

THE MEDIA'S ROLE

In the unfinished work of liberty, the press has a role to play.

Sometimes I despair that we need to come together at such regular intervals to defend free speech. But then I remind myself why we do it.

Liberty is unfinished business.

It was unfinished in 1863 when Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous speech—in just 266 words—when he recalled the birth of a nation conceived in liberty and when he honoured the dead who “gave the last full measure of devotion to fighting for freedom.” Lincoln called on “us the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work” of liberty. He implored us to “take increased devotion” to that cause of liberty.

In 2015, liberty is still unfinished business. There's no point talking about the importance of liberty around speech without first reminding ourselves why it matters—going back to first principles. Because sometimes those first principles get lost amidst new fads and orthodoxies.

Free speech is both the oil and the fuel that keeps the ideals of the Enlightenment working smoothly. It's vital to that central piece of machinery, the market place of ideas, where we test ideas, where we work out which ones work, which ones don't. It enables us to progress, rather than stagnate, as a society.

What is the role of the media in this unfinished work of liberty?

Surely it is to question, to challenge, to explore, to be intellectually honest and curious. When we stop doing these things, we stop servicing the machinery that powers the market place of ideas.

If you have turned on the TV, or radio, or read a newspaper about metadata laws this week, you will have noticed how the media can get worked up about free speech when it wants to. But there are self-imposed, subtle restraints that are far more dangerous to our democracy than new metadata

laws. Instead of fuelling the market place of ideas, the media too often fuels a market place of outrage where debates are stifled.

Let me give you an example. When a terrorist took 18 people hostage at gunpoint at the Lindt Café in Sydney, sections of the media were more interested in extolling the virtues of the hashtag campaign #I'llridewithyou, and predicting Islamophobia among Australians, than in discussing the unfolding Islamic terrorism inside the Martin Place café.

To them, Man Haron Monis was just a disgruntled lone madman with killing on his mind who just happened to unfurl a black and white flag and just happened to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State.

We need more people in the media to point out that when a killer slaughters people in the name of Islam, we should take him at his word. Monis is the newest form of terrorist. There is no Islamic State membership card, no initiation ceremony, not even a welcoming morning tea.

Curiously, when Islamic terrorists struck at the offices of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January, immediately the media agreed this was Islamic terrorism. Kill a customer in a café, and it's the work of a disgruntled loner. Kill a journalist, and it's Islamic terrorism.

But that was just the warm-up act for more hypocrisy in the media and the wider political class. Following the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attacks, people flocked to join free speech marches across the world, declaring “*Je suis Charlie*.”



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Good on them for showing solidarity. I was in New York City that day and walked past a tiny shop on a street corner in SoHo which had stuck up a “*Je suis Charlie*” poster in its dirty window. On a chilly New York day it warmed my heart. But that’s all it did.

We won’t win this long and sinister battle over Western freedoms with unity walks, neat slogans, and hash-tag trends on Twitter. We need more people in the media to point out the humbug and hypocrisy.

Many of the people who declared “*Je suis Charlie*” are not Charlie. Not in the least.

The Turkish prime minister was among the leaders standing shoulder to shoulder at the front of the free speech march in Paris. His marching for free speech didn’t sit comfortably with Turkey holding a two-year record—ahead even of Iran and China—for jailing the most journalists.

German chancellor Angela Merkel was on the streets of Paris, too. Sadly, the German Chancellor is less keen about free speech at home when it comes to difficult debates about immigration and integration. Barely two weeks earlier, Merkel appealed to Germans to stay away from protests by people concerned about the Islamification of Germany. Trying to stifle the protests, church leaders in Cologne turned off the lights of the local cathedral so the protests would be in the dark. In Dresden, the opera house bosses extinguished its lights, too, so protesters couldn’t be seen against the building.

Turning off the lights sums up Europe’s cultural malaise, explaining why millions of ordinary Germans are concerned about Europe’s mealy-mouthed commitment to Western values.

And while Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott was not at the Paris march, he was quick to say, following the terrorist attacks, that we must never compromise our values in defending them. It’s a fine statement. But how does it sit with his decision to drop reforms to 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act? Section 18C is a direct hit on free speech in Australia. Section 18C inhibits the market place of ideas. Instead it feeds the

marketplace of outrage where people are treated as victims and encouraged to scream loud to shut down debate they find offensive.

Many of the people who declared “*Je suis Charlie*” are not Charlie. Not in the least. They have nothing in common with the French newspaper which delights in offending religion, politicians, pop culture, and anything else in its sights.

Because if the free speech marchers are Charlie, then surely they are also Michel Houellebecq, the French novelist hauled in front of a French court for inciting hatred. If they are Charlie, they are also Andrew Bolt and Mark Steyn, men who have felt the full force of laws that strike down free speech. Yet there was no mass outrage about the free speech battles faced and fought by Houellebecq, Bolt, or Steyn.

If the free speech walkers are Charlie, they are also Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Yet the Muslim-born writer is regularly scorned by the left intelligentsia as too provocative when she speaks out the importance of defending Enlightenment values. In April last year, eight days after announcing it would award Hirsi Ali an honorary doctorate, Brandeis University cowered to critics and decided to pull the award.

Let me give you an example of what the media should do more often—and I get the chance to do something rare: praise the ABC. When the host of ABC’s *Lateline*, Emma Alberici, interviewed Wassim Doureihi, the young man behind Hizb ut-Tahrir, last year, she challenged Doureihi’s retrograde, repellent, and evasive agenda.

Full marks to her. Rather than ban Hizb ut-Tahrir, we need more of that grit and courage.

For too long, too many people—especially in the media—have taken the intellectually lazy route. They have given extremists a platform as if they are a harmless form of freak-show entertainment. That’s too easy, too. That’s not the deal with free speech.

When Islamic extremists such as the men who make up Hizb ut-Tahrir exploit our liberties to espouse their freedom-loathing notions, it is our role of the media to exploit them in the best way a liberal democracy can—using our own freedoms, by confronting them and their ideas, by critiquing them, by exposing their agenda as medieval and immoral. Remember that Hizb ut-Tahrir shares

the same aims as Islamic State—the establishment of a caliphate and the annihilation of democracy—aims that are as territorial as they are ideological. Except that Islamic State has worked out how to better catch our attention with beheadings, sexual slavery, and mass killings.

Sadly, there are too many people in the media whose commitment to free speech grinds to a halt at politically opportune times. But here's the other deal with free speech: It's not a part-time value.

You don't get any marks for credibility when you attack the words and opinions of Andrew Bolt as too offensive to be legal, yet stay quiet when men like Doureih speak. Likewise, you lose credibility when you join free speech marches but go missing in action when the Federal Court uses section 18C to strike down an opinion because it doesn't like its tone. (As an aside, I'm constantly bemused by the irony of progressives going soft on Islamic extremists. Come the caliphate revolution, they will be the first people up against the wall.)

It's important to understand why we moved away from traditional notions of free speech. Forty years ago, the Left abandoned libertarian notions of human rights and embraced a new definition of human rights that elevates egalitarian rights. As Attorney-General, George Brandis has said, the shift began with the elevation of the right to "equal concern and respect," a notion developed and championed by philosopher and scholar Ronald Dworkin.

"Equal concern and respect." What on earth does that mean? It's easier interpreting the Income Tax Assessment Act than it is ascribing meaning to these four words, "equal concern and respect."

The beauty of the phrase was not lost on the Left. It means whatever you want it to mean. It is peculiarly suited to the paternalistic tendencies and cultural relativism of the Left. Here was the beginning of a recalibrated human rights movement in favour of victimhood. Feelings became the measurement of human rights. Let me repeat: the market place of ideas is being replaced by the market place of outrage where human rights legislation and anti-discrimination bureaucracies emerged to buttress the new victimhood movement.

Free speech has become the obstacle to the Left's notion of human rights as egalitarian rights. Recall

the familiar opera of Muslim oppression used to shutdown debate on about Islam. The First Act starts with something simple. Perhaps it's a book called *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. Or a silly Danish cartoon. Or a film called *Submission*. Or a cheeky episode of *South Park* sending up the fact that Mohammed is the only guy free from ridicule.

Then the libretto comes: many Muslims will scream about hurt feelings. The drama builds in the Second Act: death threats are issued, flags and a few effigies are burned, a few boycotts are imposed and then we hear that great aria of all accusations—Islamophobia.

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The Third Act is the most depressing. The West capitulates, preferring the path of least resistance to launching a staunch defense of freedom of expression. Hence then—U.S. president George H. W. Bush declaring both Rushdie's book and the fatwa against him equally offensive.

How many newspapers ran those Danish cartoons? My newspaper didn't. *Charlie Hebdo* did. In the hours after the Paris terrorist attacks, *Newsweek* featured this headline: "After Paris Attack, News Outlets Face Difficult Choice Over Controversial Magazine Covers." Difficult? Really? How little we have learned.

In the media and beyond, there is a norm of anticipatory surrender and self-censorship.

Instead of self-censorship, we need intellectual curiosity. Instead of double standards, we need intellectual honesty.

The ABC's Chris Uhlmann recently staked a claim for Western values when he said during an interview with the PM, "in a truly tolerant Western society . . . we would hope for a day when Islam is so integrated that it can be criticised in the way that Catholicism is criticized." We need more of that.

We need more people such as UK commentator and best-selling author of *Londonistan*, Melanie

Phillips. In Australia recently, Phillips said unless we understand the wellspring of this religious fanaticism, we cannot defend ourselves. Phillips lamented how Western leaders speak as one, saying Islam is not the problem. She said it is lazy thinking to pretend that Islamic violence—largely perpetrated against other Muslims—is not based on a legitimate interpretation of their religion.

Encouraging an Islamic religious reformation first requires confronting the legitimate interpretations of Islam by groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Islamic State. Having honest debates about Islam is not evidence of Islamophobia.

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A few weeks ago, Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallstrom delivered a scathing assessment of the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia. Women can't drive, can't marry, can't have certain medical procedures without permission from men. Child marriages are common. So is public segregation of the sexes. Restaurants and banks have separate entrances for men and women. Wallstrom also castigated the Saudi justice system for sentencing Raif Badawi to ten years in jail and 1,000 lashes for setting up a website that promotes secularism and free speech.

What happened? The Oppression Opera returned for a repeat performance. The Arab world

condemned her for Islamophobia. Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador to Sweden. So did the UAE. What happened outside the Arab world was even more disappointing—but predictable. Wallstrom's defence of Western values has been greeted with silence in the West. As Nick Cohen writes in this week's *Spectator*:

There is no Wallstrom Affair. Outside Sweden, the Western media barely covered the story... A small Scandinavian country faces sanctions, accusations of Islamophobia and maybe worse to come, and everyone stays silent. . . . The scandal is that there isn't a scandal.

The Germans have a word for this: *totschweigertaktik*. Death by silence.

The media must play a critical role in the marketplace of ideas. Too often, it chooses silence—or becomes an echo chamber for the marketplace of outrage.

Why is the media's role so critical? So that those who defend Western freedoms are too many to stand out. The journalists and cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* were sitting ducks for Islamic terrorists. As one academic said, they alone stood in "defence of press freedom against the jihadist Kulturkampf."

They were a lot like Hirsi Ali, who has been forced to live with 24-hour protection in countries such as the Netherlands, in the U.S., and here in Australia. As she said a few years ago, when more of us defend Western values, "there will be too many people to threaten and at that time I won't need protection."