

Even academics spout nonsense

Letter to the Editor

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Michael Boudreau, in his review of *Speak No Evil* (*CAUT Bulletin*, April 2009), refers to the “controversy surrounding an individual’s right to free expression versus the need to protect minorities from hatred and/or violence.” Of course members of minorities are entitled to protection from violence; that’s just because all of us are.

Should members of minorities be protected from nonviolent expressions of hatred, though? Yes, Boudreau answers, because nonviolent expressions of hatred reinforce patterns of discrimination, cause emotional harm and can lead to violence.

The first problem with this answer is that censorship and suppression of expression come with costs, both to individuals who are accused of speaking hatefully and to society generally. Laws against the expression of hatred get in the way of candour and they encourage both the cult of the victim and identity politics.

The second problem is that there is no empirical evidence that censorship and suppression of expression help the oppressed or marginalized. Indeed, it’s hard to see how they could, if words are in fact damaging, since prosecuting people for what they say requires that what they say gets reported and broadcasted.

The idea that freedom of expression needs to be balanced against protection for minorities is nonsense. It doesn’t cease to be nonsense just because academics, human rights commissioners, lawyers and judges repeat it endlessly.