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Could boycotts help restore some civil discourse on political issues?

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There aren't many individuals in history whose names are taken in vain more than [Capt. C.C. Boycott](#), the notorious Irish landlord who cut the wages of his tenant farmers and got himself ostracized -- and the English language enriched -- in return.

The captain's name has seldom been out of public circulation since then. Yet every new boycott inspires vigorous discussion over whether this sort of pressure on the powerful is effective or fair. Currently on the table are two such actions: an advertisers' boycott of [Fox News commentator Glenn Beck](#), and a shoppers' boycott of the Austin, Texas, grocery chain [Whole Foods Market](#).

The campaign against the egregious Beck, who has done so much to destroy civil political discourse in this country, was organized by the African American political group [Colorofchange.org](#). The group objected to Beck's labeling President Obama a racist. Last week it claimed to have commitments from more than 40 mainstream former advertisers, including Wal-Mart and Sprint, to drop his show.

As for Whole Foods, its founder and chief executive, John Mackey, wrote an op-ed piece for the Wall Street Journal this month [largely attacking Democratic healthcare proposals](#). He argued for reforms closely resembling what John McCain proposed during the election, and

stated that if Americans would only eat more food like what's sold by his stores, we "should be able to live largely disease-free lives . . . even past 100 years of age." Within days of Mackey's article, a group of customers had organized [a boycott of Whole Foods](#) via the Internet. They say they now have more than 30,000 adherents.

These cases have revived the debate over the proper place of the boycott in politics.

Plainly, boycotts can work -- the [grape boycott of 1965-70](#) against anti-union California growers and the anti-apartheid [South Africa disinvestment campaign](#) of the '80s stand as prime examples.

Those boycotts aimed to change the targets' behavior. What about boycotts aimed at the targets' views, like the Beck and the Whole Foods campaigns?

Critics argue that these boycotts are [trampling on the targets' right of free speech](#) or stifling free expression merely because the speaker's views are distasteful.

The Economist magazine, for instance, argues that silencing Mackey -- or any CEO -- is [bad for society](#) because it deprives us of "the logical arguments and wisdom built on experience that . . . business leaders can bring."

Yet the boycotts' main thrust is informational. The Beck and the Whole Foods boycotters don't have the power to force anyone to do their will. In the case of Beck, whose advertisers sought to reach his audience without thinking about the noxious character of his commentary, colorofchange.org simply brought home that their images might be splattered with his bile.

While colorofchange undoubtedly would like to see Beck driven off the air, the thrust of the Whole Foods campaign isn't to silence Mackey but to ensure that his chain's customers can better make their own decisions about whether to continue to shop there.

Such informational campaigns as this are obviously most powerful when the information is not widely known, and especially when it undermines the target's preferred narrative.

Part of Whole Foods' appeal to many shoppers is that its policies appear to harmonize with their progressive mind-set -- green, healthful, philanthropic, etc. Mackey never made it a secret that he sees this image as a business development tool. ("A certain amount of corporate philanthropy is simply good business and works for the long-term benefit of the investors," [he wrote in 2005](#).)

Leaving aside some of the substantive problems with his op-ed, which is a melange of misinformation and misconceptions about the healthcare market unworthy of the CEO of a major corporation, its approach to social responsibility lies somewhere to the right of Herbert Hoover. "A careful reading of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution will not reveal any intrinsic right to health care, food, or shelter," he writes. "[T]here isn't any."

The discovery that Mackey harbors insensitive and even reactionary views may come as a shock to these customers, as will other things they'd learn by looking more closely at the company -- such as that its anti-union policies have much in common with Wal-Mart's.

"He's opened up a can of worms," the boycott's co-founder, a television writer named Sally Hampton, told me.

Mackey says his op-ed piece is his "personal opinion," not that of Whole Foods, but that won't wash. The Wall Street Journal opened its pages to him precisely because of his corporate position, and a version of his piece appears on the company website.

Nor is there anything wrong in people deciding to shop elsewhere because they disagree with Mackey's views. Certainly his goal in writing for the Wall Street Journal was to influence his audience. That some shoppers are influenced to stay out of his stores just means his intent may have backfired, not that the outcome was unpredictable or unjustified.

Hampton says the boycott aims to counterbalance the bully pulpit occupied by powerful figures like big-business CEOs. "I can't get an op-ed into the Wall Street Journal," she says. "How are we collectively to be heard?"

If there's a flaw in the Whole Foods boycott, it's that its endgame isn't well articulated. The company isn't going to change its own healthcare policy, which provides catastrophic-illness coverage and health savings accounts for some employees, and it's not likely to fire Mackey for his op-ed.

Hampton says the organizers may press Whole Foods to sponsor a public forum on healthcare reform including advocates of a single-payer system. To Mackey's credit, his blog on the company website includes thousands of readers' responses to his piece, both in support and in vigorous denunciation.

But a wider discussion of healthcare reform, devoid of the misrepresentations and irrelevancies for which Mackey's article has been properly criticized, is exactly what's needed in this country. If the Whole Foods boycott leads to something like it, old Capt. Boycott's misery will, once again, be our gain.

Michael Hiltzik's column appears Mondays and Thursdays. Reach him at michael.hiltzik@latimes.com, read previous columns at www.latimes.com/hiltzik, and follow [@latimeshiltzik](https://twitter.com/latimeshiltzik) on Twitter.

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