

## **Whose Political Correctness? Changing Language, Viewpoints and Tactics in Today's Intactivist Movement**

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**Abstract** Since Intact America's founding, the intactivist movement has grown enormously in the number and diversity of its adherents. As people in their thirties and twenties and even younger join the cause on social media and in the streets, it is becoming obvious that the relative weight and importance of messages and tactics once core to the movement are changing, and that new messages and tactics are emerging to appeal to radically diverse audiences.

In particular, the sensitivity to "scientific" and religious arguments among the movement's original leaders are becoming less relevant, as younger men and women—activists with different historical reference points—move to the forefront. Those of us who consider ourselves to be the elder statesmen of the movement must be willing to embrace—or at least tolerate—language, viewpoints and tactics that may not have been palatable in the past.

I am the Executive Director of Intact America. IA was founded in 2008 through a collaboration among individuals and groups who had been active for many years in opposing infant and child genital mutilation.

Our vision was to establish a centralized, virtual organization which would carry on its work principally through social media outreach. We also have created and participated in many on-the-ground events, such as informational booths at professional conventions, and street demonstrations. But our principal activity is digitally based. Primarily because of funding, but also thankfully because so many other individuals and organizations have picked up the intactivist banner, most of IA's current activities fall under the category of social media, information dissemination, and efforts to make the intact male body a mainstream concept. As of July 2014, Intact America had 26,000+ followers on Facebook, and we also are active on Twitter and in extensive blog activity and commentary.



Intact America also has around 25,000 subscribers to our website intactamerica.org, and while there's overlap, the Facebook and website lists are independent; it is our observation that some of our older (i.e., 50 and over) constituents are more likely to "belong" to our main website distribution list, while the under-50 constituents tend to engage through Facebook. Thus, we estimate that we have at least 40,000 people who see our Internet material regularly, and that number is growing by the day. [Note, as of the date this article was revised for publication, these numbers are considerably higher, and climbing daily.]

I want to discuss intactivism in the framework of social and cultural change and give my perspective on the current and future state of the movement. I specifically want to address some of the tensions, especially the recurrent accusations of anti-Semitism that arise within the intactivist movement, among some of its adherents.

I'll start with a personal story. In 1969, when I was 17 years old and a senior in high school, I had a part-time job waiting tables at the Antioch Inn, the restaurant owned by the college of the same name, located in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

One evening, a group of students came into the restaurant around closing time, and took seats at a table by the window. I went to offer them dessert; because of the late hour, the kitchen was closed so no dinners could be ordered. They demanded dinner. I repeated that the kitchen was closed, but that I could serve them dessert and coffee. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the floor. One of the women in the group had leaped out of her chair and punched me in the jaw.

I do not remember much about the events in the restaurant immediately following the assault. I recovered enough to walk home, and what I do remember is that, when I told my parents I'd been punched out at work, they did nothing. They did not call the police. They did not even call the College or the manager of the restaurant to complain. They certainly did not consult an attorney. The reason they did nothing was explicit. The woman who assaulted me was African American, and she was part of a large group of Black students who had come to Antioch in the late 1960s as part of a program designed to show the college's respect for the Black Power movement. My attacker resided in an all-Black dorm called Unity House. This dorm was off-limits to white people, and there was credible information that some of the residents were armed—something rather extraordinary for a liberal academic institution founded upon principles of secular morality. The College was afraid of confronting the problems at Unity House; afraid of being accused of racism, even if it was in speaking out or taking action against reprehensible or outright criminal behavior.

And, similarly, my parents were afraid they would be viewed as racists if they complained—this, irrespective of the fact that, like Antioch College, our family had a nice liberal pedigree, complete with civil rights activism, lots of black friends, and I had an adopted black brother. But, my parents were afraid to take any action against a black person who punched out their teenage daughter.

Of course, what's politically correct and what's politically incorrect change with time and context. The Civil Rights movement has been absorbed into other social contexts, though I believe it's reasonable to say that Americans are still uncomfortable with race, notwithstanding recent hypocritical and self-indulgent outrage expressed about Donald Sterling's comments.

In the American intactivist movement, the concern for political correctness revolves around the issue of Judaism. During the abstract-collection phase of this Symposium, at least two Jewish intactivists withdrew from participating, accusing Symposium organizers and leaders of the intactivist movement of anti-Semitism. This accusation was based on the fact that Symposium organizers refused to reject a paper on the role of comic books in changing social attitudes; the paper was submitted by Matthew Hess, creator of the Foreskin Man series, one volume of which vilifies a mohel,

The conversation that ensued, and one that regularly recurs, is how one can condemn religious circumcision—Jewish circumcision, in particular—and not be suspected and accused of anti-Semitism.

Or, returning to my personal story, How can you pursue a remedy against a black person who punches out your white daughter, without being accused of racism?

Four years ago, in Berkeley, Dr. Robert Van Howe's talk about his inability to get published in mainstream medical journals, and his suggestion that one reason for this was the heavily Jewish make-up of the editorial boards, threatened the up-to-that-point polite and feel-good atmosphere of that gathering. Two years earlier, in Keele, the 2008 Symposium was similarly disrupted when one of the attendees sought to link her feelings about the anti-circumcision/intactivist movement with other times she felt abandoned because she is a Jew.

We could spend a long time here arguing about Foreskin Man and whether he (or his creator) is anti-Semitic—an argument that is impossible to resolve (it should be noted that Matthew Hess (a) disavows anti-Semitism, and (b) portrays all of his circumcisers as monstrous villains).

We also could talk about whether the portrayal of Monster Mohel “set the intactivist movement back,” as some have claimed. I will explain why I don't think that is true, and will argue instead that an over-concern about anti-Semitism within this movement is misplaced, distracting, and destructive, and that we must grow beyond it if we are to defeat the real enemy.

As most people here know, data on the current incidence of circumcision are not reliable. We have estimates from 33% (which we all feel is low) to 58% (which many of us feel is too high). Similarly, we do not have any solid cross-sectional, national data on what Americans think about circumcision. Our information is anecdotal.

This is about to change. Intact America is working with a prominent polling firm to conduct a national survey on knowledge about and attitudes toward infant male circumcision. But, in the meantime, I will share some facts based on observations and analyses of the growth in Intact America's base from a mailing list of around 2000 people to our current approximately 40,000 constituents, the internet activity we engage in, correspondence from the thousands of people who participate in on-line activism, and the growing diversity among those who engage in intactivist events and demonstrations.

First, our followers are mostly white. The number of Latinos and Blacks is growing, but is nowhere close to their representation in the overall US population. This is a problem—something we would like to change—and we are hoping that the information we glean from our survey will help us in our messaging to attract significantly more diverse constituents.

Second, our most engaged group on Facebook is 25-34 years old. This won't come as a surprise to those of you in this room who spend a lot of time on social media, and it should make those of you who don't, feel good about the movement's reach. By the way, Intact America's donors are mostly men—white men between the ages of 30 and 65. And most of them are American and circumcised.

More observations:

Intactivism has no natural political allegiance or congruence with religious affiliation. Compared to their 2% presence in the US population, Jews are over-represented in this room and in the intactivist movement in general. Nor does intactivism line up along political party lines, although that doesn't keep people from lumping intactivism and intactivists into the same category as other issues they may adhere to—or oppose. For example, a “conservative” who finds our position objectionable will associate it with “liberals.” To give another example, on more than one radio call-in show, pro-circumcision callers have accused me of hypocrisy by being against circumcision but pro-abortion (this with no evidence of my position on the latter). One of my favorite stories is about the pro-circumcision caller to a Toronto radio station who scathingly referred to me as ... A FEMINIST (I'd made a comment about how in our culture we would have no trouble acknowledging the trauma of a female victim of genital cutting, while we continue to trivialize male genital cutting).

This absence of political alliances with intactivism poses both an obvious challenge—finding organizations courageous enough to stand beside—and the imperative of staying focused on our issue. To over-explain or to become distracted and defensive gives the opponent what he wants

Back to our supporters, they are from all over of the country, not just from metropolitan areas, not primarily from the east coast or the west coast, or Chicago. Most have never thought much about circumcision until now. Many of our newest followers on Facebook talk about their nascent awareness; they are just becoming informed, and many of them

are zealous, passionate even. They knew (or have known) little or nothing of circumcision's history or the problems it causes before having to think about whether to circumcise their newborn sons. They think circumcision is a medical thing, a "cultural" thing, an aesthetic thing, a "look like the father" or a hygiene thing. They think it's something doctors do when baby boys are born.

They don't know that circumcision is considered to be a fundamental mandate within Judaism, because they aren't highly educated (many have not gone to college) they're young (WWII and the Holocaust are not on their radar screen), and for the most part, they don't live in parts of the country where there is a significant Jewish population and probably do not personally know any Jews. To suggest that their views on circumcision arise from anti-Semitism is, thus, patently absurd.

If it's hard for you to relate to what I'm saying, recall that the highest circumcision rates in the United States occur where there are few or virtually no Jews. So, for example, Iowa, with a Jewish population of only 0.2%, has a neonatal circumcision rate of 81%; West Virginia circumcises 87% of its boys, and only one-tenth of one percent of West Virginia residents are Jewish. This tells us a lot about Iowans' and West Virginians' attitudes toward (or, better said, cluelessness about) circumcision, but I assert that it tells us absolutely nothing about these populations' attitudes about Jews or Judaism. Let's look at it another way. Put in the form of a rhetorical question: If intactivists who draw caricatures of Jewish circumcisers are anti-Semitic, are West Virginians who circumcise their babies reverential toward Judaism? Are they Zionists? Of course not! They are just ignorant Americans who are being sold a bill of goods by doctors and the medical-industrial complex.

Here is a quote by Leonard Glick, author of *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: 2006): "I'm convinced—I'm totally convinced—that cutting the genitals of children (infants or children, girls or boys) is fundamentally evil, and that's why I'm an intactivist." As in so many discussions skewed by political correctness, the Jewish Len Glick can get away with this statement, while somebody like Matthew Hess may not.

The internal (i.e., within the movement) criticism of intactivist messaging is not limited to occasional concerns about anti-Semitism. On a number of occasions, in response to an Open Letter or to a letter-writing campaign, or in reaction to a sign carried by one of our supporters at a demonstration, I've been called by physicians, telling me that pediatricians, especially, are good people, and that it's not helpful to criticize and vilify them for not opposing circumcision.



I've received the same kind of call from midwives, about other midwives who circumcise. "It's not really their fault; they think they have to do it." When somebody tells me that we should lay off doctors, or midwives because they are really wonderful people who circumcise babies because ... well, because that's what we do in this culture, I think, "Yes, but they should know better. And they should stop." But I don't face any serious, sustained pushback among fellow intactivists because, it's politically acceptable—at least sometimes and in some circles—to criticize or even vilify doctors. So, this caricature (from another edition of Foreskin Man) has not caused any outcry.



...while this one has.



Let's consider this photography of a ritual Islamic circumcision.



And this, which probably wouldn't even make it into an American newspaper but which is inflammatory in Europe, where Muslim circumcision is the focus.



And now let's look at this?



Which one makes us more uncomfortable? Negative representations of Muslim circumcision and Muslim circumcisers, or those of Jews? Does it make a difference if the image in question is a photo, rather than the drawing by a youngish, blond non-Jewish intactivist?

Now, while we're looking at photos, how about this?

## THE HORRORS OF CIRCUMCISION

**HORROR #1:**  
"We ♥ circs"  
on whiteboard

**HORROR #2:**  
smiling nurse

**HORROR #3:**  
circumcision  
assembly line



**HORROR #4:**  
newborn strapped down against his will with  
the most vulnerable part of his body exposed



[www.intactamerica.org](http://www.intactamerica.org)

Note the "We love circs" message on the whiteboard in the background. The happy nurse in this picture threatened to sue IA when we posted it on FB. She said that she helps a lot of babies. She said that besides the doctor and her, the "only other person in the room" was the father who had given consent (and presumably took the photo). Of course, we need to be willing to examine our own biases, our own prejudices, the language we choose, the images we employ. However, the enemy is not an intactivist who might step outside our personal comfort zones. If we think this way, we will cannibalize ourselves, rather than keeping the focus on the real enemy.

If we are to end the horror of genital cutting, we must be willing to vilify circumcision and call it for what it is—horrifying, yes, evil. We must unequivocally call to account those who perpetuate it. This includes ALL circumcisers. And yes, it includes parents too—if they have been informed, and still persist in doing it.

We can understand why people cut children, but the constructive use of that understanding is to refine our messaging and tactics, not to let people off the hook because of their religion or their culture or their ignorance—or because of our own fears of being accused of bigotry.

Going back to my personal story, we can understand oppression and be compassionate toward oppressed people, but it is another thing altogether to give a pass to somebody who engages in tortuous or even criminal assault, out of fear that holding that individual accountable means we are bigots.

To see everything through the lens of political correctness ties us in knots, and creates a no-win situation. You can never be satisfied with my actions because you doubt my underlying attitude—and I can never reassure you enough. I then lack freedom to express my opinion about what I consider to be an evil—yes, evil—practice, because I am hypersensitive about whom I might be offending.

Let's look at another Matthew Hess character, a caricature of “the most famous female circumciser in West Africa.” Can I use this image when condemning female genital cutting? If I do, must I preface it with an assurance to African Americans, or maybe only to Africans or maybe only to West Africans, that I don't hate them?



If I use this image, do I need to reassure you that I really like black people or that I don't think Africans are primitive?

Punch me out. But rest assured, I will call the police!

Rather than continuing to engage in conversations about whether those who refuse to condemn the creator of Foreskin Man as anti-Semitic are themselves anti-Semites, we need to step back and acknowledge that no one owns the intactivist movement. We don't even control the conversation anymore; it's gone way beyond us. You, I, most of the people attending this Symposium, which is taking place on an elite college campus, probably wouldn't relate personally to many of the people who have come over to "our side" in deciding to leave their boys' genitals intact. We might have influenced them, but we are not the face of the masses of people who are going to ultimately make the decisions to drop this custom. They are less educated. They are not political. They shop at Walmart. They go to church and cite the Bible—sometimes erroneously. Their grammar and spelling—at least on Facebook—isn't so great.

It's ok. Actually, THAT IS A GOOD THING. These are the people who—by becoming aware and changing their minds—are going to ultimately change the American paradigm.

Of course, we need to be aware of our biases. We need to think about where we're coming from—whether we are talking about race or religion.

But an over-concern with political correctness is a distraction and a waste of time and energy. It disrupts our work and detracts from our agenda, which is to end the genital mutilation of children.

Speaking for myself, I am an activist, not a culture broker or an apologist. Thus, I must brand circumcision as evil, and circumcisers as wrongdoers—the enemy, even. That's what activists do. If I didn't want to do this, I would have stayed in cultural anthropology, and I'd be talking about the societal function of (female and male) genital cutting.

The loathsome act is circumcision, and the enemy is any person of any religion, culture, race or gender who circumcises a child. We need to stop questioning the motives of those whose aim it is to make all circumcisers feel bad, so they stop circumcising. That's the way we are going to end this practice.

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