
ACADEMIC FREEDOM
NEARLY a year has passed since the firing heard around the world.

Steven G. Salaita, whose job offer was revoked last summer by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign following a series ACADEMIC FREEDOM of inflammatory tweets, has finally secured a position, at the American University of Beirut. But his legal case against Illinois continues, as does the broader debate about academic freedom and social media.

Scholars who have followed Mr. Salaita's case say that while he is certainly not the first professor to come under fire for comments on social media, the scrutiny his situation has received is influencing how academics and colleges think about those issues, for better and worse.

Colleges are working to develop effective policies to govern online speech. But those policies have at times generated further controversy, with critics saying they threaten academic freedom and shared governance. Academics are now quicker to recognize that 140 characters can carry more weight in the public's eye than a lifetime of scholarship. But some scholars may be avoiding controversial topics altogether, for fear of getting caught in a debate gone viral.

"Whenever a really big academic-freedom case spills out like this, it often has a salutary effect in that people have concrete discussions about what does it mean, what is appropriate discussion. That is a good thing," says Henry F. (Hank) Reichman, chairman of the American Association of University Professors' Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure. At the same time, he adds, many colleges have not fully thought through how they should react if one of their professors is subjected to public harassment because of remarks on social media.

The AAUP, which has criticized Urbana-Champaign for dismissing Mr. Salaita without faculty consultation, censured the university last month.

The reaction, which also includes boycotts by scholars and widespread criticism by scholarly associations, has proved cautionary for other institutions, Mr. Reichman says: "Administrations will be far more hesitant to move in the way the University of Illinois did, with no attempt at due process."

YOU BETTER BE READY
Others aren't so sure. Claire Potter, a history professor at the New School for Public Engagement, believes that the case has "emboldened universities to eliminate voices that they see as disruptive to their branding, to their political agendas, to their trustees."

Those hurt the most at Urbana-Champaign, she says, have been academic departments ostracized by their peers in the wake of bad publicity. More than 5,000 scholars have pledged to stay away. Meanwhile, the University of Illinois overall, says Ms. Potter, "is a thriving institution."

At the same time, Ms. Potter wishes people would think harder about what they post on social media, noting that some of it is "deeply abusive." She says the case is also a reminder that anything you write can become the focus of intense scrutiny. "The Salaita affair should have signaled to all of us," she says, "that if you're going to put speech out there, you better be ready for someone to try and hurt you for it."
Mr. Salaita, who declined an interview request, is suing Illinois to get his position back, as a tenured professor in American Indian studies. He maintains an active and at times politically charged Twitter presence. And he is coming out with a book about his experience: Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom. He has spent the past year on the lecture circuit, speaking about academic freedom, the corporatization of academe, and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Omar Shakir, one of his lawyers at the Center for Constitutional Rights, says Mr. Salaita had a difficult time finding a job. He applied for several tenured positions, "none of which he was able to secure even an interview for." And while he is excited to take up his one-year appointment as the Lebanese university's Edward Said Chair of American Studies, "it certainly is a far cry from the tenured appointment at Illinois," the lawyer says.

Given that Mr. Salaita was forced to move in with his parents to make ends meet for him and his family, says Mr. Shakir, "this is Steven trying to make a living."

The university's leaders have stood by their decision to rescind the job offer, on the grounds that they would not tolerate "disrespectful words or actions," said Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise.

Mr. Salaita, who believes the institution caved in to pressure from donors, won a court battle last month to have the university turn over all internal correspondence about the decision not to hire him.

Mr. Shakir says his client will accept nothing less than reinstatement: "It's a line-in-the-sand case about academia today. To what extent do universities continue to adhere to standards of academic freedom and free speech, or will universities continue to become corporatized?"

UNCOMFORTABLE DISCUSSIONS
Michael H. LeRoy is a professor of labor and employment law at Urbana-Champaign who has studied more than 200 court rulings, dating back 50 years, in faculty members' First Amendment lawsuits against colleges. He says Mr. Salaita's situation exposes a lack of norms for measures of public expression.

"There needs to be a national conversation around what are the boundaries, if any," he says.

The case also relates to accusations of political interference in academic administration, concerns that uncomfortable discussions are no longer allowed in classrooms, and the polarization of public debate, Mr. LeRoy says.

Two recent events make clear that scholars and administrators are still stumbling in their efforts to find the best path forward. In May a newly hired assistant professor of sociology and African-American studies at Boston University, Saida Grundy, came under fire for a series of tweets about race. In one she asked why white America was "so reluctant to identify white college males as a problem population." Her comments were picked up on social media and reported on by the mainstream press. Petitions for and against Ms. Grundy, with some calling for her to be fired, were quickly assembled online, drawing thousands of signatures.

Boston University's president, Robert A. Brown, issued a statement acknowledging Ms. Grundy's right "to hold and express her opinions," but he said that the university does not condone racism or bigotry and that some of her remarks had reduced individuals to stereotypes. Ms. Grundy issued a statement of regret, saying some of her remarks had deprived matters of race "of the nuance and complexity that such subjects always deserve."

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Mr. Reichman, of the AAUP, says he thought the matter was handled well by both sides, although he wishes Mr. Brown had issued a more general statement in support of academic freedom without naming Ms. Grundy but simply noting that professors' views aren't necessarily those of the university.

The New School's Ms. Potter suggests an additional reason that the Grundy case was more contained than the Salaita one: Boston is a private institution, not beholden to state legislatures, First Amendment protections, and the public. "Political speech has profoundly political consequences in a public institution that it doesn't have in a private institution," she says.

'SHOULD I TWEET THAT?'

In another case, a former assistant professor of sociology at the University of Memphis, Zandria Robinson, posted some racially charged tweets in June, leading to more public outcry. The university responded with a cryptic tweet about her no longer being employed there, leading some people to believe she had been fired. She hadn't -- she had simply moved on to a position elsewhere before the controversy erupted. Then began another round of criticism, some of it directed at the university.

Both scholars made their Twitter accounts private following the uproar.

"One of the problems people are beginning to be aware of is that social media is more akin to an op-ed piece than a conversation around the dinner table," says Mr. Reichman. That's fine, he says, as long as people are prepared to expect criticism, which they sometimes aren't.

In a recent conference session he sat in on, called "Should I Tweet That?" some participants said it's OK to tweet on personal accounts but not on university ones. "The people who go after you," he notes, "don't make that distinction."

Mr. LeRoy, the law professor at Urbana-Champaign, says he'd like to see scholars fight for an academic bill of rights. In his research on court cases and academic freedom, he concluded that the First Amendment offers far fewer protections than most professors probably think it does. Such protections, he suggests, should be spelled out by the university and written into employment contracts.

Although none of the First Amendment disputes he examined in his study involved Twitter, Mr. LeRoy anticipates that more cases like Mr. Salaita's are on the way, given the growing popularity of social media and how it feeds on extreme rhetoric.

"It's not like academics are getting excited and everyone else is remaining calm," he says. "Everyone else is getting heated, too, but they don't see the same consequence, necessarily."

GREG KAHN FOR THE CHRONICLE Colleges are wrestling with issues of academic freedom amid outrage over some professors' online comments, as in the case of Steven Salaita.