

Can you teach people how to disagree without being disagreeable?

Tony Koutsoumbos explores the lessons from his own experiences in building an environment of robust and strong public debate.



In February 2015, I met with a young man who identified himself as a former radical Islamist, who had since devoted himself to helping others to escape the clutches of extremism.

He believed the extremists were effective in recruiting new members because they masqueraded as ambassadors for all British Muslims. Broadcasters gave them a platform, fearful of providing 'balanced' coverage of public debates on religious extremism. In a bid to raise awareness of this problem he asked me to host a public debate at my club on the subject, the motion for which read: *Censorship is a justifiable response to Islamic extremism in the UK.*

As a professional debate trainer, who had already chaired or spoken in over 100 such events, I agreed to his request.

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Our venue was full with almost 80 people turning out for the debate. We took a vote before hearing from the speakers, members of the public who had agreed to defend the position assigned to them regardless of their own views. The audience was overwhelmingly opposed.

Then the debate started.

The next hour covered everything from the origins of extremism, its impact on vulnerable members of society, and the boundaries of free speech. The most stirring speech came from my young friend himself about his renouncement of extremism and the threats of violence and isolation that followed. After 45-minutes of questions, we took the final vote.

The motion was defeated, but now only by six votes.

Impressed as I was by the willingness of the speakers to argue so passionately against their own convictions, I was even more impressed by the audience. There was not a single personal attack and not a single interruption. This was a place where even a former violent extremist could freely admit what he used to think about the other 79 people in the room without threat of reprisal.

This was the quality of robust civility, as identified by Timothy Garton Ash, at its finest. I would like to say this is representative of how sensitive issues are debated every day in the wider public domain, the truth is I cannot.

After the debate, I was thrust back into a world where holders of unpopular opinions are hounded on Twitter and holders of popular ones are encased in the echo chamber of their Facebook newsfeeds. This happens not by force, but by choice.

It is the desire to reverse this trend that brought me together with the other members of the Great Debaters Club, a training programme I started to provide a space for people to explore disagreement, including over 5000 people who have signed up to attend our public debates.

So what makes the members of the Great Debaters Club, the social enterprise through which I run these exercises in micro-democracy, different?

In short, nothing. Members come and work from all parts of the city. Nor do we force anyone to listen to people who disagree with them or deny our guests the right to complain if they are offended by what they hear.

Does this mean, somebody can be *taught* to disagree without being disagreeable? No, I believe it can only be encouraged.

I may be able to teach someone how to express themselves in a way that minimises the risk of causing undue offence but I cannot teach them to care about how their comments make others

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feel. What I can do is create a space in which everyone is expected to consider the impact of the language on others.

Now ask yourself this: how many spaces can you think of that exist explicitly to serve the purpose of debate? I imagine your top answers will mostly likely be: Parliament and the courts.

Which brings us to the real question we must answer: what is the purpose of debate? Strip away the age-old traditions of Parliament and the courts and what you are left with are two spaces that exist for one reason: to make decisions. Innocent or guilty; murder or manslaughter; raise taxes or lower them; make peace or declare war?

In a democracy, the people must have confidence in the decisions made by those who govern them. This confidence comes from allowing disagreement to occur without it disrupting the decision-making process because that's the only way to know that the best possible decision has been made and a fair process has been followed.

Realising this purpose requires us to provide rules and therefore limit free speech as well as to protect it. MPs are granted immunity from libel laws for comments made in the House but penalised for unparliamentary language. Advocates are free to present their cases as they best see fit, but can be over-ruled by the judge if the line of questioning falls short of accepted standards. This delicate balance makes it possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

The Great Debaters Club therefore attempts to create a purpose-built debate chamber for members of the public. There is no reason why it cannot be replicated in communities, households, and businesses across the country.

All you need is a space and a purpose.

Tony Koutsoumbos is the founder of the Great Debaters Club, a community for adults who missed out on the opportunity to debate at school or university. Established in 2009, the club has hosted over 150 public debates and in 2015, launched London's only specialised 12-month training programme for new debaters.

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