

Title: Rick Mehta on Free Expression in Canadian Universities
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Transcript

Chris Martin: My guest today is Rick Mehta. He's a professor of psychology at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. His research focuses on the psychology of decision making. He has recently begun speaking about issues related to academic freedom in Canada, and his talk Free Speech in Universities: Threats and Opportunities has received over 4,000 views online.

Chris Martin: Hi, Rick.

Rick Mehta: Hello, Chris.

Chris Martin: How are things in Canada?

Rick Mehta: Well, we're living in interesting times. I think that's the most diplomatic way of putting it.

Chris Martin: You're in Acadia University in Nova Scotia, is that correct?

Rick Mehta: Yes, it is.

Chris Martin: And you studied at Toronto and McGill.

Rick Mehta: Yes, I did my, yeah, undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto and neuroscience when it was a new program just starting up over there. Then yeah, I did my Master's and PhD at McGill's, spent three years at the University of Winnipeg on a post doc before coming to Acadia in 2003.

Chris Martin: So you've seen the whole breadth of Canada.

Rick Mehta: Yup.

Chris Martin: So you're a professor of psychology. You've historically taught Introductory Psychology and Research Methods which are not exactly controversial issues.

Rick Mehta: Nope.

Chris Martin: And your research has been on cognition, numerical cognition and decision-making. So how did you get involved with issues of freedom and academic liberty?

Rick Mehta: It was around – yeah, it was 2015 that I started noticing items in the news that didn't – that I found bothersome. So I think the first major one was the events with the Christakis at Yale University and there was the article on Vox that was by the anonymous author saying that he fears his liberal students. So that's when I started noticing that something may be wrong. And I wasn't sure if that was just a one-off incident at Yale but then it seemed to be increasing with frequency. And then I was worried about coming to Canada.

And so probably Jordan Peterson—when he spoke out, that's when I really started to become concerned and was really keeping an eye on what's happening in the university to the best of my ability.

Chris Martin: And did you know Jordan when you were at Toronto?

Rick Mehta: No. Actually – or even at McGill, what's interesting is I started at McGill with my grad degree just as he was leaving. So there may have been overlap but if there was, it was minimal and we didn't even have it – I never even got introduced to him.

Chris Martin: That's interesting. You're actually our first guest from Canada. I interviewed David Frum who was born in Canada but he is American now and he's outside academia. So as our first representative from Canada, do you feel like the situation in Canada is roughly similar? I know one difference legally speaking is that there's no First Amendment there but in terms of culture, it does seem like the culture of university is similar.

Rick Mehta: Yes. I guess I would not have suspected. I guess my – I thought that maybe it was happening at other universities and it wasn't something that was actually happening at Acadia until I did my talk on free speech and that's when students would come up to me and tell me silently that, "We support you but that we're afraid to speak up."

So one was even saying that the atmosphere at Acadia was worse. She felt more frightened here at Acadia than she did in Communist China and said she had that feeling that there's some kind of revolution in the air, just really – that there was a lot of tension just that it was all going beneath the radar and silent.

Chris Martin: So did some of that student feedback come before you gave [that big talk at Acadia University](#)?

Rick Mehta: Well, it started coming after I organized my panel discussion in May last year. So afterwards, that's when a few students said to me, "Thank you for organizing it." And some stories started coming out of the woodwork. And yeah, so I had informed the VP Academic because she would ask me for a feedback on the event I had organized because she wanted a blurb for the governor's report. And so at that point, I did express that there might be more at stake than might be a parent but I never got an email or a response for that message to meet or follow up.

Chris Martin: I don't believe that panel is on YouTube. Can you speak a bit about what that panel was about?

Rick Mehta: It's on my YouTube channel. So far, there are only two videos there. So if you type in Rick Mehta free speech, it will take you to my YouTube channel. So what happened was last May when I was first not sure what was happening with the free speech issue, I thought, "Let's get more information."

So I organized [a panel discussion](#). And so the first hour with the actual discussion went was fine and interesting. It was interesting to hear the different perspective. That's the first I had heard of the Tuvel controversy. I had no idea about that. So that put on the radar in terms of the academic mapping when it comes to peer review journals.

And it was interesting hearing the one person who said, "Oh, there's no issue of free speech on campus. It's not a big deal." But then later on, he was saying that – admit to self-censoring and, "I'm worried about other philosophers hearing – watching this video in case that comes back to haunt me."

So there just seemed to be some interesting discrepancies there. So the first hour was smooth but then the second hour when you look at the kinds of questions that were asked, I think it speaks for itself because there were just these extended diatribes but no actual position put forth as here's a potential problem or even here's maybe a potential solution.

Chris Martin: That's interesting. When I search for your YouTube videos, the first thing that comes up is your big speech called Free Speech in Universities that you gave at Acadia and then there are a number of interviews with you. Gad Saad is the one at the top. I didn't know there was a panel. I have to look that up.

So at that panel, you didn't actually have protests per se but you had very hostile questions, is that right?

Rick Mehta: Well, they weren't really questions as it was, just these extended – to me, they just seemed like extended rants. I think yeah, it's best to let viewers watch for themselves.

Chris Martin: And the talk you gave, it looked like there was no Q&A session, so this talk, Free Speech in Universities. It's about an hour and 45 minutes long. It looked like that actually went pretty well and the student group that sponsored it is still there at Acadia and the Acadia Student Government if I recall also sponsored it. Was there any blowback because of that?

Rick Mehta: Well, it's kind of interesting in terms of what did happen there. So what got included in the audio recording but not in the video were the questions that were asked. So what I found interesting is that almost no faculty members showed up to the talk. So there were only two or three in total, two of which asked questions and both of those were very hostile.

So basically, the first question was about one or two slides and just saying, those are already discredited even though those studies have just come out the week prior. And I think then that faculty member then took the trouble to email me with a follow-up to say how wrong I was. And what's interesting is that the rebuttals he had given had since been rebutted themselves.

Then the other person just discredited the entire talk all together as just, "All you did was present anecdotes and the plural of anecdote is not data." So that was her criticism. So she had asked about some particular type of study that I wasn't aware of. And so she said on the basis of that, the whole talk should be discredited. And later, actually followed up by public email where she said that my talk was I think the worst violation of academic integrity she had ever seen.

Yeah, so that's sort of from the faculty. And then in terms of the student group, I noticed that the newspaper, the way they went about advertising, it seemed a little strange to me, they advertised it as if it was a debate, which it wasn't. And on top of that, what was supposed to happen was a discussion was supposed to happen a couple of weeks afterwards to go over the ideas in my talk and that never actually did materialize.

And then for the Acadia Student Union, they had endorsed the talk initially. Later on, I got an email from the president of the Student Union just saying, "We supported your talk but we didn't endorse it. We generally don't go around endorsing events." And so, I kept those emails.

Chris Martin: So you have received some support from Mark Mercer, the Chair of the Philosophy Department publicly. But you've mentioned in many cases, it's just people expressing support privately which I've also heard at American universities. Is that correct?

Rick Mehta: Yes. So what's interesting is after I did my [talk at ideacity Conference](#) held in Toronto a couple of weeks ago, a filmmaker came up to me, a Canadian documentary filmmaker and she said she had no trouble in past getting drug dealers to appear before her camera and speak about their experiences. But that she was having difficulty getting professors—tenured professors—to appear before a camera. So they said that if they did – they would be willing to speak but it was on the condition of having anonymity so like their face is blacked out and maybe even their voice is altered. I can't remember if she said that or not.

But that I think gives you a state of what – an idea of what the state of universities is right now. People are afraid to speak.

Chris Martin: Yeah, that is quite shocking. So in terms of students at Acadia, have they been mixed in terms of their support? Is there a faction of students who is pretty supportive but again, privately?

Rick Mehta: Yes. What's interesting is that when I spoke out in the classroom, that's when I started actually noticing what was happening because if I just give let's say my overall instructor ratings, so I had 40% gave me 4's and 5's, 45% giving me 1's and 2's, and only 20% giving me 3's. And normally, I don't get that many 1's and 2's. It's like it has to be a really bad year. But this was interesting year for the Introductory Psychology too which I hadn't taught in 10 years. And so even though I taught it the same way, I mean I spoke about other issues that I just figured got updated for modern context. But the reaction that I got which was quite strong and visceral and resistant to any disconfirming information, that is something I've never seen before, at least not in that kind of – not to that magnitude.

Chris Martin: Now, you've spoken about possible solutions to the problem. Have you tried to implement any of those solutions?

Rick Mehta: Well, no one wants to discuss them. So there's not much I can do from within the university. So that's why I started going to social media. And so these days, I try to use Twitter as my main feed, main way of communicating with the outside world.

Chris Martin: OK. I mean Canada does have Jordan Peterson and Lindsay Shepherd as well-known figures in the academic freedom debate. Are there any other people speaking out at universities let's say further west like QBC?

Rick Mehta: Apart from Gad Saad, the only other professor I know of who is quite public would be Janice Fiamengo from the University of Ottawa. And I believe that Paul Quirk who is an I believe philosophy at the University of British Columbia has been trying to implement change from within his institution and is involved with free speech efforts there.

Chris Martin: That's interesting. So there's some support but it's mixed. I know at the Heterodox Academy Conference last month and I don't recall meeting anyone from Canada. It was a pretty US-centric event to be honest. There may have been one or two people from Canada whom I didn't talk to. So in some ways, here in the US, we only hear about these stories from Canada typically around Jordan Peterson, Lindsay Shepherd, and other famous case. But it's hard to get a sense of how much political or ideological diversity there is at Canadian universities.

Would you say there is at least a certain degree of religious diversity with some that are just conservatives and some are just liberals because of the immigration?

Rick Mehta: It's possible maybe in some of the departments like let's say Theology Department or maybe Engineering. But I think for the most part, the data that we see in the US are applicable to Canada.

Chris Martin: Are you planning to do any psychological research either on decision-making or ideological prejudice?

Rick Mehta: Well, I did a report study at the Canadian Society for Brain Behavior and Cognitive Science. So there's a scale called the Bullshit Receptivity Scale. And so the way it's worded right now in the current – what's published is there are a bunch of statements, some which are true and then some which are just statements of random words put together but are syntactically correct. And so I think the ones they used are let's say, as examples are, Deepak Chopra's tweets and he asked people to give ratings of how profound they are. And so for those nonsensical ones, if you give high ratings then that's considered not being able to detect BS.

So when my honors student was doing the project on that scale, she thought why not just ask people just straight upfront, "Is this BS, yes or no?" And what I decided to do is add just one question at the end which was I added one – the statement "because it's 2017." So the rationale

for that is that our Prime Minister, the Canadian Prime Minister, one of his first actions was making a gender balance to Cabinet. And when asked why he said, “Well, because it’s 2015” that was the response that was given.

And I noticed that academics seemed to really rejoice in that response. But if you look at comments on any newspaper article, people thought it was a nonsensical. And so, I thought well, what students would say to that. And at the demographic section, just ask for their political orientation. I just used the categories that are on the Heterodox Academy website.

And so what I found was the left progressives classified did not – only 55% classified that statement as BS. But people of other orientations so at least 67% or above said it was. So I found that rather interesting. And so that’s something I want to follow up on.

Chris Martin: Interesting. So are you planning to do any more studies of that type or do you have graduate students who are interested in this?

Rick Mehta: Well, I’m hoping to have if not an honors student and maybe a student who is willing to do it as a third year project. So we’re meeting next week to try to figure out the nuts and bolts because what I’d like to do for the follow-up is have more statements from the Canadian Prime Minister or from other members of his Cabinet and then see what people say.

So based on their tweets because what I find interesting here in the Canadian context is people like the academics here will make all kind of criticism about Donald Trump and his administration but I haven’t heard – I’ve heard next to nothing about our own Canadian Prime Minister. And of course, when it comes to politics, they’re good to make good and bad decisions and smart and not great statements but we haven’t really had most discussion about that for our own Prime Minister and he seeming to be getting a pass. So I thought it might be interesting looking at within our own context because it doesn’t seem like anyone else is asking that question.

Chris Martin: Speaking of the Prime Minister, when you look at the population as a whole, do you feel like the Canadian population is also polarized in the way the American electorate is?

Rick Mehta: I believe it’s starting to get more in that direction. It’s not something that has been the kind it has been like previously. But especially in more recent years it has become that way. So I think my impression is especially since Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister.

Chris Martin: I don’t know if any surveys, I’m sure there are out there, but I don’t know if any surveys off the top of my head that have looked at. There are many, many surveys in the US every year about polarization and effective polarization is now a big issue. I know you talked about that in your talk a little, this effective disagreement with the other side or discussed this like whatever you would prefer to call it.

Now in terms of your job, I know you can’t divulge too many details but can you talk about whether people at the university have called for your removal?

Rick Mehta: Yeah. I guess – yeah, those are the ones you hear from. And I know there are ones who are again, who are silently supporting me. But in terms of the facts on that, well, what’s interesting is that the investigation was – the VP Academic did send a letter to me saying, “You’re going to be investigated.” And I posted that online.

So I guess since then, what I find interesting is that our Equity Officer resigned over the University’s handling of my investigation. So think of widespread publicity but it’s in a magazine called Frank Magazine, that’s local probably to Atlantic Canada. So there’s in the print magazine. Unfortunately, they didn’t put their article online but that is where that has gotten coverage.

So I guess that's one objective fact I can disclose because it is out there in the media. And I guess with my courses, so I used to teach the large sections of Introductory Psychology. And this past year, I was given the second half whereas probably I think since 2006 I taught the first half almost every year consistently. And last year at this time, I had gotten two teaching awards for my teaching. But now, that course was taken away from me.

So in terms of what has been told to me is that it was just a discretionary decision made by my department and that's in my appeal, that's what the dean said that there was nothing wrong there. All the procedures were followed. There's no – your change wasn't disciplinary in any kind of fashion. However, in a statement to the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, our media spokesperson had said that students were offended by a tweet I had made in January would not be required to take courses with me.

And in a career development letter that I had received, my designated head, so in a section on deficiencies, he had said, "Concerns about Rick's teaching had been addressed by the change in his teaching allocations." So I guess those are the objective facts.

Chris Martin: So unfortunately, it does seem there have been consequences?

Rick Mehta: Yeah, I guess. Yeah. I let the listeners decide for themselves.

Chris Martin: In terms of the panel you just appeared on, if I recall, Lindsay Shepherd was also on that panel. She was also at the Heterodox Academy Conference. Who else was on that panel?

Rick Mehta: One was a retired faculty member from I believe it's Queens and I think he was in English. The other person is someone who has been – Chris DiCarlo, that was his name. Yeah, so he has been trying to get an academic position but he keeps just getting the short-term teaching contracts and he is always having to reapply and is never sure if he actually going to get the contract. So that's the situation he is in and it's just for promoting critical thinking in the classroom.

Chris Martin: And how was the reception? Was it pretty hostile?

Rick Mehta: Actually, that one was – went over very smoothly. So I was a little worried because a Halifax-based activist had posted about it on her Facebook page but that didn't gain much traction in Ottawa.

I think the other factor that worked in our favor for that event going smoothly was that it wasn't being held during the semester. And so, I think a lot of the students who would be protesters were gone from campus.

Yeah. So I think those factors worked in our favor so there weren't any disruptions or anything like that. And it was held at the Ottawa Public Library and not on campus, so that might have been yet another factor that worked in our favor.

But no, it ran smoothly. The questions that were asked by audience members were good and got more public support I guess from people and they would come talk to me after the panel discussion was over.

Chris Martin: Can you remember any of the questions you got from the audience and whether any interesting critiques?

Rick Mehta: I guess it has been – it's a couple of months ago so I can't remember the details. I think there's just a lot of people saying, "This is not the way I remembered my university years." And I'll just say that after the ideacity Conference, I had a couple of faculty members who had come from Russia and they had said that the climate on campus was very much what they had tried to escape and just the number of topics you can discuss and then the number of viewpoints that you can actually put forth is getting smaller and smaller. So ...

Chris Martin: I feel like I can relate to that a little. I'm from India myself and I left India around the time Hindu Fundamentalist parties were starting to be successful in parliamentary elections. And my father – well, my family is Catholic and so my father thought it would be better for me to immigrate sooner rather than later. I had – I eventually had plans to immigrate anyway.

And I do remember one of the things that happened during that era was mobs would show up and even though what they were doing was legally impermissible the police wouldn't do anything about that, and that was quite disturbing. And one of the reasons I came to the US was the situation – the law and order situation here was better and in theory at least, you couldn't get away with that sort of behavior.

And I do feel like at some universities now, depending on which student group you are affiliated with, you can engage in mob-like behavior and sometimes face no consequences for it. So I see how people from places like China and Russia are also sensing that atmosphere here.

So to wrap up, do you have any closing thoughts or would you like to talk about any upcoming panel appearances or articles that you might be writing?

Rick Mehta: I guess I just have so much on the plate. I'm just hoping I can get back to my normal work in terms of planning my course, trying to work on my research and not still with – yeah, I guess the way I see it is yeah, the forms of academic mobbing that are taking place just because of a viewpoint being expressed that people disagree with.

Chris Martin: And your research is just told containing to be primarily about decision-making, is that correct?

Rick Mehta: Yes. I'm hoping to try to publish some of the work that my honor students had done. So yeah, the one on the decision-making. One student had looked at perceptions of singles versus married people. And so, I'll try to look at that issue. Do we see or still see singlism in 2018 compared to the other research that was the main research that was done I think back in 2006.

Chris Martin: OK. It will be interesting to see the results of that. I go to social psych conferences and maybe I'll see one of those if it's not presented at a personal or romantic relationships conference but at the social conference. Is that where your students typically present?

Rick Mehta: Well typically, they'll present within the Canadian conferences. And so if they had presented, it has been the Canadian Society for Brain Behavior and Cognitive Science. So in terms of that research on singlism, when I was meeting with an honor student and trying to figure out what she might want to do, I mentioned that I had passing interest in that question. Her eyes just lit up. And so, she was keenly more interested in that than my research on decision-making per se. So I thought that's a form of decision-making, this perception of others.

So, I decided to – we decided to go with that and she was very keen. She worked really hard on that project in terms of getting all the literature reviews, letting me know what was happening, planning out the study and a lot of the details. It really was a true collaborative effort as opposed to some honors theses where they just hand the student a project and they just do the leg work.

Chris Martin: Well, it has been good having you on the show. Thanks for your work in Canada and thanks for being a member of Heterodox Academy.

Rick Mehta: Oh, it's my pleasure. I figured that this is part of my duty as being an academic.

Chris Martin: You can follow Rick on Twitter @RickRMehta, and you can find several other interviews with him on YouTube. Half Hour of Heterodoxy is produced by Heterodox Academy.

You can find us on Twitter @Hdxacademy and on the web at heterodoxacademy.org. Thanks for listening.
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