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Free speech can provoke

It's a freedom worth defending even when it outrages minorities

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Tribune Media Services

The First Amendment has been getting a workout in recent weeks on two college campuses -- the University of Florida and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill -- where students are learning that free speech is a messy business.

The two cases, one involving a columnist at UNC and the other a political cartoonist at UF, have inflamed minority groups -- Muslims and blacks, respectively -- provoking protests and debate. That's the good news insofar as protest and debate are the currency of free speech.

What's not such good news is that the columnist was fired, while the Florida cartoonist has been condemned and threatened. Both students have been virtually abandoned by university officials, some of whom apparently are more concerned about burnishing their multiculti images than in demonstrating the importance of a founding principle.

Tasteless, but legal

Exhibit A is Jillian Brandes, a former columnist for The Daily Tar Heel. Her column, intended to make a case for racial profiling in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, began hyperbolically: "I want all Arabs to be stripped naked and cavity-searched if they get within 100 yards of an airport." Then she quoted several Arab students and a professor who said they wouldn't mind being searched. Some of them subsequently claimed their remarks had been taken out of context, an unprecedented development in journalism history. Brandes was fired.

One could make a strong argument that Brandes' column was silly, amateurish, lacking in taste, strident and ineffective. Being outrageous for the sake of outrage requires no special talent. Witness Howard Stern. But people have a clear and protected right to be both silly and amateurish.

Brandes' editor claimed that he fired her for "journalistic malpractice," for taking quotes out of context, not in response to pressure. In 25 years with newspapers, I've never known anyone to be fired when a story's subjects didn't like the way quotes were used.

Offensive or just irreverent?

In Gainesville, Fla., cartoonist Andy Marlette drew an image that has angered black groups. Yes, a new generation has produced another Marlette. This one is the nephew of Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Doug Marlette, whose talent as an equal-opportunity offender apparently seeped into the family gene pool.

Marlette the Younger's cartoon in the Independent Florida Alligator was a commentary on rapper Kanye West's remarks that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." Marlette drew a cartoon of West holding an oversized playing card labeled "The Race Card," with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice



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saying, "Nigga Please!"

The N-word makes me cringe ... especially every time I hear Kanye West say it. His spicy songs are liberally seasoned with the word "nigga," often couched in violence and obscenity. But when I imagine the immaculate and proper Condi Rice saying it, especially to a "brotha" who has made a fortune playing the bad boy, it makes me laugh.

Which is to say Marlette's cartoon hit the mark. It was sophisticated, irreverent and funny. His use of West's own language to parody the rapper's political statement was, in fact, the art of the cartoon.

Certain campus groups and administrators were outraged. This, despite the fact that the same student government that pulled ads from the Alligator is paying West to drop the N-Bomb in concert at the university in a few days. UF's reputation as a party school unburdened by intellectual heavy-lifting remains intact.

Unpopular freedom

It's hardly surprising that students don't understand that the First Amendment which protects Marlette's and Brandes' right to voice unpopular opinions also protects West's "music," as well as their right to protest. A recent nationwide study by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education found that one of four college students couldn't name any of the freedoms protected by the First Amendment.

It's disturbing, however, when faculty and administrators' understanding is little better. Some journalism professors have embraced the debate as a teaching opportunity, but others, including UF President Bernie Machen, have behaved like Church Ladies, pursing lips and wagging fingers instead of defending liberty.

The painful irony is that those minorities whose sensibilities have been offended are historically the first to suffer when free speech goes.

Which is why African Americans and now Arab-Americans troubled by the specter of discrimination should be the loudest voices in supporting the freedoms that permit even speech they find offensive.

It's a messy job, but everybody's got to do it.

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