Censorship and AIDS

November 24, 2010 By Joseph Sonnabend, MD

"If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all". Noam Chomsky

A letter to WBAI demanding that Gary Null's proposed program be removed from their schedule has been signed by numerous AIDS advocacy and support organizations as well as individuals concerned with the well-being of HIV infected individuals. The letter states that "Mr Null and his frequent radio guests support the notions, among others, that HIV does not play a role in causing AIDS...."

I am not alone in my surprise and dismay at the willingness of so many to deprive an individual of his right to freedom of expression. This is particularly puzzling as many of the signatories represent communities that are still not free from discriminatory practices against them, and the rights they have demanded and achieved for themselves have been possible because freedom of speech has been recognized as a human right as well as a constitutional right.

I'm sure that if asked, the letter's signatories would affirm that they respect the rights of individuals. They justify their willingness to deprive Gary Null and presumably others, of their rights because they feel they know that people could be endangered by his words.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of how they are able to know that harm actually results directly from Gary Null's exercising his rights, they seem to forget, or maybe just disagree, that the right to freedom of expression is a fundamental principle crucial to the maintenance of a free democratic society and a key protection against the threat of tyranny.

This principle is so important that it holds irrespective of whether or not we agree with what is being said, or whether or not it conforms to what we believe to represent the truth.

"If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter." George Washington.

"On Liberty" was published in 1859. In it John Stuart Mill wrote the following:

"there ought to exist the fullest liberty of professing and discussing as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered ..."

It is also true that John Stuart Mill also considered that there is one limitation on free expression:

"the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others"

This is the specious justification presented in the letter to WBAI. Merely stating that HIV is not the cause of AIDS does not cause harm to others, it does not have the remotest connection with shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theatre.

To believe otherwise is a measure of a complete disregard for individual autonomy and an assumption of an inability of others to make up their own minds; to decide for themselves. At best this represents a paternalistic and patronizing attitude, at worst, contempt for individual autonomy.

The professed concern to protect people from arguments believed to be fallacious is best expressed by working to make valid information available and accessible, not in attacking freedom of expression. This is not an attempt to engage Gary Null, or others expressing disagreeable opinions in a debate, as has been suggested by some who wish to silence him. Our obligation is to provide information and allow others the dignity of deciding for themselves.

Rather than attempt to deprive Gary Null of his right to free expression the signatories of the letter might consider some of the reasons why his messages might receive a sympathetic hearing among some, with a view to countering those we can.

Perhaps some individuals are mistrustful of medical authorities. Unfortunately there are instances when those we are asked to trust have misled us or let us down in other ways.

Of course there is no single reason why denialist opinions receive a sympathetic response. But there is no reason to uncritically accept that people necessarily hold these opinions just because they have heard them stated by people like Gary Null.

It is much more likely that for most, there is already is a pre-existing predisposition to reject the views presented by orthodox scientists and doctors.

While there may be disagreements about what separates science from pseudo-science and quackery, some arguments that attempt to justify limiting Gary Null's freedoms are unquestionably beyond the limits of science.

Here is an excerpt from the letter to WBAI:

Among the destructive effect of spreading these falsehoods is to reduce condom use, increase infection risk and dissuade people from the use of life-saving antiretroviral therapy (among other modalities).

The destructive effects listed result from individual choices; nobody is compelled to make them. People have a right to make choices and yet again, the signatories of the letter might express their concern more effectively by making reliable information available and accessible to help prevent such destructive choices being made. We might expect calls for censorship from religious zealots, not from those who claim to respect science.

This onslaught on the freedom of expression is deeply disturbing. There is now a generational distance from the horrors of repressive regimes that flourished because the expression of certain opinions was prohibited.

The privileges that the letter's signatories enjoy have been made possible because we recognize that freedom of expression is crucial to the maintenance of a civilized free democracy.

Sometimes it seems that the door to tyranny is already ajar. Attempts to curtail the freedom of expression can only widen it further.

The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen 1789

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Articles 1 and 19 from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

And finally:

I believe in censorship. I made a fortune out of it. Mae West

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