

Book Notes: Academic Freedom in the Wired World: Political Extremism, Corporate Power, and the University, by Robert O'Neil

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Book Note**ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE WIRED WORLD: POLITICAL
EXTREMISM, CORPORATE POWER, AND THE UNIVERSITY,
by Robert O'Neil¹**

STEPHANIE ANDERSON

ROBERT O'NEIL NAVIGATES the rapidly changing and contentious landscape of academic freedom from a passionate pro-freedom of expression stance. The title of the book does not do it justice: O'Neil explores academic freedom from all vantage points and does not limit his analysis to the "wired world." Specifically, he focuses on the issues that have been raised in regard to freedom of expression in the post-September 11 ("9/11") era and their effect on limiting academic freedom.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first explores the history of academic freedom by outlining the developments that led to the contemporary concerns surrounding freedom of expression. One example that presents itself throughout the book is Northwestern University Professor Arthur Butz's statements concerning the Holocaust.

The second chapter examines the role of higher education groups, including the American Association of University Professors, in recognizing and protecting academic freedom by using collective bargaining and other negotiation strategies to prevent problems of academic freedom from arising.

Much of O'Neil's book focuses on the US context. In the third chapter, he analyzes the protections for academic freedom provided by the US Constitution, most of which are only applicable to public institutions. The progress that academic freedom protection has seen over the last fifty years is largely due to the recognition of constitutional free speech rights in the academic setting. The fourth chapter embarks on a comparison between two times of crisis in the United States: the post-9/11 era and the McCarthy era. Here, O'Neil shows that

1. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 312 pages.

9/11 did not dramatically affect academic freedom as compared to the decrease in academic freedom that was seen during the McCarthy era.

The fifth chapter shifts the book's focus toward subject-specific academic freedom concerns, beginning with the research lab. Here, concerns over the lack of privacy and academic freedom protection granted to researchers caught in the litigation crossfire are shown to be more common than expected. While the author notes that similar concerns have been raised in Canada, he concludes that analogies are impossible to draw since academic freedom is only protected in Canada by contract law, rather than by constitutional law. In the sixth chapter, we see how academic freedom can impact the dramatic and visual arts. The author argues that virtually all artistic expression originates in the academic setting; therefore, it is vital to uphold freedom of speech safeguards in this specific context to further encourage the dissemination of the arts.

It is not until the seventh chapter of the book that O'Neil embarks on his analysis concerning the "wired world." He postulates that the growing use of the internet has caused academic freedom to diminish, despite the increased protection that universities have brought to the academic setting over the last fifty years.

O'Neil also considers, in the eighth chapter, who should actually benefit from the academic freedom that universities and public bodies aim to protect in the event that the interests of the institution, faculty, and students collide. The views and values of professors have always been of interest to university students, but in recent years increased curiosity has created concerns over students' freedom to learn in a balanced and ideologically and politically unbiased environment. In the ninth chapter, the author offers several suggestions to create an unbiased learning environment, such as instituting cross-departmental faculty positions or visiting faculty positions, while ensuring that legislatures, governments, or private bodies are not dictating such change.

The book's final chapter largely addresses overarching questions and the future implications of academic freedom rights: "First, does academic freedom really matter? Second, how secure is academic freedom? And third, how might academic freedom be made more secure?"²

Robert O'Neil writes from an illustrious background in free speech rights. His book effectively shows how academic freedom should be a concern not just for academics but for anyone in the modern corporate and political world. O'Neil touches on virtually all aspects of academic freedom, thus making *Academic Freedom in the Wired World* an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of this hotly debated subject.

2. *Ibid* at 269.