

## Feedback—with a Punch!



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

It's a new world out there, with the advent of social media. Opinions can be magnified and easily go viral. And people or groups with certain opinions can try to enforce their views on organizations by leveraging social media.

The Commonwealth Club has always hosted proponents of a wide range of views, and that neutral role has been generally accepted as a legitimate and positive one for society. The Club does not advocate for any position, but gives voice to others who do.

Over the past year, three groups of people have made their objections known to the Club hosting certain speakers or points of view. They have complained through social media and in some cases tried to leverage the Club toward or away from hosting individuals or program topics either in line with or opposing their own values and views.

Perhaps the loudest of these controversies was over the decision by the Club's Inforum division to host Kim Kardashian earlier this year. Inforum's thinking was that, whatever people may think of Kardashian, she is a force on television, in social media, in business and in popular culture. The outcry about the Club hosting Kardashian rippled from NPR supporters on the KQED website who believed the Club was degrading its standards, to local Bay Area community members who vowed to cancel (or in most cases never to join since they were not Club members) their memberships in the Club.

In the end, the Club's program with Ms. Kardashian, a conversation with respected Santa Clara County retired judge LaDoris Cordell, was substantive, with the pop culture star, for example, announcing her support for gun control. And it was attended by many young people, who were for the first time discovering the opportunity the Club provides to participate in civic affairs. All in all, this was a positive event for the Club and for the community.

The second instance has been demands, from those who oppose mandatory vaccinations, for more airtime at the Club to discuss the dangers of vaccines. The Club had already presented programs reflecting this view, including with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. But the Club has also presented programs with public health officials who stress dangers to society if children, in particular, are not immunized against infectious diseases.

In this case, the vaccine skeptics posted, on a public autism website, an email from a volunteer program organizer at the Club who

had postponed an additional program on this topic, and encouraged people to protest this decision. This created angry mail and email to the Club from the autism community about our decision to reflect a more balanced approach on this topic.

The third case was a little bit different. Each year, the Club holds its annual gala dinner, and in the spring of 2014 we honored the chairman of a large Bay Area company. This company has been engaged with the Club for over 100 years, and it is the second largest philanthropic donor in the Bay Area.

An environmental organization objected to the Club honoring the company, and a few days before the dinner, posted an online petition asking that the Club rescind its award to its chairman. I received thousands of emails making this demand. The organization also tried to pressure the Club's Climate One project through contacting its speakers and advisory board members and attempting to drive them away.

In past years, there was a steady but minor pattern of complaints from all sides about various speakers at the Club. What is new is the attitude that not only do some people disagree with the speaker or honoree choices the Club makes, but they are determined to embarrass the Club or try to force their own views on the Club through pressure.

The spirit in which the Club was founded and continues to operate today is that respectful dialogue between people with differing views is essential to the healthy functioning of our democratic

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society. We solve our societal problems better if we are able to be open-minded, and if both our citizens and our leaders are able to listen to those with whom they differ and learn about different possible approaches. Many of the greatest problem solvers in our history have crossed ideological boundaries to solve problems, such as Republican Teddy Roosevelt, who embraced conservation and established national parks, and cold warrior Richard Nixon, who opened relations with China.

Some people or organizations may garner advantage for their values and views in the short term by using social media or leveraging tactics to inhibit the Club's presentation of divergent voices. But in the long run, any restriction in the range of dialogue harms both our democracy and our ability to solve problems. In this age of social media and online pressure, the Club will continue to vigorously exercise its mission to present a wide diversity of views. 🌟