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IDEAS | THE SATURDAY ESSAY

# When the Twitter Mob Came for Me

Recently hired by the Atlantic and then promptly fired, the conservative writer Kevin D. Williamson discusses the social-media outrage that made the celebrated magazine retreat



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN S. DYKES

By *Kevin D. Williamson*

April 20, 2018 10:34 a.m. ET

In early March, I met up with Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor in chief of the Atlantic, at an event sponsored by the magazine at the South by Southwest conference in Austin. He had just hired me away from National Review, the venerable conservative magazine where I'd been a writer and editor for 10 years.

"You know, the campaign to have me fired will begin 11 seconds after you announce that you've hired me," I told him. He scoffed. "It won't be that bad," he said. "The Atlantic isn't the New York Times. It isn't high church for liberals."

My first piece appeared in the Atlantic on April 2. I was fired on April 5.

The purported reason for our "parting ways," as Mr. Goldberg put it in his announcement, had nothing to do with what I'd written in my inaugural piece. The problem was a six-word, four-year-old tweet on abortion and capital punishment and a discussion of that tweet in a subsequent podcast. I had responded to a familiar pro-abortion argument: that pro-lifers should not be taken seriously in our claim that abortion is the willful taking of an innocent human life unless we are ready to punish women who get abortions with long prison sentences. It's a silly argument, so I responded with these words: "I have hanging more in mind."

Trollish and hostile? I'll cop to that, though as the subsequent conversation online and on the podcast indicated—to say nothing of the few million words of my published writing available to the reading public—I am generally opposed to capital punishment. I was making a point about the sloppy rhetoric of the abortion debate, not a public-policy recommendation. Such provocations can sometimes clarify the terms of a debate, but in this case, I obscured the more meaningful questions about abortion and sparked the sort of hysteria I'd meant to point out

and mock.

Let's not equivocate: Abortion isn't littering or securities fraud or driving 57 in a 55-mph zone. If it isn't homicide, then it's no more morally significant than getting a tooth pulled. If it isn't homicide, then there's no real argument for prohibiting it. If it *is* homicide, then we need to discuss more seriously what should be done to put an end to it. For all the chatter today about diversity of viewpoint and the need for open discourse, there aren't very many people on the pro-choice side, in my experience, who are ready to talk candidly about the reality of abortion.

Which brings us back to that event at South by Southwest, where the Atlantic was sponsoring a panel about marginalized points of view and diversity in journalism. The panelists, all Atlantic writers and editors, argued that the cultural and economic decks are stacked against feminists and advocates of minority interests. They made this argument under the prestigious, high-profile auspices of South by Southwest and their own magazine, hosted by a feminist group called the Female Quotient, which enjoys the patronage of Google, PepsiCo, AT&T, NBCUniversal, Facebook, UBS, JPMorgan Chase and Deloitte. We should all be so marginalized. If you want to know who actually has the power in our society and who is actually marginalized, ask which ideas get you sponsorships from Google and Pepsi and which get you fired.



The author in Dallas on Wednesday. PHOTO: JUSTIN CLEMONS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The event itself was revealing, not for the predictable banalities uttered on stage but for the offstage observations coming from the master of ceremonies: my new boss. Mr. Goldberg in private sometimes takes an amusingly ironic view of the pieties of P.C. culture. After giving the opening remarks, he joked about inflicting upon me the “wokiest” thing I’d ever suffered through

and said that he himself was “insufficiently intersectional” for the event. He had a good laugh.

I couldn't share so easily in his humor. Mr. Goldberg knows something about the power of the Twitter mob. A Jewish liberal with some hawkish foreign-policy views and a clear-eyed understanding of the problems associated with the poorly assimilated Muslim minority communities in Europe, he has been labeled everything from a perpetrator of crimes against humanity (he served in the Israeli military as a young man) to an “Islamophobe” to the intellectual author of George W. Bush's ill-conceived war in Iraq.

But he underestimated the energy with which that mob would pursue someone like me. Mr. Goldberg sits atop one of the most celebrated magazines in our country's history, and before that he was a star at the New York Times Magazine and the New Yorker. He can survive the occasional heresy.

I'm an unassimilated conservative from Lubbock, Texas. Much of my career for the past 20-odd

years has consisted of writing pieces that tell people things they don't want to hear. My angry critics on the left think I'm a right-wing monster; my angry critics on the right don't like the fact that I've reported extensively from Trump country and haven't thought very highly of what I've seen. If I'd been hired for a new job at some conservative outlet, you can be sure there would have been talk about how I pray each night for the death of the white working class.

But this time, the tsunami came from the left, as I'd predicted.

On March 22, the Atlantic announced that it had hired me and three others as contributors to its new section "for ideas, opinions and commentary." In no time, the abortion-rights group Nara was organizing protests against me, demanding that I not be permitted to publish in the Atlantic. Activists claimed, dishonestly, that I wanted to see every fourth woman in the country lynched (it is estimated that 1 in 4 American women will have an abortion by the age of 45). Opinion pieces denouncing me appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the New Republic, Slate, the Huffington Post, Mother Jones, the Guardian and other publications.

The remarkable fact about all this commentary on my supposedly horrifying views on abortion is that not a single writer from any of those famous publications took the time to ask me about the controversy. (The sole exception was a reporter from Vox.) Did I think I was being portrayed accurately? Why did I make that outrageous statement? Did I really want to set up gallows, despite my long-stated reservations about capital punishment? Those are questions that might have occurred to people in the business of asking questions. (In preparing this account, I have confirmed my recollection of what Mr. Goldberg said with Mr. Goldberg himself.)

Instead of interviewing the subject of their pieces, they scanned my thousands of articles and found the tidbits that seemed most likely to provoke. I was half-amused by progressive activists' claims to have "uncovered" things that were, after all, published. Goodness knows there's lots to choose from: I have unpopular and contrarian views about what we used to call sex-reassignment surgery and are now expected to call "gender-confirmation surgery," and I have argued that the much-remarked upon epidemic of sexual assault on American college campuses does not in fact exist (check the numbers).

**'It is easy to misrepresent and exaggerate views that are controversial to begin with.'**

But no, I  
didn't  
call an  
African-

American child a "monkey," and, as should be clear by now, I'm not eager to be any sort of executioner. I am one of what I suspect is a very small number of American journalists to have seen a hanging (a lynching in India), and that kind of violence is worth taking seriously.

Having my views misrepresented is familiar territory for me. In 2014, I got a call from a friend who was disturbed by my public support for Donald Sterling, the owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers, who had gotten himself into trouble for some racist remarks. I had, at that time, never heard of Mr. Sterling, but there was a quote from me right there on Twitter: "'Looks like the antiracist gestapo are already lacing up their jackboots for Donald Sterling,' National Review's Kevin Williamson commented."

I mention that one mainly because I know the source of it: It was invented by Matt Bruenig, a left-wing blogger and lawyer formerly associated with the progressive think tank Demos and a contributor to, among other publications, the Atlantic. That quote was not a distortion; it was not "taken out of context" or anything of the sort. It was a pure fabrication. (Mr. Bruenig says that the quote, produced in its entirety above, was intended as "satire.")

You can find other tweets attributed to me that are pure invention. And while the claims against me during the course of the Atlantic fiasco were not created ex nihilo, the distortions and exaggerations represent a similar kind of intellectual dishonesty: indifference to the facts of the case in the service of narrow ideological goals.

It is easy to misrepresent and exaggerate views that are controversial to begin with. I have argued for years that the current U.S. model of capital punishment is defective and that the practice ought to be tightly restricted or eliminated entirely. I also have argued that if we are to have capital punishment, then it should be carried out by means that are forthrightly violent—firing squad, hanging, etc.—rather than the current pseudo-clinical method of lethal injection. We should always be honest about what it is we are doing, and the involvement of the medical profession in the willful imposition of death is a perversion of its creed, whether in the matter of abortion or in the matter of executing criminals.

Whatever you think of my views on this issue, I'd suggest that they're more interesting than hearing someone repeat the same shopworn talking points on capital punishment for the thousandth time. The editors of the Atlantic thought so, too, until the mob started doing their thinking for them.



Atlantic writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and the magazine's editor Jeffrey Goldberg onstage at South by Southwest in Austin, March 10. PHOTO: ISMAEL QUINTANILLA/GETTY IMAGES

The Atlantic has often welcomed controversial writers. The magazine's best-known contributor today is Ta-Nehisi Coates, arguably the nation's foremost writer on race. He came in for criticism after writing, in his book "Between the World and Me," that the first responders on 9/11 were "not human" to him, that he had come to regard such uniformed figures as menaces. I don't share his view, but if that's what he thought at the time, then I'm glad he wrote it. He could have pretended to have had thoughts and feelings other than the ones he did—but the truth is usually more interesting, and it is always more useful.

The late Christopher Hitchens was another frequent contributor to the Atlantic. He was routinely denounced by people on the left for his harshly critical views of Islam. He complained of the war in Afghanistan that "the death toll is not nearly high enough," described the Jewish scriptures as "evil and mad" and directed shameful vitriol at Mother Teresa. Hitchens routinely and gleefully gave occasion for offense—and he was one of the invaluable essayists of our time.

"Yes," Mr. Goldberg said when I reminded him of this precedent. "But Hitchens was in the family. You are not."

And that, of course, is what this whole episode was really about. No one is very much interested in my actual views on abortion and capital punishment—I am hardly a household name. Anyone genuinely interested in my views would have done what journalists do and inquired about them. It isn't hard to do.

I'm working on a piece right now touching on the way that my fellow conservatives sometimes misrepresent the views of the economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman. Mr. Krugman is not the left-wing radical of the right-wing imagination but a moderately liberal Democrat with more traditional views on trade than the Trump administration; his critique of Republican tax policy is fundamentally a conservative one. I think Mr. Krugman would say that's a fair accounting of his views. I am confident of this because I asked him, and he said so.

Where my writing appears is not a very important or interesting question. What matters more is the issue of how the rage-fueled tribalism of social media, especially Twitter, has infected the

op-ed pages and, to some extent, the rest of journalism. Twitter is about offering markers of affiliation or markers of disaffiliation. The Left shouts RACIST!, and the Right shouts FAKE NEWS! There isn't much that can be done about this other than treating social media with the low regard it deserves.

But when it comes to what appears in our newspapers and magazines, some of the old rules should still apply. By all means, let's have advocacy journalism, but let's make sure about the journalism part of it: Do the work, ask the questions, give readers a reason to assume that what's published adheres to some basic standards of intellectual honesty. To do otherwise is to empower those who dismiss the media as a tangle of hopeless partisan opportunism.

Without credible journalism, all we have is the Twitter mob, which is a jealous god. Jealous and kind of stupid.

*Mr. Williamson is a former writer and editor at National Review.*

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