

On policing RuPaul's "free speech"

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Abstract

I think the freedom of speech and policing arguments that have popped up around RuPaul are entirely disingenuous. Nobody is stopping RuPaul Andre Charles from using these terms as much as he likes in his personal life. RuPaul Andre Charles is a human being; RuPaul is a brand that Logo sells. Logo does not want the brand they're selling to be [...]

Article

I think the freedom of speech and policing arguments that have popped up around RuPaul are entirely disingenuous. Nobody is stopping RuPaul Andre Charles from using these terms as much as he likes in his personal life. RuPaul Andre Charles is a human being; RuPaul is a brand that Logo sells. Logo does not want the brand they're selling to be associated with terms people use while they kill trans women. Period.



Figure 1. HuffPo: "RuPaul's Drag Race and the Danger of Overpolicing Language"

ALL OF US do exactly what Logo just did. We do it in our homes, with our children, and with the language standards we permit in our own businesses. Some of us refuse to buy things the Koch brothers make money off of and/or won't shop at certain stores because they use the money you would give them for political speech that seeks to oppress you.

WE ALL joke and say things that editors, producers, employers, etc would never allow near their brand. That's not censorship, that's public relations. Equating PR with censorship is equivocation. Whether you're a writer or a Walmart greeter, your boss won't allow you to use certain terms because - for whatever reason - they're loaded and if you want to equivocate, you can call that censorship. Others might call it professionalism.

Very specific in-groups who use certain in-group terms in very specific ways will continue to do so. If Logo wants a brand it's selling to not be viewed as misogynistic, they're probably not going to allow drag terms like "fish" or "fishy" to be associated with that brand. In the larger community, referring to women as being "fishy" has a wider disparaging context. If RuPaul wanted to associate Logo's brand with that specific in-group term, how do you think that would work?

I absolutely reject claims of policing and censorship - IN THIS CONTEXT - as pure hyperbole. If someone is stopping you from making rude jokes, announcing that you support Sarah Palin for public office or share Reddit's WTF pics on your own time, on your own dime, and in your own personal media then fine. That's actual censorship.

On your own dime, using your own platform, you get to associate anything you want with your reputation -

your brand - but that doesn't mean that there won't be consequences. Didn't punks rock this life lesson already?

If the value of your reputation goes down because you are associated with the terms people widely use when they're killing oppressed people, then that's the price you'll pay. Claiming that you're oppressed because you think you should somehow be exempt from the rules of social currency is a bogus argument.

I'm sure RuPaul has topics and terms that he wouldn't want to be associated with his brand because he knows it would harm his brand. In this case, I think he's too biased (I'm guessing because he feels attacked) to grasp that his brand was suffering. Fortunately, he has people who could act to protect his brand even when he wouldn't.

Yes, there are very specific contexts in which very specific groups use tranny, shemale, and fish. They will continue to do so. All of these terms have a wider context and meaning outside of those very specific in-group usages. It's a mistake to assume or expect that those terms won't retain their larger contexts when used outside of those very specific in-groups and a national branded cable TV show is absolutely outside the context of those very specific in-groups. RuPaul is RuPaul precisely because he has social currency outside the context of that very specific in-group and yes, there's a price one pays for one's brand reaching that level of popularity and that price, IMHO, is totally fair. We all pay that same price, to one extent or another.

If you're still having problems, here's xkcd with a PSA:

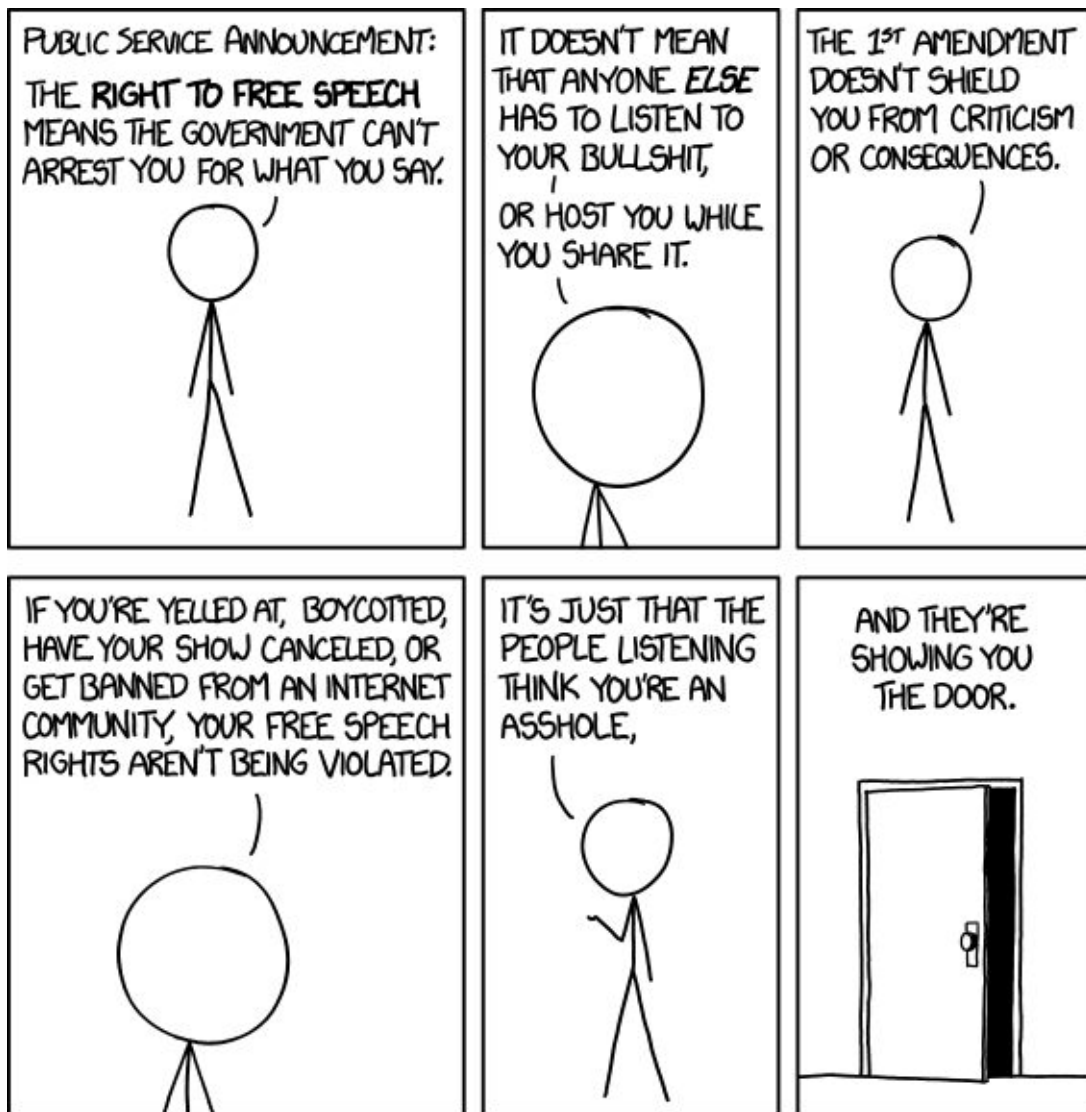


Figure 2. *free_speech*[1]

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