

## The alarming decline of public speech

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“WERE it not for public speech there would be no public, only a babble of lamentations and complaints, pleadings, pronouncements, claims and counter claims,” wrote Thomas F. Green, a renowned educational philosopher, in his 1999 book *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience*.

While Green was writing about the educational imperative to prepare children to participate and engage in the public dialogue on the public good, he might very well have been predicting what we are dealing with today as a result of failing to do so effectively.

Considering the current decline of the quality of public speech in general, we have reason to share Green’s worry that our ability to speak to, and with, each other to our mutual benefit has been seriously eroded. The evidence, ubiquitous in different forms, is particularly apparent in social media, sports, politics and schooling.

Social media have become the homes and bearers of conspiracy theories, hate speech, racism, xenophobia, misogyny and all forms of bigotry, in the name of free speech and social reality. Language and attitudes that previously had no place, and were not tolerated, in the public sphere have become commonplace, even celebrated.

Deliberate lies, other deceits and vile slurs flow virtually unchecked.

Freedom of speech never meant an unconstrained free-for-all. Its original intent was to ensure nothing worthwhile would be held back out of fear of reprisal; it’s hard to claim that when the above appear on social media they are meaningful and worthwhile. *And our children are reading and participating.*

Today’s partisan politics, fuelled largely by events and activities south of our border, have also normalized an unprecedented, or at least renewed, incivility marked by insults and polemical attacks.

It exemplifies the “babble” about which Green wrote. Public-office holders and public servants both contribute to this and become legitimate targets of unprovoked insinuations and unwarranted criticisms.

Many politicians, and their leaders, embrace extreme anti-government actions and unlawful behaviours, seemingly in the hope of gaining the support of the terminally disenchanting and alienated. Others cater to the private interests of large corporations shielded and protected from public accountability, often at the expense of the socially disenfranchised and economically impoverished.

The idea of governments existing for the benefit and welfare of all — the whole public — seems a distant, forgotten dream. *And our children are seeing and watching.*

Sports, the favourite entertainment of many, has also not avoided the degeneration of public speech. Hockey Canada, vowing to clean up its sexual-abuse act, is now facing accusations of racism and gender discrimination. Meanwhile, our star athletes, our sports announcers and outof-control fans are

emboldened to use coarse and occasionally profane language when talking about plays, games or opponents.

Where profanity used to be “bleeped,” with live broadcasts employing slight delays to catch such unacceptable comment, it is now often presented live and seemingly without hesitation or offence. Swearing now appears to be an acceptable practice associated with sports broadcasting. *And our children are listening and imitating.*

For our children, it just one more indication of the decline of public language norms in the media. But perhaps of more concern, the language of private rights has colonized that of the public good in our educational vocabularies. In our schools, colleges and universities education is more likely to be framed in terms of economic advantage than community service.

And the rise of “schools of choice, private schools and home-schooling” suggests the only children parents are inclined to concern ourselves with are their own.

Compulsory public schooling has become an unwelcome claim to our personal finances. Taxes for education are viewed as an unreasonable demand on our pocketbooks, rather than an acceptable demand for our part in contributing to the formation of democratic citizens. *And our children are learning.*

Our children are learning adults can get away with being publicly untruthful, bigoted, malicious, rude, foul-mouthed and selfish; and sometimes will benefit from being so. Such public behaviour has had a significant negative impact in schools, manifesting as increased disrespect for truth, empathy and authority, and a proliferation of abusive and unacceptable language.

Our children are learning that individual private desires trump the well-being of others or their communities. This is the opposite of public schools’ main purposes, which are to help children become caring, civil contributing citizens, responsible adults who create and re-create a public realm through public speech.

For the sake of our children and their education, our “public speech” must consist of more than a chorus of “private gripes and outbursts.” We can all clean up our acts, starting today.

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