

Chapter Ten: Time to Re-Think Press Freedom?

Julian Petley

In 1997 a report by the Runnymede Trust entitled *Islamophobia: a Challenge For Us All* concluded that closed and negative views of Islam are routinely reflected by the British press, and that such views ‘are seen with particularly stark clarity in cartoons’ (Richardson: 21). Since then, and particularly in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, these views have been expressed by newspapers with ever greater frequency and intensity – and yet not one British national paper re-published any of the Jyllands-Posten cartoons which caused such a stir in February 2006, cartoons which mirror with uncanny accuracy the attitudes of most of the British press towards Muslims and Islam. Why should this be the case?

Let’s begin with the liberal press, in other words the minority papers in Britain’s overwhelmingly conservative, and indeed illiberal, press culture.

Though by no means above criticism of their coverage of Muslims and Islam, the *Guardian* and *Independent* have been consistently less negative and more open in their coverage than most other national dailies and Sundays, whose Islamophobic tone they have frequently criticised. Their decision not to re-publish any of the cartoons was thus perfectly consistent with their editorial stance on reporting this whole area. Thus a Leader in the *Independent*, 3 February, argued that: ‘There is, of course, no doubt that newspapers should have the right to print cartoons that some people find offensive ... But there is an important distinction to be made between having a right and choosing to exercise it’, which could be seen both as ‘throwing petrol on the flames of a fire that shows every sign of turning into an international conflagration’ and as infringing the ‘right for people to exist in a secular pluralist society without feeling as alienated, threatened and routinely derided as many Muslims now do’. Maintaining that, in this instance, the responsibility to respect others’ beliefs outweighed the right to publish, the paper concluded that: ‘There is a deceptive borderline between controversial and irresponsible journalism. Especially in these troubled times, we must take care that it is not crossed.’ And the following day, a further Leader argued that re-publishing the cartoons would have been a ‘cheap gesture’, concluding that: ‘There is no merit in causing gratuitous offence, as these cartoons undoubtedly do’.

The *Independent on Sunday*, 5 February, took a similar line, Ziauddin Sardar arguing that the idea that the ideals of liberal secularism are superior to the ideals of other cultures is ‘Eurocentric and arrogant’, and reaching the conclusion that the limits to free expression ‘are to be found in the social consequences, the potential harm to others of an exercise of free speech. Tolerance is easy if there is nothing to offend. We become tolerant only when we defer to the sensitivities of those with whom we profoundly disagree on matters we do not believe can or should be accepted. Forbearance is the

currency of peaceful coexistence in heterodox society'. In similar vein, the paper's Leader stated that, in its view, re-publication would be regarded by Muslims as a 'deliberate insult' adding: 'When the deeply held beliefs of so many people has been made so clear, it requires a particularly childish kind of discourtesy to cause offence knowingly'.

Meanwhile the *Guardian* adopted a similar stance. Thus a Leader on 3 February stated that: 'The right to publish does not imply any obligation to do so', especially if putting that right to the test inevitably causes offence to many Muslims at a time when there is 'such a powerful need to craft a more inclusive public culture which can embrace them and their faith'. In the following day's paper, Gary Younge argued that: 'The right to freedom of speech equates to neither an obligation to offend nor a duty to be insensitive. There is no contradiction between supporting someone's right to do something and condemning them for doing it', whilst Emily Bell made the point that the paper could and should not ignore the impact of publishing the cartoons – 'not least on our correspondents working in Europe and the Middle East'. Unsurprisingly, then, the paper's Leader announced that: 'The *Guardian* believes uncompromisingly in freedom of expression, but not in any duty to gratuitously offend. It would be senselessly provocative to reproduce a set of images, of no intrinsic value, which pander to the worst prejudices about Muslims ... Freedom of expression, as it has developed in the democratic west is a value to be cherished, but not abused'.

Whilst one might wish that liberal newspapers put a higher premium on freedom of expression, one cannot in all fairness accuse the *Guardian* and *Independent* of inconsistency. The same, however, most certainly cannot be said of the conservative press, given its past (and current) representations of and attitudes to Muslims. Not, for example, of *The Times*, whose Leader on 3 February pompously intoned: 'To duplicate these cartoons several months after they were originally printed also has an element of exhibitionism to it. To present them in front of the public for debate is not a value-neutral exercise. The offence destined to be caused to moderate Muslims should not be discounted'. (This did not, however, deter the paper from having its cake and eating it by providing weblinks to sites displaying the cartoons). Nor of the *Sun*, which the same day published a credulity-busting Leader which argued that it was not re-publishing the cartoons for two reasons: 'First, the cartoons are intended to insult Muslims, and the *Sun* can see no justification for causing deliberate offence to our much-valued Muslim readers. Second, the row over the cartoons is largely a manufactured one. They were printed first in a Danish dispute over free speech. The *Sun* believes passionately in free speech, but that does not mean we need to jump on someone else's bandwagon to prove we will not be intimidated'. Similarly, it is impossible to take seriously, given its past record on this and other matters, the pious protestations of the same day's *Telegraph* Leader to the effect that the paper had chosen not to re-publish the cartoons since 'we prefer not to cause gratuitous offence to some of our readers ... Our restraint is in keeping with British values of tolerance and respect for the feelings of others'.

However, the first prize for sheer gall and breathtaking hypocrisy has to go to the *Mail*, whose Leader on 3 February attempted at a stroke to airbrush out its history of

110 years of bile-spewing and hate-mongering. Freedom of speech, it tells us, is a 'treasured characteristic of a civilised society', before making one disbelieve the evidence of one's own eyes by adding: 'But great freedoms involve great responsibilities. And an obligation of free speech is that you do not gratuitously insult those with whom you disagree. While the *Mail* would fight to the death to defend those papers that printed the offending cartoons, it disagrees with the fact that they have done so'.

As it is impossible, given the past record of the conservative press on all matters Islamic, to take any of these protestations remotely seriously, one can only conclude that papers normally only too happy to misrepresent Islam and to heap opprobrium on the heads of Muslims decided on this occasion to self-censor themselves for fear of reprisals. It's one thing to spew out anti-Muslim sentiment to no-one but your like-minded readers, but quite another to do so in the full glare of the global media spotlight, and when you're well aware of the treatment meted out to those papers which, for whatever reasons, did re-publish the cartoons. Such a stance would have required both consistency and courage, two qualities conspicuously lacking in Britain's conservative press, which is a byword for hypocrisy and which is perfectly happy to attack the weak as long as there's no chance of the weak retaliating. As Gary Younge quite correctly pointed out in the *Guardian*, 4 February: 'The right to offend must come with at least one consequent right and one subsequent responsibility. If newspapers have the right to offend then surely their targets have the right to be offended. Moreover, if you are bold enough to knowingly offend a community, then you should be bold enough to withstand the consequences, so long as that community expresses displeasure within the law'.

The other aspect of the conservative press which this affair all too clearly illuminated was its utterly cavalier attitude to freedom of expression. For most press owners, press freedom means simply freedom to exercise a property right, in other words to own and to make money from newspapers. In the hyper-competitive British newspaper market, money is not made from what we might call 'public service' journalism but from sensationalism, salacious gossip, the cult of celebrity, and, above all, pandering to readers' prejudices and reinforcing what they think they know already. In such a culture, press freedom no longer automatically means the ability to tackle difficult issues from quite possibly unpopular stances, still less to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and can indeed be airily dismissed as something of interest only to mischief-makers and foreigners – witness Simon Jenkins' characteristically *ex cathedra* (and equally characteristically pompous and wrong-headed) pronouncement in *The Sunday Times*, 5 February that: 'To imply that some great issue of censorship is raised by the Danish cartoons is nonsense. They were offensive and inflammatory. The best policy would have been to apologise and shut up'. The re-publication by certain European papers of the cartoons is dismissed as 'the idiot antics of a few continental journalists', whilst the mere suggestion by some of these papers that at least one or two of their British counterparts might consider following suit in the interests of press freedom is met with the lordly rejoinder that: 'The demand [sic] by foreign journalists that

British newspapers compound their offence shows that moral arrogance is as alive in the editing rooms of northern Europe as in the streets of Falluja’.

The conservative press in Britain is never happier than when calling for the censorship of broadcasters and film-makers, and equally prone to self-censor stories which don’t fit its own peculiar news agenda. Rarely, however, is the latter process quite so overt and unashamed as it was here. Such a situation is almost beyond parody. Almost, but not quite, thanks to an absolutely spot-on editorial in *Private Eye*. Entitled ‘A Free Press’, it deserves reproducing in full:

In this country we are fortunate to have a long tradition of press freedom ... jewel in the crown ... absolute right to publish cartoons ... cornerstone of liberty ... John Milton ... John Wilkes ... valiantly fought for ... hallmark of a truly civilised society ... bulwark of democracy ... naturally freedom not absolute ... John Locke ... need to respect others’ beliefs ... no licence to give gratuitous offence ... excitable chap, Johnny Muslim ... might get bomb through window ... got to be careful ... funny-looking bearded bloke in the car park ... perhaps this editorial’s a bit strong ... jolly good chaps, these Muslims ... we are right behind them in banning these cartoons ... those Danes should be strung up if you ask me ...

The ubiquitous Jenkins notwithstanding, the Danish cartoons affair does raise extremely pressing issues concerning press freedom. On the one hand, that freedom is generally taken to be one of the chief hallmarks of a democratic society. On the other, as I suggested above, the notion of press freedom has come to some extent to be re-defined in Britain, and now appears to include the ‘right’ of newspapers to say whatsoever they want about whomsoever they want – and in particular about ethnic communities, which, for years now, have been subjected by most of the press to a rising tide of misrepresentation, hostility and abuse which can only be described as institutionally racist. As Onora O’Neill (2002, 2004) has argued, the notion of press freedom based on a nineteenth century model in which a free press was seen as a bulwark against an overweening state and a champion of the powerless needs seriously re-thinking in order to take account of the fact that the modern media in general, and the press in particular, are now themselves some of the most powerful institutions in society. As O’Neill put it in the *Guardian*, 13 February: ‘Once we take account of the power of the media, we are not likely to think that they should enjoy unconditional freedom of expression. We do not think that corporations should have unrestricted rights to invent their balance sheets, or governments to damage or destroy the reputations of individuals or institutions, or to deceive their electorates. Yet contemporary liberal readings of the right to free speech often assume that we can safely accord the same freedom of expression to the powerless and the powerful’.

This question of power brings us right to the heart of the matter. For all newspapers’ daily espousal of neo-liberal economics, the British press can in no sense be described as a free market of ideas, and, sadly, we are a long way indeed from the ideal outlined by Ziauddin Sardar in the *Independent on Sunday*, 5 February, in which he argued that: ‘Freedom of expression is not about doing whatever we want to do because we can do it. It is about creating an open marketplace for ideals and debate where all, including the marginalised, can take part as equals’. My own view, however, is that this admirable

ideal is best served by empowering the powerless rather than by muzzling the powerful, and that newspapers, rather than being censored, should be allowed to ‘publish and be damned’ – damned in the marketplace, damned in the courts both of law and public opinion, and encouraged to become more accurate and less abusive by a statutory right of reply. Why? Because history shows us that censorship is used just as frequently, if not more frequently, against the powerless and marginal as against the dominant and mighty. Because, post 9/11 and 7/7 the last thing that the coinage of civil liberties needs is yet more clipping. And because we need to remember what was said by Salman Rushdie in the wake of the *Satanic Verses* affair:

What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist. Without the freedom to challenge, even to satirise all orthodoxies, including religious orthodoxies, it ceases to exist. Language and the imagination cannot be imprisoned, or art will die, and with it, a little of what makes us human. (1992: 396)

References

- O’Neill, Onora (2002). *A Question of Trust: The BBC Reith Lectures 2002*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O’Neill, Onora (2004). *Rethinking Freedom of the Press*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Richardson, Robin (ed.) (1997), *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, London: The Runnymede Trust.
- Rushdie, Salman (1992), *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London: Granta/Penguin.

Chapter Eleven: Comments to Julian Petley's article

Barry White

Before commenting on Julian's paper I would like to set it in a wider social context, and make some references to our experiences in the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF). A good background can be found in Tahir Abbas's collection of works in the book *Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure* (2005). It provides real insight into the complexities and personalities of the south Asian Muslim communities, particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The book is in four parts and its interdisciplinary approach is what gives it the edge over other books in the genre of "British Islam". Topics range from the historical and social background of Islam and its presence in the UK, the sociological concepts and phenomena of Islamophobia, identity politics and multiculturalism, and an important section on media representation of Islam. Specific issues include attitudes to *jihad*, Pakistanis in Northern Ireland, and the personal turmoil that Bangladeshi women went through as a result of post-11 September reactions, both from within and outside the community.

In Britain today there are some 1.6 million Muslims (2001 Census). The majority originally came from south Asia and the numbers peaked in the 1960s. They are the second largest religious group with 2.7 % of the UK population as against 71.6 % who considered themselves Christian. Most are concentrated into a small number of large urban areas such as: London, Birmingham, Greater Manchester, Leicester and Bradford.

Pakistanis and Bangladeshis represent the poorest minority populations in Britain. The same 2001 census showed them to be the most economically marginal of the minority ethnic groups in Britain. The broad picture of the census confirms that Muslims as a whole occupy an underprivileged position. They are also increasingly targeted by the extreme right, the British National Party, who use their religion to mask racist attacks. So much for a limited journey into background.

In his contribution Julian Petley identifies much of the British press as conservative and illiberal and only too willing to repeat and reflect closed and negative views of Islam post Rushdie and 11 September. They are, in the words of Friedrich von Hayek, one of the 'dealers in second hand ideas' and it is the press that more often than not influences the national agenda for the broadcasters and thus reaches a wider audience. There are national rather than regional daily newspapers, in England and Wales, which are London-centred – and there is a close relationship between editors and politicians. Despite all the concerns about falling circulation, the British still buy more than 11.7m national papers each weekday and 12.5 million on Sundays (Professor Peter Cole, Media Guardian, 20 August 2007). Readership is of course greater than sales, between two and three times it is estimated.