

Erasmus University Rotterdam  
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## **Controversy as a Social Performance**

*Observing the positions surrounding the Harper's Magazine Letter: is the debate about free speech?*

Supervisor: Prof. Rogier van Reekum

Candidate: Vittoria Canni

Student Number: 627605

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## ABSTRACT

The Thesis aims to discover whether the positions shaped around the controversy of the Harper's Magazine Letter result in mere disagreements concerning the right of free speech, or if they reveal shared assumptions. Such shared assumptions consist in the structure and in the dynamics on which the debate is grounded: in order to prove it, a theoretical conceptualization has been first formulated, and later applied to the data through a coding process. The data are opinion articles published after the Letter and the following dispute begun to circulate online; the research design reflects the technique of the grounded theory. The coding procedure, based on the theoretical themes, reveals how the concepts explain the different positions emerging from the data, overlapping among them. Mapping the controversy in such way helps to further investigate the entity of debates as social performances.

**Keywords:** social performances, debates, controversies, grounded theory, Harper's Magazine Letter, free speech

*The social game has a deeper double meaning – that it is played not only in a society as its outward bearer but that with its help people actually “play” “society”.*

*Georg Simmel*

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## Introduction

The Thesis research aims to understand how controversies in knowledge are embodied through the different positions engaged by the actors involved in the disputes. Even though the reasons behind the hostility seem to depend on differences and disagreements of beliefs, the Thesis aims to reveal the hidden mechanisms at the foundation of the debate.

In order to study a similar phenomenon, it has been chosen to analyze the case of the Harper's Magazine Letter, a publication occurred in July 2020, which raised both supportive and adverse positions around it. Such positions can be perceived through the examination of different opinion articles available online.

The Letter is a complaint against the limits that nowadays, according to the signers, free speech is required to respect. The signers, who identify themselves as intellectuals due to their professional roles of lecturers, journalists, doctors or experts in some fields, sustain that currently their freedom of expression is compromised by politically correct attitudes which however, according to them, are not based on the aim of avoiding further perpetuations of discriminations and injustices. At the same time, they are mainly counterattacked by people who perceive such status of intellectuals as too powerful and, thus, illegit to talk about this kind of discourses and to demand for change. This is already a starting point to perceive that the debate itself is not fully about freedom of speech; instead, it is about the right of exercising it. Therefore, the Thesis aims to dig deeper on the reasons why there are differences of opinion about such right. Moreover, the environment of online media shapes the exchange of information as a phenomenon which is on one hand efficient in its fast speed, but on the other hand superficial in its limit of reflecting fully the public arena; even though it seems easier to expose our opinions online, the opportunity of debating them, increasing the reciprocal mutual understanding and, consequently, the capability to create harmonic discussions and coexistences, seems compromised by the features of the media themselves. Thus, the interpretation of the online context in which the controversy takes shape is under consideration, even though it is not a fundamental aspect of the theoretical assumptions. Such aspect, instead, serves only to keep under control the context of the phenomenon, as if it was a conceptual juxtaposition. The research question is, thus, formulated in the following way:

*To what extent is the controversy about the Harper's Magazine Letter structured around shared assumptions rather than disagreements about the principle of free speech?*

In order to conduct the research, first a theoretical conceptualization is formulated, grounded on previous literature combined in six main themes. Such themes are translated in a coding procedure, as supposed by the qualitative deductive methodology chosen. First the articles selected are coded according to the specific concepts, then such concepts are clustered according to the conceptual

themes, with the aim of observing which patterns of codes emerge, and whether such patterns illustrate that the positions, although opposing each other's, can be explained through the same theoretical assumptions.

The outcome of the research is to find out whether the positions share sociological explanations, besides embodying disagreements and oppositions.

Therefore, the societal relevance of the study relies on further understand how controversies, and debates specifically, can be considered social performances other than being explained through the explicit difference in positions that they present. At stake is the ability of comprehend which mechanisms justify the hostility and the shape of the debate, through a mapping process of all the different positions. Such map is a meta-observation of the matrix of codes emerging from the data analysis, which helps to confirm the theoretical conceptualization, in terms of sociological and academic significance. The scope is, thus, to observe how social performances such as knowledge controversies result in terms of debate and positionality.

## Theoretical Framework

The element of controversy, by boosting the division of opinion, maintains the debates and the public interest more accessible to larger audiences or masses of people (Osborne & Rose, 1999).

A knowledge controversy, however, can resemble of a social performance. This is because, as argued by Venturini (2010, p. 261), “controversies begin when actors discover that they cannot ignore each other and controversies end when actors manage to work out a solid compromise to live together”: when actors disagree, and there is uncertainty between their opinions, knowledge becomes a social instrument.

Considering that knowledge controversies can depict social performances, they can appear in different shapes. Moreover, such shapes are defined by power mechanisms as well, operated both by the actors themselves and by the contexts in which such debates take place.

The core reasons according to which the controversies occur, explaining why the actors involved articulate their opinions and, consequentially, take a position, entail certain dynamics and structures. Such forces are analysed in the Thesis, to describe to what extent are disagreements or share assumptions the causes for the controversy to occur in the first place. According to Venturini (2010), describing controversies is a different task than the mere observation of them: while the observation consists in the “liquid, malleable”, side of studying a controversy, the description represents the “solidification of some portions of social magma” (Venturini, 2010, p. 268). Both aspects are important while studying controversies, for the purpose of building social maps able to portray such phenomena.

Therefore, the disagreements occurring in the controversy under analysis are mapped according to six conceptual themes exposed in the current theoretical section. Moreover, due to the relevance of the online context in shaping such controversy, for each conceptual theme other elements relative to the internet environment and its features will be associated.

The specific research approach pertains to map the debate in terms of which actors are participating, which positions are undertaken and whether such exchange influences the definition of their identities, to a degree that symbolizes a conflict of knowledge.

### 2.1 Conceptual theme 1: Symbolic Capital.

First of all, it is important to consider the concept of *symbolic capital* (Wray, 2013). The perception of the social world depends both on the pre given explanations of interactions and social assets, both on the product of battles and struggles which served to express and modify the power dynamics. But at the same time, everybody perceives the reality according to personal views and experiences, reaching a degree of uncertainty, which is fundamental for the existence of a plurality



of opinions and positions, opposed to the one of the homogeneity. Plurality and uncertainty depend on each other's in the symbolic strife that determines the "production and imposition of the legitimate vision of the world and, more precisely, [the link] to all the cognitive strategies of *fulfillment* which produce the meaning of the objects of the social world by going beyond the directly visible attributes by reference to the future or the past" (Wray, 2013, p. 497).

When the perception of being a society in terms of plurality is compromised by the presence of opposing forces, people solve such issue by imposing a hierarchy of power. In order to do so, different categories are defined and organized in vertical order, rather than in a horizontal one, as if the distinction between them is a reason to establish an arrangement of positions, as much interrelated as hostile to each other's.

In the symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or, more precisely, for the monopoly of the legitimate *naming* as the official - i.e. explicit and public - imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world, agents bring into play the symbolic capital that they have acquired in previous struggles, in particular all the power that they possess over the instituted taxonomies, those inscribed in people's minds or in the objective world, such as qualifications. Thus all the symbolic strategies through which agents aim to impose their vision of the divisions of the social world and of their position in that world can be located between two extremes: the insult, the *idios logos* through which an ordinary individual attempts to impose his point of view by taking the risk that a reciprocal insult may ensue, and an *official naming*, a symbolic act of imposition which has on its side all the strength of the collective, of the consensus, of common sense, because it is performed by a delegated agent of the state, that is, the holder of the *monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence* (Wray, 2013, p. 501).

For what concerns the environment of social media, *skepticism* can act as coping strategy for *persuasion* (Evans et al. 2017). The resistance and counter-arguing against the persuasion is typical of the market approach, and resisting to such power may affect the behaviours of individuals towards the knowledge exchange. In the online context, both elements of deliberation and market makes the knowledge exchange difficult to occur due to the degree of uncertainty typical of social media.

Therefore, within the Letter controversy, such concept might result in opposed positions. Some people believe that the society, by being a plurality, will carry all the social divisions based on past and present struggles with itself, achieving harmony only through further conflict based on the revenge of a symbolic capital. At the same time, others perceive that sharing the symbolic capital owned by each individual, by looking at the idea of plurality as a combination of differences, is the right way to compensate past injustices.

## 2.2 Conceptual theme 2: Idioculture.

The concept of *idioculture* represents the culture owned by a specific group and includes the concepts of *history of meanings* and their *negotiation* between groups (Wray, 2013). Interaction and communication define the elements on which cultures and societies are built on, thus knowledge depends on the context in which it is exchanged and in its transmission modes. As the Two Step Flow communication theory explains (Wray, 2013), concepts may emerge in a group, but will then flow between other individuals who are not part of the original group: in such way, the meaning of the concepts are exchanged in a broader collectivity, acquiring different shapes. Therefore, the meanings are constantly negotiated among groups, which filter them according to their belonging principles and beliefs. Cultural items are created and shared, but the interpretation between groups may differ.

The idioculture construct indicates that groups do not exist in a content-free context but are continuously engaged in the construction of a social reality, a history, and a sense of meaning. [...] Following interactionist theory, we assume that cultural content derives its shared meaning through interaction, rather than through an a priori assignment of meaning. Groups negotiate meanings, and this ongoing negotiation structures the culture of groups.

(Wray, 2013, p. 372)

The concepts of *functional* and *appropriate* culture are explained by Wray (2013): the former is the incorporation of certain items in a culture, which scope is to facilitate the survival of a group, while the latter refers to items that might be avoided due to their incongruity with the group's constitution, independently from their utility in reaching a goal. For instance, if the group is women who want to emancipate from the traditional subordinate role, the feeling of harassment is functional to remind of such injustice, but at the same time it is inappropriate since it challenges the group's agency itself, so the women's ability to defend themselves. Moreover, the similarity (*homophily*) between people's knowledge increases their ability to exchange and convert it in shared terms (Wray, 2013); homophily boosts the uncertainty created by the flowing of meanings among groups, reinforcing the individuals in taking a position rather than another.

What can be said concerning the environment of social media, is the fact that, as enlighten by Fuchs (2008, p. 333), the cyberculture communities permanently define, redefine and produce meanings, values, identities and lifestyles.

“Cooperative cyberculture is based on the idea of unity in diversity - a dialectical interconnection between the One and the Many - competitive cyberculture on the ideas of unity without diversity and diversity without unity - a separation of the One and the Many”.

While the first culture refers to “sharing and building relationships”, the second one refers to “erect borders, construct classes and separate people” (Fuchs, 2008, p. 333). As Ureta and colleagues

(2009) mention about the social media act of impressing others through the messages, which can be ambiguous compared to concrete actions, a form of gratification can derive from the resemblance that virtual interactions have with real communication. It could even happen that virtual interactions compensate a social need, such as recognition and dialogue, making the individuals more engaged in a virtual idioculture, even at the potential cost of losing solidarity within the real society.

Therefore, concerning the Letter controversy, the concept of idioculture explains different positions sharing the same feeling of group' belongingness. Homophily might represent a limit for the flow of meanings, since the individuals are not always willing to reshape cultural elements, in order to portray their devotion and belongingness to the group. However, the balance of powers, influenced by the course of history, needs radical change in its structure: in this way, superficial changes based on the mere adaptation of old hierarchies to new discourses on how to perceive them can be avoided. Some people perceive the exchange between groups as a deterioration of a group's heritage and pride, while others consider the flow of meanings as a way to merge past and present for the purpose of a better future.

### 2.3 Conceptual theme 3: Distribution of Culture.

In the previous themes it has been explained how different groups interpret, deal with and adhere to cultural elements and their meanings. Belonging to a group or the ways in which meanings flow among such groups influence the creation of social positionalities, which can also be opposed and hostile to each other's.

Different access to knowledge has always been a core reason for the existence of inequalities. Focusing in particular on the environment of social media, it has been argued that the new dynamics of centralization of power, which include the manipulation of information as much as the reciprocal surveillance that users can perform on each other's, represent a form of freedom on the producer side, but on the consumer side it promotes distort feelings of self-realization (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). The consumers have been included in the production processes and such changes determines a higher tendency to behave individualistically rather than collectively (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). However, an individualistic approach to the share of information, in societies where homophily and group identity are fundamental conditions, may create an even more singular impact on the positionalities undertaken by people within knowledge controversies.

*Digital optimists* consider the greater participation of "non-professional" users in the public debates as something innovative and potential for an increase in creativity of thought, yet "education and gender continue to play a role in shaping who is involved in such 'participatory culture'" (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 325).

Indeed, in the information society, new forms of power determine the distribution of culture. For instance, the media representation of stereotypes and discriminant content is very impactful and still a current phenomenon, besides the increasing consciousness of the modern societies. In addition, there are differences between *high-brow* and *popular* culture, as argued by Hesmondhalgh (2019, p.384):

the educated may have become more omnivorous in their tastes, indulging in low culture while also maintaining an interest in high culture. This is easily mistaken for postmodern blurring of high and low, but the less educated continue to be excluded from, and/or are uninterested in, high culture.

Online, because of the way in which people tend to interact with similar minded ones (also in technical terms, as in the case of bubbles such as algorithms or echo chambers, which have the ability to reduce and enclose the knowledge available), the risk to not network with different points of view is high, even though ideally different knowledges could coexist peacefully together in a context of cooperation (Song, 2009). Katz (1987) explains that, in the mass society in particular, the individual is atomized and has a difficulty in perceiving cultures which differ from the main ideology. Despite this, mechanisms such as “negotiation”, “para-social interaction” or decoding using a critical perspective (Katz, 1987, p. 38) can work as gatekeepers in between communities and their exchange of interpretations. Moreover, the distortion of the truth tends to occur very often, for instance when people online appear as characters in an observable story, and indeed such phenomenon is defined Third Person Effect. This can clearly compromise the valence or the real impact that an event can have on the reality (Dwyer, 2007).

The profit generated by the fast and volatile knowledge belongs to the dynamics of the capitalist society, where time and space are compressed, generating controversial human experiences relatively to the knowledge exchange (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Now more than ever, the “exploitation and amplification of fear [and conflict]” (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 388) are aspects of the way in which knowledge is shaped, creating controversies and perpetuating injustices based on concrete inequalities of living. The distribution of culture is a core reason explaining the pre-assumptions that support the hostility against who express opinions in ways and with references which do not belong to what the individuals are used to. Hence, such concept can be applied to every position within a debate.

#### 2.4 Conceptual theme 4: Distrust, Rejection and Social Ostracism.

In the literature of Summers (2008), Mills portrays our epoch as very irrational: the citizen feels its role as the one of spectator or forced actor, while morality and passions sound as mere illusions. According to the author, after the last decades, *distrust* is the main response activated between people who own power; the private freedom is damaged by a spread public

*anxiety*, and the rational dissent or the freedom of judgment are banned, reinforcing conformity, which superficially seems a calmer condition in which to live. Powerful roles are disorganized and the ones at the bottom, suffering the consequences, also lack of a leading opinion. After the last historical atrocities, conflict is perceived as something negative, and such perception deprives the individuals of the fundamental developing instrument which is confrontation; this leads to a situation where “rejection is more important than acceptance” (Summers, 2008, p. 89).

However, distrust and *rejection* act as common ground between different positions. Differences are perceived through stereotypes, untouched by the pseudo-world created by media. Mills’ work was written before social media arose, hence, considering the multitude of pluralities more available now online, the confines of the personal routines really clash in a lost sense of belonging, reinforcing stereotypical narratives and the inability to communicate with the others. Excess of differences coexisting in the same environment without significant interest in exchange, reveals itself as an individualistic and almost inhuman freedom of struggling.

It seems better to reject than welcome something that is not ideologically clear or categorized yet. Indeed, the concepts of *disrespect* or *denial of recognition* (Seidman & Alexander, 2008) refer to the act of injuring the identity of someone, according to a hierarchy of values that people in which people believe regarding the opinions of the others. This leads to unjustified *social ostracism* or denigration. Violating the “intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgments” (Seidman & Alexander, 2008, p. 45) is, according to Honneth, a cultural device useful to compromise the process of self-realization and dignity construction, downgrading the beliefs of the individual and, lastly, robbing it of “every opportunity to attribute social value to their own ability” (Seidman & Alexander, 2008).

For example, popular celebrities in particular, have the ability to *manipulate knowledge*, by sharing their preferences and creating value (Roberts, & Lascity, 2019). It is part of their job to promote consumerism and personification around such values, especially on social media where the feelings of intimacy and belief can be easily simulated, obtaining significant reactions which include rituals and experiences that fans perceive as part of their personal life, rather than an external object of entertainment. However, as explained by Ferreira (2011), the nature of the deliberation is to support people “to redefine their views, [and to] eventually identify common goals for the complex situations of social life” (p. 218). The opinion climate (Lee et al. 2014) is a perception which makes people more or less willing to participate, regardless from their skills or interests. Hence, the *promotion of the participation of ordinary individuals* in the online dimension can happen only when there is equality in the mutual respect of the different others.

Concerning the Letter controversy, such theme behaves, together with the previous one, as an infrastructure on which different opinions can position themselves as antagonist. In this specific case, without the elements of rejection, distrust and social ostracism, the individuals could not perform conflictual behaviors, and they would be forced to interpret and further confront each other's.

## 2.5 Conceptual theme 5: Knowledge as a Form of Power.

Mills enlightens the importance of debate when knowledge and power seem to *overlap*. While in the past, freedom was something to use, nowadays it seems something to prevent, and to protect as a possession; it is “safer” to glorify human rights rather than using them in a politically effective way (Summers, 2008, p. 127). According to the author, this is the reason why *intellectual people*, the owners of high-brow knowledge, often reveal themselves as conservative, due to the absence of significant debate between the social parts. Knowledge is a device to channel power and wealth, but such channel is not institutionalized fairly, and freedom might act as a limit of such, rather than a *vehicle*; such uncertainty reveals itself in the extent of perceiving knowledge as an enemy, fearing it, as if it features only in terms of hierarchies of power, rather than in the ones of an emancipating tool.

Mills (Summers, 2008) concludes by saying that cancelling the holders of power, when the latter coincides with knowledge, might be useful to limit the abuses of authority. However, it compromises the ability of a society to use responsibly and as a prosocial tool the power of democracy.

Furthermore, Castells (Seidman & Alexander, 2008, p. 320) deduces that “cultural battles are the power battles of the Information Age. They are primarily fought in and by the media, but the media are not the power-holders. Power, as the capacity to impose behavior, lies in the networks of information exchange and symbol manipulation, which relate social actors, institutions, and cultural movements, through icons, spokespersons, and intellectual amplifiers”. Information and the ability to express it is the new power, the main capital; disagreements do not matter anymore, and the coexistence of differences is only an apparent condition, which does not necessary relate to any social values. Therefore, in the online environment, the opportunity of having bottom-up speech is a democratic phenomenon, but it can also give voice to extremist perspectives (Song, 2009): the configuration of the new media might potentially limit the people who would like to learn “how to reach beyond the scope of their affinity groups. In this way, the connection between sociability and democratic vitality is not as direct as many assume” (Song, 2009, p.125).

Concerning the Letter controversy, if the previous two concepts represent the infrastructure of the debate, this one embodies the justification that sustains the existence of the debate. Without the

awareness that knowledge and the right to express and shape it are the first emancipation tools and, therefore, a form of power, paraps nobody would have been interested in being either pro or against the Letter.

## 2.6 Conceptual theme 6: The Importance of Mutual Understanding in Socio-Political Debates.

The ability of individuals to cooperate as a group for a collective aim will always be one of the strongest powers. In order to achieve it, though, it is important to communicate efficiently in terms of *mutual understanding* of each other's needs and positions.

Beings, when they are not strongly held together by bonds of solidarity, go astray and allow themselves to be led into deviations. They dissolve into subgroups, or, worse, into self-serving individualism: 'Democracy cannot be improvised in this world shaped by individualism.' People left to themselves, prey to their own appetite for personal power, monopolize speech and, 'practiced in influencing assemblies,' make decisions along lines that have very little to do with the interests of all the others.' In the minority, they form a tight inner circle: There is a great risk that a hierarchy will be constituted among the militants and that a tight inner circle will be created, one that cannot really use the existing possibilities.' They are finally isolated and cut off from the base, and this absence of grounding in the general will gives them an arbitrary character contrary to the rule (irregularity) that leads them toward a fall and annulment (qualities that characterize the greatest deficiency imaginable in the civic world) (Boltanski et al. 2006, p. 193).

*Taking the role of others* is a social ability, and the social media might compromise it. The self-conception derives from the role-taking procedure typical of human interaction, and absent in the virtual world. Social and self control might coincide when procedures of shame and guilt are enacted. Moral inadequacy balances the presentation of the self and its adaptation to the others, the same happens with pride (Greco & Stenner, 2009).

Notwithstanding, language assumes a very important role in debates. Language is controversial: it carries symbols within its essence, but every individual interprets it according to personal experiences. In order to understand each other's, especially when important values are at stake, a communication rich of attempts to avoid misunderstandings is a fundamental, if not mandatory, social commitment; "every speech act involves the raising of criticizable validity claims aimed at intersubjective recognition" (Seidman & Alexander, 2008, p.38).

Concerning the analysis of the Letter, the last conceptual theme serves to imagine the reasons why the individuals arrange themselves around the debate through positions which nature is fixed. In other words, the positions themselves impede mutual understanding: without the habit of taking a position, the individuals could have greater opportunities to learn from and confront each other's. This explanation does not intend to underestimate the importance of taking a stand, but it suggests

how taking a position before having debated or having considered other points of views (taking the role of others) might be the reflection itself, in the case under analysis, of the controversy's shape.

New battles can be created through the use of past language and, thus, they can perpetuate its symbolic meanings, regardless from the different purposes. Pre given distinctions need to be visualized in their overall shape and meaning, before fighting against injustices. To this regard, the question of Butler raises interesting points: "what does it mean to avow a category that can only maintain its specificity and coherence by performing a prior set of disavowals?" (Seidman & Alexander, 2008, p.168).

The majority of political problems nowadays, taking place online where knowledge about the social significance and depth of the topic are not required to debate, suffer of the same lack. Going against the past injustices by fighting them, rather than questioning their existence and the ways in which such existence survives, creates useless conflicts with no ends. Repeating a problem, according to Butler (Seidman & Alexander, 2008), is a way to perpetuate it. Repeating rather than being flexible in defining situations is a symptom of constriction within a cultural hegemony, because the categories of identities are artificial constructs (Seidman & Alexander, 2008). The visibility of untraditional identities and innovative choices is not enough to challenge the legal systems and the social shared values, hence, politically the individuals feel the need to fight for their causes.

Moreover, as explained by Song (2009), in the social media communities, the authority depends on the self rather than on external guides. Even though the underneath mechanism of online platforms is about consumption, this new kind of democracy reinforces the responsibility of the single user's actions in having autonomy and choice to shape the civic sphere. The *e-democracy* challenges the traditional assets of power when participating in political debates (Dutton, 2014). However, interaction results as a fragmentation of interests, rather than a cooperation with the aims of solidarity and mutual exchange of knowledge. Lower coordination and new forms of mass mobilization based on weak ties, end up in ephemeral results rather than coherent protests able to significantly impact the institutions.



## Research Design

The material has been analysed through a qualitative method defined as grounded theory. Such methodology consists in specific techniques for what concerns the choice and the analysis of the data, which are continuously intertwined with the theoretical framework and development (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Indeed, the choice of this method lays on the features that it pertains: the interdependency of data and theory suits the topic under analysis because of its flexibility, which reveals at the same time the opportunity to differentiate, elaborate and consolidate the categories (or dimensions) which stand for the theoretical background as much as it can be found in its application on the data (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).

*RQ: To what extent is the controversy about the Harper's Magazine Letter structured around shared assumptions rather than disagreements about the principle of free speech?*

To answer the research question, different steps are necessary in order to obtain findings, which structure is both grounded in the theoretical analysis, and represents a map of positions around the Letter. Such matrix of concepts, which can be thought as a map, reveals which aspects connect the different opinion articles selected and which ones differentiate them.

### 2.1 Data Collection and Sampling

First, 32 articles (see Appendix 1) have been selected through a desktop research on the web. The software Google resulted as suitable due to the availability of its research tools: on the search engine it is possible to set the filter of the time period under analysis. The time filter was July 2020, hence the moment in which the Letter was published and the different opinions arose online. The other inclusion/exclusion criterion is the keywords inserted in the research: "Harper's Magazine Letter".

The sampling was made using a random procedure, hence, selecting one article out of three or four. The articles, in order to respect the rules relative to the qualitative analyses, needed to be longer than 300 words. The saturation was achieved once a homogeneous number of articles was obtained, constituting either opinions pro- (8 items), against- (10 items) or neutral (10 items) towards the Letter; plus, four extra articles were also selected because of their link with some articles, considering that they served as depth understanding either of the actors involved or of the context in which the controversy was taking shape. Indeed, as envisaged by Vollstedt & Rezat (2019), with this type of method, cases are first selected according to the theoretical development, which in this case involves the clusters of concepts illustrated in the previous chapter, later they can be chosen to further contribute and validate the theoretical dimensions operated; the articles are picked not only to represent different voices, but mainly different positions around the Letter. Therefore, after having

obtained this kind of sample, the coding procedure could follow the grounded theory methodology which consists in a conceptual abstraction where theoretical concepts are assigned to singular pieces of data (sentences or paragraphs of the different articles). In this way, it was revealed a combination and overlapping of different concepts within the same articles or their specific pieces, creating a map of patterns between the articles (and their specific pieces) with the assigned theoretical concepts.

## 2.2 Operationalization of Concepts and Data Analysis

The theoretical concepts have been extracted from the literature chosen. Such concepts result in 68 codes. The articles were coded according to the 68 codes and multiple concepts were allowed to overlap. The same labelling of different pieces of the different articles is a fundamental aspect for the creation of a matrix of results. This first step is called *open coding*: the purpose of such first step is to develop an intensive analysis of the data in order to obtain a rich interpretation of the content with respect to the theoretical concepts, which presence is covered within the patterns of codes emerging from such process (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).

The second step is known as *axial coding*: the 68 codes have been clustered in groups. Such groups represent the conceptual themes explained in the theory. In the theoretical framework it can be seen how such clusters merge different literature, as supposed by this type of qualitative methodology. The grounded theory requires that the categories of concepts reveal a level of abstraction achieved from a deep selection and developed combination of theories. The categorization obtained through such procedure ensures “density and precision” (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p.88), as much as providing validity to the research, reliability of the methodological instrument engaged with and replicability of the procedure.

Out of the six clusters obtained by the axial coding, in order to obtain a cohesive model (or matrix), the third and last step is carried out. Such step is defined as *selective coding* and it is similar to the axial coding but is effectuated on a more abstract level: “the results of the axial coding are further elaborated, integrated and validated” (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p. 89). The categories now assume a valence able to unveil the core phenomena under analysis, both in terms of theory and in terms of empirical application. Now, the categories are sustained by a literature review, and they appear within the data analysis: the central phenomena emerge from the data coherently, giving to the grounded theory a valid and significant structure (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).

For what concerns the practical tool chosen to conduct the coding processes, the software Atlas.ti suits well the purpose. In the software it is possible to insert the pdf format of the texts, which is then labelable with the codes created. Moreover, the codes created within this research project contain the title of the book/journal from which they are extrapolated, in order to be easily and quickly founded while formulating the conceptual links, especially during the stages of axial and selective

coding. The codes can be clustered in groups, and for each code it is possible to see both the emerging combination with other codes, in the single articles' pieces selected, and the other codes arranged together in the same cluster, namely the categories (or the groups, using the technical term visible on the software).

In summary, starting from the first level of abstraction, called open coding, the axial coding and the final selective coding emerge, shaping the controversy according to the theoretical concepts. The *memoing* is a fundamental aspect of the grounded theory, which assumes that the ideas are theoretically grounded but at the same time developed while conducting the data analysis. The memoing keeps the link between theory and data, the conceptual connections, less superficial and more based on a conscious and coherent organization (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).

## Data Analysis

In the following section, the matrix that has been explained in the research design is exposed, and the method through which the theoretical concepts have been found in the empirical data is described.

### 4.1 Conceptual theme 1: Symbolic Capital.

Bari Weiss is a journalist who signed the Harper's Magazine Letter and who was discriminated because of that in her workplace: she ended up leaving her job. The article published by the Washington Post (Ellison & Izadi, 2020) mentions how the New York Times ex-columnist has been excluded for her views on certain topics by the colleagues who "no longer wanted to associate" with her. The controversial aspect of such episode is represented by the ban imposed on the journalist: part of her job is to express personal opinions, regardless from the popularity of her view. Knowledge and common sense are interrelated in the constant political struggle

which is inseparably theoretical and practical, over the power of preserving or transforming the social world by preserving or transforming the categories of perception of that world. The capacity of bringing into existence in an explicit state, of publishing, of making public (i.e. objectified, visible, sayable, and even official) that which, not yet having attained objective and collective existence, remained in a state of individual or serial existence - people's disquiet, anxiety, expectations, worry - represents a formidable power, that of bringing onto existence groups by establishing a *common sense*, the explicit consensus, of the whole group. In fact, this labour of categorization, of making things explicit and classifying them, is continually being performed, at every moment of ordinary existence, in the struggles in which agents clash over the meaning of the social world and their position in it, the meaning of their social identity, though all the form of speaking (Wray, 2013, p. 498).

The judgment over the quality of someone's thought, which is related to an uncertainty over the power of such thought, is the core of the social categorization. If from one side this is necessary to maintain order among different social behaviours, on the other one it is the reason why change and adaptation create challenging uncertainties. The symbolic capital of the journalist not only resides on the visibility of her work, instead in this case she is associated to the categorization in which belongs the important and established journals she worked for, which are supposed to being able to influence broad audiences.

What is important to consider now is the fact that the same treatment is applied to all the other positions of the debate, underlining its relative and symbolic value. For example, opposite perceptions of the social context in which the Letter has been created are argued by other columnists. The Harper's

Magazine is considered a prestigious journal, thus the last position from which to complain about the power of free speech (Braun, 2020). For instance, in the magazine *Girls United* (2020) the journalist writes:

an opinion, or longstanding ideology, that is oppressive, regressive or attempts to say that someone's existence is illegitimate or wrong, is not one that deserves an ear. Why accept abuse under the guise of being capable of participating in a debate?

The journalist sustains that, in order to participate in a debate, the individuals are willing to accept injustices due to the nature of free speech. However, such situation is defined as “illegitimate and wrong”. At the same time, journalist McNamara (2020) affirms:

when I was a young feminist, the pejorative term applied to those calling for change in a way that upset the establishment was ... well, actually ‘feminist’ worked pretty well, even among liberals. But so did ‘politically correct.’ You want diversity in the workplace, equal pay, a nonbrutal police force, rapists brought to justice? How ‘politically correct’ of you. Male co-workers complimenting my hair or outfit would follow it with a smirking ‘I know that’s not very politically correct of me’ as if a compliment could easily be mistaken, by me, for sexual harassment. Which is one reason the term ‘politically incorrect’ became a synonym for ‘cool’.

The two opinionists seem to express a share value about freedom of being but, actually, they occupy opposite positions within the Letter's debate. This is an example of symbolic capital playing its “game”. Is the hierarchy of offense an implication of discrimination itself? The symbolic capital previously observed in the case of journalist Bari Weiss was on one side increased by the journals she worked for, but at the same time it was damaged by the hostility of the working environment which was trying to exclude her. In magazine *Girls United* the message is to, indeed, ban whoever has an opinion that can be oppressive; instead, opinionist McNamara defines “politically correct” the exclusion of certain content, to the extent that the fear of its damage compromises the authenticity of the human interactions in the workplaces. Even though the principle to which both opinionists appeal is the one of free speech, according to which everyone is legitimated to express themselves, even when the content produced is oppressive or exclusive, they consider each other's as antagonists in the controversy. For *Girls United*, Bari Weiss and the Letter aim to perpetuate traditional hierarchies of power through free speech. For McNamara, Bari Weiss and the Letter push for redefine the limits of free speech going beyond political correctness. This proves how, in the specific case of free speech, the symbolic capital does not reside only in the concrete opportunity of writing opinions which are visible and accessible, but in determining who is allowed to do so and why. As Wray (2013, p. 500) sustains:

It is distinctive, whether or not it was inspired by the desire to get oneself noticed, to make oneself conspicuous, to distinguish oneself or to act with distinction. [...] The fact remains that social agents,

being capable of perceiving as significant distinctions the ‘spontaneous’ differences that their categories of perception lead them to consider as pertinent, are also capable of intentionally underscoring these spontaneous differences in life-style by what Weber calls ‘the stylization of life’ [...] Symbolic capital - another name of distinction - is nothing other than capital, of whatever kind, when it is perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception arising from the incorporation of the structure of its distribution, i.e. when its known and recognized as self-evident.

The concept of symbolic capital takes shape as well through the presence of a counter-Letter, written by people of color only, and explaining through a list of points how vague and invalid the Letter’s complaint was. It is interesting to note how the people belonging to such group, historically discriminated, speak about justice, in a way which could as well perpetuate the social division. In other words, why from the Letter is it not the concept of equal rights to stand out and instead it is the one of division to be recalled? For example, extracted from the counter-Letter (2020):

The letter was spearheaded by Thomas Chatterton Williams, a Black writer who believes “that racism at once persists and is also capable of being transcended—especially at the interpersonal level.” Since the letter was published, some commentators have used Williams’s presence and the presence of other non-white writers to argue that the letter presents a selection of diverse voices. But they miss the point: the irony of the piece is that nowhere in it do the signatories mention how marginalized voices have been silenced for generations in journalism, academia, and publishing.

The Letter’ signatories’ intentions are depicted as if hierarchies of power count more than the free speech principle itself. On the other side of the debate, journalist Bokan-Lindell (2020) argues:

the liberalism that keeps getting mentioned is to be a universalist project, rather than a class one, ‘then it must ask what material conditions are necessary for empowering all people to fully and freely participate in the debates that shape their lives.

The Letter’ signatories are very different to each other’s, not only from a cultural, ethnical and competences points of view, but especially from the point of view of their life’ stories. Some of the signatories fought the injustices losing their family and rights, going exiled to jail, or risking their life, but because of the positions they acquired in the society, they are (according to the counter-Letter) hypocritical and, thus, they should not speak about rights since they are only privileged people. Even though some of them still live with security and institutional protection, they represent only the high-brow side of the society. The opinionist Goldberg, who is also a signer of the Letter, wrote (2020):

progressive movements sow the seeds of their own destruction when they become censorious. It’s impossible, Willis wrote, ‘to censor the speech of the dominant without stifling debate among all social groups and reinforcing orthodoxy within left movements. Under such conditions a movement can

neither integrate new ideas nor build support based on genuine transformations of consciousness rather than guilt or fear of ostracism. [...] But those changes came about through private sanction, social pressure and cultural change, driven by activists and younger generations.

Goldberg narrates about old denunciations of violations of free expression occurred in the 90s during the conservative campaigns against political correctness. Here the symbolic capital is definitely associated to the power of different groups, rather than to the power of free speech itself. Indeed, Goldberg (2020) goes on affirming:

Predictably, their valid critique of left authoritarianism has segued all too smoothly into a campaign of moral intimidation, [one] aimed at demonizing egalitarian ideas, per se, as repressive. [...] But to let this occur is to surrender what has historically been a sacred left-wing value. One reason many on the right want to be seen as free speech defenders is that they understand that the power to break taboos can be even more potent than the power to create them. Even sympathetic people will come to resent a left that refuses to make distinctions between deliberate slurs, awkward mistakes and legitimate disagreements. Cowing people is not the same as converting them.

#### 4.2 Conceptual Theme 2: Idioculture.

An important controversial point for what concerns the culture of specific groups is the accusation of discrimination and racism. Even though the Letter's signatories were different from each other's from an ethnic point of view, some people argued that they do not credit a plurality of voices. Thus, the columnist Desk (2020) from an Indian newspaper wrote:

journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell, who is a signatory of the letter tweeted, 'I signed the Harpers letter because there were lots of people who also signed the Harpers letter whose views I disagreed with. I thought that was the point of the Harpers letter'. Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institute who also signed the letter tweeted, 'I suspect part of what angers some commentators so much about the Harper's letter is just how involved people of color were. For them, we're only allowed to have one position, and if we diverge from that, we're not truly what we are.'

This is very interesting and controversial at the same time. If within an idioculture also elements of history of meanings and their negotiation between groups are included (Wray, 2013), why regarding some groups (namely, people of color) the content of the Letter is not about free speech but about inequality? Concerning the right of people who have been historically silenced and that now have the tools and opportunity to freely express themselves, why elements of history of meanings and their negotiation between groups perpetuate discrimination in this case, as if the reference in mind needs to be different in negative terms? Not valorizing the content of the Letter as if free speech was not a right of everybody, on one side shows how racism is interiorized and dominant, on the other

side it reflects how such phenomenon is a framing choice, structured within the culture groups itself.

Yet, independently from their intentions, individuals struggle to go beyond the pre given schemes of knowledge. Indeed, Sarah Ellison and Elahe Izadi from The Washington Post particularly focus on this aspect of the controversy under analysis. They write (2020):

it's what Reich considers 'an incipient movement of people of color [who are] teaching the rest of America about systemic racism, and women [who] are courageously opposing systemic harassment' [...] Jill Abramson's reason for not signing? 'I thought it was part of an anti-wokeness campaign, backlash clothed as free speech,' the former New York Times executive editor said bluntly. 'Fatuous, self-important drivel' wrote HuffPost editorial director Richard Kim, who also declined to sign, 'that would only troll the people it allegedly was trying to reach.' [...] And then, of course, there was Weiss herself, who had agitated many on the left with columns cheering cultural appropriation and mocking what she saw as a progressive "caste system" based on which identity groups can claim to have been most oppressed. [...] 'a list that would be so diverse in both identities and political views that no single name could define it, and no one could dismiss it as a clique of the usual suspects,' he said. 'I wanted a list that would make people stop and ask, 'What are all these people doing together? What belief do they all share?' [...] But 'you couldn't wait until someone would not mistake your purpose, because someone will always mistake your purpose' [...] 'The idea that it's a bunch of white elites has become a rhetorical talking point that's just not an honest reading of what we put together,' said Williams [the editor of Harper's Magazine].

Being part of a group, the idioculture, determines how the belonging individuals should interact with other outgroup people as well. Because of this, within the debate the individuals are unable to perceive a common ground, regardless from their support for the same principle of freedom of speech. Their belonging to the group is more impactful than their belief, as if the latter is shaped by the former.

The existence of different opinions about the intentions of the Letter illustrates how individuals associate different meanings and roles to the other people involved in the Letter who are considered as part of other idiocultures.

The same controversial situation is shown with the topic of gender equality. Margaret Atwood wrote in her famous article, *Am I a bad feminist?* (The Globe and Mail, 2020):

my fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system. Nor do I believe that women are children, incapable of agency or of making moral decisions. If they were, we're back to the 19th century, and women should not own property, have credit cards, have access to higher education, control their own reproduction or vote. There are powerful groups in North America pushing this agenda, but they are not usually considered feminists. [...] they are just feeding into the very old narrative that holds women to be incapable of



fairness or of considered judgment, and they are giving the opponents of women yet another reason to deny them positions of decision-making in the world.

Two years earlier than the Letter debate, Bari Weiss also wrote (2018) “approximately 25 percent of millennial-age American men think asking someone for a drink is harassment. More than a third of millennial men and women say that if a man compliments a woman’s looks it is harassment”.

As in the previous case of racism, the negotiation of meaning concerning the discourse of gender, demonstrates how the group that the journalists feel to belong to will shape their position, while the principle of free speech remains again untouched. While the latter should be the core of the controversy, it is the equilibrium between groups that shape the debate’s positions, rather than mere ideological differences.

#### 4.3 Conceptual theme 3: Distribution of Culture.

In the theoretical framework, it has been argued how the access to knowledge has always been a reason for inequalities to occur. Especially in the environment of social media, the requirements needed to create contents and participate to debates are very reachable; still, the possession of different types of culture can influence the ability of the individuals to maintain a position based on their beliefs.

In the Finnish magazine of the Humak University, the professor Lindholm (2021) referring to the Letter debate concludes:

according to psychologist Rob Henderson, participating in cancel culture increases one’s social status and correspondingly lowers the status of the perceived enemy. Cancel culture also strengthens the social ties between the participants and offers quick, attractive rewards.

The polarization, the uncertainty and ambivalence created by contents such as the Letter push the individuals to take a position even though the boundaries of the different opinions are not really explicit. Producing conflict and the rejection of both solidarity and shared compromises, seems the main result. Kane (2020) defines the Letter as “garbage” or “oppression”, but Singal (2020) has a different perspective:

the people furious at this letter largely have genuine ideological problems with liberal norms and laws regarding free speech. ‘Please, think for a minute and consider: what does it say when a completely generic endorsement of free speech and open debate is in and of itself immediately diagnosed as anti-progressive, as anti-left?’ he [de Boer] wrote. (Emphasis his.) ‘There is literally no specific instance discussed in that open letter, no real-world incident about which there might be specific and tangible controversy.’ He goes on to explain, accurately: ‘Of course Yelling Woke Twitter hates free speech! Of course social justice liberals would prevent expression they disagree with if they could! How could any honest person observe our political discourse for any length of time and come to any other

conclusion?’ Hit dogs holler, in other words. The reason people are so mad at the pro-free-speech letter is that they aren't really in favor of free speech. Not when it comes to anyone who isn't their ally, at least. They can make up other reasons to be mad, of course; they can complain that people they view as transphobic signed it (Rowling, to take the most obvious example, though a subset of people have also lobbed that accusation at both myself and my podcast co-host, Katie Herzog, who is also a signatory), or that it's unfair Harper's published a letter about free and open speech while not paying its interns (a separate issue)—but at root, their beef is ideological.

The two antagonist positions argue in different ways, appealing to different types of knowledge. Not only this reinforce divisions among who is able to manage certain knowledge and who is not, but especially such divisions reveal themselves as reasons to focus on the people involved in the debate, not on the content of the debate itself. Although free speech is a shared value, again it can be seen how, in this case because of the skills, people perceive and produce hostility rather than solidarity. The same condition happens to the shape that the knowledge concerning the principle of free speech acquires according to this controversy.

In particular for what concerns social media, the concepts of political correctness and symbolic racism are well defined in the article of Gantt Shafer (2017): where the correctness is imposed by the fast life of the platforms rather than by a deeper school or civic education on that, unintentional or clumsy mistakes are made, resulting in a subtle but real racism. For example, as cited by Chan (2020), the mainstream critique made of the Letter for what concerns diversity, was able to reach a paradoxical point: Williams, who was mainly accused since he is the writer and publisher of the Letter, is black but, because he occupies a good position in the journalistic environment, his ethnicity is in this case not relevant. Moreover, besides the interviews where it is explained the broad diversity of the signatories, the main underlined critiques concern the concepts of “whiteness” and “cisgenderism”, which do not really appear neither explicitly or implicitly or structurally in what seem are the values promoted in the Letter. The symbolic racism consists in perceiving the discourse of race only when it is a matter of injustice, perpetuating a difference in the races which only refers to power hierarchies. As Kane (2020) underlines with her opinion, it does not matter if different points of view signed the same Letter, because online is not the content to become popular, rather it is the people involved and the positions they take. Social media create belonging environments without the use of knowledge and rationality, and only relying on emotional engagement.

Different journalists, who oppose each other's for what concerns the Letter, promote the same values in terms of e-democracy: the boundaries of its autonomy. As White (2020) sustains that the concept of tolerance limits the discriminated voices and abuses to be revealed, or Beauchamp (2020) argues about who to exclude from such boundaries or whether if firing is the right revenge after expressing harmful opinions, Bokan-Lindell (2020) quotes Grossman explaining that the point is

“drawing the lines of socially acceptable expression and determining appropriate responses to transgressing those norms”. Bokkat-Lindell (2020) also quotes Yang who coined the term *successor ideology* to illustrate the new left-wing movement substituting the right-wing illiberal democracy, hence an authoritarian utopia hiding the traditional structures of injustice.

Hence, if from one side journalists like Yang (2020) perceives privilege and power abuse as features of the Letter’ signatories in their call against the limitations of free speech, on the other, journalists like Singal (2020) affirms that “calling the manager” to fire someone, since some people disagree with them, is not very mature or democratic. Rather, in a free society, the power of self-agency should be enough to go against who is expressing a content that someone considers offensive. If this is not the case, then the inequality is perpetuated, and freedom is compromised. Singal (2020) continues illustrating that losing a job is a serious condition, which can not be exchanged with an opinion tweet. This conceptual theme is to show that, in the online environment in particular, but in general as well, where autonomy and choice are not regulated by the laws, the line between freedom and limitation is blurred.

#### 4.4 Conceptual theme 4: Distrust, Rejection and Social Ostracism.

As argued in the theoretical framework, distrust and rejection can act as common ground between different positions. Diverse groups of people, if unable to interact with each other’s, or without being attracted by exchanging their differences and interests, can also reject and disrespect each other’s. The magazine Indian Express specifies (2020) that:

according to the dictionary, “cancel is getting a new use. Canceling and cancel culture have to do with the removing of support for public figures in response to their objectionable behavior or opinions. This can include boycotts or refusal to promote their work.” Srikanth (2020) reports a tweet saying “a more simplified way to frame what’s happening now: This isn’t cancel culture. This is consequence culture. And some people hate the sudden accountability while others worry the focus will turn to them because they have much to be accountable for.

While the individuals against the Letter and pro cancel culture prefer to reject the others, the opponents believe in uncensored expression, regardless from the consequences, as if the opinions of the individuals, included the discriminant ones, are worth as much as the personal pride of the own identity. Of course, such ideal discourse can occur only in a society where discrimination does not cause harm and where all the different opinions are valorized.

Rather than “cheering cultural appropriation and mocking what she [Weiss] saw as a progressive “caste system” based on which identity groups can claim to have been most oppressed” (Ellison & Izadi, 2020), McNamara (2020) underlines that the Letter condemns the institutional

leaders for not taking a position of protection of the right of free speech and of the right of not be fired because of unpopular opinions online.

#### 4.5 Conceptual theme 5: Knowledge as a form of Power.

Taking into account now and again the ideas about the intellectual world shaped by Mills (Summers, 2008), some interesting aspects can be observed and associated to what has been said so far about the individuals positioning themselves as supporters of the Letter. The author illustrates that the sense of tragedy and frustration, which well represents the Letter's feeling, is typical of the individuals owing a knowledge which cannot be exchanged and thus is not powerful. The need of acting and being responsible of their own knowledge can be misinterpreted as an unpopular and elitist behavior. Professors, journalists, are employees under the rule of higher roles. The freedom of not belonging to a stereotyped social role, by emancipating through knowledge, is dangerous for those higher roles which might lose power.

If he is to think politically in a realistic way, the intellectual must constantly know his own social position. This is necessary in order that he may be aware of the sphere of strategy that is really open to his influence. If he forgets this, his thinking may exceed his sphere of strategy so far as to make impossible any translation of his thought into action, his own or that of others. His thought may thus become fantastic. If he remembers his powerlessness too well, assumes that his sphere of strategy is restricted to the point of impotence, then his thought may easily become politically trivial. In either case, fantasy and powerlessness may well be the lot of his mind. One apparent way to escape both of these fates is to make one's goal simply that of understanding. [...] The writer tends to believe that problems are really going to be solved in his medium, that of the word. Thus he often underplays the threat of violence, the coercive power always present in decisive political questions. This keeps the writer's mind and energies in general channels, where he can talk safely of justice and freedom. Since the model of his type of controversy is rational argumentation, rather than skilled violence or stupid rhetoric, it keeps him from seeing these other and historically more decisive types of controversy. These results of the writer's position, his work and its effects, are quite convenient for the working politician, for they generally serve to cover the nature of his struggles and decisions with ethically elaborated disguises. As the channels of communication become more and more monopolized and party machines and economic pressures, based on vested shams, continue to monopolize the chances of effective political organization, his opportunities to act and to communicate politically are minimized. The political intellectual is, increasingly, an employee living off the communicational machineries which are based on the very opposite of what he would like to stand for. He would like to stand for a politics of truth in a democratically responsible society. But such efforts as he has made on behalf of freedom for his function have been defeated (Summers, 2008, p. 20-23).

Indeed, if from one side, Hemmer (2020) reminds the readers that knowledge has not been used optimally through the Letter due to the focus on narrow battles rather than broader ones concerning

broader groups and inequalities. On the other side Weiss (2020) or Goldberg (2020) explain how thin the line between sanction and moral intimidation is, and how Twitter's dictatorship undermines the expression of thought: knowledge is thus perceived as power, in a negative way though, as something which utility must be limited.

#### 4.5 Conceptual theme 6: The Importance of Mutual Understanding in Socio-Political Debates.

Renouncing to personal immediate profits, transcending the divisions and aiming to a collective solidarity and struggle (Boltanski et al. 2006) through its expression seems the aim of Williams, the Letter representative, according to several articles. For instance, Dougherty (2020) express a severe opinion, defending the Letter:

I think much of cancel culture is driven by revenge of mediocrities. Many of the “cancelers” are tragic; the adults and institutions that were charged with giving them a decent moral and academic education in their childhoods just failed utterly or abandoned the work. And so the cancelers are totally unequipped to deal with things like mature disagreement, bearing wrongs patiently, and negotiating with adults who don't give them what they want the moment they cry or scream for it. Because it is born of a bottomless hole of insecurity, it should have bottomless energy. But for the first time in a long time, it looks like there is some resistance where it matters.

But others refuse this perspective, not seeing how Williams and his signatories represent the individuals they seem to fight for. No matter the actions promoted, only through the feeling of association (*homophily*) people can consider a struggle as a personal cause. This type of opposed position is well reported in Yang's opinion (2020):

Concerns over PC culture seem to have long been a preoccupation for the letter's ringleaders. Williams has previously written in the pages of Harper's about his concerns over the left's "fanaticism" and "totalitarianism." [...] It's sure to be used [the Letter] by serial bad actors on the list as a shield against legitimate criticism. And in this uncertain, turbulent era especially, beset as it is by crisis and challenge but also suffused with real hope for transformative change, it's puzzling that these prominent individuals would choose to stand athwart history. The strata of racism, sexism and systemic exploitation in this nation have been laid down across centuries. So many of those who have been brutally silenced beneath them have had just a few months to exercise their voices with newfound mainstream support — and already there are calls to change their tone. The signatories should swallow their own medicine. If, as the letter itself suggests, the way to defeat bad ideas is "by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away," let the people expose, argue and persuade — rather than silencing them, or wishing them away.

Bari Weiss (2020), a Letter signer, seems to really believe in such cause devoted to solidarity, but she has been criticized anyways and her interest in freedom from censorship is not shared by some individuals who does not feel represented by her, as apparent in Yang's opinion above.

According to Butler, oppression works through the domains of “unthinkability and unnameability” (Seidman & Alexander, 2008, p. 171), and this is the main problem to solve if the society aims to improve the conditions of its individuals. In order to give pride to minorities, such categories need to be defined as separated, not in relation to the other ones, but in a horizontal geometry of equality. Modifying the ontology, and setting it free from certain categories, could work as a resistance process, Butler supposes that there is no need to imitate the condition of a category, to be a new category. Identity is a concept needed to perform a role within the society, but it is as well needed for the individuals to perceive themselves as part of the reality in some way. The self-identity, however, depends on the Other: the contraposition is a fundamental aspect for the creation of the former, for the condition of its possibility.

If mutual understanding is a general social challenge, in particular in the environment of social media, it can be even more compromised, as assumed in the theoretical framework, by the features of the platforms engaged (for instance, the technical tools of algorithms and echo chambers which cluster knowledge and people, separating them from other groups or types). Hence, from one side, concerning the public socio-cultural debates, journalists as White (2020) consider the social media as the opportunity to merge consumerism and skills, due to their features which allow the ban of certain topics, in such a way that causing harm can be avoided. On the other side, journalists as Weiss (2020) think that only by engaging with all the shades of the different opinions, through intelligent discussions, and having the courage to interpret different roles, mutual understanding can be reached.

Therefore, mutual understanding does not matter only when determining the positionalities of the actors involved in a controversy, instead, it is itself a fundamental reason why the individuals engage in such positions: often, as it emerges from the data of the current research, it is just because of the position occupied by someone, who is misinterpreted in its beliefs or considered as opposed in its identity or group identity, that individuals take a position and express an opinion.

## Conclusion

The current research aims to study whether a controversy about knowledge, in the case of the Haper's Magazine Letter, concerns disagreements about the principle of free speech, as it seems from the positions engaged by the actors involved, or if such controversy reveals shared assumptions between the individuals.

In order to carry the research and answer to the research question, a qualitative analysis has been conducted, grounding the understanding of the phenomenon on a theoretical assumption. The formulation of such assumption has been framed according to the development of six main conceptual themes, which act as guidelines during the steps of the coding procedure. From the coding procedure, it emerges that the different actors, who position themselves as antagonists towards the content and the purpose of the Letter, actually do so because of common beliefs and behaviours.

Indeed, such beliefs and behaviours have been categorized according to the theoretical concepts, and it emerges from the matrix of codes during the data analysis how the categorization apply to both the sides pro and against the Letter.

The symbolic capital (Wray, 2013) is the first fundamental assumption which serves to understand that even though power relations among the different social actors exist concretely, in the environment of a controversy such power also depends on the symbolic and cognitive beliefs that the individuals express towards each other's: reinforcing the different positions is as much a matter of group or individual pride, as it is a feeling of necessity about keeping to perform a conflictual correspondence.

The idioculture (Wray, 2013) is the second important aspect used to analyze the phenomenon. Differences and similarities of cultural beliefs rely, to some degree, on the belonging to a specific group. Culture is defined through interaction, and its differences are not always structural, but they also depend on the context and the modes of transmission between the groups. The principles, as it can be the one of free speech, are continually engaged between groups who negotiate their meanings throughout time. The meanings are filtered according to the boundaries of the groups, which might be limited in sharing similar positions because of that: indeed, there are also different types of knowledge that can be channeled in the public discourse, and they can perform in terms of status or convenience concerning the deeper interests of the groups.

Therefore, the distribution of culture is the consequential theoretical assumption which supports the explanation of the research question's answer. The dynamics related to the sharing of powers and tools, in terms of knowledge, are not equally allocated: the democratic process responsible of distributing the knowledge which sustains the debate about free speech is compromised by power relations or, at least, the legacies and analogue fears that the individuals internally possess

(Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Moreover, the inequality between high-brow and popular cultures is an impactful boundary due to the concrete advantages that the former has in dealing through debates in the public arena (Wray, 2013). Especially in the environment of online media, digital divide, commercial schemas and the fast pace at which information are exchanged and exposed, beliefs and values are also manipulated in terms of shareability and popularity, however shaping a dynamic of conflict, but actually attributable to the features of the online web (Roberts & Lascity, 2019).

The fourth fundamental assumption refers to the concept of distrust and social ostracism. As studied in different disciplines, often groups and individuals position themselves as antagonists due to pre-given distinctions and hierarchies of values, creating social ostracism. This means that the different identities are compared and denied of recognition, ending as injured and disrespected (Seidman & Alexander, 2008; Summers, 2008). Often, in the public arena, the individuals are politically passive and an organized irresponsibility (Summers, 2008) of values, combined with the inability of reciprocally understand each other's, which is described in the last theme, leads to the creation of distrust and anxiety, in a context where rejection of the others is more suitable than acceptance (Summers, 2008).

Therefore, the fifth conceptual theme assumes another central relevance: knowledge as a form of power. What happens when power and knowledge overlap, for what concerns the seeking of common truths and beliefs? As applicable to the study of the Letter's controversy, a single truth is defined as the reality, but as emerges from the theoretical discourse explained so far, there is not a single truth, and it depends on the position engaged towards the social and cultural phenomena. The representation and the legitimation of knowledge, hence, is inevitably linked to power relations. In a democratic condition, the only way to establish a common ground is through debate, avoiding that decisions and ideologies apply passively on the individuals (Summers, 2008). However, as revealed in the previous paragraphs as well, the environment of social media particularly shape such power conditions: the symbolic racism or the political correctness might hide the real position of the individuals (Gantt Shafer, 2017), while at the same time coping strategies against persuasion can lead to skepticism towards the others, reinforcing even more the existence of unique narratives rather than supporting the healthy confrontation and debate about different perspectives and beliefs (Evan et al. 2017).

Lastly, the concept of mutual understating in socio-political debates encloses the previous assumptions and reveals the final stage of this research. Thus, on one hand the civic world (Seidman & Alexander, 2008) is shaped according to elements of collective will, supported on one side by the individuals' independence of thought and on the other side by the existing political division. The world of fame (Seidman & Alexander, 2008) instead, relies on elements of public image and reputation, devolved to the identification and the persuasion of a supporting audience. Both these



worlds pertain and underpin the existence of this controversy, which occurs not only in terms of beliefs but mostly in terms of the different positions undertaken. Often, different individuals and groups have difficulties in exchanging values while communicating due to a lack in a common ground of knowledge, in such situation, stereotypes should be avoided leaving room for a more general and shared ethical sensitivity (Summers, 2008). Rational argumentation is a medium against injustices and misunderstandings (Summers, 2008), but only if such argumentations and the validity of the intersubjective rationality is recognized by the law (Seidman & Alexander, 2008). Indeed, something often mentioned by the individuals who do not position them neither pro or against the Letter is the inability of the law to protect from discrimination or financial threats, especially at work, the positions of different people, creating inequalities and, with particular focus on this debate, controversies around the principle of free speech.

The research also presents some gaps. The main limitations concern the method selected: although the high internal validity of the findings and of the theoretical conceptualization, in case different theories were selected, the theoretical framework would have established different themes, perhaps modifying the results. Hence, while the measurement-related validity is significant, and therefore the replicability is also strong, weaker could be the reliability of the research, since the grounded theory is a method based on the researcher's theoretical selection and construction, and on its applicability within the procedure of data mapping (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Moreover, the sampling could have been established in a more systematic way, in order to obtain a saturation in terms of quantity of articles selected rather than only in terms of the content (hence, the position pro or against the Letter) conveyed by them. For what concerns the theory, the discourse about the online world, although being important since the debate reflects also social media opinions, could be considered irrelevant due to the nature of the controversy itself, which consists in a debate of opinions regardless from the context in which it lays.

The positions around the controversy are mostly shaped according to shared assumptions about how the right to have freedom of speech depends on the personal identity, which belongs to a group, owning certain characteristics. However, such shared assumptions behave in terms of positions as either agreements or disagreements with other individuals. The infrastructures and the reasons in which such debate occurs are decisive in the shape that the controversy will have. Moreover, the context of online media emphasizes a fast although quite superficial interaction, which is consequentially problematic for an efficient outcome of a public debate.

To answer the research question, in conclusion, it can be said that shared assumptions and disagreements do not exclude each other's, instead, they consist in different perspectives from which the controversy can be understood. The common assumption that free speech is an important right is shared, but the agreements about which individuals are allowed to benefit from it and why remain

uncertain and turbulent. Therefore, the issue at stake and its societal relevance for what concerns the studies in the sociological discipline, relies on the contribution to further comprehend how positionality within the controversies is often a matter of social performance, which shape depends on the social context in which the controversy occurs. Indeed, following on the research of Venturini (2010), controversies exist because, although people disagree with each other's, sometimes the issues at stake, as it is freedom of speech, cannot remain uncertain battles: looking at controversies in terms of social performances rather than disagreements, through the lenses of the established conceptual framework, helps to further understand how conflicts and harmony, in a context where democracy is cherished and actual resolutions of past injustices are portrayed as a universal goal, often depend on inefficient communication and exchange of information.

As Butler argues (Seidman & Alexander, 2008), pre-given distinctions of identities are based on artificial constructs: the categorization of social groups and their features is grounded on hegemonic power relations, and its repetition rather than its reformulation reveals its instability rather than its valorization. For this reason, analyzing controversies such as this one, inspires new ontological definitions because, as Butler concludes: "oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability" (Seidman & Alexander, 2008, p. 171). Conflict resides on the inability to learn and communicate efficiently together, and on the inability to reformulate knowledge, considering it as a malleable rather than a rigid entity.

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## Appendix 1

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