

Three months on: Oxford Union refuses to tell truth about why whistleblowing panel debate is censored

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The Oxford Union has finally responded to the exposure of its attempts to censor one of its own panel discussions, “Whistleblowing: Exposing injustices or undermining institutions?” held on February 27.

The response came in the form of an article in Oxford University’s student newspaper, *Cherwell*, June 7 under the headline “Union denies censoring whistleblowing panel video.” In it, the Oxford Union’s society bursar Lindsey Warne and current president Gui Cavalcanti use evasions and lies against one of the panel members, human rights activist Heather Marsh.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, “Records of the event, including transcripts and videos, have been withheld from publication.” The only plausible reason for this was to suppress Marsh’s devastating criticism of one of her co-panelists—former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative David Shedd.

For more than three months Oxford Union have kept silent on why the event was not reported. This is despite repeated requests by Marsh, asking when the video of the panel would be uploaded and why this was not being done.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has made its own attempts to establish on whose authority and on what grounds the panel was censored but has been ignored.

Only after Marsh visited Oxford Union in person in April did she receive a response. Marsh states that Warne informed her that Shedd had pressured for the video to be withheld—something Warne now claims she never said.

The only other contact Marsh has received from the Oxford Union was in response to her letter dated April

25 threatening to pursue legal action. Cavalcanti replied on May 9, on the latest date legally permitted, to inform Marsh that the panel will remain censored, with no reason given as to why and by whom.

Now that Marsh has published the April 25 letter, Oxford Union has been forced onto the defensive by taking to the pages of *Cherwell*. It quotes Cavalcanti claiming that the society was under “no obligation to upload it [the video of the panel discussion] to our YouTube channel or to publicise the event to third parties or the media.” Cavalcanti claims they were “in no breach of contract,” given that the contract to which Marsh alludes was actually a “participant’s consent form.”

The WWSW contacted Marsh for her comments on the claims being made by Warne and Cavalcanti. She said: “I clearly allude to the invitation letter, not the YouTube release form. A contract, in the UK as in most of the world, consists of an offer (the invitation letter), acceptance (as I clearly did) and consideration (the benefit promised on each side). I delivered my part by showing up and delivering my talk (to full approval of audience, OU president and Standing Committee members). They reneged on every consideration offered by them.”

Warne told the *Cherwell* she “made absolutely no mention of David Shedd or any other panelist” as the cause for censoring the video. She claims instead that she gave Marsh “a general explanation, which was that we can only upload events when all the speakers involved have signed the consent form.”

Marsh responded: “as we all did, at the same time, as witnessed by everyone present at the meet and greet. It is interesting that they quote the participant’s consent

form, as it clearly states that David Shedd assigned publication rights to the Oxford Union.”

Warne wrote: “Some speakers prefer not to have their events uploaded but just wish to address the members in person, so don’t sign the forms. Also, the consents give us the rights over the content, not the obligation to publicise.”

Marsh replied that this is true. “The consents gave them the right to publicise, and the invitation letter gave them the obligation to, if we agree, which we all did. Here they make clear that if anyone had not agreed, they would not have signed the form—and we all did. Since the forms are presented before the panel, it is strongly implied that this is a decision that is not to be made based on retroactive judgement, and even if someone had not signed the form, that would only give them the right to censor their own content.”

Marsh described Cavalcanti’s claim as “disingenuous.” She continued, “A speaker choosing to not have their own talk published is not in the same category as third-party censorship of an entire debate in opposition to the wishes of the speaker. The former complies with the offer, ‘It goes without saying, though, that the level of media coverage would be entirely at your discretion’ [quoted from the invitation letter]; the latter is in breach of it. If US officials can censor entire debates on US policy at the Oxford Union that is (at least as far as the public is aware) something new and something which ought to be known by anyone planning to speak there.”

As Marsh told the Oxford Union in her April 25 letter: “If you did want to censor a part of the panel, to accommodate the pettiness and fragility of another panelist, it is perfectly easy to remove his audio track and blur his image. Other panelists have no standing to censor the parts where I am speaking. Does a petulant loser have the right to censor the entire debate?”

No reason exists to not upload the video and the Oxford Union does itself no favours, and brings itself into disrepute, by refusing to give a reason for this.

Fellow panelist Ewan MacAskill replied to an enquiry by the WSWS by saying: “I was unaware the video had not gone up online until I read a few pieces online. I have no objection to it being made available.”

That means two of the three panelists, both active in journalism for decades—with one a leading columnist in a national newspaper—confirm they either want the

discussion published or have no opposition to its publication. Still the Oxford Union refuses to publish!

There is only one inescapable conclusion. David Shedd has in one way or another called for the video of the discussion to be censored; a request which the Oxford Union is obliging and in this operation is covering for Shedd. The *Cherwell* notes, “David Shedd did not respond to *Cherwell*’s request for comment.”

Marsh is correct to claim: “The Oxford Union should make clear to potential speakers that it is only the ‘last bastion of free speech’ for those in power and change its slogan to reflect that—I suggest ‘the last bastion for punching down’.”

The refusal of the Oxford Union and its staff to honestly deal with the events of February 27 and its aftermath brings the body into disrepute and denies the study body at Oxford of their democratic right to what was said at the “Whistleblowers” panel discussion. As Marsh says to the *Cherwell*, “[t]he incoherence, unprofessionalism and fear of being associated with the action (of not posting the video) indicates that they also know it is indefensible.”



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