



Free to boycott; free to not

Let the Games begin...but you don't have to watch

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I was making plans with family for next month when I said, "Just keep in mind, the Olympics will be on." Those who know me understand what that means. My attention is decidedly focused on screens during the Games. But then I felt the need to add the caveat: "If I watch these ones."

The winter Olympics open next week and it's anybody's guess what viewership might be. It's been only six months since the delayed summer Olympics wrapped up and even the most ardent viewers might need a longer break. Also, because these Games are in Asia the 14-hour time difference makes viewing tougher. Added to that is the feeling they shouldn't be taking place while the pandemic continues to surge. Then there are the calls for viewing boycotts because these Games are in China so we should refuse to watch, based on the host country's political and human rights record.

Some are piling on disapproval and reproach solely because they are in Beijing. Can I call out the irony here? These are some of the same people you find on one of the most successful apps in the world that just happens to be owned by a Chinese company. The same app that has been found to spread misinformation, fuel conspiracy theories, is the object of a probe concerning the transfer of personal data to China, was fined for violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, is currently under Federal Trade Commission investigations, and is the object of concern regarding sexual predators and the collection of data on children. You want people to shut out the Games? Lead the way and shut down the app.

We are told we need to take a stand by not watching. But I would ask these individuals how closely they look at the labels on the electronic equipment they buy, the clothes they put on their backs or the shoes they can't get enough of. Everything from plastics to perfume, clocks to chemicals, and tin to toys comes to us from China. It is possible to buy from other places, including Canada, if we are prepared to pay more. Time to take a principled stand? Let your dollars lead the way.

That's the thing about living some place where we are given choice. We can select which apps to put on our phones, what clothes to put on our bodies and what objects to purchase for our homes. But let's be consistent about it.

The Cato Institute in Washington along with the Fraser Institute in Vancouver co-published the annual Human Freedom Index. The report ranked 162 countries in the areas of Personal Freedom (freedom of opinion and expression, equality before the courts, freedom to come and go) and Economic Freedom (personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to compete in markets).

According to their indicators, New Zealand is the freest country in the world. Canada ranks sixth. Let that sink in for a moment.

Now think of those who live in countries at the bottom of the list. How different are they from us? Not much. They fall in love, they care about their families, they grieve their loved ones, they go after their dreams and they strive for a good quality of life. But they do so in opposition to factors that are beyond my frame of reference.

It will surprise no one that China ranks poorly on this list, along with countries like Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, Iraq, Venezuela, and on it goes. Eleanor Roosevelt said that with freedom comes responsibility, so the question we need to confront is what those of us in freer countries can do for those who live where personal and economic freedoms are negligible.

The 23 million Canadian adults who say they will watch the Beijing Olympics are most looking forward to hockey, figure skating, ski jumping and biathlon. Recent immigrants are nearly 10% more likely to follow the Games, while those aged 18-24 will be the biggest block of viewers. They have the freedom to watch. Just like they have the freedom to load whatever apps they want or use their purchasing power how they see fit. But that freedom requires recognizing that others get to make their own decisions as well.

Does it mean we pretend the issues don't exist? Not by a long shot. We can support human rights organizations. We can send letters lobbying government action. Some make consumer choices based on where products and tech come from. We can do more when we know more. Perhaps while we cheer on athletes such as Marielle, Erik, Jennifer and Brad, we can take some time to learn the stories of people like Gao, Chen, Wei and Qui, Chinese dissidents who risked their lives and were imprisoned for speaking out.

Drawing each other in rather than shutting one another out demonstrates our understanding that we have more in common than not. Doing what we can to be advocates for each other, no matter where we are on the planet, should be the gold (medal) standard. That's my outlook.