Lack of tolerance: form of censorship?

by William Lauer

There have been several cases over the past few months that the MIT administration has indulged in or has threatened to indulge in censorship. With the exception of the press, the main purpose of institutions of learning is the potential fulfillment of what are thought to be at least Constitutional rights. The rights of free speech and a free and independent press, on campus and elsewhere, implies a high level of tolerance within the community to minority viewpoints, however distasteful. These rights do not protect actions which violate another’s rights; nor do they justify verbal assaults directed against another member of the community. But tolerance cannot exist when the expression of political, religious or moral views is curtailed or even discouraged; nor can freedom exist when the students are forced onto a minority position.

The most recent occurrence indicative of the apparent growth of intolerance at MIT was the scuffle between the Arab Club and Hillel concerning a lecture that was to have been given by Palestine Liberation Organization National Representative Stan Alhout Friday evening. The talk was cancelled for reasons unrelated to the protest generated by the Jewish community.

A statement by Hillel, published in last week’s chronicle, asserted that the organization did “not object to the PLO’s representative speaking, but only that he be speaking here.” Alhout had been scheduled to speak in 44-100, where he could address only those interested in hearing him.

Hillel should be congratulated for responding to what they saw as a threat to the organization by invoking their own rights of protest and assembly and not by calling for administration action to inhibit Alhout from speaking. Nonetheless, their statement reflects a growing tendency on the part of members of the community to assert that minority viewpoints should not be expressed at MIT. The Arab Club has since attacked Hillel for using in particular what it considered unjustified - storm of protest occasioned earlier this year when members of the American Nazi Party attempted to organize a march through the streets of Cicero, Ill. In that case, personal injury to survivors of the Holocaust and their families would have resulted from an open-air march which would have been difficult to ignore by those who objected and attempted to go about their daily business.

The difference between the Cicero march and the Alhout speech is not one of effect or intent. These different, but repugnant views in a manner calculated to injure others is not speech but action, and it need not be tolerated. The Alhout appearance cannot be locked upon as anything more than the exercise of free speech.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote that “every idea is an assertion.” Thus, it is within those auspices that violent statements should be prohibited. Jefferson distinguished between belief and action, justified - storm of protest occasioned earlier this year when members of the American Nazi Party attempted to organize a march through the streets of Cicero, 111. In that case, personal injury to survivors of the Holocaust and their families would have resulted from an open-air march which would have been difficult to ignore by those who objected and attempted to go about their daily business.

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Feedback

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