

Hollaback! Ottawa: against incivility or against freedom of expression?

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Some jerk on the bus decides to entertain the crowd by rapping vulgarities at the top of his voice—and the passengers have to alert the driver? Didn’t the driver notice? And why did the passengers have to speak to the guy? Shouldn’t the driver have taken charge right away?

Those weren’t the first questions that came to mind when I read “Taking back the 95: Commuters stand up to harasser on OC Transpo bus” (24 April 2013, <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/ottawa/Taking+back+Commuters+stand+harasser+Transpo/8287329/story.html>), but they are important questions.

I would like to think that the person driving the bus I’m on knows how to respond appropriately to a disturbance (that is, by calling the police, should the instigator ignore her firm directive to sit and be quiet) without my having to prod her into action. Surely bus drivers are better trained to deal with annoying riders than we civilians are, especially with those who might turn violent.

My first question, though, on reading this story, was where was the harassment? Now clearly the man didn’t mind making the ride a little hell for everyone on the bus. He was obnoxious, and obnoxious, moreover, in a way that would make people fear for their safety. But I had to read the article twice to try to figure out why the headline tagged him a harasser, and I’m still not sure I’ve got it.

According to the story, a woman asked the man to stop, but he didn’t. She asked him again, and this time he started yelling more loudly. There are elements of harassment here, but not enough to justify the headline.

For behaviour to be harassing, it must be directed at a concrete individual, it must be persistent, and it must be meant as a means to gain an advantage. The behaviour here would not seem to qualify.

Perhaps the harassment is to be found in the content of his rap or his invective. The article tells us (though coyly) that he spoke the terms “bitch” and “nigger.” Perhaps he even addressed the people he yelled at using those terms. His choice of language certainly reveals something about his character, something in addition to that revealed by his loud singing and bad temper. I’d say his choice of language made him even more obnoxious. But since harassment is not simply high-grade vexation, we won’t find it in his foul words.

Does it matter that we call him a nuisance rather than a harasser? That we describe his actions as annoying, vexatious, and obnoxious rather than harassing?

I think it does. It enables us to focus on the problem at hand, and not confuse it with different problems. In our confusion, we are likely to fail to solve our problem, if we don't indeed make all the problems worse.

The problem at hand is simply incivility. It is the unpleasant, annoying, or vexatious behaviour that too often disrupts our day and prevents us from enjoying the morning commute or the movie or the meeting—whatever we're trying to enjoy (or endure). Our jerk on the bus is at the far end of incivility, but he's on a continuum with litterers, movie-talkers, and the people who stroll three abreast on the narrow sidewalk.

Sociologists tell us that something happened in the nineteen-sixties, in the middle of the struggles for equality, self-expression, and self-affirmation from which we've all benefited. What happened is that in many minds boorishness became tied to self assertion. No better way to proclaim that one is worth notice than by pissing people off. And so we get our guy on the bus.

How, then, are we to recover civility as a widespread personal virtue—and to recover it, of course, without retreating to a world of etiquette and social hierarchy? I wish I knew.

We should laud the efforts of Julie Lalonde, the director of Hollaback! Ottawa, to address harassment (and violence) on our streets and buses. But it seems that Lalonde, along with bus rider Randy Fisher, who is also quoted in "Taking back the 95," have something different in mind. They appear to be attempting, rather, to extend the idea of the safe campus to the streets of the city.

The idea of the safe campus, familiar to anyone who's been paying attention to incidents and discussions at Carleton and Ottawa U over the last few years, is the idea of a campus on which people who belong to groups designated marginalized or vulnerable need not fear encountering images or ideas offensive to them. A woman who has had an abortion will not, on a safe campus, ever walk past a pro-life demonstration. Trans people will not overhear psychology students inquiring whether there's a relation between sex-reassignment surgery and self-mutilation.

The safe campus is a place hostile to freedom of expression, as people free to say what they want might well say things that challenge aspects of one's identity, and, if one is vulnerable, hearing such things can be emotionally painful or debilitating, as can any affront to one's dignity.

I worry that Hollaback! Ottawa is out to make the city safe rather than civil because Lalonde, as quoted in the article, says words like "offensive" and "intolerant" in the same breath that she says "harassment," as though people are harassed by what offends them or betrays intolerance. Her target is talk that she characterizes as homophobic or misogynistic, and she wants it shut down just because it offends some people or betrays intolerance. I can't help but conclude that it's the content of speech that matters to her, not its obnoxious delivery.

It's bad enough that provosts and deans police the content of expression on university campuses. Do we also want the police to police it on the streets?