

Our View

Our use of Facebook means censoring comments

Our recent article about a local woman raising funds to display a Black Lives Matters billboard in La Grande lit up our Facebook feed like nothing else. Most stories we link to our Facebook page receive a few comments. Many of our features covering the COVID-19 crisis receive dozens or more. The features in June about the outbreak at the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Island City received somewhere in the 90-140 range, which is substantial for our Facebook page. Subsequent articles on COVID-19 have reached into the three-digit mark. Our editorial on the Lighthouse Church needing to take responsibility for its actions has almost 200 comments.

But the article on the Black Lives Matters sign blew up, at one point totaling more than 1,100 comments. Most of those were in response to other comments, but still, The Observer’s Facebook page had not seen that kind of activity in the short time I’ve been here and I doubt ever. Some of those comments were salient, introspective and added to the larger conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement. Others, not so much. A few threatened violence against the sign or wished ill upon the organizer.

That’s the wrong tactic when disagreeing with speech. Rather than shutting down such speech, counter with a different or better argument. Or in this case, a billboard.

Facebook lets you delete or hide comments, and we do that to comments that threaten violence, use swear words or engage in nothing more than insults and the like, but usually we first take screenshots of the posts. In some cases, we ban people from the page.

I handled some of that when I was a reporter for the East Oregonian. Some folks asserted this violated their First Amendment rights to free speech and deleting their comments amounted to censorship. Well, it is censorship, but it doesn’t stop them from posting whatever they want on their own page, and it does not violate any Constitutional rights.

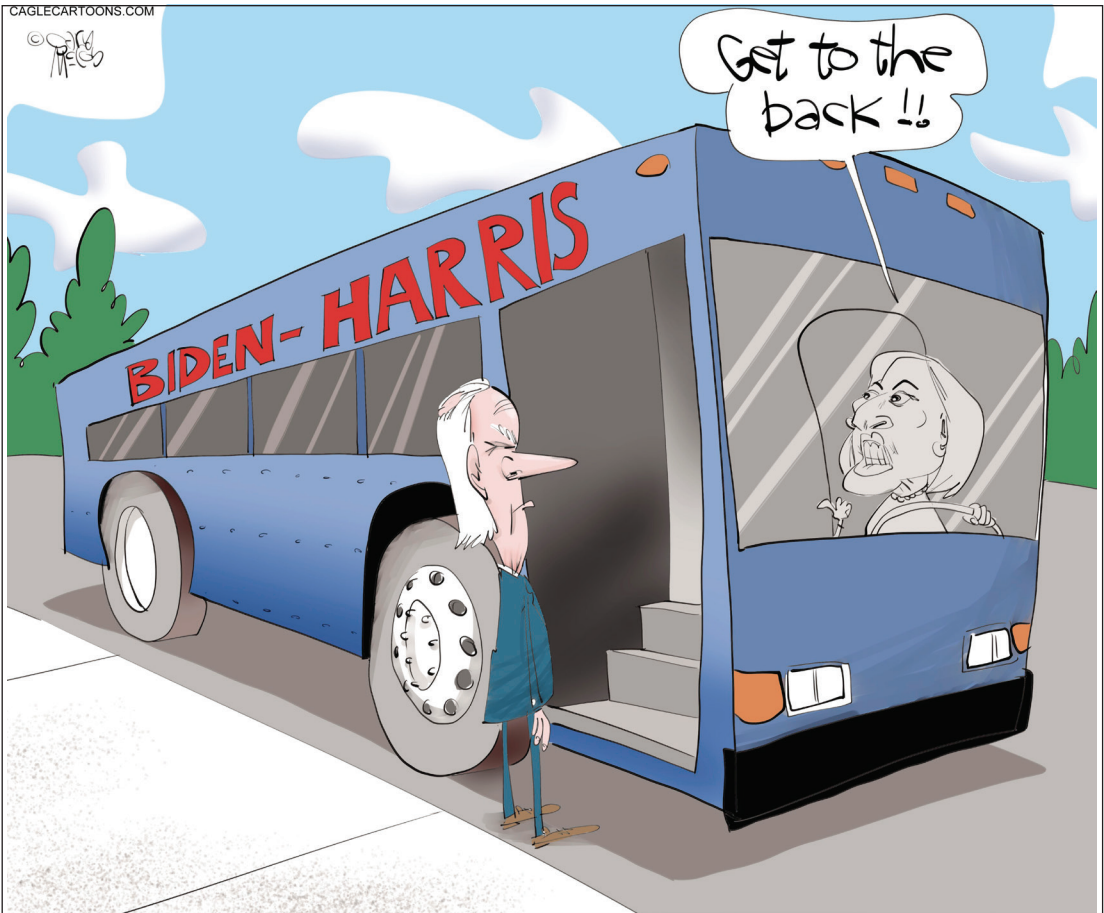
The First Amendment, of course, applies to the government, prohibiting it from abridging the freedom of speech or of the press. The law also protects the exercise of religion, the right of people to peaceably assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

The law does not free anyone from the consequences of exercising any of those freedoms. Someone posting on Facebook that so-and-so is a liar and cheat could face a lawsuit. The First Amendment also does not prohibit businesses from deleting comments on their own social media pages. As the editor, I’m concerned the paper could face consequences for leaving a defaming comment on our Facebook page.

True, deleting comments from The Observer’s Facebook page is not presenting a better argument. But that is not the issue when it comes to a business. We use Facebook, Twitter and others platforms to promote our work and engage with our audience. These platforms are not free-for-alls for speech but tools that require management, and that means time and money, commodities too precious for us to devote much of either for constant debate on social media.

For Facebook, that can mean getting rid of comments that serve no purpose but to derail a conversation. I would be thrilled to see such comments dry up from social media, but I’m a realist. I also enjoy civil discussion and even a good argument. The word derives from Latin’s augere — to make clear, which, after all, is central to the role of a newspaper. Name calling and bombast, then, don’t help with that.

Just as threatening to ruin a billboard does no good for those who may not like its message.



Letters

Oregon still behind on ADA accessibility

Most Oregonians would agree that grocery stores, doctor’s offices and libraries should not be out of reach to someone because they use a wheelchair or experience low or limited vision. Yet, 30 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law, we know how far we have to go.

A December 2017 statewide survey from ODOT showed that 97% of curb ramps on state roads and highways across Oregon violate ADA standards. That data also revealed that Union County had roughly 500 curb ramps on state roads, only eight of which met current ADA standards.

The good news is that a lawsuit filed in 2016 by eight individuals with mobility and visual disabilities, the Association for Oregon Centers for Independent Living, and Disability Rights Oregon succeeded in securing the largest commitment to accessible transportation in state history. The upgrades underway in Union captured in “ODOT program eases mobility issues” (The Observer, Aug. 13) are the tangible results.

If you know of a missing or inaccessible curb ramp, you can report problems to ODOT using their “ADA Accessibility Requests” complaint form. You can use the “Ask ODOT” form for complaints that are not covered by the settle-

ment agreement but are within ODOT’s control — such as railroad crossing without barriers or sidewalk obstacles that make it impossible for you to reach the curb ramp or use the signal.

Tom Stenson
Portland

Veterinarians should be allowed to help all injured wild animals

Today I contacted the governor’s office asking her to change the Department of Fish and Game policy of forbidding vets to work on injured wildlife animals like certain kinds of squirrels here in Oregon.

It shouldn’t matter what kind of injured animal is helped. The Fish and Wildlife regulation forbidding vets to help injured wild animals is mean-spirited and wrong-headed. They get that way from having too much power and from not thinking the public has authority greater than theirs from the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

State employees work for us — we don’t work for them. They must listen to the public and do our bidding. We, after all, pay their salaries, and if they want to work in our state, they had best listen to all of us.

Nicholas L. Smith
La Grande

Write to us

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U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.	Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.	Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.
U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (2nd District): D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-	Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.	City of La Grande: Mayor Steve Clements, City Manager Robert Strope; P.O. Box 670, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-1309; fax 541-963-3333.
	State Sen. William S. Hansell (29th District/Athena): Salem office: 900 Court St. NE., S-423, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1729. Website: www.oregonlegislature.gov/hansell. Email: sen.billhansell@oregonlegislature.gov.	Union County Commissioners: Donna Beverage, Matt Scarfo and Paul Anderes; 1106 K Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-963-1001; fax 541-963-1079.
	State Rep. Greg Barreto (58th District/Cove): Salem office: 900 Court St. NE., H-384, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1458. Website: www.oregonlegislature.gov/barreto. Email: rep.gregbarreto@oregonleg-	Wallowa County Commissioners: John Hillock, Todd Nash and Susan Roberts; 101 S. River St., Room 202, Enterprise, OR 97828; 541-426-4543, ext. 11; fax 541-426-0582.

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