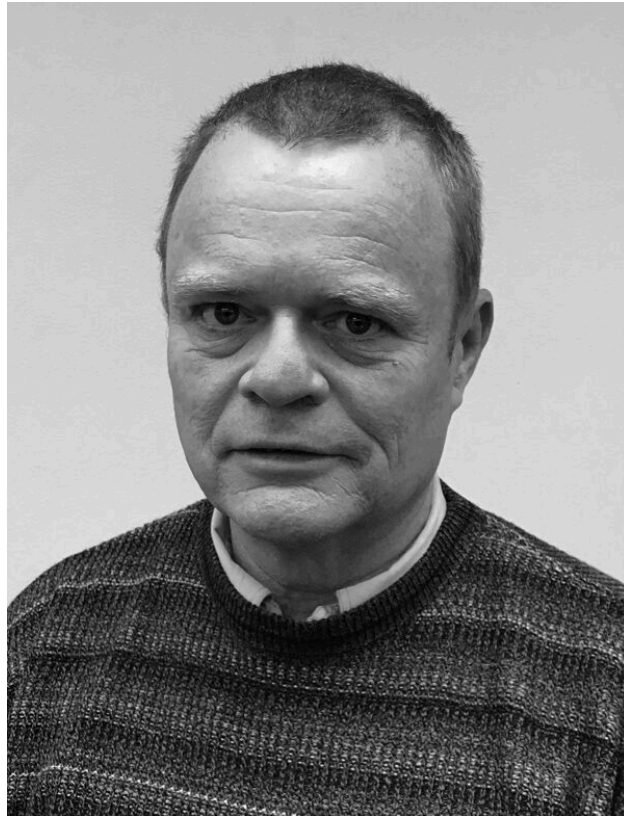


Column: Freedom of speech trumps the right to not be offended

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Over the last few weeks, I have received letters, calls, messages and other complaints about a wide variety of topics loosely related to freedom of speech.

In Crescent City, the complaints were mostly about the paper's decision to allow Roger Gitlin to share his views on local politics. Mr. Gitlin is a well-known Republican and former county supervisor. And, yes, he says things that are controversial and even offensive.

Kevin Hendrick, the well-known Chairman of the Del Norte County Democratic Central Committee, also shares his views weekly in the Triplicate. Incidentally, it was Mr. Gitlin who suggested that we invite Mr. Hendrick to write a column. And, for what it's worth, we have received no complaints about Hendrick and his thoughts.

In my mind, these complaints all boil down to freedom of speech. A lot of people talk about the issue, the vast majority say they support it, but it seems few really understand what freedom of speech is.

First of all, freedom of speech only applies to the government. The government is not allowed to create rules that limit freedom of speech. Private companies, including this one, can limit what they allow their employees to say and can limit what others say on our platform. And we do that.

We have rules that prohibit others from using our opinion pages to take shots at private companies and private individuals. Other than that, we allow a lot of different views to be expressed. If you don't like whoever the current president is, you can share that view. If you don't like what your local government is doing, you can share that view, too. If you are strongly pro-life, or pro-choice, bring it on. We are not going to censor what our readers think because others might be offended.

This whole country was built on arguing – whether we were to have an elected king or a president, life-longers or a temporary servants. One of the coolest parts of the U.S. government is the peaceful transition of power – to the extent that even if the newly elected official is a completely against everything you hold near and dear, the power transfers without a call to arms.

History tells us that all the presidents and elected officials have those who completely and unequivocally oppose them shout their views from every rooftop. Even John Wilkes Booth thought he was a hero, in his mind, because there was such opposition to Lincoln.

The debates on the floor of the Continental Congress were barely short of violent, but the case to unite was greater than the case to be right.

When it comes to freedom of speech, the Constitutional protections are not there to protect those who want to say friendly, happy things. Freedom of speech protects the most vile, hateful, evil speech out there. If you remember, several years ago, a small group from Westboro Baptist Church was protesting at funerals of fallen service members. The signs the church members held said the most spiteful, hateful things imaginable. Yet, every attempt to quiet them was overturned because free speech includes vile speech.

That doesn't mean there aren't repercussions for speech. While the government can't limit speech, many private businesses have rightly held employees to account for things they have said, written and shared. And that is perfectly legal.

That isn't always popular, but I support speech with little restraint, even if that speech offends me and targets me. Putting limits on speech is a slippery slope, that once begun, can spiral out of control quickly. Do we as a country really want people being arrested because they have an opinion outside of the norm? If you say yes, then who gets to decide what opinion is allowed?

Under a President Joe Biden, what is allowed might look very different than what is allowed under a President Donald Trump. What if the decided opinion completely opposes your own and you are never allowed to air a different thought?

We appreciate our readers, and we value their input. We don't want to lose a single one. But we understand that embracing free speech will sometimes mean others get offended. We will not censure or remove writers who say offensive things within our limits.

My hope is that, if you are offended, rather than getting angry, sit down and send me a letter with your own views. Use this space to share your thoughts. Who knows, maybe you can change some minds.

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