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# Students are 'learning' about Israel–Hamas from TikTok. We must step up

**Gen Z students need practical courses in how to distinguish fact from opinion and assess online sources' credibility, says Eli Gottlieb**

The pile-on that led the University of Pennsylvania's president, Elizabeth Magill, to resign following her embarrassing evasions the previous week at a congressional hearing on campus antisemitism, was understandable. But it misses the point.

The problem isn't the cowardice or selectively applied anti-discrimination policies of a particular president or university. It's not even toleration of students and faculty who abuse university platforms to justify terrorism. The root problem is that universities have long been derelict in their first duty: namely, to teach students how to be responsible consumers and producers of knowledge.

Demonstrations on campus since the Hamas attacks in October have been characterised less by physical violence or intentional incitement than by displays of shocking ignorance. Students call for Palestine to be free from the river to the sea, but few know which river or which sea. They shout about oppression and genocide without considering how such terms might apply to the Hamas regime they

seek to defend. This isn't because they've been brainwashed by woke faculty. It's because they get their news and opinions from Reddit, TikTok and Instagram.

Since you're reading this rather than thumbing through TikTok, you might not appreciate just how bad things are out there on social media. Much of the misinformation to which today's undergraduates are exposed comes not from AI-generated deepfakes or even from "cheapfakes" that repurpose video from other sources into propaganda about the current conflict. It comes, instead, from talking head videos by Gen Z influencers, who state as fact mixes of opinion, conspiracy theory and specious analogy. The worst thing about such influencers is not that they make claims that are wrong but that they make no attempt whatsoever to base their claims on evidence.

Professors can't improve the quality of what influencers say on social media, but they can influence how students consume it.

Universities aren't governments; no one needs their statements on foreign policy. Nor

is it their job to defend free speech or to protect minorities from racist violence: these are matters for law enforcement. Universities have one job, which is to educate. And Gen Z students are in desperate need of education.

Many of my fellow professors agree. But they fear it's impossible to educate students about the Israel-Hamas war without stirring up further controversy or, worse, being cancelled. Their fears are warranted. When history, geography and politics are this contentious, it's hard to teach anything of substance that won't put you on someone's blacklist.

To this I have two responses. First, grow up. If you can't teach in ways that aren't partisan or you don't have the courage to take on entitled students, choose another profession. Second, tackle the medium, not the message. More than Israel-Palestine 101, Gen Z students need practical courses in how to distinguish fact from opinion and how to assess an online source's credibility.

I'm a professor of cognitive psychology. I study how people's identities affect how they judge credibility online. For over a decade, I also directed an institute in Jerusalem whose faculty and students comprised Jews and Arabs from across the political spectrum, ranging from settlers to anti-occupation activists. My research and professional experience have taught me two things. First, when people from opposing sides are brought together to jointly evaluate controversial claims, they pay closer attention to the evidence and are readier to revise their prior assumptions. Second, to lead a pluralist institution of higher learning through periods of political unrest requires the courage sometimes to suspend business as usual and to face the burning educational challenge of the day.

Current campus unrest is one such teachable moment. Instead of playing defence, university presidents should launch a "counteroffensive" of their own. They should suspend regular classes for a full day and replace them with compulsory crash courses in online literacy, in which contentious claims about the Israel-Hamas conflict are fact-checked jointly by students and faculty with opposing views.

Most universities have faculties with the expertise to create courses of this kind at short notice and the sociological and disciplinary diversity to minimise bias in their design and implementation. Sure, making this happen would entail much administrative arm-twisting and herding of professorial cats. But isn't that precisely what university presidents are hired to do?

In short, the crisis in which university presidents now find themselves also presents them with an opportunity to re-commit to their core educational mission and to teach students skills of online literacy vital for democracy in the digital age. They have the power to do so. Do they have the courage?

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**Eli Gottlieb is a senior fellow at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University and an adviser to government and non-profit organisations on leadership and strategy.**