

THE HARM IN SILENCING OTHERS

This document is intended to familiarize you with some of the arguments against silencing, shoutdowns, no-platforming, and heckler's vetoes.

When someone else believes or says something you dislike—something you strongly disagree with and that you are sure is wrong—what should you do?

You might think that the right thing to do would be to attempt to prevent that person from speaking and expressing those views. After all, if someone is going to say something you think is *bad*...wouldn't it be *good* to do whatever it takes to stop him or her?

That's what happened recently in Los Angeles when protesters opposed to a controversial speaker threatened attendees, pulled fire alarms, and led to the cancelling of the event. It happened again in Berkeley, California, when protesters took it a step further and threw fireworks, started a fire, broke windows, caused \$100,000 worth of damage, and assaulted people with sticks, leading to at least one unconscious victim lying in a pool of blood. It happened again at a college in Vermont when another controversial speaker was drowned out by shouting protesters who—not satisfied with merely disrupting the event—followed the guest speaker and one of their own professors to their car where she was assaulted and received a concussion and neck injury.

But leaving the violence aside, what is wrong with preventing an unpopular or unwelcome person from giving a public speech, say by blowing a horn or shouting so loudly as to drown them out or by blocking the entrance so attendees can't get in, if you don't want to hear or to allow others to hear what he or she has to say?

Well, there are many good arguments against yielding to the temptation to silence others. Here are several of them:

1. First of all, how do you know what another person is going to say, if you don't allow them to speak before you condemn them? Most of these silencing protests are based on speculation and suspicion. Relying on hearsay is a bad way to begin a credible argument. It is unwise to attempt to put words into someone else's mouth or engage in mental fortune-telling. It is not possible to respond accurately or appropriately to speech before it occurs. If you haven't read an author's book or listened to a speaker's expressed views yet, then your opinions on the subject are worth little, because they are uninformed.
2. If another person's ideas are so terrible, then letting them speak would be the best argument against them. Here is what President Obama had to say about this: "You know, there's been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view, or to disrupt a politician's rally. Don't do that. No matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths, because, as my grandmother used to tell me, every time a fool speaks, they are just advertising their own ignorance. Let them talk. If you don't, you just make them a victim."



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3. As Obama suggested, by attempting to silence an offensive speaker, you're contributing to the problem. Censoring a speaker will likely increase interest in that speaker's message and raise publicity levels, thereby spreading the very message you are hoping to suppress.
4. An argument that has not been fully heard has not been fully rejected, either. It remains viable and has life until it is refuted with better ideas, more persuasively stated. Shouting it down merely bypasses this important intellectual hard work and sidesteps the issue, leaving it for another day.
5. People who attempt to silence others rather than engaging with them in the arena of ideas, where the real debate is happening, forfeit the contest. In other words, they lose by refusing to join the discussion. These protests are a mere sideshow to the main event, which is the battle of ideas. You can't "win" an argument if you don't participate, and persuasion, not coercion, is the way to win hearts to your side. Evasion is not persuasion, and you don't convince anyone of anything through bullying or censorship. In fact, you're more likely to create opposition for your view by behaving badly. As Dale Carnegie wisely said in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: "a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Or, like the lottery slogan says: "You have to be in it to win it."
6. Silencers' own censorship argument could easily be used against them. If you propose that some ideas are too dangerous to allow, and that people who express dangerous ideas must be silenced by force or coercion, you are arguing that some people ought to be deprived of their constitutional liberties if other people agree that they deserve it. The idea of depriving certain people of their constitutional rights could be construed as an extremely dangerous and threatening idea by many people, and, by your own argument, you could therefore merit silencing. You're not thinking this all the way through; be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it! If you agree to the idea of censorship, then don't be surprised when the censors come for you. Censorship seems like a good idea when you imagine that the censors will share your opinions, but imagine your worst enemy with the power to silence you, and then you might feel differently.
7. The silencers are, ironically, using free speech to oppose free speech. They are claiming a right that they would deny to others. This hypocritical stance has been called, "Free speech for me, but not for thee." Or, to put it another way: "Censorship for thee, but not for me." Of course, by using free speech to make their point, the silencers are also unwittingly showing their support for the concept of free speech. Remember the words of Abraham Lincoln, who said that, "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves." Of course, peaceful protests are an American tradition and a fundamental expression of liberty. The right to peaceful protest must certainly be protected. But shouting down a speaker in a way that prevents him from expressing his own opinion or being heard by others is an exercise in the suppression of liberty, not free speech. Your



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free speech rights do not supersede others' rights. Remember the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated.

8. Prejudice and ignorance and bigotry, if that's what protesters think they are opposing when they silence speakers, do not disappear when their expression is suppressed. Rather, they simply go deeper into people's minds where they fester and grow and no one has the chance to know how other people think and to respond effectively. Suppressing these views rather than addressing and refuting them would be like leaving an infection or a disease undiagnosed and untreated. Or, As Brookings Institution scholar Jonathan Rauch once said, "Suppressing speech that's wrong-headed and hateful is like curing global warming by breaking the thermometers." Not smart. Sunlight and exposure is the best disinfectant. Or, as Greg Lukianoff [explains](#), it's like "taking Xanax for syphilis."
9. It is wrong to conclude that you can learn nothing from "bad" views. One of the best things that can happen from listening to views you think you oppose is that you come away with a greater understanding of your own position. Nobody can be confidently certain in their own ideas unless those ideas are tested through exposure to the widest variety of opposing arguments. One of the worst intellectual habits is only listening to those who already agree with you. This leads to extreme narrow-mindedness and lack of awareness of contrasting viewpoints, which is how blind spots form.
10. By attempting to deny others their rights—the same rights you claim for yourself—you're breeding resentment and creating enemies. There's an old saying that "the medium is the message." If you think you're spreading love, compassion and understanding by employing force and bullying tactics, you might want to rethink the message you're actually sending.
11. Willingness to hear others out is especially crucial in a democracy, where ideas must contend for supporters. You can't only listen to people who agree with you and think that you fully understand a complicated issue. Hearing ideas you disagree with helps you clarify your own position and identify the weaknesses in your own argument.

Refusing to listen to a speaker with whom you disagree—or worse—refusing to let him or her speak—hinders your own intellectual development. Learning how to think critically, grapple with opposing viewpoints, and formulate convincing arguments supporting one's position is crucial to the enterprise of higher education. Nobody grows or learns or sharpens their argumentation skills by only hearing things you already think.

Many wise proponents of free speech have pointed out that there is no reason to fear "bad" or "erroneous" ideas in a society that allows everyone freedom of speech. That is because free speech is the corrective. One of the most venerated principles in First



Amendment law is Justice Louis Brandeis' counter-speech doctrine. He wrote: "If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehoods and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied, is more speech, not enforced silence." John Milton wrote: "Let truth and falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter? Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, it is the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate." In other words, if you're offended, or if you believe a speaker is in error, by all means use your free speech rights to speak up and articulate why. One of the key principles of First Amendment legislation is that the government has no role in regulating opinions when there are other means available to respond to it.

12. It is vital for young people in a diverse society to learn to accept and be comfortable with other people having a view that's different from their own. To "live and let live." That's what it means to coexist in a liberal, democratic, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive society. It means allowing others to reach their own conclusions, even if they are antithetical from your own; this is also what it means to be open-minded rather than closed or narrow-minded. Freedom of speech is a profound philosophy that helps protect deep pluralism in our society, rather than enforced uniformity. It might be a messy process, and it might take a little longer than you want, and you may need to participate in the process, but freedom of speech has proven to lead to innovation and progress, which is one of the reasons it is so highly valued and protected.
13. Another reason not to fear another person's exercise of free speech is that there are already legal limits to what a person can say, in order to protect you and society. Speakers can't harass an individual, they can't threaten violence or incite a riot. All they can do, legally, is share their views, ideas, and opinions. You are entitled to disagree with them, to respond to them, and to lawfully protest them, since you, too, have First Amendment rights. First Amendment rights do not, however, give anyone the right to deprive another person of their first amendment rights.
14. In America, we settle our intellectual disputes and disagreements with words and debate, not force. This is an extremely important distinction. Not because we don't feel strongly about our ideas, but because we have learned from history that this is the best method of settling disagreements and discovering the best ideas. Ideas must compete for legitimacy against one another for acceptance. The way in which this happens is not a fistfight or a public beat-down, it's a debate.

The alternative to this is societal breakdown into endless violence, where "might equals right," and each side arms up to defeat the other in a physical confrontation. This is how life proceeds in much of the world. The idea that "might equals right" is the worldview that lasted for decades in the old Soviet Union. It is the worldview of North Korea, and other dictatorial, autocratic regimes that people try to flee.



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Silencing opponents and denying others the rights to speak is not a way to fight so-called “fascism.” This is instead the signature behavior of fascists, which history plainly shows. One of the first acts of the newly-formed Nazi party was to declare a state of emergency and an immediate end to individual freedoms, including freedom of press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the right to privacy. In other words, they suppressed all opposition. The same pattern of censorship and speech suppression, enforced by force, was followed by the Italian fascists under Mussolini, and inspired young Hitler. This is not a roadmap for Americans, or anyone else, to follow. We must not repeat the deadly mistakes of the past.

If you want to win over hearts and minds, you must arm yourself with words and solid arguments, not bricks, bats or pepper spray. The majority of Americans want to live in a liberal order, where disputes are settled with words — sometimes angry words, wrong words, mean words, but still just words, allowing everyone to walk away with their bones intact. If we want to keep living there, we need to act now to preserve it.

15. What makes you so sure you’re right that you must prevent other views from being aired? This betrays a worrisome lack of humility and a dangerous sense of final certainty. Have you ever felt strongly about something, only to later re-think it and change your mind? Are you positive you’ve looked at every angle of an issue and that you have nothing left to learn? Furthermore, what makes you so certain that you should be deciding what’s right for other people? Yes, there are good ideas and there are bad ideas. It’s just that we don’t all agree on what those are, and nobody gets to make that determination for anyone else. In America, each individual gets to decide for him or herself.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche famously warned: “Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster.” In other words, the action of forcing another person to be silent—depriving them of their legal, Constitutional rights—makes you the aggressor and is the action of a despot. Are you considering fully the implications of your actions and what they say about you and your morals? Even people you disagree with or despise have rights. For more on this, watch the “Devil Speech” from the play *A Man for All Seasons*.
17. Silencing actions do not hold up against legal scrutiny or administrative challenges. Students have been punished and faculty members/school administrators have been placed on leave, lost their jobs, and been sued in court for participating in the sorts of actions that interfere with the free speech/civil rights of others.

