

Hate speech is not a cultural norm

Racial insults should not be tolerated, regardless of which group is attacked



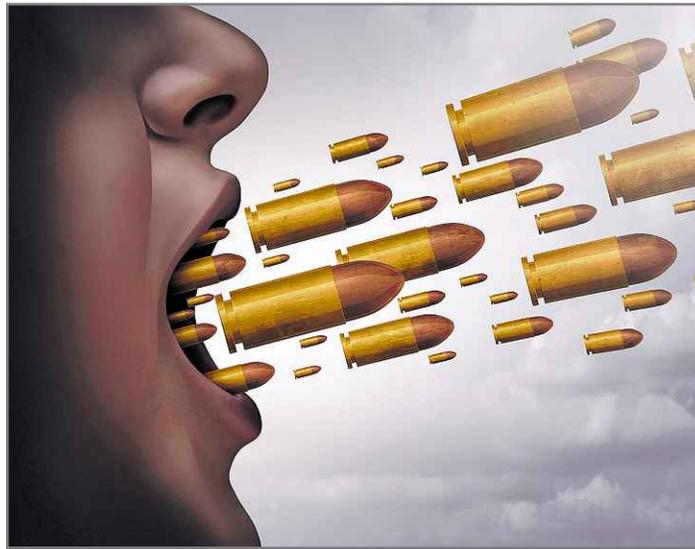
Cathy Young

“Oh man it’s kind of cruel how much joy I get out of being cruel to old white men.” That’s one of the many racially charged tweets that have gotten their author, Sarah Jeong, a tech writer and an incoming member of The New York Times editorial board, embroiled in a raging controversy over the last few days. The Jeong controversy raises many contentious issues, including how much people should be penalized for their Twitter trail. But at the center of the debate is a question whose relevance goes beyond Jeong and her career: Should hateful speech about white people be considered racist and stigmatized just as we stigmatize hate against other groups?

When screenshots of Jeong’s tweets, mainly from 2013 to 2015, began to circulate on conservative Twitter, many saw them as clear evidence of racism — or, as

New York magazine columnist Andrew Sullivan wrote, “vicious hatred of an entire group of people based only on their skin color.” Jeong has explained them as a bad attempt to mock racist trolls who were targeting her as an Asian-American woman by responding in their own style — an explanation the Times has accepted for now, though there seems to be no evidence that the tweets were in response to trolls.

Meanwhile, many of Jeong’s supporters, such as New Republic writer Jeet Heer, argue that her tweets were satirizing anti-minority racism on the right. Some of the controversial tweets do seem to parody (caricatured) conservative views. Thus, one Jeong tweet Sullivan cited as especially hateful — “Are white people genetically disposed to burn faster in the sun, thus logically being only fit to live underground like groveling goblins” — was followed by “let’s debate” and was apparently a reference to Sullivan’s own suggestion that we should openly debate whether racial gaps in achievement are



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partly due to genetic differences in intelligence.

But many other Jeong tweets, such as an obscenity-laced comment about “white people marking up the internet with their opinions like dogs on fire hydrants,” don’t fit the “parody” mode. What they represent, as both Jeong’s defenders and detractors have noted, is a style popular among progressive activists and writers in recent years: performative white-bashing. Jabs at white people are

seen as witty or righteously angry attacks on white supremacy.

It’s very likely Jeong’s tweets were, in fact, performative rather than an expression of actual hatred of white people or white men. But that doesn’t make them any less ugly — just as an alt-right troll’s racist or sexist tweets aren’t any less bigoted because he sees himself as fighting “political correctness” rather than being racist or sexist.

Is vitriol toward white peo-

ple just as repugnant as bigotry toward blacks, Asians or Jews? One can certainly argue that the history of oppression and discrimination toward minority groups that were once openly treated as inferior or pernicious makes a difference. But white-bashing rhetoric, however ironically intended, still dehumanizes and demonizes an entire group. It doesn’t have to be “just as bad” as racism against minorities; it’s enough to recognize that it’s bad and morally wrong.

Such rhetoric can justify actual mistreatment of white people. In one of her tweets, Jeong dismissed the ordeal of public relations executive Justine Sacco, who was hounded out of her job and had to go into hiding for a while after her tweet mocking white privilege was misunderstood as racist. It is also very likely to provoke backlash, boost the right and even provide an excuse for alt-right racism.

The stigma against racial insults is a hard-won cultural norm. Let’s not erode it by adding an “except for white people” clause.

Cathy Young is a contributing editor to Reason magazine.



AFP/GETTY IMAGES / TIMOTHY A. CLARY

Demonstrators protest the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and federal immigration policies on July 31 in Manhattan.

leased because they and county lawmakers appear to be more concerned with reassuring immigrants who are here illegally than securing public safety? I certainly don’t feel safer because of this policy.

Anthony Johnson Sr., Brentwood

■ This country is divided over the issue of immigration. Many are outraged by the sheer number of people entering the country illegally. Others are equally outraged by the cruel deportations and family separations. Surely, this can be healed.

There should be a price to pay for the crime of entering our country without permission, but the punishment should fit. Deportation should be left for those who are recurring violent criminals. Hardworking people who came illegally should be forced to pay a fine, and then required to take a citizenship class and pass the citizenship test, which they shall pay for. If these conditions are not met, deportation would be the punishment. Restitution should be made for social services these immigrants received before gaining full citizenship if those services were obtained using phony identification or Social Security numbers.

Finally, if possible to determine, unpaid income taxes should be prosecuted under the penalties stipulated in IRS regulations.

Let’s stop ripping our country apart by taking extreme positions. Use common sense.

Dave Setteducati, Smithtown

Hit reset button on presidential powers

Thank you for Ted R. Brundum’s insightful column about our forefathers’ intentions [“Crack down on presidential power,” Opinion, July 22]. What we have now is an aberration of a balance of powers for the three branches of government. This Congress appears to have abdicated its powers to this president.

I call for a bipartisan convention of historical and constitutional scholars to make recommendations to redefine the powers of the executive branch. At the least, I suggest a limitation on executive orders that attempt to reverse national policies already in place without congressional approval. The president should not be allowed to change or abridge previously approved national agencies, programs or regulations that have been approved by Congress.

We need respected scholars and think tanks to fix our executive branch, because it is broken.

Lucille Cordero Protosow, Mount Sinai

■ The way to resolve hot-button issues such as immigration, abortion, etc., is to put them to a public vote! Make it mandatory to vote and make the result a mandate as well. Right now, we are all being ruled by the vocal minority, when most of us do not agree with “them.”

We must take back our democracy with direct democracy. No more leaving it in the hands of a politically active few and an easily bought legislature.

Gloria Mason, Lindenhurst

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