



Free speech comes with a price tag

By Ahmed Afzaal

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Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the United States Constitution. Like all other freedoms, this one doesn't come to us without a price tag. Part of the price we pay to enjoy this freedom is the inevitable risk that we have to take, i.e., the risk of being swayed by inaccurate or misleading speech.

While the freedom to speak does not include the license to cheat, it does create innumerable opportunities for the dissemination of wrong, dangerous or deceptive speech. This means that intellectual laziness is particularly hazardous in a society that prides itself for its freedom of speech.

In order to ensure that this freedom works in everyone's best interest, all parties must exercise considerable vigilance and critical discernment.

There is great wisdom in common-sense imperatives, such as, "Don't believe everything you read in the newspaper" and "Don't believe everything you see on television." What can be more disastrous for a democratic society than a freedom of speech that is not balanced by the ability to discriminate?

Our response to the film called "Obsession" is a test case for the above argument. The constitutional guarantee of the freedom of speech means that, at a purely legal level, the Clarion Fund was well within its rights to produce and distribute this film; the editors and management of The Forum can also deny any wrongdoing in accepting this film for mass distribution (though many serious issues remain unaddressed in both cases).

The main question for us, however, is whether we should swallow the message of this politically motivated propaganda simply because it entered our living rooms on the back of an old and trusted friend, the local newspaper? Should we allow ourselves to be swayed by this film simply because we are otherwise ignorant of the reality of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims? Should we let this film be our major source of information about the history and nature of Islam, simply because the talking heads in this film appear to know what they are talking about? Should we permit our primordial fears and anxieties about "others" – unfamiliar peoples, cultures and religions – override our instincts for community and cooperation?

Or, should we exercise our critical faculties?

The contents and message of "Obsession" have already been analyzed in great detail, as well as conclusively refuted and debunked, by real experts. Interested readers can find thorough rebuttals at www.obsessionwithhate.com; www.theamericanmuslim.org; and www.altmuslim.com.

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Professor Omid Safi of the University of North Carolina has exposed the money trail behind this film all the way to the usual suspects, and his article "Who put that hate in my Sunday paper?" is widely available on the Internet.

There is some irony in the fact that one of the talking heads in "Obsession" grimly mentions "the price of freedom" that we all must pay. Indeed, freedom isn't free. It is maintained only at great cost on the part of the citizens, including large and continuous investment of intellectual alertness, healthy skepticism and critical discernment. The moment we stop paying attention to the "man behind the curtain," we make ourselves vulnerable to all varieties of con artists, political and otherwise.

If there is anything worth learning from the film "Obsession," it is perhaps this: A democratic society and its freedoms will be separated pretty soon, unless its citizens maintain their obsession – with truth.

Afzaal, Ph.D., teaches in the department of religion at Concordia College