

## SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE MEDIA

DEAR Friends, thank you for the invitation to this, my fifth All-Ireland Humanist Summer School. We have had some great meetings in the past and I was very much looking forward to seeing you all again.

Our subject for the weekend has been 'Humanism, Freethought and Censorship', and we have heard some excellent presentations covering many of the challenges we face as Humanists in politics, society and the media. When I was asked to give this talk I thought I should cover one particular challenge we face in trying to fight for truth and reason: the reluctance of many in the media to address what they consider to be "sensitive" or "controversial" issues. But the more I looked into the problem of self-censorship the more I realised that it is only the tip of an iceberg of misrepresentation, distortion and downright lies that we are now faced with almost constantly in both the traditional and social media.

I first became aware of the power of self-censorship at the time of the Danish cartoons affair about 12 years ago. The cartoons, published in a Danish newspaper, *Jylands Posten*, were the brainchild of the paper's cultural editor, Fleming Rose. He had wanted to test the climate of tolerance among Muslims in Denmark. The trail of death and destruction across the Middle East that followed showed how seriously he had misjudged... Or had he?

His action was certainly provocative, as he knew it would be, but what the reaction showed – the riots, deaths and burnt embassy buildings – was that today's Islam has become a deeply intolerant religion quite unprepared to live at peace with others in an increasingly multicultural world.

But even more worrying than the Islamic reaction to the cartoons was the response of the western media. None were prepared to reproduce the cartoons: no TV station, no newspaper and no magazine (with the honourable exception of *Charlie Hebdo* – remember them?) was prepared to show its readers what all the fuss was about. Of course, the BBC and ITV, the *Times* and the *Telegraph*, all made excuses, citing reasons of "cultural sensitivity". But this self-righteous cowardice was shown up for what it was by a cartoon that appeared in – I think – *Private Eye*. An editorial board are discussing why, for reasons of cultural sensitivity, decency and respect for minorities that, on balance, it might be better not to show the cartoons, when a junior reporter pipes up: "And of course they would kill us".

And you would have waited in vain to hear from the BBC tell us who was responsible for the London bombings in 2005. A former BBC reporter told me they were under instructions not to use the words Islam, Muslim or Islamic in connection with any terror attack.

It was this kind of self-censorship, this refusal to accurately report the facts, that opened the door to the normalisation of intolerance and extremism, allowing to go unchallenged, for example, calls for gays, Jews, blasphemers and apostates to be murdered.

### **The New Media**

How the world of information has changed in just 12 short years. Today, the traditional media no longer have a monopoly on reporting facts. A majority of us now get our news on line or via social media.

The fragmentation of news sources has led to two closely-related problems: the proliferation of fake news, and the rise of hate speech and intolerance. We now get our news and opinions almost uniquely from sources within our own tribe, whatever that tribe may be: sources that share our own opinions and values. Inventions, falsehood and unchecked assertions abound, masquerading as facts. And even more worrying, where the social media have led, the worst of the traditional media have followed, starting and ending of course in America with Fox News, spreading fake news and Trump-inspired hatred in equal measure.

Paradoxically, the spectacular rise of social media means that young people today are rather less well-informed about what's going on in the world than earlier generations. Many young people now get most of their news from their peers via social media, and most of what they get is personal, local, or relates only to their group. It also means that what they see and hear of the wider world is from sources that share their tribal views and are more likely to be selective, politically biased, misleading or downright false. Without the traditional truth checks on our sources of information, the majority of us (and not just in the West but worldwide), can now be lied to with impunity. The voting public are becoming increasingly ill-informed.

It is difficult to see what can be done about it. There are two main problems: the sheer size and power of the multinational media giants which individual governments are unable to control, and the uncontrolled flow of fake news along with the true. Clearly international action is needed, but this could only come about if governments – perhaps via the United Nations – were willing to act. But so many governments seem happy with the way things are – you need look no further than the United States and Donald Trump – that no concerted action to tame the monster – or the flow of fake news – seems likely in the foreseeable future.

And what a monster it is. Mark Zuckerberg had a bad day a few weeks ago. His shares in *Facebook* took a hit. In one day he lost more money, 62 billion dollars,

than the annual GDP of any one of 100 of the world's nation states. That's not what he is worth – it's what he lost in a single day!

I've moved rather a long way from self-censorship to the far greater problem of the loss of truth. How can the ordinary man or woman in the street get facts they can rely on? Might some form of censorship perhaps be the answer? Unfortunately, the evidence suggests it can't.

Despite the decades-long post-war ban on hate speech and Holocaust denial in Germany, a nationalist movement, the Alternative for Germany, has gained seats in the Bundestag for the first time since the Nazis, and its influence appears to be growing. It seems you cannot eradicate little Hitlers by refusing to give them the microphone. If people want a Hitler, you can't prevent them from having one. And in fact, argued the film-maker Hans Syberberg, "the repression of those views may only increase their seductiveness among those who feel left out of society already". He foresaw the situation in Germany today: the suppression of right-wing nationalism seems only to have seeded its rebirth.

That's the conundrum. Does tolerance normalise evil? Should the fire be snuffed out before it spreads, as Germany and other European states tried to do? Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) certainly thought so: "If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them." He went on: "We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant."

Yet he also cautioned that "we should not always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies. As long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of today's staunchest defenders of free speech is Mark Zuckerberg. He believes it would be totally counter-productive to ban Holocaust denial from *Facebook*. And he is defended in his view by Fleming Rose. Writing in *World Post* earlier this month Rose said that criminalising Holocaust denial makes "free-speech martyrs" of deniers. Because of the very distrust of elites that we are seeing today, censorship only serves to legitimise what is being censored. Bans turn disputes into "dogma"... that are beyond question no matter what the facts.

Banning Holocaust denial in Germany has not worked. Nor does it seem likely that banning other kinds of falsehood on the grounds of the public good would work either – even if such a ban were possible in practice.

It has long been a given among Humanists that freedom of expression is the *sine qua non* of the pursuit of truth; let good and bad fight it out in the market place of ideas. The problem is that this only works if you have a free market and a level playing field. But the market today is far from free, and as Paul Kurtz once famously said: “the press is only free if you own one” (He did). With such unimaginable levels of wealth concentrated in so few hands, how is the ordinary man or woman with good ideas ever going to get those ideas across?

It would be nice if social media were the answer. But have you noticed how fragmented the internet has become? We seem to spend most of our time preaching to one another and very few other people seem to be listening. In an article in the *WorldPost* earlier this month, its editor, Nathan Gardels warned that it's no longer fact, only narrative that matters. He says: “Open societies are headed toward a “catastrophic failure of the marketplace of ideas” with no one believing anything, or everyone believing lies, depending on their tribal standpoint. What to do about “this coming info-pocalypse” will itself become the central issue of our time. In a post-truth environment, it's no longer facts that matter, but who dominates the narrative. What Plato said long ago applies in spades to our own times: “Whoever tells the story, rules”. Or as my mentor in the United Nations, Joep van Aarendonk put it: “It's ideas that rule the world”.

So where is this all leading us? Well, you don't have to look any further than America. Donald Trump has understood and exploited the unpalatable truth first noted by Adolph Hitler: “The bigger the lie the more people are likely to believe it.” Not since the Nazi Holocaust has any western government openly set out to demonise ‘the other’ in the way that Trump has done with immigrants, Muslims, the media, and America's erstwhile European allies. Yes, we have seen ignorant American presidents in the recent past: Ronald Reagan and George W Bush spring to mind. Both were prepared to ignore the evidence before making what proved to be catastrophic decisions. But neither of these turned to the rhetoric of hate, or used lies, quite so prolifically as Trump.

In her No1 *New York Times* bestseller, *Fascism, A Warning*, the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright defines a Fascist as someone who claims to speak for a whole nation or group, is utterly unconcerned about the rights of others, and is willing to use violence and whatever other means are necessary to achieve their goals. “Fascism not only endured through the twentieth century”, she warns, “but now presents a more virulent threat to peace and justice than at any time since the end of World War Two. The US, which historically championed the free world, is led by a president who exacerbates division and heaps scorn on democratic institutions”.

Where will this lead? Sadly we have ample evidence that hate speech leads to violence and mayhem. In India, Modi's rhetoric has led to the deaths of thousands of Muslims, and it is still going on. Do you remember the Pol Pot regime in the 1970s and the deaths of two million people in the killing fields off Cambodia? Or the Hutu government-inspired 1994 genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda in which 900,000 people died? All of these were not only made possible *but became inevitable* because of government-driven hate speech. How long will it be, I wonder, before the first American reporter, "an enemy of the people" is shot down in the street?

So let me come back to what can be done about it? We know that censorship of falsehood and hate speech will not work. Hate speech (that is, incitement to hatred of any individual or group) is generally understood to be banned under international law. But the United States constitution goes further in protecting hate speech – which has allowed Trump and his allies to attack individual journalists by name.

But how have the mainstream media reacted? In my view, woefully inadequately – and with self-censorship! The *New York Times*, when commenting on an obvious lie by Trump, reported the lie, but continued: "which is not apparently supported by the facts of the case". Excuse me? Surely "Liar, liar, pants on fire" would have been a more appropriate comment. *Fox News* of course merely repeated the lie without comment.

Even if the Republicans lose both the Senate and the House of Representatives in the mid-term elections in November, and by some miracle the gulf now separating the democratic left and the ultra right in America doesn't descend into violence, there is still an awful lot that will be lost. Ripping away environmental protections, denying climate change and demonising the other will leave scars that will persist for generations. And having given hate speech the cloak of respectability for the first time since the 1940s, far right groups in Europe, most notably, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Poland have been quick to take advantage.

The future for international relations is already looking bleak, with trade wars on the horizon. And there are no gods around to help us cure runaway global warming.

So what, if anything, can we do about it? The first thing we can do, I suggest, is not sit idly by and watch it happen. Protest, protest and protest again! Call out every lie for what it is. Campaign in the media, blog about what's happening. Get involved in politics. Think globally, as the saying goes, and act locally.

The world is on a slippery slope to the normalisation of hatred and violence. Humanists must do everything in our power to resist. Thank you for listening.