



Brendan Eich has the right to fight gay rights, but not to be Mozilla's CEO

Mary Hamilton

Mozilla has decided, for better or worse, that it cannot have a CEO that fractures the goodwill of the people it relies upon

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If you've been on the internet recently, you're likely already aware of the saga of Brendan Eich's brief stint as Mozilla's CEO. Eich, the creator of Javascript, is a very well-regarded techie who was recently promoted from CTO, whereupon it became suddenly apparent that his record of donating to anti-gay political movements, particularly California's Prop 8, which sought to ban

same-sex marriage, was a problem for many of his employees as well as the coders, developers and broader community who work with Mozilla.

Eich sought to make clear that he would not and has not let his political feelings influence his working practices, but stopped short of apologising. As a result, anger and hurt grew, both within Mozilla and outside it. Perhaps most obviously, OKCupid put out a message to all Firefox users, urging them to boycott the browser and saying: "Those who seek to deny love and instead enforce misery, shame, and frustration are our enemies, and we wish them nothing but failure." Eventually, after a few more days of furious debate, Mozilla announced that Eich had stepped down.

Mozilla has decided, for better or worse, that it cannot have a CEO that fractures the goodwill of the people it relies upon. Andrew Sullivan says this response "disgusts him". Others have joined him in that disgust: Michael Arrington, Dave Winer, Jay Rosen, a range of social conservatives. Conor Friedersdorf at the Atlantic writes that the saga will have a chilling effect on political discourse, comparing it to companies firing their employees for their views on abortion (quite a lot of women who've been denied access to Plan B by objecting pharmacists might have something to say about that comparison.)

There are three particularly disingenuous strand in much of this criticism.

The first is the way it equates the personal decisions of individuals not to work with people whose actions they find abhorrent with an organised form of vigilante justice. No one has said, so far as I am aware, that Eich cannot be CEO, aside from Mozilla; rather, people have said they personally don't want to - or won't - work with someone who actively sought to harm them, their friends, their colleagues, or their customers.

And before you object, Eich's political donation did lead to harm: some back-of-the-envelope maths in the Hacker News thread on this subject suggests that Eich's \$1,000 donation equates to the dissolution of about 0.46 of one marriage. To suggest that donations are the same thing as speech is to say that actions are the same thing as words.

Moreover, Mozilla is a special case when it comes to a CEO acting in a way that polarises its community. Its primary mission, as Farhad Manjoo notes, is not to make money: it's to spread an open internet philosophy, and to do so it requires inclusivity, goodwill and - crucially - a CEO who can articulate that vision to a hugely diverse community. As Mozilla employee Erin Kissane wrote:

A CEO is a symbol. Mozilla's work is made cohesive by an activist mission, rather than by a mandate to make as much money as possible. It is difficult for me to understand how we are best served by a leader whose capacity to divide our community is so apparent.

The second: it is dishonest to say Eich has been hounded out of office simply for having a political opinion, or even for expressing it. There is a common rhetorical move: to frame the debate in intellectual terms and to take it out of the realm of the real. To say that opinions are all that is at stake, and to decide therefore that Eich has been pilloried purely for his beliefs, is wrong. Andrew Sullivan may say that:

It was a coalition of those, gay and straight, who do not believe that people with different views than theirs' should be tolerated in a leadership position.

But this is not a case of "different views". Eich took his views out of the realm of the theoretical when he donated to Prop 8, to Pat Buchanan, Tom McClintock, and Linda Smith. Rather than some shadowy coalition, it was a group of Mozilla's employees and associates, gay and straight, who do not want to work with or for someone who has actively worked to hurt them, their friends and their families. The situation was exacerbated by Eich's failure to reassure his community that his anti-gay activism was a thing of the past. Three board members stood down, the community was fracturing beneath him, and that meant he was failing in his first duty as CEO.

The final strand of criticism is the idea that Eich was simply taking advantage of his right to freedom of speech, and that political speech will be unacceptably constrained by his removal as CEO. This is laughable.

Kathy Sierra was hounded off the internet for being female, but her abusers have a right to speak. Anita Sarkeesian has been harassed online and off, but gets attacked again for daring to turn off comments under her videos to avoid more abuse. I'm scared to post this on my blog, for fear of unpleasant reprisals, but the people who might harass me have the undiluted freedom to do so.

As such, freedom of speech is a neoliberal shibboleth that means "I have the right to say whatever hateful thing I like without consequences from anyone". Those who evoke it in this case are grasping for all of the rights with none of the responsibilities, and ignoring that one person's freedoms infringe on others.

All Eich is having to do here is face the consequences of his speech - and no one is attempting to restrict it, least of all the government. He can say what he likes and believe what he wants. But he doesn't have a right to respect, or freedom from responses, or to a CEO job. No one does.

Eich clearly could not lead Mozilla in the way Mozilla needs and wants to be led. I'm sure he will have many other opportunities elsewhere, and I wish him well. I also hope he never again has the opportunity to actively assist in the oppression of LGBT people, and that if he does have it, he decides, this time, that the consequences just aren't worth it.

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