

'Dissenting opinions foster balanced debate'

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Lately, when I read The News Herald's Viewpoints section I feel like a long-tailed cat in a room full of angry rocking chairs. Much credit has been given to my talk-radio show for the defeat of the half-cent sales tax, and it's generated a vicious barrage of vitriol.

Take, for instance, last week's online Squaller: "Our schools are bad enough. Thanks for rallying your goons, Burnie."

Or the local writer last Friday who called me an "agitator," a "divisionist," and implied that my opinions had been bought by the Bay Tax Foundation ("Local agitators negatively influenced sales tax vote," op-ed, Nov. 9).

Goodness grief — all this just because we disagree? The last writer also claimed he could reveal me for who I really am. No need — it's no secret:

I'm a husband and a father of two girls, and a former Air Force captain with four college degrees. I have taught English composition at three different colleges. I'm a libertarian minded Republican who champions personal freedom and responsibility.

And I don't sign up for more taxes.

Name-calling and character assaults indicate not only intolerance toward another's point of view, but also intolerance toward the very expression of it at all. The writers' frustration might emanate from their inability to control or contain information. My show is a vibrant marketplace of competing ideas that can't be regulated by those who have grown accustomed to regulating.

I welcomed proponents of the half-cent sales tax on my show, including School Board member Ginger Littleton and Citizens for Bay Schools Chairman Doug Merkle. All told, they had a few hours to set me straight, but listeners didn't buy it. Ultimately, it came down to truth in advertising.

Talk radio is compelling because arguments can be challenged instantly. I criticized Bay District Schools for inappropriately advocating a political issue on school property and during work hours; they contended it was a worthy cause. It was a fair debate. Listeners heard both sides and challenged me and my guests. In the end, people gained clarity and conviction.

A letter writer last Thursday chastised Bay County for letting me "spew radical views" ("Half-cent defeat reflects badly on Bay County," Nov. 8) He was "ashamed to be counted as a Bay County resident" after voters said no to the half-cent sales tax. Isn't that a bit of an emotional overreaction, considering there were good arguments on both sides?

This isn't the first time I've had to dodge arrows of slander. I was called a racist after I invited several prominent medical examiners on my show to debunk the autopsy myths in the Martin Lee Anderson case. One online Squaller called it my "master plan to rile up the bigots."

Racism is an evil belief system that insists some people are superior to others based on skin color. People who find power in victimhood dilute the severity of the charge when they sling it around recklessly. I agree with Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl, who was asked if he hated the German race. “There are only two races in the world,” he said. “The decent, and the indecent.”

Another local writer last Wednesday accused me of hurting our community “in ways yet to be realized” (“Trial brings old diversionary tactics,” op-ed, Nov. 7). He said I “whip up a frenzy among the populace for ratings and job security.” Evidently, it doesn’t occur to the writer that good people can reach different conclusions.

Wouldn’t public debate improve if people didn’t start out by impugning other people’s motives? Wouldn’t we do better by engaging arguments directly and encouraging more dialogue rather than less?

All this really comes down to maturity and tolerance. Hearing dissenting opinions can be unsettling, and contemplating their merits even more uncomfortable. But the best way to respond is with better arguments, rather than launching insults and personal attacks.

Acknowledging that we might be wrong is paramount to critical inquiry; hypotheses must be subject to continual testing. This happens daily on my show. I realize that if I were right even 51 percent of the time, I could make a fortune on Wall Street. My show is not about being right — it’s about pursuing the truth and treating people with dignity.

That’s not to say there aren’t spirited debates and even occasional heated exchanges. Grappling with dissenting opinions is a healthy exercise. Listeners benefit most when they get antagonism as well as confirmation — it strengthens their intellectual bones. That’s how we develop our philosophy.

As British poet William Blake wrote a couple hundred years ago, “The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water and breeds reptiles of the mind.”

Unfortunately, evidence of these reptiles in the form of intellectual intolerance is becoming too prevalent in our community.