

Claire Hoy ? Let the public see both versions

Everybody loves free speech until, of course, they don't agree with the speaker. Or the message. Then it's an outrage. Which is what the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) is apparently dealing with at the moment.

Specifically, an application from a pro-Palestinian, Montreal-based group called Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, which, according to newspaper reports, wants to run ads on the TTC similar to a controversial ad it ran in Vancouver's transit system.

The Vancouver ads depict a series of pictures purporting to show how Israel has gobbled up Palestinian territory over the last 66 years, a bit of propaganda which has outraged Jewish groups across the country.

As this is being written, the TTC 's advertising review committee has made no decision. Whichever way they ultimately go, you can bet there will be a firestorm.

Jewish groups complain, with considerable accuracy, that the ads are blatantly anti-Israel and grossly inaccurate.

B'nai Brith spokesman Sam Eskenasi was quoted



in the Toronto Star saying, 'This is derogatory against Israel and people who support Israel.'

No doubt it is, since it is propaganda for one side of this seemingly irresolvable issue. But so what? Sure, it's maddening, but surely the answer isn't to kill the ad. The answer is to reply to it, rebut it with the facts.

Indeed, by making such a fuss about the original Vancouver ads, the Jewish community is playing right into the hands of the pro-Palestinian groups. Instead of being seen by passing transit users, and likely ignored by most, these ads are now front-page news across the country because of the furore they have created.

In his Globe and Mail column, Gary Mason quoted Josh Patterson, executive director of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, saying, 'Political speech in particular is core to the values around free expression that we need to protect. We see no reason why the public should be insulated from these issues even though they might be emotional or cause consternation or where they make people feel uneasy. That's part of the public discussion.'

It certainly is. Or should be.

You can't really expect political ads or any ads for that matter to be fair and balanced. That's not what advertising is about.

Instead, it's about promoting a particular view or a particular product.

Imagine the complete shock we'd have if during a federal election the Tories ran an ad outlining all the positive things the Liberals have done, or the NDP ran an ad saying that while they have differences with the Tories, overall they've done a good job in government.

Ain't gonna happen, any more than you would expect a group from either side of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute to present a completely fair and balanced picture of the situation there.

Yes, ads can be overdone and stray from fair comment, even if highly partial to one point of view, to something hateful and libellous. But these ads, at least the ones in Vancouver, don't do that. Instead, they leave out some rather important caveats to paint a picture which they want the world to embrace, but which, in truth, is completely biased.

Many years ago, the Canadian Federation of Students and the B.C. Teachers' Federation, separately, wanted to run political ads in Vancouver but were turned down by Translink, their version of the TTC. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court before the courts sided with the students and the teachers, saying Translink had to respect the rights enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Too often these days, certain groups make so much noise about speech or writing that they don't agree with and we end up with abject apologies and the further trampling of free speech.

Usually, those doing the screaming ? and I'm certain this applies in the current case ? would tell you they are absolutely supporters of free speech as one of the major cornerstones of democracy.

Until, of course, they don't support it.

Instead of demanding the TTC nuke the ads there's a much better solution: the Jewish groups should run their own ads telling their version of the truth.

Let the public figure out which version is the most accurate. That's what free speech is supposed to do.