

# Illusions of Engagement Less May Well Be More

## *Janet Keeping*

One of the marks of good thinking generally and reliable decision-making in particular has long been open-mindedness, the willingness to consider opposing points of view, to weigh the evidence for and against. This standard still applies, of course, and at a time when the idea that conclusions should be reached on the basis of carefully considered factual evidence is under challenge in some influential circles, striving to meet this standard is more important than ever.

But it is an illusion to think that there is always an opposing point of view that should be entertained. Sometimes there isn't any such thing. And sometimes there is, but it would be dangerous to give that position more credibility than it already has by attending to it. Some ideas are so toxic we should strive never to engage with them. Then there are the many, many less dangerous other ideas, engagement with which would distract us from the more important issues at hand.

Although open-mindedness is usually a laudable trait, there are times when a line has to be drawn and it takes good judgment to know where best to draw it. Good judgment is also needed when it comes to engagement with the less dangerous: time and energy wasted on the timely and tempting, but ultimately trivial, leaves us less well-equipped to deal with the serious.

Mies van der Rohe famously said, in justification of his much pared down version of

modern architecture, that “less is more.” He was wrong – or at least he wildly overstated his case – vis à vis the built environment. It turns out that most human beings respond better to something less hard-edged, if you will, as post-modernism and even post-post-modernism have shown. But in the face of an overwhelmingly huge number of opportunities to engage – most of them, and during the COVID-19 pandemic virtually all of them, on-line – his maxim may be not such a bad idea after all: less might well be more.

### **There are not always two sides to the story**

Although they are not my primary concern, there are at least two ways in which it is obvious that there are not always two sides to every story.

For one, some assertions must be true – are necessarily true – and to claim there is another side misses the point entirely. Some things are necessarily true ( $p=p$ ) either as a matter of formal logic or because they are conceptually true, that is, true by definition. “A member of the Toronto Blue Jays plays for Major League Baseball.” This statement has to be true because the Toronto team is a constituent part of MLB. By definition, the only way to play for the Blue Jays is to play for MLB. To deny that claims which are necessarily true are what they are – to claim there is another side to the story – involves asserting a contradiction – saying something that both is and is not true, for example,

that “Bo Bichette plays for the Blue Jays and does not play for MLB.”

The logicians say that anything follows from a contradiction. Although this statement may sound purely academic and to be of little practical value, it is not. For it explains why we instinctively mistrust those who say one thing one day and the opposite the next, for example, that the spread of COVID-19 is a politically driven hoax and, shortly thereafter, that we have a serious pandemic on our hands. We mistrust them because they have demonstrated that they are capable of saying absolutely anything at all. If they have expressed the view one day that there is no pandemic and shortly thereafter that there is, then – if they don’t go out of their way carefully to explain their change of heart – we have no reason to trust them on any other subject.

For another, there are often *more* than two sides to a story. Police investigations often turn up myriad accounts of the same event. Eyewitness accounts are notoriously unreliable and virtually every observer of an incident sees what happened at least somewhat differently. Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh could not have written the many successful novels they did were this not the case. Many of their murder mysteries involve myriad characters each with some evidence as to the circumstances surrounding the death. We the readers are led down first one road and then another, as our hero and heroine detectives sort through accounts that lead in a variety of directions. While Christie’s and Marsh’s plot lines are much more elaborate than what usually transpires around actual murders, they illustrate the point: there are often many different pieces of evidence to be sifted through before the best account – the most truthful as-

certainable under the circumstances – can be identified.

This is of course not to say that there is no truth to be discovered, but only to note how many different interpretations (stories) sometimes have to be examined before we reach the best possible understanding of what actually happened. Careful thinking has to try to discern the best account on all the pertinent evidence: in much of life that is not a matter simply of what’s for and what’s against a certain proposition. It is instead a matter of how the most compelling pieces of the evidentiary puzzle are best assembled to give a coherent picture of what is the case.

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#### **Some ideas should just be ignored**

But the above observations aside, my main concern here is with the idea that no matter what the issue, we should always be ready to entertain views opposite to it. We should not. There are well-documented matters of such enormous ethical significance that to give air time to their negation is to endanger the public good. The clearest example concerns denial of the Holocaust. It is both logically and conceptually possible to claim that the Holocaust did not happen, but to do so is either manifestly crazy or just evil. To treat Holocaust denial as a serious position when the subject of the Holocaust comes up “because there are always two sides to a story” is to give credibility to a claim that has been shown time and again to be nonsense. And more important, it is to give support to a faction – Holocaust deniers – that, if it has any impact at all, can only do moral harm, for example, by supporting white supremacists who propagate anti-Semitism and other hateful doc-

trines. It is also to undermine the role of factual evidence in our understanding of history. There is no other side of the Holocaust's reality that should be heard.

### **It's a question of engagement**

We can put this point in terms of engagement; it is not always best to engage with an issue, for example, whether the Holocaust occurred. Sometimes refusing to so engage is much the better course. For example, it may serve the cause of humanity better to ignore rather than to prosecute someone who is alleged to have violated laws against hate speech. No one has addressed this better than the late Alan Borovoy, who served as General Counsel to the Canadian Civil Liberties Association for many years. In connection with more than one case of hate-speech, Borovoy argued against using the law to go after the offender.

His perspective was this: in prosecuting those who seek to spread hate, we give the offender exactly what he or she wants – the largest possible audience. Without a prosecution and the attending trial, the hateful view espoused would be heard by many fewer people.

One of the most prominent cases Borovoy dealt with involved a Holocaust denier from Eckville, Alberta, a small town lying about midway between Calgary and Edmonton:

In another infamous case, Alberta high school teacher and mayor Jim Keegstra, who taught his students that there was a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, was prosecuted under the anti-hate law. Even before the charge was laid, he was removed from the classroom and ousted from the teaching profession, and the voters of his town had removed

him from office. What, asks Borovoy, was the point of prosecuting him after all that? *"He should have been allowed to wallow in the obscurity he so richly deserved."*<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis added)

Borovoy always argued that to prosecute Holocaust deniers was to give them and their ideas exactly the platform and the publicity they sought for their fringe ideas and which they could not have obtained in any other way. They could not have bought the publicity a prosecution and trial would focus on their ideas. Prosecuting them was doing them a favour while doing the broader society no good at all and perhaps harm.

Some deranged ideas are more immediately pressing on public life than is Holocaust denial at the moment. Although perhaps not as ultimately dangerous as denial of the Holocaust, they may be harder to ignore. Take, for example, the "birther" movement which for years has questioned whether

Barak Obama was actually born in the US and thus entitled, as per the US Constitution, to be president. Obama was understandably reluctant to engage with the "birthers" – those who, led by Donald Trump, claimed against clear evidence to the contrary that Obama had not been born in the US. For a long time Obama ignored the birthers' demands to provide more evidence as to his place of birth. To use Alan Borovoy's language, he tried to let the birthers "wallow in the obscurity they so richly deserved."

But of course some of the "birthers" weren't so easily ignored. Turning your back on Jim Keegstra was one thing; trying to deny Donald Trump the limelight is quite another. Eventually Obama gave up on the let-them-wallow strategy and released more detailed information on his place of birth, thereby running the risk that the

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birthers' attacks would be given greater credibility. As *The New York Times* reported on April 27, 2011:

President Obama released his long-form birth certificate on Wednesday, a step that injected him directly into the simmering "birther" controversy in the hope of finally ending it, or even turning it to his advantage.

The gamble produced dramatic television as Mr. Obama strode into the White House briefing room to address, head on, a subject that had been deemed irrelevant by everyone in his orbit for years even as it stoked conservative efforts to undermine his legitimacy as president.

*Mr. Obama's comments risked elevating the discredited questions about where he was born, but also allowed him to cast his political opponents as focused on the trivial at a time when the nation is facing more important issues. (Emphasis added)*

It will not always be possible to ignore those who advance seriously dangerous or offensive ideas, but if paying them no attention – refusing to engage with them – is an option on the table, we should try to do so.

### **This is neither an argument for nor against hate-speech laws**

It is probably clear, but to err on the safe side, I note that nothing here should be taken as an argument either in favour of or against laws on "hate-speech." Whether the law in any given jurisdiction should punish "hate-speech," however that term is defined, is a complicated question beyond the scope of these brief remarks. But it is perhaps useful to note that the social conditions from which Holocaust denial emerges are vastly different here in Canada – where a libertarian (let-them-wallow) approach is probably the better one (I have always stood

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with Borovoy on this one) – than in, say, Germany or Austria or Poland where the drive to deny is much stronger because of the role those countries played in carrying out the Holocaust.

### **The bigger picture on engagement**

So, it's an illusion that there is always another side to the story that should be taken into account. Those that make outrageous

claims – such as that the Holocaust never occurred or that Barak Obama, all evidence to the contrary, was not born in the US – are attention seekers; that is in large part why they propound extreme ideas. We should withhold our attention from them whenever possible; we should steer clear of engagement with them.

But the much bigger, and these days ever-present threat to useful, civic-minded engagement is presented not by the hate-mongers and racists but by the sheer volume of opportunities to engage that are presented to us daily. Opportunities for meaningful discourse on serious topics are vastly out-numbered by the array of videos, clever (or infuriating) tweets, comments sections, Facebook posts, and so on.

One way of stifling communication is through censorship – reducing what may be communicated. Another is to do the opposite, to drown everything out with a flood of the inconsequential. In this way, the room for meaningful response to serious matters is vastly reduced and the role that good thinking should play in public life is undermined.

It seems this is where we are today. But how did we get here? Fingers are often pointed at the massive distraction presented by the Internet, in particular, by the video games and especially social media that are enabled by it. But many would say that the roots of the problem go further back, at least to the emergence and

proliferation of television. Neil Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* provides an oft-cited analysis of how serious deliberation in public affairs has been replaced by the ability to amuse.<sup>2</sup> Or, we might say more generally, the ability to distract.

Postman's son, Andrew, wrote in 2017:

The central argument of *Amusing Ourselves* is simple: there were two landmark dystopian novels written by brilliant British cultural critics – *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell – and we Americans had mistakenly feared and obsessed over the vision portrayed in the latter book (an information-censoring, movement-restricting, individuality-emaciating state) rather than the former (a technology-sedating, consumption-engorging, instant-gratifying bubble).

But the more serious danger lay elsewhere. Andrew Postman continues:

Unfortunately, there remained a vision we Americans did need to guard against, one that was percolating right then, in the 1980s. The president [Reagan] was a former actor and polished communicator. Our political discourse (if you could call it that) was day by day diminished to sound bites (“Where’s the beef?” and “I’m paying for this microphone” became two “gotcha” moments, apparently testifying to the speaker’s political formidableness).

“This was,” Postman reminds us, “in spirit, the vision that Huxley predicted way back in 1931, the dystopia my father believed we should have been watching out for.” As his son reminds us, Postman senior had written:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be con-

cealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture.

“An Orwellian world is much easier to recognize, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan,” my father wrote. “Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us ... [but] who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements?”

To paraphrase van der Rohe: less could be more, so much more. But how the “sea of amusements” gets pared down cannot be left solely to elites and certainly not to any board of censors or, as per Orwell’s *1984*, to some “ministry of truth.”

It is up to us collectively to find a way out, and the first step, as always, is recognizing the problem. Perhaps hardship – the COVID-19 pandemic or the harm wrought by climate change – will constitute the shock that begins to shift large numbers of people away from the trivial to refocus on what matters. As Andrew Postman says, “It will be difficult” but it is, hopefully, possible because, really, “It’s not so amusing anymore.”•

## References

1. <https://www.freedomtoread.ca/articles/challenges-in-every-generation-alan-borovoy-in-conversation/#.Xl6G9KhKjIU>
2. For an insightful and highly readable article on the prescience of Postman’s views, see <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/feb/02/amusing-ourselves-to-death-neil-postman-trump-orwell-huxley>

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