

FREE EXPRESSION: A MEANS TO SUBSTANTIVE SPEECH

Stuart Chambers

Genuine debate involves a three-step process: first, a claim is made about a given topic of interest; second, one is open to debate surrounding the assertion; and third, criticism is leveled to examine the merit of competing truths. Lately, however, the process has been interrupted. Both left- and right-wing political adversaries have developed new tactics to stifle discussion. Some of these methods include: shouting down opponents, censoring deliberations, and dismissing rival commentary.

These strategies are problematic because without a dialogical exercise — a civil conversation with others — the accuracy of a given claim cannot be assessed. Hence, free expression never realizes its full potential as substantive speech. The latter involves a genuine exchange of ideas that leads to higher truths. Without the freedom of others to posit alternative perspectives — and the ability to assess their merits — substantive speech remains unattainable.

Recently, extremists have made it their *raison d'être* to inhibit dialogue. For instance, in 2014, Janice Fiamengo, a University of Ottawa English professor, questioned the existence of rape culture at a talk organized by the Canadian Association for Equality (CAFE). Before Fiamengo could begin the discussion, she was continuously interrupted by members of the campus's left-wing Revolutionary Student Movement. A representative for the organization clarified the group's political goals: "We feel that these (Fiamengo's) ideas have no place on our campus and refuse to legitimize them by allowing them space to organize." To avoid hecklers, Fiamengo attempted to move to another room, but a fire alarm was pulled to thwart her efforts.

In 2016, University of Toronto psychology Prof. Jordan Peterson said he will refuse to use non-gender-specific pronouns when addressing students and was subsequently berated by transgender activists. On *The Agenda* with Steve Paikin, panellist Nicholas Matte, lecturer on transgender studies at the University of Toronto, dismissed Dr. Peterson's position outright, maintaining that it was a form of "hate speech," something tantamount to "violence." One guest who declined to participate in the panel discussion provided the following rationale: "Holding a debate which places a false equivalency between the views expressed by Peterson and the human rights concerns of the trans community would be an act of transphobia."

More recently, on February 1st, 2017, riots broke out during a protest at the University in California, Berkeley, after *Briertbart News* editor and right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos arrived as part of a campus speaking tour. To silence Yiannopoulos, a small group of agitators set fires, hurled rocks at police and broke windows. Amid the chaos, however, freedom of expression and substantive speech became conflated. As the *National Post* commented, "The rioters presented the 'argument' that Yiannopoulos's (aborted) talk was an act of violence, while ever so superciliously they maintained that their acts of violence were free speech."

That said, Yiannopoulos's own mean-spirited rhetoric hardly constitutes substantive speech. Rather than engage with others, Yiannopoulos uses such opportunities to humiliate his rivals. At a recent presentation at West Virginia University, he referred to one of its faculty members,

Daniel Brewster, as a “fat faggot” and then further denigrated Brewster’s discipline of study: “Prof. Brewster teaches sociology, which comes in just above gender studies in my rankings of ‘burger-flipping majors.’”

There are other instances in which the behaviour of right-wing ideologues mirrors the antics of their ideological opponents. Alt-right devotees rely heavily on insults to deflect criticism away from their own entrenched positions — namely, their continued justifications for the 2003 illegal invasion of Iraq, their caricatures of Islam, and their attacks on multiculturalism. To discredit leftists on these issues, arch-conservatives label the former as “terrorist sympathizers,” “anti-Semites,” and “liberal elites.” Ironically, this kind of stigmatization represents the hard right’s own form of political correctness. Dissenting voices that make ultra-conservatives feel uncomfortable are simply ridiculed or ignored.

For example, on Fox News’s *The O’Reilly Factor*, host Bill O’Reilly is well known for telling his own guests to “shut up” whenever their positions on Islam, Middle East politics, or patriotism offend his sensibilities. Just as dismissive is American conservative writer David Horowitz. He asserts that Islamophobia is a “meaningless term,” and that instead of discussing its damaging effect on society, it would be better “to remove the term from our active vocabulary.” In the American neoconservative publication *National Review*, op-ed writer Brendan O’Neill is equally evasive: “Islamophobia is a myth” and “the idea that there is a climate of Islamophobia... is an invention.”

Not to be outdone, Canadian media personality Ezra Levant once described a Muslim law student, Khurram Awan, as a “serial liar” and an “illiberal Islamic fascist.” In a libel suit, a judge found Levant’s comments were motivated by “ill will” and “showed a reckless disregard for the truth.” When condemned by the media for his conduct, Levant doubled down, insisting he was just another victim of the assault on “free speech” by the left. That his expressed views, and those of other far-right pundits, are void of any real substance appears irrelevant.

Tactics that involve degrading opponents, censoring speakers, or dismissing contentious perspectives represent partisan forms of expression. Their only purpose is twofold: to limit truth telling and to diminish our capacity as critical thinkers. Whenever free expression’s potential is left unfulfilled, the substance of a given truth claim remains disputed. There can be no consensus as to its value.

Fearing that an open, adversarial review of truth claims would expose flaws in their thinking, zealots resist efforts at free and vigorous inquiry. For both left- and right-wing ideologues, an exchange of ideas is viewed with either suspicion or contempt. It’s no wonder honest deliberation has become a process too frightening for the insecure among us.

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