

## Against denunciation

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Eventually you realize the paradox is intractable. Then there's nothing for you to do but to examine the assumptions that lead to it.

The paradox is this: Groups across Canada are bent on silencing people whose views or feelings they don't like, but their tactics ensure that lots and lots of Canadians become aware of those views or feelings.

Most recently, we saw this in Waterloo, where three protesters occupied the stage on which *Globe and Mail* columnist Christie Blatchford was to appear, causing the university to cancel Blatchford's talk. Yet the book Blatchford meant to promote is available in bookstores everywhere. Soon it will be in libraries. Much of it is already available free on the web.

The Waterloo disruption succeeded in its limited aim of shutting the event down. But likely enough it will also result in increased sales of Blatchford's book. It certainly earned Blatchford media coverage across the country.

This is not the only instance in which activists wanting to shut someone up have won a battle only, thereby, to lose the war. A couple more examples are Ann Coulter's talk at the University of Ottawa and Jose Ruba's presentation at Saint Mary's, in Halifax. In both cases, the event was disrupted and, yet, because of the disruption (not in spite of it), the speaker's views gained wide circulation.

The clearest examples of this paradox involve the various human rights commissions and tribunals in this country.

Though Stephen Boissoin himself was forbidden (for a time) to speak his views on homosexuality, his offending letter was all over the internet. It was even reprinted in a few respectable newspapers.

Some bloggers posted Boissoin's letter and begged the Alberta commission to come get them, too. They were told that since they were using the letter to discuss freedom of expression, they were not speaking hate, and were welcome to continue posting it.

Pearl Eliadis, former director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, appended to a defence of censorship she published in the magazine *Maisonneuve*, in 2008, a page of vile racist rants, the sort of thing that she argued in her article should be banned. If you check the Canadian Human Rights Commission's report "Freedom of Expression and Freedom from Hate in the Internet Age," you'll find even more choice passages, helpfully introduced by "Warning: The language used in these examples will disturb and upset some readers."

Different groups in different places at different times cannot all be so clueless as to act in self-defeating ways, over and over again.

The assumption that leads to this intractable paradox is that these groups aim in their actions to suppress the views and feelings that draw their wrath. Well, maybe they hope eventually to suppress them. But preventing people from saying what they want or from hearing what others have to say cannot be their immediate goal. No one enjoys failure that much.

So what are the would-be censors trying to do in the here and now? My hypothesis is that they are simply denouncing the views and feelings that draw their wrath. They are simply telling the world that they hate these views.

This isn't all, of course, especially when it comes to groups with power. Human rights commissions and tribunals are clearly intending to chill expression, and they are succeeding. But denunciation is their main business, and the chilling effects they get flow from their main business.

Now, to denounce a view or a speaker isn't to argue against the view or to engage that speaker in critical discussion. It's not to debate; in fact, it's to refuse to debate. To denounce is simply to stand to be counted against some rotten view or speaker. One who merely denounces a view does not seek through argument to change people's beliefs or reform their emotions. Instead, he or she attempts to apply social pressures to get others to stand with her, to conform to her norms.

This is to bully, of course, and that explains why disruptive protesters and human rights commissioners alike shock and frighten us, just as bullies do.

It also explains why would-be censors don't mind spreading the views of others. Their goal is to be seen denouncing vile views, to be seen standing for the good and the right. Publicizing the views they denounce is a necessary part of publicizing their denunciation of them.

The trouble is, same-sex marriage, the plight of members of marginalized groups, the role of the police—all these are serious matters, requiring open discussion and argument if we are to make headway on them. Many of us, of course, are up to the task, for we prefer discussion and argument to striking a pose. And yet, the denouncers will always be with us, getting in the way, for denunciation is quick, easy and fun. To adapt a quip from Bertrand Russell, it has all the advantages of theft over hard work.