

EAST OREGONIAN

Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

Apologize or don't, but silence not OK

The internet troll, once an anonymous denizen of message boards and chat rooms who held little sway in the real world, has come out into the light with the prevalence of social media.

We used to be able to dismiss his presence as the ugly fringe of cyberspace, a reaction-seeking miscreant spewing inciting, hateful speech from a basement somewhere far away. We used to be able to rationalize that his words represent no real human being, and certainly none we respect or admire or who have any actual power in our lives. And we could altogether ignore him quite easily, as our daily lives weren't so intertwined with the internet.

But now that we've all (or nearly all) moved into his domain, the troll is everywhere we turn. And we've come to the chilling realization that he is among us in real life, too.

We saw it earlier this month as Echo city councilman Lou Nakapalau weaponized his Facebook account in a war of words with a documentary filmmaker. Nakapalau accosted director Joe Wilson, who is gay, on the page for his film "Kumu Hina," using slurs and saying if Wilson died of AIDS he would spit on his grave. The men have never met in person. Nakapalau has since removed the comments from the page.

Nakapalau has not responded to several attempts to ask about the encounter, and as the city council met Thursday about how to address the remarks he sat silent and expressionless in the chambers. He didn't say a word as the council voted to apologize for his offensive words, and none of his fellow council members addressed him.

That's shameful, and a real shame.

The city issued a broad apology to any who were offended by the comments and noted that the personal accounts of individual councilors aren't endorsed by the city. It also said the city does not

and will not enact policies that are biased against classes or groups of people. And in the final line it says the council is made up of volunteers who have the right to free speech.

It's the kind of statement that doesn't make anything better, but is issued to make sure things don't get worse. It's a safe and generic stance that declines to mention the offending party — Nakapalau — by name, though it does take the time to mention the *East Oregonian*, who first reported the insults, and Facebook, the platform on which the comments were made. As if either are more responsible for the behavior than the man himself.

Nakapalau has the right to speak his mind. He's a volunteer councilman solely on the merit of earning eight write-in votes last November. And because he was elected, his words — even the ones he fired off to antagonize and belittle a stranger from another state, but never meant to be seen by friends and neighbors — carry weight. The citizens of Echo deserve to hear what he has to say for himself. The people of Umatilla County and beyond deserve to know how the city responds to this kind of hate.

Echo is not the sleepy town it once was. New wineries, downtown dining and Main Street restoration have created a beautiful place for a visit, and events like last weekend's Oktoberfest and the springtime Red 2 Red mountain bike race have brought in new life and the potential for even more tourism.

While some have demanded an apology from Nakapalau, we don't believe forcing such a statement has any value. If he regrets the statement and the effect it had on another human being, we want to know that. If he just regrets that it got out, he should say it.

If he doesn't have the decency or courage to even own up to his words, we'd suggest he step down.

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Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

America's best university president

Several years ago Robert Zimmer was asked by an audience in China why the University of Chicago was associated with so many winners of the Nobel Prize — 90 in all, counting this month's win by the behavioral economist Richard Thaler. Zimmer, the university's president since 2006, answered that the key was a campus culture committed to "discourse, argument and lack of deference."

Reflecting on that exchange in March, Zimmer noted a depressing trend: While Chinese academics have made strides to "inject more argumentation and challenge into their education," their American peers are moving "in the opposite direction." As universities go, so ultimately go the fate of nations.

The University of Chicago has always been usefully out of step with its peers in higher education — it dropped out the Big Ten Conference and takes perverse pride in its reputation as the place where fun goes to die. It was out of step again last year when Jay Ellison, the dean of students, sent a letter to incoming freshmen to let them know where the college stood in respect to the campus culture wars.

"Our commitment to academic freedom," he wrote, "means that we do not support so-called 'trigger warnings,' we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own."

The letter attracted national attention, with cheering from the right and caviling on the left. But its intellectual foundation had been laid earlier, with a 2015 report from a faculty committee, convened by Zimmer, on free expression. Central to the committee's findings: the aim of education is to make people think, not spare them from discomfort.

"Concerns about civility and mutual respect," the committee wrote, "can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community."

Those are fighting words at a time when professors live in fear of accidentally offending their own students and a governor needs to declare a countywide state of emergency so that white supremacist Richard Spencer can speak at the University of Florida. They are also necessary words. That isn't because universities need to be the First Amendment's most loyal guardians — in the case of private universities, the First Amendment generally doesn't apply. They set their own rules.

Instead, it's because free speech is what

makes educational excellence possible. "It is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears," Louis Brandeis wrote 90 years ago in his famous concurrence in *Whitney v. California*.

It is also the function of free speech to allow people to say foolish things so that, through a process of questioning, challenge and revision, they may in time come to say smarter things.

If you can't speak freely, you'll quickly lose the ability to think clearly. Your ideas will be built on a pile of assumptions you've never examined for yourself and may thus be unable to defend from radical challenges. You will be unable to test an original thought for fear that it might be labeled an offensive one. You will succumb to a form of Orwellian double-think without even having the excuse of living in physical terror of doing otherwise.

That is the real crux of Zimmer's case for free speech: Not that it's necessary for democracy (strictly speaking, it isn't), but because it's our salvation from intellectual mediocrity and social ossification. In a speech in July, he addressed the notion that unfettered free speech could set back the cause of "inclusion" because it risked upsetting members of a community.

"Inclusion into what?" Zimmer wondered. "An inferior and less challenging education? One that fails to prepare students for the challenge of different ideas and the evaluation of their own assumptions? A world in which their feelings take precedence over other matters that need to be confronted?"

These are not earth-shattering questions. But they are the right ones, and they lay bare the extent to which the softer nostrums of higher ed today shortchange the intended beneficiaries.

They're also questions not enough university presidents are asking, at least not publicly and persistently. Instead, the prevailing conceit is that nothing is really amiss, that censorship concerns are overblown, that there are always creative ways to respect free speech while remaining sensitive to all sensitivities — a balancing act so exquisite that no student need ever be insulted, and no administrator need ever take a stand.

Zimmer knows what bunk this is; that if free speech — never a popular idea to start with — isn't actively defended, it will rapidly be eroded. For using the prestige of his office to make the case both brilliant and blunt, he has become the most essential voice in American academia today.

Bret Stephens won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 2013. He began working as a columnist at *The New York Times* in April.



BRET STEPHENS
Comment

YOUR VIEWS

Softening drug laws will make state worse

Well, the ragtag legislators and the misdemeanor governor did it again: They turned hard drugs possession into a nothing sentence. This is what we get for electing poor quality. Now the people will face more crime, and in fact it will bring more drug addicts into the state for sanctuary. Real smart people we have, making stupid laws. It will serve us right when Oregon turns into the armpit of America.

Jim Tiede
Hermiston

Re-election of Larry Givens and other news

I hear Commissioner Larry Givens has announced his intention to run for re-election, and it's about time. After pushing through the EOTEC project being both a board member and commissioner, I'm convinced that he's the right man to solve that bird nesting and goat-head problem at Hermiston's new state-of-the-art maintenance-free facility. With Commissioner Bill Elfering as an ally, county funding for any repair work on the damage caused by the birds and a long-term solution shouldn't be a problem. Then again, maybe it's time for him to make a choice, the EOTEC Board or county commissioner, not both, and eliminate the obvious appearance of a conflict of interest.

Minimum wage increases have perhaps claimed another victim — my paperboy. Remember that young man that gave \$1,000 of his hard-earned money to get the fund raising effort off the ground and completed for the July 4th fireworks? Yup, that's right, the money has been raised, though it looks

like unemployment will be staring him in the face at a young age.

The latest news on the Rivoli Theater Restoration project looks promising, and city taxpayers may finally be getting a well-deserved temporary break. It sounds like Mr. Picken has a new target — current and retired federal employees. Fortunately, that's a pretty long list.

Meanwhile, those stewards of our public property that balked at deeding the BMCC baseball field over to the college, calling it irresponsible, continue to let the Vert Auditorium rot away while investing in a private project that will compete directly with its venue. City donations total \$165,000 so far for the Rivoli Theater project. Really? A City Hall that would lease a public building for \$1 a month or give away a building appraised at \$300,000 while ignoring the Vert? Sounds like the pot calling the kettle black when it comes to irresponsibility.

The city manager states: "We're not ignoring it, we're just not talking about it right now," and then blames a past convention center manager and the budget for the current state of affairs. The apathy shown by the city manager, mayor and city council, those stewards of our public property, is the Vert's worst enemy.

Now, "deferred maintenance" rears its ugly head again as the window replacement at city hall is postponed. Why the Rivoli Theater renovation and moving the Eighth Street Bridge continue to garner a higher priority than city infrastructure is beyond me. "Please help tell our story" pleads the mayor in the latest city newsletter. The condition of the Vert is one sad story that's desperate for a happy ending.

Rick Rohde
Pendleton

Take a knee, President Trump

It has been a year since Colin Kaepernick and others first took a knee during the national anthem before professional football games. This simple but solemn gesture was a non-threatening protest against unequal treatment of African-American citizens by police across the country. Is anyone so naive and gullible to believe that the rash of deadly police/citizen encounters in the past five years were all entirely justified?

These players are well within their First Amendment rights of free expression to take a knee, whether the national anthem is playing or not. There is nothing in the U.S. Constitution, or anywhere else that requires us to stand, remove our hats, and/or salute when Old Glory is going up or the national anthem is being played. Sure, we were all taught these things at home or elementary school, so we have just conformed to do what we are expected to do without giving it much thought. Yes, standing is generally considered to be the "norm" when the national anthem is played; however, some might view this as a form of subtle indoctrination.

At any rate, here comes President Trump who manipulates the situation into something it was never intended to be — you are unpatriotic and disrespectful to our country and service men and women

if you do anything other than what I think you should do. Typical superficial and shoot from-the-hip thinking by our president.

The Donald clearly equates military service with patriotism. Then where was Trump when the brutal Vietnam War was raging? He could have volunteered to serve there and fought in the mountains, rice paddies, jungles, streets, or skies of Vietnam.

During an interview, shock jock Howard Stern asked Trump about his lack of military service. Trump responded that "chasing skirts" was just as dangerous as serving in Vietnam because he could catch a sexually transmitted disease. This is a blatant insult to the 58,000-plus American men and women who died there, the hundreds of thousand wounded, many grievously, and those still dealing with unseen psychological wounds from trauma, and all of their families.

Just like Muhammad Ali in his refusal to be drafted to fight in the Vietnam War, and the black-gloved athletes at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, I respect Colin Kaepernick, and the others, who demonstrate moral courage and principle in doing something they sincerely believe in, and not just doing the popular thing.

Bob Shippentower
Pendleton

LETTERS POLICY

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