



UP  
front

*Free speech. There's a lot of talk about it (pun intended?). Whichever side of the aisle you populate, you look across and – from your viewpoint – those on the other side are trying to restrict yours. One man's (said with gender-ambiguous intent) free-speech champion is another's democracy-destroyer...and so it goes.*

It's such a hot-button topic that it has found its way into this little, friendly, neighborhood magazine. A couple of letters to the editor in this issue make direct reference to the concept (page 6).

This debate got me thinking: If speech is no longer free, why are we giving it away?! With unwavering regularity, for more than two decades, we have produced *The Skinnie* and delivered it to your door (mailbox, actually) at no expense to you. We have not charged the subjects of our articles for the attention we have given them. We have not asked our readers to compensate us for our paper, printer's ink, or time. But it's become painfully clear – reworking a popular phrase to make a point – that free speech isn't free.

Inflation is a real thing. Especially if you're a chocolate like me. Cocoa bean prices are up 143% year-to-date, as of press time...likely more as you're reading this. But *The Skinnie* has lived a zero-inflation fantasy for its entire lifespan. The price in 2003 was \$0.00. The price of this issue is \$0.00. But the cost of the materials and labor required to craft this book have steadily increased. And these expenses weren't zero to begin with.

As it's become painfully clear that free speech is more a quaint ideal than an unassailable right, we've made a difficult editorial decision: From now on, there's a price on speech, and we intend to collect it.

How will the mechanics of this reckoning work? Perhaps ironically, we'll employ a tactic I learned at an institution that should – theoretically – advocate for free speech in everything it does: The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Your assessment of the presence or absence of a free-speech ethos at the school is likely influenced by your philosophical leanings. No matter, the social psychology tool of which I speak (freely) is the opt-in, opt-out lever. It's basically apolitical. In other words, it's practically Harvard-proof.

Generally, if you ask people to opt into a thing, it requires them to make a conscious decision and act upon it. If you require them to opt out of a thing should they not want it, some – maybe many – will be too lazy or

unaware or both to bother, and you'll have a bevy of de facto yeses, an unsuspecting if unenthusiastic subscriber base. I've come to know this as the Hammacher-Schlemmer Model (a name coined by me, not social psychology practitioners). Once, I got a nice sweater as a Christmas gift and it took me a year and a half to realize I was subsequently purchasing the company's catalog every month thence. When I finally paid enough attention to my Amex bill to recognize the offense, I opted out... of a thing I wouldn't have opted into if I had been paying attention or given the choice.

So, you're a subscriber now. You'll be billed quarterly...we are finalizing the pricing structure, but we expect it to be "reasonable." We'll share the details with you when we know them with certainty... we promise. If you don't want the magazine in its new pay-to-play form, you can opt out. Just scan the QR code near the back of this issue and you'll be directed through a series of not-too-arduous steps that will probably relieve you of your ongoing financial obligation.

I have the free-speech police to thank for this revelation, and so do you. Without them I wouldn't have realized that free speech should come at a cost, lest we will treat it as worthless.

As one letter-writer recently admonished me: "Stick to your knitting." Well, our knitting in the context of *The Skinnie* is making magazines. It's high-time we stop giving them away out of the goodness of our hearts. And in keeping with the notion that great ideas often come to a person by accident, we'll get into actual-knitting, too. The Skinnie Knitting Club is looking for members. The membership fee is nominal, but required, of course. We'll add the monthly membership to your subscription bill, unless you figure out a way to opt out.

*Scott A. Lauriat*

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