

(This letter is also included in a post on wendellsden.com titled “A Matter of Words, Or, What’s in a Name?”)

Letter to the Editor

In response to Mark Sardella’s latest column titled “the civics lesson” published in this paper on April 19, 2018, I would like to point out that the term “politically correct,” as noted by the unidentified gentleman, was indeed used to control the press by a regime in power in the early 20th century.

In relation to the issues Mark refers to, the meaning is now understood by many to describe citizens working within a democratic process with the goal of creating a society from which no one is denied the ability to live to their fullest potential and enjoy inalienable rights of, to quote our Declaration of Independence, “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This modern definition is in great contrast to an attack on freedom of the press leading to a fascist state.

“In the early-to-mid 20th century, the phrase "politically correct" was used to describe strict adherence to a range of ideological orthodoxies as dictated by those in political power. In 1934, the [New York Times](#) reported that Nazi Germany was granting reporting permits "only to pure ‘Aryans’ whose opinions are politically correct.” (1)

The meaning of the term has, however, shifted over the years. In the early to mid 20th century as the [Marxist-Leninist](#) movements gained political power, “the term "politically correct" was used disparagingly, to refer to someone whose loyalty to the CP [Communist Party] line overrode compassion, and led to bad politics. It was used by Socialists against Communists, and was meant to separate out Socialists who believed in egalitarian moral ideas from dogmatic Communists who would advocate and defend party positions regardless of their moral substance.” (2)

In his March 23, 1965 address to the Convention of the United Auto Workers, Lyndon B. Johnson also used the term as a negative descriptor of political policy, saying "I’m here to tell you that we are going to do those things which need to be done, not because they are politically correct, but because they are right." (3)

The term has continued to shift in meaning, with it being used proudly by activists starting in the late 60s and 1970s as meaning “morally justified” or, as time went

by, in a disparagingly manner to describe ideologies by and on both sides of the political spectrum. (4)

At this point in time, I agree with former AIDS activist and current associate dean at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, whose take on the term is described January 2016 article by journalist Caitlin Gibson: "As someone who has spoken the phrase [PC] with pride, Huff now thinks it's not salvageable, even for those who once used it in what they hoped was a spirit of inclusiveness and open-mindedness. "It's such a term of ridicule," she says. "Even those of us who would still want to strive to that as a conceptual goal wouldn't use that term." (1)

As to the statement "politically correct speech is oppressed speech" attributed to Abe, the main character in the story told by the unnamed Item reader, I can understand why someone who suffered under the Nazi regime would, in the 1970s, be frightened by the term since it's use meaning inclusiveness and tolerance was still relatively new.

In fact, Abe did not get it totally wrong, although, rather than it being oppressed speech, politically correct speech is now seen as being by or in support of those who are oppressed via any number of policies, e.g. economic, educational, or environmental, and that speech is protected by our First Amendment.

1) Gibson, Caitlin (January 13, 2016). "How 'politically correct' went from compliment to insult". Washington Post.

2) Kohl, Herbert (1992). "Uncommon Differences: On Political Correctness, Core Curriculum and Democracy in Education". *The Lion and the Unicorn*. 16 (1): 1–16. doi:10.1353/uni.0.0216.

3) Remarks in Atlantic City at the Convention of the United Auto Workers. March 23, 1964. The entire speech is available via www.presidency.ucsb.edu

4) <http://www.journalgazette.net/features/Political-correctness-evolved-over-years-10923391>

Sincerely,
Wendy Dennis