

## On Opinions—and Why You Won't Find Any Here.

*“We live in a time where intelligent people are being silenced so that stupid people won't be offended.”*



I saw these words on a wall. I don't know who first wrote them—neither the internet nor ChatGPT provided a definitive answer—but they suggest it may have originated from two comedians and a philosopher: Kevin Hart, George Carlin, and Plato.

Be that as it may, and without wanting to sound elitist or place myself in the “intelligent” bucket, this quote resonates. It seems to capture the current interpretation of “woke” and how we, in Western liberal democracies, approach so many so-called “difficult” issues. Perhaps it struck a chord because, at some point (I don't know when), I started applying it to myself.

Instead of expressing an opinion or making an observation with a judgment, I now consider who I might offend before speaking. I spend time—perhaps too much—thinking about how my words will be received. More and more, I find myself self-censoring, disclaiming, or softening my thoughts rather than stating them as they originally formed.

And that worries me.

It also means that on certain issues, I hold back, while on others, I don't—not based on their importance to me, but on how I perceive they will be received. Even now, my mind is flooded with examples of both (self censored and uncensored), yet I hesitate and do not include them, thinking about how they will be read and by who, how will they be interpreted, and what I need to include to justify and substantiate my position.

If I express opinions openly, I wrestle with whether to publish under my own name or anonymously—ideally the former, but can I do it and what will be the consequences? Then comes the question of where to publish and who to address. Should I write two versions, tailored for different audiences?

All of this conflicts with who I want to be, how I feel, and how I think of myself. It's unsettling because it raises doubts about authenticity, integrity, and what I would do if my comfort or safety were at stake. At what point would I stand up for myself? For others?

Yes, one should be mindful of consequences—but that doesn't mean remaining silent. Is there a threshold at which I would take a stand, and until then, I remain passive or restrained?

Now I externalise: Coming back to the quote that started this. Like many others, I have become cautious—sometimes even fearful—of how my opinions will be received before I express them. But why? What is the root cause of these feelings?

In the past—before the internet, before mass communication, before mass media—information spread slowly, primarily through speech. Oratory, the ability to present arguments, and dialectic, the art of reasoning and discussion, were the norm. An argument could be presented, processed, and debated. The difference is that back then, disagreement led to counterarguments and, potentially, changed perspectives. Today, it more often leads to judgment, where those in opposition take offence. There is little space to modify opinions and change positions.

Discourse has become a tug of war in which might—measured by numbers, noise, and popular opinion—determines whether something is deemed right or wrong. This dynamic fuels polarisation, reinforcing so-called "confirmation bias bubbles". Within these, I can safely express my views among like-minded individuals, while with those who disagree, I can freely and vociferously oppose (knowing I will receive support for this from those within my bubble). Rarely is there a space for genuine dialogue—a forum where ideas can be exchanged, challenged, and refined. There is no room to change. Instead, the focus shifts to avoiding offence, leading to self-censorship, dilution of messages, or silence.

Of course, there are boundaries. Hate speech, incitement, discrimination, and victimisation are rightly unacceptable. But beyond these, the ideal should be the freedom to express opinions and engage in thoughtful, intelligent discussion—where ideas are tested, flaws exposed, and perspectives refined. Unfortunately, when I observe politicians, leaders, civic and religious groups, and others, this rarely happens. Opinions are either reinforced within echo chambers or weaponised in adversarial "shouting matches" where no one is truly open to change.

This dynamic creates "societal norms" within groups—whether demographic, racial, religious, or ideological—where questioning or dissent is met with ostracism. Once a norm is established, it becomes rigid, as even the slightest deviation risks exclusion. Many examples come to mind, but again, I hesitate.

And that hesitation saddens me. I should be able to express my views—none of which approach hate, discrimination, extremism... —without fear. Yet I hold back, not only because I fear condemnation from those who disagree but also because I will receive blind affirmation from those who agree. In both cases, my words risk achieving nothing beyond defining me as "friend" or "enemy".

**Roger Cohen.**  
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\*Images generated by ChatGPT.

\*\*Opinions (where expressed!) are those of the author.