

Censorship on the airwaves? Not quite David Frum wants 'media freedom' for Canadians. They already have it

Ronald Cohen
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In his recent contribution to the National Post's "Fixing Canada" essay series, David Frum argued that Canadians deserve "full and secure media freedom." His article ("Make speech free, and all else follows," Oct. 20) claimed that Canada's media environment is burdened by formal and informal censorship mechanisms that restrict full-throated debate on sensitive issues. Balderdash.

Mr. Frum claims there is no equivalent to Rush Limbaugh or Keith Olbermann north of the 49th parallel "because it's against the law." Come on, Mr. Frum. You can't be serious.

He should try listening to Canadian talk radio sometime. He might be pleasantly surprised. There are hosts across this country who would be shocked to read his description of the radio landscape as tame or anodyne.

Try Charles Adler in Winnipeg. Dave Rutherford in Alberta. John Gormley in Saskatchewan. Bill Carroll in Toronto. Lowell Green in Ottawa. Tommy Schnurmacher in Montreal. Andrew Krystal in the Maritimes. If political and religious speech are banned from the airwaves, as Frum alleges, nobody has told those hosts.

Far from being shunned, controversial topics such as politics, religion, "reasonable accommodation" and same-sex marriage are the very issues that spark dialogue among Canadian talk show hosts and their callers. The on-air debate is vigorous, robust and occasionally quite aggressive.

Does this mean there are no limits to what can be broadcast? Of course not. Not in the United States and not in Canada. They have their issues (Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction," coarse language, excretory humour) and we have ours (human rights, abusive comment, violence on television).

Are the Canadian rules vague? Is there an "invisible line," as Frum would have us

believe? Not at all. It's very visible. The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council's Code of Ethics calls for "no abusive or unduly discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability." Sound familiar? It should. It's the equivalent of Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In this respect, are Canadian private broadcasters practising "extra" self-censorship? Nothing extra about it. With their codes of ethics, the private broadcasters take care of this aspect of their profession. In this respect, they are just like the self-governing associations formed by doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, speech pathologists, plumbers and other professional groups. Not "extra" -- just responsible. Even newspapers respect their own standards via the various press councils across Canada.

Frum referred to the specific example of Laura Schlessinger's radio show, dealt with by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) seven years ago, but he didn't explain why we ruled against it. Would the National Post permit any of its columnists to describe gays and lesbians as "abnormal," "aberrant," "deviant," "disordered," "dysfunctional" or "an error" -- as Schlessinger did? I doubt it. In any event, the CBSC concluded that the broadcasters had breached Canadian codified standards.

Should the National Post, or any other Canadian newspaper, permit any "humour" columnist to write what Howard Stern said on radio stations in Toronto and Montreal in 1997 in reference to a famous American actress: "Oh, I just wanna take that piece of ass body, put tape over her mouth, and do things to her"? (The segment went downhill from there. I'll spare you the rest.) The CBSC said "No way."

Canada's private broadcasters live and work in the communities in which they broadcast. They recognize that rousing political discourse is good for their audiences. They encourage it, but they know it has limits. There's no reason for any one of their listeners to feel denigrated by their on-air hosts. Such a result, they understand, would diminish all their listeners.

And when one of them slips up, as occasionally happens, the private broadcasters' self-regulatory body -- the CBSC -- steps in to maintain a level playing field. The process works. In Canada, we respect freedom of speech, but we don't worship it blindly.

-Ronald Cohen is national chairman of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council.