The Voice of the 'Intellectual Dark Web'

by Amelia Lester via gayle - Politico *Monday, Nov 12 2018, 12:25am*
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> One evening this fall at a house in West Hollywood, the Australian editor and writer Claire Lehmann had dinner with the neuroscientist Sam Harris and Eric Weinstein, the managing director of tech entrepreneur Peter Thiel's investment firm. Joe Rogan, the podcast host, joined later on, when the group decamped to a comedy club.

You could think of the gathering as a board meeting of sorts for the "intellectual dark web," or IDW, a loose cadre of academics, journalists and tech entrepreneurs who view themselves as standing up to the knee-jerk left-leaning politics of academia and the media. Over the past year, the IDW has arisen as a puzzling political force, made up of thinkers who support "Enlightenment values" and accuse the left of setting dangerously illiberal limits on acceptable thought. The IDW has defined itself mainly by diving into third-rail topics like the genetics of gender and racial difference—territory that seems even more fraught in the era of #MeToo and the Trump resistance. But part of the attraction of the IDW is the sense that many more people agree with its principles than can come forward publicly: The dinner host on this night, Lehmann says, was a famous person she would prefer not to name.

Over steaks, Lehmann recalls, the conversation revolved around a brewing academic scandal, a prank engineered by friends of hers. They had successfully placed seven nonsensical research papers in various academic journals devoted to what they characterized as "grievance studies." One of the papers included a lengthy passage from Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf, rewritten to focus on feminism and intersectionality. Another was about rape culture in dog parks. Absurd as the papers were, they had been accepted by expert editors and published as serious research. For those in attendance, it was a ringing confirmation of just how politicized academia had become, and how blindly devoted to fashionable moralities.

It was also a big story for Quillette, the online magazine Lehmann runs and the unofficial digest of the IDW. Lehmann had known about the prank before the Wall Street Journal broke the news, and she had some time to formulate a response that would fan the flames. "I wanted the public to be

aware that there are many people within the academy who are fed up with grievance studies scholarship," says Lehmann, who went on to publish responses from five like-minded academics—one of whom called the incident "a Cultural Revolution in our own backyard."

For readers and thinkers who regard themselves as intellectually curious but feel alienated from the lock-step politics of universities and the broader left, Quillette has become a haven for stories like this—and topics treated as taboo elsewhere. At times, it has drawn intense social media backlash, with contributors labeled everything from "clowns" to "cryptofascists" on Twitter. But fans of the site include pop psychologist Jordan Peterson, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, psychology professors Steven Pinker of Harvard and Jonathan Haidt of New York University, and columnists like David Brooks, Meghan Daum and Andrew Sullivan. "I continue to be impressed that Quillette publishes heterodox but intellectually serious and non-inflammatory pieces [about] ideas that have become near-taboo in academic and intellectual discourse," Pinker wrote to me in an email, "including ones connected to heritability, sex and sex differences, race, culture, Islam, free speech and violence." Haidt, co-author of the recent book The Coddling of the American Mind, called Quillette in an email "a gathering place for people who love to play with ideas and hate being told that there are ideas they are not supposed to play with."

This kind of prominence hardly seemed inevitable when Lehmann, now 33, founded Quillette in 2015. She was pregnant and had recently decided against finishing her master's degree in forensic psychology. The site, with the tagline "a platform for free thought," began as a repository for psychologists, particularly evolutionary ones, to write in an accessible way about topics relating to human nature. Contributors often shared Lehmann's interest in debunking the "blank slate" theory of human development, which postulates that individuals are largely products of nurture, not nature. But, Lehmann told me, it quickly grew beyond that topic. In "setting up a space where we could critique the blank slate orthodoxy," she says, Quillette "has naturally evolved into a place where people critique other aspects of what they see as left-wing orthodoxy."

Quillette now publishes roughly seven to 10 articles each week. The suppression of free speech on campus is a big theme, as is the reality of sex difference and the revisiting of post-colonial relations—all in their own way denunciations of what Lehmann describes as the left's "purity politics." The list of the site's all-time Top 10 most-read articles includes "The Psychology of Progressive Hostility," "I Was the Mob Until the Mob Came for Me" and "Why Women Don't Code." (Short answer: Because they don't want to.) Quillette's rapid-fire response in support of James Damore, the writer of the notorious "Google memo" that criticized attempts to promote women and minorities within the organization, was so popular that the site crashed. (Lehmann's tech support team told her it could have been a successful denial-of-service attack.) And when the writer Stephen Elliott wanted to protest his inclusion on the widely circulated "Shitty Media Men" list, he turned to Quillette, which published his essay, "How an Anonymous Accusation Derailed My Life," this fall. (Shortly after the article ran, Elliott sued the creator of the list, Moira Donegan, for $1.5 million in damages.) But Quillette's editorial mix is more unpredictable than these greatest hits might suggest; recently, a treatise against thank-you notes led the site for a few days.

Over a 30-day period this fall, Quillette received north of 2 million page views—more than the New York Review of Books, and more than Harper's and Tablet combined, according to data Lehmann provided from the analytics service Alexa. Twitter, the forum of choice for contrarians, is the site's biggest driver of traffic. Lehmann herself has more than 100,000 followers, and giants like Peterson and Pinker regularly tweet links to Quillette articles. In June, Peterson, who has encouraged his followers to donate to the site, tweeted, "Quillette gives me hope for the future of journalism."

Lehmann, though, doesn't think of herself as a journalist. When I spoke with her by phone from her

home in Sydney, she said she's not even very interested in politics. And as a woman and an Australian, she is an unusual gatekeeper for a group that is mostly male and almost entirely American. (They're also mostly, though not all, white, as is Lehmann.) "I'm an outsider to the debate," Lehmann concedes. "I think that helps." Whether you think the magazine is a "safe space for academics and others with novel ideas who feel stifled by oppressive social and speech norms," as Lehmann herself does, or a "hub for reactionary thought," per the website the Outline, Quillette keeps appearing in roiling controversies about speech and identity, so much so that what started as a niche destination for evolutionary psychologists is now on the front lines of the culture wars. Yet, with its increased popularity comes greater scrutiny of Quillette's controversial ideas—as well as the risk that its mostly dry, academic discussion could become flash points for extremists. Just how far will Quillette go in its devotion to iconoclasm?

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Long before she launched Quillette, Lehmann says, she had found herself out of step with her peer group in the academic world. At the University of Adelaide, she started out as an English major but recoiled from the emphasis on post-structuralist theory, which she believed to be a set of "bad and faulty" ideas. ("I read Foucault and thought it was bullshit," she says.) She wound up graduating in 2010 with a psychology degree and worked for a year in Australia's capital city of Canberra at the Department of Health. "My first week, I was tasked with writing letters, and I was immediately told I was completing the task too quickly," Lehmann says. "It was like a Kafka novel." The daughter of an artist and a child-care worker, she had grown up comfortably ensconced in Adelaide's urban left. On seeing the inefficiencies and waste of public funds firsthand, she turned away from the politics of her upbringing.

Lehmann, who talks slowly and carefully, with a scientific precision, describes herself as "centrist." But like many of Quillette's ilk, her views are not easy to locate on the political spectrum. Although she calls herself a feminist—she cites maternity leave and other "policies that focus on women's role as carers" as issues important to her—she is very much out of the feminist mainstream, as her first forays into opinion writing demonstrated.

Quillette's Fan Club

"Progressive public commentators do not like to admit that marriage is actually good for women and children, or that a happy marriage is associated with better well-being, longevity and lifetime health," went Lehmann's first op-ed, in the Sydney Morning Herald, in 2013. She also argued that "having a male breadwinner around actually makes life a great deal easier" for women and children. Lehmann had by that time left Canberra for Sydney, where she was pursuing her graduate psychology degree and was also about to marry her now-husband, who runs his own real estate startup.

A longtime Herald columnist, Paul Sheehan, had approached her about writing for the newspaper after discovering her on Twitter. "What Paul said to me was I was one of the only young people he noticed who weren't full of cynicism," Lehmann says. "I was expressing earnest opinions." Although she never imagined herself a columnist and the feedback to her initial piece, she told me, was "incredibly nasty," Lehmann enjoyed the writing process and wanted to do more. Sheehan, a controversial conservative who over a 30-year career at the Herald decried, among other things, multiculturalism, Muslim culture and overstep in sexual assault cases, wrote to me in an email that he was "immediately struck by the elegance of her posts. … She did not follow the herd."

It is worth noting that the herd in Australia, a nation of about 25 million people, is pretty small. Rupert Murdoch owns more than 60 percent of the daily newspapers sold in the country, so there

are not all that many platforms. As Lehmann tells it, she was eager to keep writing for the paper but was shut out by a feminist clique of editors. On YouTube, there is a 2017 interview with Lehmann by Ezra Levant, an excitable Canadian who runs the right-wing website Rebel Media. As the two stand beside the steps of the Sydney Opera House, squinting into the sun, Lehmann says, “I particularly wanted to criticize feminism, and I couldn’t get published in the Australian media if I was critical of feminism. … I was blacklisted.”

Whether or not Lehmann was indeed blacklisted from what is arguably Australia’s most respected newspaper, which in turn led her to start her own publication, remains relevant. Cries of victimhood, or of being silenced for voicing unpopular viewpoints, are common grievances among her site’s contributors. Free-speech activists often depict themselves as embattled defenders of reason, even when they speak from positions of power. Lehmann mentioned to me that one editor in particular was determined to shut her out from the Herald and had even tried to ban her. But when I asked that editor, Sarah Oakes, who at the time led the women’s vertical Daily Life, she disputed Lehmann’s account and said she had to google the name to jog her memory. “I never thought it was a good fit,” Oakes wrote in an email. “I certainly never ‘banned’ her and in my recollection I never spoke to her directly.” (Full disclosure: I am a contributing writer to the Herald’s weekend magazine and have written for Oakes before, though not while she was at the Herald.)

Everyone agrees, at least, on the awesome rapidity of what happened next, which is that Lehmann set up her own website in less than two weeks. Her provocative columns could have found a home at Murdoch’s conservative broadsheet the Australian, perhaps, but by then Lehmann had fallen in with an international crowd of psychologists on Twitter, and had set her sights on a bigger stage. Besides, the Australian, she says, was “partisan and narrow,” and she wanted to do something “fresh and interesting.” Peter Thiel’s Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future, which she was reading at the time, “gave me the inspiration to do my own venture,” she says. As Sheehan puts it: “She created Quillette in her living room, with no staff, while having a second baby, and teaching herself coding, and catching the train to a part-time job.”

Quillette, which has three other editors who work remotely, operates without advertising, but, according to Lehmann, it is turning a profit. Patreon, a crowdfunding platform, is Quillette’s primary source of revenue, which is steadily growing; in September, Patreon donations brought in $19,000. In addition, Lehmann says the site has “a few supporters” in California who send some money every quarter. Although all the editors are paid, only Lehmann and one other work full time on the site. Writers have been paid from the start. About half the stories are commissioned, at a rate of 400 Australian dollars per article (less than $300 U.S.), and the rest are unsolicited manuscripts, for which Quillette pays less. Lehmann says she is not “living in luxury,” but, “I’m making a living off the site now.”

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Today, Lehmann admits Quillette has become something different from what she first envisioned. “I thought we would be more oriented towards scientific discussions,” she says, but it is the site’s heterodox articles about politics, culture and the academy that have attracted broader attention.

Take a well-read piece published in September, “Academic Activists Send a Published Paper Down the Memory Hole,” written by Ted Hill, an emeritus professor of math at Georgia Tech. In it, Hill says that a mathematical paper he wrote about the possible evolutionary underpinnings of gender differences was pulled from two separate journals after an intimidation campaign by academic activists. I’m not a mathematician and am not able to adjudicate the validity of Hill’s research, which Lehmann tells me underwent two weeks of fact-checking by one of her editors. But Andrew Gelman,

a statistician at Columbia University, wrote a post on his personal blog saying that Hill had "no direct evidence" that the paper had been discarded based on politics, rather than merit. "The most unfortunate part of the story," Gelman wrote, "is the amplification of Hill's post throughout Twitter, Quillette, 4chan, etc., abetted by thought leaders on Twitter, leading to noxious hatred spewed at Amie Wilkinson." (Wilkinson is a math professor Hill had blamed for suppressing his work.)

"Noxious hatred," and in particular misogyny, is rife in the comments on Hill's article; the phrase "vaginal privilege" makes an appearance, as do predictable tirades against "whiny" feminists. Lehmann says she regrets not moderating those comments but that she isn't worried about reasonable arguments on Quillette's website being hijacked by unreasonable people. "We've become a place where people who don't fit perfectly into a little box or a label can feel at home and not under pressure to identify with one tribe or another," she says. I was curious, though, if there were certain political positions Lehmann would disavow, either personally or as an editor. Lehmann says that because she is an atheist, she feels alienated from the Christian right. "I would identify with the left if they were a little more old-school in their advocacy for workers," she allowed, "but I'm not too bothered to be aligned with a political movement."

But, I pressed, is she worried about extremists using Quillette articles about inflammatory matters like race and gender to validate their views? "We don't want to be considered provocateurs," she said. "We never publish anything about Milo Yiannopoulos"—the British polemicist formerly of Breitbart—"and we never defended him even though I would agree with him on free speech issues. We never respected his methods of causing outrage for the sake of it." She did say that she wouldn't want Quillette to be associated with "anything like ethno-nationalism" or "racist, bigoted viewpoints." Ultimately, Lehmann says she can't take responsibility for how posts will be interpreted. "If we are constantly inhibiting ourselves because we're worried about people misusing our work," she says, "that presents its own ethical problem and leads to a corrosion of honesty."

Ben Winegard, an assistant professor of psychology at Hillsdale College, a small Christian school in Michigan, isn't as sanguine as Lehmann. In 2016, he co-authored an article for Quillette titled "On the Reality of Race and the Abhorrence of Racism," arguing that race exists and corresponds to genetic differences, and that denying this fact "leaves a vacuum for extremists to exploit." It's not something Winegard, who identifies as a "New Deal Democrat," would write today. "I have had to stop writing about race because it's just so toxic and not even responsible to do," he told me. Winegard remains an avid Quillette reader and says the work it does is "important." But there are risks inherent in a research forum raising difficult questions about gender, race and intelligence, he says: Young people might glom on with a wrongheaded view of the data. He also worries that the site, ironically, is becoming an echo chamber in the name of radical openness. "There's a risk," he says, "that it does just become an outlet for a lot of people who feel grievances about identity politics and political correctness."

It's not as though Lehmann wants an echo chamber, either. "I want to give more of a platform for people on the left who are in support of liberal values," she says. "We want to get more conservatives who feel disillusioned with whatever conservative bubble they're in." Winegard told me with admiration that he didn't know what Lehmann's own politics are, exactly, and she told me she doesn't agree with everything she publishes.

"Sometimes there are misrepresentations, and people assume that my politics is far more right-wing than it actually is," she says. "I think because I'm Australian, and I take so many things for granted like universal health care, access to abortion, and we don't have guns everywhere."

This is a theme to which Lehmann returns: From outside the United States, she is not "emotionally

invested” in American politics and so can better diagnose that country’s pathology. “Everyone in the U.S. is lost in the weeds. They’re focusing on the minutiae of what’s happening to Trump,” she says, or “getting upset over Nike sponsoring that NFL player. … We don’t feel the need to constantly follow what’s in the news.” Lehmann has consciously hired Canadian and British editors, and one thing that is generally absent on the site is coverage of Donald Trump. “You’ve got to inevitably choose a side in America. You can’t just sit in the middle,” says Mark Carnegie, an Australian venture capitalist and a backer of the site. Quillette is powerful, he says, because it’s “an independent media voice.”

Lehmann has two children now, ages 5 and 2, and she is happy to have built herself a self-sustaining, family-friendly career. Her plans for Quillette are to keep doing what it does, at scale. She recently announced a new slate of columnists and launched a Quillette podcast she is co-hosting, featuring interviews with contributors. It’s all part of the site’s efforts to “broaden the Overton window,” Lehmann says—referring to a term that originated in the late 1990s as a synonym for reasonable political discourse but more recently has been hijacked by the alt-right in an attempt to normalize extreme rhetoric. For Quillette to avoid the same fate will require vigilance. “It will never be a completely mainstream publication,” Lehmann says. “We just want to capture the highly educated but open-minded, curious, heterodox audience wherever they are.”

https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/11/intellectual-dark-web-quillette-claire-lehmann-221917
