond organized hate groups and self-described white supremacists.

Spaces that might seem unrelated to political extremism, such as school board meetings and city council meetings, are increasingly showing signs of this form of political engagement. Explosive media coverage of these extremist incidents and spaces where far-right ideologies are practiced, acted as a double-edge sword. In other words, many journalists felt victim to media manipulation by hate groups looking for exacerbated attention.

Considering that extremists seek the spotlight as a way to expand their reach, PEN advises that instead of out-right censorship, the mainstream media should focus on reporting that promotes informed citizenry. In order to do so, news media should be committed to divorcing commercial demands, and be fully prepared to address the threats that right-wing extremism poses to society. The more research I did on this topic, the more I realized that reporting on right-wing extremism should be treated as its own beat within the journalistic industry. Additionally, partnering and collaborating with universities and unbiased research centers with expertise in extremism, disinformation, and media, to access resources for training and educating journalists in developing expertise regarding these matters, is essential to producing journalism that cares about democracy. But how can this be achieved if hatred is not treated as its own academic discipline? In *Need for Interdisciplinary Field of Hate Studies*, Bard College's Center for the Study of Hate Director, Kenneth Stern, writes that "hatred is also a basic part of the human condition, yet we have no synthesis of academic disciplines to look at the problem holistically (Stern, 8). If we understand hatred as an intrinsic mechanism to the human condition, then there should be a place for its study in the world of academia. This would not only add onto the field of interdisciplinary studies, but it would also serve as a resource when reporting and communicating on political and social conflicts that pertain to the issue of hate.

When researching for the report, my work entailed fact checking every single statement provided by the 75 experts that were interviewed, as well as any political and historical reference mentioned in their arguments. Considering that the report focused on the field of mass information, PEN was very, rightfully so, careful about being accurate in their reporting. Although tedious at times, sourcing citations and claims is vital within the context of PEN because they pride themselves in factually combating disinformation. In the report *The escalating risk of mass violence in the United States*, The Stanley Center for Peace and Security argues that “In regimes with a lower degree of democratization, the institutional constraints on power holders are compromised by the lack of an independent and impartial judiciary, media, or police” (4). In the process to reinvigorate and revitalize democracy, impartial media outlets, or organizations such as PEN, are fundamental. If speech and information are used as tools to achieve a higher level of democratization, then it is essential that the information being provided is thoroughly fact-checked.

Interview with James Tager, PEN America’s Director of Research

Disinformation defined as false information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media, holds a very close relationship with the spreading of hate-fueled ideologies. I asked James Tager, Director of Research, if he thought disinformation can lead towards a path of hatred, or be easily transformed into hateful speech, his answer was the following: “Totally, one hundred percent. Someone denying the Holocaust existed, or someone misrepresenting slavery, is arguably both

hateful speech and misinformation. Disinformation and hateful speech tend to go hand in hand. It is easier to fight disinformation because you can factually identify when someone is being factually incorrect... We see purveyors of misinformation, purveyors of hatred are actually very good at teasing out the nuances and ambiguities of speech. We are familiar with the phrase “Listen I am just asking questions”, and unfortunately it’s a smart thing for a purveyor of hatred to say because it illustrates the difficulties of drawing lines”. Hatred thrives when people are able to isolate themselves from other sources of opinions that contradict their own, and social media and digital technologies have a major role in allowing this to happen. James touched upon this topic in our conversation saying that extremist perspectives are exacerbated “because they self isolate into communities that allow them to carry those narratives forward, and social media and digital technology makes that easier in the sense that you can be living what appears to be a regular life, while secretly participating in close chapters of very racist views, so you no longer need to be hidden in a mountaintop somewhere to be isolated from hearing other points of view. It’s become quite easy to only participate in digital conversations talking to people like you and that’s how radicalization dramatically accelerates”.

So how do we confront disinformation and hatred besides advocating for responsible and civil-driven media communication? Considering the notion that conversations society holds collectively affect the conclusions of members of society, cultural organizations like PEN and their work are of great importance. James mentioned in the interview when talking about this idea that “The most interesting thing about that is that it’s a conversation that occurs in the cultural sphere, you can’t legislate a civic conversation, we would never support legislation that said all Americans are supposed to read X book, but we would support efforts from cultural

organizations that want to foster a shared civic touchstone that can be conversed about. People say in the past we all had three or four news network so we had a shared civic discourse we could participate in because we would all watch the same people, that's not the case anymore. Does that lead itself to certain answers? Not necessarily, but it highlights the importance of shared civic conversations, and arguably that's a space where cultural organizations are far better placed to participate than policy organizations".

Over the course of the summer, I found myself constantly reassessing how to address hateful speech. The question of how to balance the importance of defending all speech and freedom of expression, including harmful speech, as opposed to solely condemning it, is one that I'm sure everyone working under PEN has asked themselves many times. When talking to James he addressed this topic saying, "Our identity as a free expression advocacy organization clashes, or is seen to be in conflict at times, with not only our mission of uplifting diverse voices but the general societal imperative to combat hate... There's changing expectations regarding how freedom of expression organizations should approach hate, and the extent to which they should essentially prioritize anti-hatred work, anti-racism work, over the effort to stand even noxious speech". While PEN believes that an effective way of dealing with free expression issues is that of countering speech with more speech, as opposed to censoring it, they focus a great deal of their attention to uplifting the voices of those who are being under attack by groups that uphold hateful speech.

PEN America's approach regarding hateful speech does not negate the potential dangers of language. It proposes a new idea, that of words having the equal potential of paving the way for

change, the power to challenge harmful institutions and social structures. Although words alone cannot void hate altogether, they can work to push back against it and challenge its roots. Asking for an antidote, a simple solution, to hatred is asking for the impossible. That being said, using words as a form of engagement, as PEN does, is actively combatting hate.