

# In defense of Dr. Laura

The laws being used to silence her could come back to haunt us



I have no love for Dr. Laura Schlessinger. But now I'm finding myself in the peculiar position of having to stand up for her. Before you start writing hate e-mail, let me explain.

Recently, stations planning to air Dr. Laura's forthcoming television show in Canada were told they would have to edit out any negative references to gays and lesbians. For those hoping for a quick end to her program, this was good news.



But is it?

The decision was made by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, a government agency responsible for monitoring radio and television programming and making sure the content doesn't pose a threat to any particular group. In the case of Dr. Laura, the watchdogs feared her negative comments about queer people might lead to violence against lesbians and gay men.

This would seem to be a victory. The problem, though, is that in censoring Dr. Laura, the council relied on the same guidelines that have been used for years to censor freedom of expression for the same people it now is claiming to protect.

Canada's government has a long history of censoring art under the guise of protecting the rights of various groups. The most infamous example of this is the long-running battle against sexually explicit material. Ostensibly enacted to protect women, children and others from the threat of abuse, these so-called "protective" laws frequently have been used to keep gay-oriented books and magazines out of the hands of readers.

Erotic magazines have been favorite targets of Canadian censors, with guidelines preventing the import of any periodicals depicting, among numerous other things, anal intercourse or "excessive" ejaculation, both of which are considered degrading and violent sexual practices. Fiction is similarly restricted, and numerous gay and lesbian books have been seized by customs for allegedly containing material that would threaten the well-being of readers.

As a result of this, many publishers of queer material have toned down their products. Instead of waging costly wars against a government with deep pockets, they've decided not to publish certain kinds of books and magazines. Ultimately, they have silenced themselves because fighting back is too difficult.

I know what it's like to have a book banned because someone thinks it's dangerous. My book *100 Questions & Answers About AIDS* has been banned in several U.S. cities because it allegedly promotes homosexual sex as healthy and normal.

Similarly, my book *OutSpoken*, a collection of interviews with lesbian and gay people, has been removed from school libraries because opponents fear it will encourage young people to explore the "gay lifestyle." And yes, I also have been banned in Canada

on several occasions.

What made me maddest about these instances of censorship wasn't that my books annoyed certain people. What infuriated me was that the various school boards, city councils and governments involved effectively were saying readers of their communities weren't intelligent enough to decide for themselves what they should or shouldn't read. Instead of providing freedom of choice, they were making choices for people who were perfectly capable of making them themselves.

As I said, I don't like Dr. Laura. I think she's a misinformed person whose dogmatic rhetoric spreads ignorance and makes people ashamed of who they are. But I don't think you protect or educate people by running to the government and asking it to make her shut up, any more than you protect people from violence by stopping them from looking at pictures of excessive ejaculation and anal sex.

Whether we like it or not, Dr. Laura has a right to her opinions, and she has the right to spread those opinions if someone wants to give her the forum to do so. And although it might not seem like it, this is a great thing, because it means those of us who disagree with her also have the right to express our opinions.

And that is where our power is. In the United States, we're winning our battle against Dr. Laura not by censorship but by letting the sponsors of her show know we won't support their products if they support her views.

One by one, advertisers have been pulling out, leaving producers scrambling for replacements and running out of justifications for airing her views. If enough advertisers turn their backs on her, you can bet she'll be out of a job in no time flat.

This kind of action is far more powerful than government sanctions. By standing up in record numbers and letting advertisers know we watch what they do, we as gay people are using our voices to effect change.

We aren't relying on someone else to protect us. We're doing it ourselves. And in the long run, that will make a huge difference.

Maybe you're happy Dr. Laura has been banned in Canada. But don't be fooled—the same laws that are being used to protect us from her may be used to protect someone else from what you have to say.

So let Dr. Laura have her say. Because as long as we have freedom of expression, we can have our say right back, and our voices are a lot louder—and a lot clearer—than hers is.

■ MICHAEL THOMAS FORD'S latest book, *It's Not Mean If It's True*, will be in stores this month, as will *My Queer Life*, an audio collection of the most popular pieces from his *Lambda Literary Award-winning essay collections*.


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