

UP FRONT

Deciding Who Should Speak on Campus

Deborah Tannen

In public institutions, as in our personal lives, our strengths are also our liabilities. Two of the great strengths of American democracy are our dedication to free speech and our conviction that truth is best reached through open debate in which both sides are heard. Yet there are dangers in some of the practices that grow out of these bedrock beliefs. I will be calling attention to some of these dangers, but I do not mean to question the rightness, the urgency of protecting free speech or the importance of open dialogue, including passionate and even vitriolic debate.

In our society, we tend to regard “open debate” as synonymous with “open exchange of ideas,” and to define “debate” as giving a hearing to “both sides.” What dangers can lurk in a commitment to open debate between both sides of a controversial issue?

One danger is that most issues don’t have two sides—they have many complex, nuanced, and overlapping sides. And those complexities, nuances, and points of overlap are obscured when an issue is cast as a debate between two sides.

Another danger is that this approach privileges views that fit most easily into its framework—often the most extreme, the most polarized views, which then come to define the debate. This makes a solution seem hopeless, so we give up seeking one. Furthermore,

most people hold views that lie somewhere in the middle, and when they don't see their views represented they turn off and fall into apathy.

The two-sides approach creates a need to find spokespersons to represent "the other side," even if it is a widely discredited position. For example, as Ross Gelbspan demonstrated in his book *The Heat Is On*, there is widespread agreement among experts and ample scientific evidence about the reality of global climate change, yet some Americans still consider this issue "controversial" because any article or program about it includes the same few fringe researchers who question its reality based on dubious research paid for by the fossil fuel industry.

The two-sides approach can also create an illusion of equivalence. Marvin Kalb, a television journalist during the Vietnam War, recalls that if, say, 90 senators voted one way and 10 voted the other, the TV news, determined to get "both points of view," would present a representative of each side. Although viewers were told that one senator spoke for himself and 89 colleagues, while the other spoke for himself and 9 colleagues, the visual impact of seeing two men, each occupying half a screen, gave the impression that these were two equally weighted sides. (This is not to imply that the minority "side" was wrong: Kalb points out that early in the war the minority opposed it; toward the end of the war, the minority supported it. The point is that the "two sides" approach obscured the difference in how widespread each opinion was.)

Perhaps most dangerous is that an unthinking devotion to a two-sides approach can help spread false information, or even outright lies.

None are more aware of the preciousness of freedom of speech than those who have lived in a nation deprived of it. The Czech poet and former president Vaclav Havel has spoken of the "special radioactive power of the truthful word." I think we all believe in this power. We believe we can recognize the truth by its sparkle, and detect when someone is lying. Unfortunately, we can't. Paul Ekman, a University of California psychologist, set up experiments in which individuals were videotaped talking about their emotions, actions, or beliefs—some truthfully, some not. He showed these videotapes to

thousands of people, then asked them to say who they thought was lying and how certain they were of their ability to tell. The vast majority performed no better than chance, yet the many who were unable to detect lies had just as much confidence in their answers as the few who were truly able to tell.

This means that when we give speakers a platform, audience members are as likely to be convinced by falsehoods as by truths. The reception of Holocaust deniers and revisionists in the United States illustrates the danger of providing people who falsify facts with an opportunity to spread their message. Holocaust deniers try to refute the historical fact that during World War II Nazi Germany killed many millions of people in concentration camps as part of a plan to eradicate Jews from Europe. Holocaust revisionists agree that it happened but maintain that it was not nearly as bad as has been claimed. Deniers and revisionists have had far more success in the United States than in any other country. One reason, sadly, is our devotion to a “both sides” debate as the path to truth.

For example, when Deborah Lipstadt published her book *Denying the Holocaust*, she was invited to appear on television—together with another guest who would argue that the Holocaust never happened, so the two could debate. Lipstadt refused because inviting such a guest to appear on a national television show would vastly enlarge the deniers’ and revisionists’ audience and enhance their credibility. The TV producer protested to Lipstadt, “Don’t you think viewers have a right to hear the other side?”

The same rationale surfaced in 1993 when deniers had one of their greatest successes by placing in college newspapers advertisements that claimed (falsely) that the Holocaust Memorial Museum contains no proof that gas chambers actually existed. Lipstadt quotes a college newspaper editor who justified running the ad by explaining, “There are two sides to every issue and both have a place on the pages of any open-minded paper’s editorial page.” The fallacy here, as in the TV producer’s use of the same argument, is that there is no other side to historical fact. Would we provide a forum for a historian who argues that the Civil War never happened? Or that it happened, but that the casualties suffered by the Confederate side have been greatly exaggerated?

Another college newspaper editor that Lipstadt quotes justified publishing the ad by saying, “The issue of freedom of expression outweighed the issue of the offensive nature of the advertisement.” This brings us to the key way that the “two sides to every issue” approach becomes intertwined with freedom of speech and expression.

What’s wrong with the notion that giving a platform to those whose claims we know to be false is a freedom-of-expression issue? It reframes an individual’s right to express ideas as an obligation on the part of editors, producers, or those who invite speakers to give that individual a platform. I have a right to say or write just about anything I want. The First Amendment says the government cannot infringe on that right. But I can’t call up Oprah Winfrey and say, “I have a First Amendment right to appear on your show.” Oprah Winfrey has the power to amplify my message by inviting me on her show, but deciding whether or not to use that power in that way is her responsibility, not my right.

Universities occupy a special position in society as institutions dedicated to knowledge and learning. The editors of student newspapers and members of campus communities in a position to invite speakers have a unique power to amplify the messages of those they cover or invite to speak and the power to lend them credibility. These powers come along with an enormous responsibility.

Universities have a responsibility to encourage open debate and discussion of a wide variety of views, but they also have a responsibility not to disseminate false information and lend credibility to those who spread it. For instance, Georgetown University, where I am a professor, protects the rights of students to invite lecturers who oppose the policies and teachings of the Catholic Church. This takes great courage and conviction since Georgetown is a Catholic university. But would we also want to invite a speaker who proclaims that Catholics kidnap babies, kill them, and drink their blood and eat their flesh in secret religious rituals? These are the so-called “blood libel” myths that were spread—and widely believed—by Protestants about Catholics in the 19th century (and that have been repeated up to the present time about other groups). We would not want to execute or imprison those who disseminate these myths, but neither would we

want to invite them to speak at Georgetown—not only because such myths were evidence and provocations of hatred against Catholics in the 19th century (which they were), but because they are lies, and a university is an institution devoted to learning, knowledge, and scientific investigation.

As Amitai Etzioni and other communitarians remind us, in a democracy, rights always come along with responsibilities. A university within a democracy must be a bastion of free speech and expression. But it is also a bastion of knowledge and reason. This responsibility is especially urgent in the age of the Internet, when so much information comes to us without editorial filtering, and baseless rumors—modern equivalents of the blood libel myths—spread so quickly and easily.

A university should not offer a platform to Holocaust deniers or revisionists not because what they are saying is repellant, not even because of the grievous pain they cause those who endured the concentration camps or lost their families to them, but because it is counter to our knowledge of history. If a university does not stand for factual history, science, and accurate knowledge, then it is no longer a center of learning, but has become something else.

There is a place in a free society for a forum in which anyone can get up and say anything. Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, London is such a place. Sproul Plaza at the University of California, when I was a graduate student there in the 1970s, was such a place. Anyone could stand on a soapbox and hold forth. But passersby approached them knowing that no one had invited them—no university-related organization or person endorsed or promoted their ideas. But if speakers are invited inside a university building, given an invitation by a university entity, then they bear the imprimatur of that university, whether those who invite them intend it so or not.

America's dedication to freedom of speech is one of its greatest strengths. Americans rightly cherish open debate. But the tendency to frame all issues as debates between two sides can distort issues and even obscure the truth. And we shouldn't misconstrue what the right to freedom of speech guarantees. All individuals have a right to say what they want, but universities have no obligation to amplify the message of any particular individual by providing a platform and the

credibility implied by the invitation to speak. On the contrary, all members of a university community have a responsibility to ensure that the halls of learning do not become an echo chamber for the spread of disinformation in the name of free speech.

Squandering Volunteerism

Amitai Etzioni

In January 2002, when President Bush called on Americans to commit at least two years or 4,000 hours of service to neighbor and nation, he was widely applauded. After September 11, Americans rushed to find ways to help—to the point that the Red Cross had to turn away donors, and Salvation Army warehouses in New York City overflowed into the streets.

This public desire to address our national vulnerabilities was just waiting to be tapped. But in the weeks and months that followed, the administration faced a problem known to every itinerant preacher: all the charisma in the world will do little good if you get people all riled up and then have no church for them to join. The administration hasn't institutionalized citizens' desire to serve, and now that desire is fading away.

To be fair, Bush hired some very good people to head his new drive. The USA Freedom Corps set up a tiny headquarters, published a brochure, and created a neat website, but it hasn't organized a new army of volunteers. Many observers claim that the main difficulty was that Congress appropriated only about \$25 million for the new drive instead of the \$230 million the White House requested. Local organizers complain that they can get little seed money and that what they can get is slow in coming. All this is true. But as I see it, the problem lies elsewhere.

The program created to recruit volunteers in the area of homeland security—the Citizen Corps, a sort of national version of the neighborhood watch program—was buried.