OPINION

GUEST COLUMNISTS

ANDREW CAI AND LYNN DAI

Make innovations accessible

Yale labs gave the world the insulin pump, the first antiviral drug and the first use of chemotherapy to treat cancer. Yet nearly half of the world's diabetes patients cannot access or afford insulin, and many of the medicines born in university labs remain priced beyond the reach of those who most need them. This gap is a structural one, and universities have a role in it. Because universities negotiate the patent rights for innovations developed in their labs — innovations largely built on taxpayer-funded research — they wield power over a medicine's reach and ultimate price.

At Yale, that power is managed by Yale Ventures, which oversees the protection and commercialization of university-developed innovations. When Yale researchers make a discovery, Yale Ventures licenses the technology to a company or startup and negotiates the terms.

However, Yale has no formal accessibility policy governing how University-developed innovations are licensed, despite the fact that multiple peer institutions have taken the lead. The University of California, Los Angeles, University of California, Berkeley and the National Institutes of Health, the largest funder of biomedical research in the world, have each adopted some equivalent of "Affordable Access Plans." These plans are university-required commitments that aim to promote affordability and accessibility to essential medicines.

Under such policies, any company licensing a publicly-funded health invention must submit a written plan, updated and reviewed annually, for making the resulting product accessible and affordable. However, existing plans merely require licensees to describe how they plan to serve underserved populations and lack the enforcement mechanisms that would force them to actually implement these plans. By incorporating concrete benchmarks, regular compliance reviews and meaningful consequences for licensees who fail to deliver on their access commitments, Yale can ensure that its accessibility policy produces patient-level outcomes and set a new standard for how research universities translate public investment into public benefit.

Yale Ventures has no publicly available accessibility policy governing its licensing of health-related technologies. The University's published licensing guidelines contain no requirement for licensees to submit access plans, provide non-confidential versions for review or report on access commitments. This gap stands in contrast to Yale Ventures' stated mission to help "translate Yale University innovations into products and services that benefit society."

As students conducting research in Yale labs — one studying protein nanowires and the other in the department of pharmacology, housed in the same wing where Yale's first chemotherapy was developed — it is troubling that peer institutions have already begun acting where Yale has not and that the impact of our work might be more constrained by institutional incentives rather than by the science itself.

Yet Yale's own history shows that a different approach is possible. On multiple occasions, the University has used its licensing leverage to expand global access to critical medicines. During COVID-19, Yale offered non-exclusive, royalty-free licenses to accelerate global access.

An earlier and even more consequential example came in 2001, at the height of the AIDS crisis, when a small group of Yale students formed an organization called Universities Allied for Essential Medicines and helped spark a turning point in the global access-to-medicines movement. Students urged Yale and Bristol Myers Squibb, a global biopharmaceutical company, to ease patent restrictions on stavudine, an HIV drug developed at Yale and exclusively licensed to BMS. Stavudine was generating roughly $40 million a year for the University in license fees, but the drug was priced far out of reach of most people in the developing world.

Though the University initially refused to budge, mounting pressure from students, high-profile advocates, and the original inventor led Yale and BMS to relinquish the exclusive patent and end the monopoly of BMS. Once generic production became possible, the cost of this lifesaving treatment dropped from over $15,000 to $350 per year in sub-Saharan Africa, becoming affordable for millions who had previously been priced out. William Prusoff, the Yale professor who developed stavudine, was "jubilant" when the patent restrictions were eased.

The laboratories where that antiviral work began are still here in the B-Wing of Yale's Sterling Hall of Medicine. That legacy carried us to Hartford last year to advocate for bills on prescription drug affordability and patient protections based on what we had seen in our own communities, from classmates rationing inhalers to relatives stretching insulin. If that crisis is urgent enough to drive state legislation, it should be urgent enough to drive change at the institution whose own labs are producing the medicines in question.

At a time of political backlash against public health and growing threats to health equity, the discoveries that carry Yale's name travel far beyond New Haven. The responsibility for how they are priced should travel just as far.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

HANNAH RUBIN

Murder is not justified resistance

This Saturday, a Yale student looked me in the eyes and told me that Oct. 7th was justified.

Walking away from a conversation at Yalies4Palestine's latest table on Beinecke, I felt like laughing and crying. Laughing, at the cruel absurdity of the statement. Crying, because I assumed all Yale students understood the difference between resistance and murder.

Crying ultimately won, because I was wrong.

Context is crucial to understand conflict. I believe I cannot call myself a pro-Israel student leader unless I try, at least once, to talk to the other side. The chosen sign for today's tabling said "Apartheid didn't start October 7th." The implications of those words troubled me, but I always think the best of people. Surely my peers did not believe that mass murder, kidnapping and rape were appropriate responses to circumstances that have little resemblance to the apartheid of South Africa and North America.

To be sure, I asked them.

Two students explained how this sign contextualized Oct. 7 in a history of Israeli apartheid and oppression. One girl used the word "resistance" to describe the actions of Hamas that day.

Can the actions of a U.S.-designated terror group whose members cheered as they shot at innocent Israelis point-blank — including children — really be called resistance? I asked how the resistance in this case differed from abject terrorism.

The student responded that terrorism was an emotional word, strategically used to characterize acts of resistance by Black and brown people. I reflected on the implications of her interpretation: Unlawful and violent acts against civilians are actually "resistance" when certain races commit those acts.

She asked me why America's attacks in Iran weren't called terrorism, but those of Hamas were. I replied that international conflicts with targeted aims, where it is a sad fact innocent civilians may be harmed, are different than attacks directly intended to target innocent civilians. The difference did not seem significant to her.

The students said Israel is enacting apartheid. Yet Arab Israelis participate in all levels of political leadership. In the West Bank and Gaza, security measures impose hardships on Palestinians, but they are due to valid threats. When I explained this, one student said that in Jim Crow-era North America, segregation was justified by racist beliefs painting Black people as security risks.

This heuristic is only convincing without context. There is a history of attacks from the West Bank and Gaza, of which Oct. 7 is but one example. What if Israel withdrew from the West Bank like it withdrew from Gaza in 2005? In Gaza, Hamas took over immediately and began sending rockets into Israel targeting civilian populations. Israel has an incentive to avoid a similar situation in the West Bank.

One student compared slave uprisings in America to Oct. 7. She asked me if slave uprisings were justified. I said I would need to understand who had been harmed, but in general, yes, if the people who the enslaved individuals fought against had actively oppressed them. I explained that individuals murdered on Oct. 7 had not actively oppressed Palestinians. The students replied that those individuals had been indirectly oppressing Palestinians through their daily actions.

What daily actions? Many Israelis living on the border were advocates for peace. They transported sick Palestinians to Israeli hospitals. They created job opportunities.

My peers employ a dangerous parallel. I am against slavery and segregation. I also believe in Israel's right to exist. In their eyes, I can never believe in both.

Acknowledging Israel's need for security does not mean ignoring Palestinian suffering. Last Tuesday I attended an event with the Palestinian peacebuilder Mohamad Jamous, who spoke about the hardships of checkpoints and settler violence in the West Bank. Mohamad believed violence would only perpetuate itself. He saw the solution to the conflict as dialogue addressing both sides' suffering. After all, he said, neither group is going to leave.

Inspired by Mohamad's words, I asked Yalies4Palestine members about their ideal solution.

"We believe in a free Palestine," one girl replied, "so we think Israel should not exist." She added that Israelis had stolen the land and engaged in settler violence from the beginning. I pointed out that there had been violence on both sides. Moreover, much of the land was legally obtained.

"That's misinformation," one student said dismissively. Having spent several class periods in a history seminar discussing these exact events, I knew my words were, in fact, true.

"If we can't even agree on our sources, maybe it wouldn't make sense to keep talking," the other girl said.

Actually, I thought, maybe it is especially important to continue. But I knew they wanted me to leave, even though they had done most of the talking. So I asked my final question.

"Do you think October 7 was justified?"

One of the students immediately launched into a summary of the points we had already covered. I wondered if I would have to ask her again. After a minute, she got to the point.

"So, yes… it was justified."

"Thanks for talking," I said, and walked away.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

NANCY GRAHAM-MARTINEZ

Say what you mean

In the Western world today, entire words, phrases, expectations and stereotypes are completely taboo. The ways in which we talk about and engage with identity are now held within the confines of an invisible social law. Jokes targeting particular groups, nationalistic sentiments, identity and sex politics, derogatory words, etc. are all on very thin ice. In breaking the unspoken laws, a single clumsy sentence, screenshotted and circulated, can cost someone a career. In 2013, Justine Sacco posted one poorly-judged joke to a few hundred followers before boarding a flight to South Africa; by the time she landed, she was the most talked-about person on the internet and had lost her job. Whatever one thinks of the joke, no one weighed her intent or her record, or gave her a chance to explain.

I remain unconvinced that creating an atmosphere of fear around certain concepts is an effective teacher in any capacity. In fact, by virtue of this overt focus and restriction on words, I myself have spoken less on concepts that came with this policing of language. Being able to think out loud is essential to the ability to learn and our democratic process. Today, taboo constricts people into silence.

I see the counterargument that if a certain terms were to become ingrained naturally in our collective repertoire, it may not be an entirely bad thing. Language has changed this way before: no one is forced to say flight attendant instead of stewardess anymore, because people simply adopted the phrase over time.

But language that is forced on people through taboo and cancel culture will never become theirs. Policing language breeds resentment, polarization and a lack of genuine conversation. We have created a world where, instead of engaging with varying, distinct experiences of personhood — which by nature must be conveyed using varying and distinct language — we are sorted into narrow boxes, which often are not accurate or helpful.

A prime example is the abortion debate. In recent years, there has been a strong push from the left to say "birthing people" instead of just "women" when talking about abortion in the U.S. In doing so, an issue that has historically been a feminist one suddenly became a wider debate on transgender inclusivity. The new debate centered around arbitrary labels and the argument about access to care was no longer had.

The issue is exacerbated when using the "wrong" label for any person or idea is punished with the extreme: unemployment, ostracism and death threats. Meaning and intent are genuinely lost when we focus on the correctness and inclusivity of our labels rather than the very thing we are trying to label. Modern abortion debates inherit a complicated legacy forged by generations of American women whose labor on the issue is diminished by these eye-catching but abstract debates on labels.

The stinginess with which we refer to and categorize people in civil society today not only distracts from what matters but provokes entirely unproductive pushback. On the left, language becomes a matter of over-scrupulousness, caught up in labels and definitions and distracted from meaningful issues. On the right, we see a coarse and extreme language in response to the confinement of words. Both sides are driven apart.

What in the stead of our current situation? Aristotle puts it well in the "Nicomachean Ethics" — to feel and act "at the right times … with the right motive, and in the right way" is best. Aristotle's mean is not a strict rule, but a matter of judgment: what a person of practical wisdom would see as fitting in a moment with the people around them. That is exactly what rigid language codes try to replace. A checklist of approved words cannot do the work of judgment, and it teaches us to stop exercising it. Instead, we have two reasonless extremes pulling in opposite directions as hard as they can.

Learning, and subsequently advancement, comes by asking questions, being vulnerable and leaving space to be wrong. Those who speak the publicly deemed "incorrect" way either move their conversations into private spheres or make their words brash and outrageous to send a message. Resentment grows on all ends. Instead of talking and engaging with those who are different from us and use different language than we do, people are not talking at all. This is dangerous.

Consider using language that, though clunky and messy, is real and true and genuinely conveys what you are thinking. If the resulting words are genuinely incorrect, isn't the best way to change how people think about things through conversation? A correction delivered by an angry stranger online teaches no one; a correction offered face-to-face by someone who has genuinely heard you out, might.

Today, people are so focused on the words they use that they have lost sight of the meaning they intend to convey, and in doing so they limit discussion, debate, thoughtfulness and reason in polarizing, harmful and utterly flattening ways. If we instead actually talk to each other, show up as we are, say what we think and are curious, change will unfold by virtue of that curiosity. I'll end with a line I encountered through the Apple TV show "Ted Lasso," which attributes it to Walt Whitman, and which carries a wise message every Yale student should take to heart the next time they encounter someone using their words poorly: "Be curious, not judgmental."

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