

Gateways to Freedom: Libraries and the New Millennium

URSULA OWEN

Index on Censorship, London, U.K.

The Index on Censorship, founded in the conviction that freedom of speech, along with the allied freedoms of conscience and religion, are fundamental human rights that the world community has a duty to guard, reports regularly on censorship in every issue of the magazine. After a brief survey of classic censorship, the author points out that the concentration of ownership in the media has affected the extent to which minorities are heard. For any concept of human rights to be universally accepted and globally enforced, equal respect and mutual comprehension between rival cul-

tures is demanded. Hate speech, political correctness and the dangers of making exceptions to the absolute right to free speech are covered. The author concludes with the role the library has in supporting and disseminating the importance of free expression. Libraries can be places where 1) dialogue takes place; 2) the diversity of cultural lives is displayed; 3) the right to choose is pre-eminent; 4) people can be guided through information which some might find offensive; and 5) freedom of expression is taught and people are encouraged to know their own rights.

Classic censorship

In 1824, James Mill, with financial support from Jeremy Bentham, founded the *Westminster Review*. It was to be a magazine with a particular reputation for intellectual excitement and radical thought. John Stuart Mill was its editor from 1837–1840. In 1852 when John Chapman and George Eliot, who was then the Editor, wrote the prospectus, they declared the magazine committed to the ‘variety of forms’ in which ‘the same fundamental truths are apprehended’. It would address the ‘widespread doubts in relation to established creeds and systems’, and would discuss ‘without reservation the results of the most advanced biblical criticism’. It advocated progress towards universal suffrage and reform of the judiciary, and a national system of education.

Then, almost in passing, we learn that there was to be ‘an independent section, to provide freedom for the expression of views that opposed those of the editors’ – and again as a casual aside

– ‘though this section was found to be impracticable and was abandoned after the second number’.

Sixty-one years ago, in 1933, a torch light parade of students marched to a square in Berlin on Unter den Linden and made a bonfire of 20,000 books, among them some of the great works of nineteenth century literature and thought. Any book was condemned to the flames ‘which acts subversively on our future or strikes at the root of our thought, our home and the driving forces of our people’. The book burning became one of the abiding metaphors for censorship.

I’m not telling these two stories together because I think they bear serious comparison. Of course they don’t. But I’m suggesting that they tell us, at these opposite ends of the censorship spectrum, how very difficult it is for people in all circumstances, from the literary magazine to the fascist dictatorship, to listen to ideas which are opposed to their own. Censoring is as natural as breathing.

Ursula Owen is Editor in Chief, Index on Censorship, Lancaster House, 33 Islington High Street, London, N1 9LH, UK.
<http://www.indexoncensorship.org>

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Index was founded in the conviction that freedom of speech, along with the allied freedoms of conscience and religion, are fundamental human rights that the world community has a duty to guard. In 1972, when the magazine was begun by Stephen Spender, it was responding particularly to the world described so poignantly by Nadezhda Mandelstam in her wonderful memoir *Hope Against Hope*. Here she is writing about the young daughter of her friend Shklovski:

She showed us her school textbooks where the portraits of Party leaders had thick pieces of paper pasted over them as one by one they fell into disgrace – this the children had to do on the instructions from their teachers. With every arrest, people went through their books are burned the works of disgraced leaders in their stoves, forbidden books, personal diaries, correspondence and other subversive literature had to be cut up in pieces with scissors and thrown down the toilet. People were kept very busy. (Mandelstam 1970)

People are still kept very busy. As you read this, people in more than 50 countries can be imprisoned without charge or trial for saying what they believe or for being who they are. Torture is used in interrogation in more than 60 countries. PEN Writers in Prison works on behalf of over 700 writers in 94 countries. Our running chronicle of censorship in every issue of the magazine, closely packed pages covering the whole world, provides abundant information that the whole range of tried and tested techniques, from assassination and imprisonment to the old blue pencil, are alive and well.

And these accounts are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg, only addressing the writers and journalists, not the thousands of ordinary people who are unable to express their views freely in many parts of the world. My in-tray reminds me daily of the incredible speed with which regimes act to ban the written word and silence free speech if they feel their power is threatened. And they are not all totalitarian regimes, though some of them are.

Inevitably, some of the most powerful and moving testimony to the horrors of censorship and silencing has come in our lifetime from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe under Communism. For the West, censorship became almost a sort of moral synonym with Communism. But, in the past five years, though walls have tumbled, ideologies have become discredited and

borders disputed, there has been plenty of censorship and silencing, old and new.

Classic censorship – the thought police, the blue pencil – survives in many countries. The old scourges of war, famine, and poverty flourish. And, the void left by the fall of communism has not been filled by parliamentary democracy or thriving economies, but by nationalism, that infantile disorder, as Danilo Kis called it. In the search for a social and economic identity, the temptation has been to assert identity by intolerance, leading to xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism.

Religious fundamentalism in all its forms – Islamic, Christian, Jewish, has terrorised people in many parts of the world, suppressing voices and inducing its own inimitable brand of fear. In Bangladesh, Taslima Nasrin was threatened with rape and death and driven into exile because of what she writes and thinks, especially her view that it is not the Quran itself that opposes women's emancipation but those who want to manipulate its teachings to hold women in contempt.

Contemporary limitations

However, it is a big mistake to suppose that censorship is all going on out there, all about matters of life and death, of intimidation or imprisonment. It is also about more subtle, more oblique things, about omission rather than commission, about new technology and access.

What is already clear, for example, is that the models of the Internet developed in North America and Europe are being transplanted wholesale to developing countries such as Africa, with a wealth of information being generated on and for Web sites – which are high-bandwidth, graphics driven. But for many countries with poor telecommunications, low bandwidth and high tariffs, the web is, at best, impracticable, and, at worst, a pipe dream. For them, e-mail is the choice, but if the multinational corporations don't invest in appropriate technologies for developing countries, vast parts of the world, the poorer parts, are going to be delinked, disenfranchised and ultimately silenced in what is becoming increasingly an information-driven world with an information-driven economy.

I believe too, that in the Western democracies, concentration of ownership in the media has af-

fect risk taking, iconoclasm, dissent and the extent to which we hear the voices of minorities. 'Popular demand' has become the god, the higher force, the alibi, of the giant communication empires, the media moguls – which on the face of it might have some validity were it not for the fact that it is they who create the demand and do it by spending vast sums of money which only they can afford, on publicity and promotion. Popular demand, closely related to the profit motive, turns out to be too often the justification for regurgitating the familiar and the formulaic. In the end it has to be asked – how free owners, controlling what percentage of a nation's mass communications, constitute a menace for free expression! It's a question not easily answered.

As stated above, Index was founded in the conviction that freedom of speech, along with the allied freedoms of conscience and religion, are fundamental human rights that the world community has a duty to guard. Free expression is, in our view, the basis of all other human rights. It is also what makes people feel human, makes them feel their lives matter. But there are some difficult questions to be faced. As Ronald Dworkin (1993) puts it,

that strong conviction is suddenly challenged not only by freedom's oldest enemies – the despots and ruling thieves who fear it – but also by new enemies, who claim to speak for JUSTICE not tyranny, and who point to other values we respect, including self determination, equality, and freedom from racial hatred and prejudice, as reasons why the right of free speech should now be demoted to a much lower grade of urgency and importance.

When I arrived in the offices of Index, the largest human rights gathering ever known had just taken place in Vienna. It was a tempestuous affair, but it did, just, manage to hold the line of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that everyone has the right of freedom of opinion and expression, and that these rights are indivisible and universal, and should not be altered by national or cultural considerations.

But Ronald Dworkin's 'new enemies' of freedom of expression include people who believe, for the best and worst of reasons, that we can't reasonably ask peoples whose entire social structure and sense of national identity are based on the supreme authority of, say, a particular religion, to allow what they see as a ridicule of that

religion within their own borders. Is free expression a right so important that we must be committed to defending it even in nations where it is unfamiliar and alien?

Abdullahi an Na'im, the distinguished Sudanese writer, argues that at the very least any concept of human rights, including free speech, that is to be universally accepted and globally enforced demands equal respect and mutual comprehension between rival cultures. The implication is that this equal respect is not really forthcoming between, for example, the liberal West and Muslim countries at the moment. What is at issue, he says is how and by whom these rights are to be denied and articulated. For Muslims, secularism and liberalism came to the Islamic World in the suspect company of colonialism, and this makes some of them additionally suspicious of the baggage that comes with a secular society.

The careful and generous arguments of Abdullahi an Na'im are a far cry from the cynical attempts by authoritarian governments such as Malaysia and Indonesia at the conference in Vienna to claim that free expression is alien and inappropriate to their culture. It's not difficult to see their agenda in trying to rid themselves of this troublesome issue, but there is another area where freedom of expression has run into trouble for the best, not the worst of reasons.

Political correctness

'Hate speech' is an unfamiliar name here for something that is nevertheless not unfamiliar to us. It was so named in America, and refers to speech directed usually against minorities, against Jews, against people of colour, against women. It is often odious, malign and chilling. Speech codes prohibiting remarks that are sexist or derogatory of a particular race or religion, were instituted in some American universities, and with these was born an enormous debate on political correctness. Political correctness has been pilloried and defended and argued over endlessly. All the great battles for extending liberty in America, e.g. anti-slavery, anti-segregation, rights of women, have involved parallel battles for the principle of free speech. Yet, suddenly, all sorts of people who affirm the traditions of civil rights are openly saying they think free expression is not an absolute right but a contingent and relative thing. They say we

must restrict speech to protect vulnerable groups against hate speech and discriminatory language.

We all have our jokes about political correctness. In a university in Oregon, if a man wanted to kiss a woman, he had to ask her first. If she said yes, then he had to ask – are you sure? In Vassar a young man was brought before a sort of kangaroo court and given a warning about homophobia because he'd pushed a friend, who was homosexual, off his lap. These are awful or absurd stories. Though we perhaps shouldn't forget other, earlier, horrors in America such as McCarthyism, many of them infinitely more terrible and terrifying than these.

Political correctness is, in its way, a recognition of the multinational, pluralist society; it has a sort of utopianism about it; and it has a touching, though authoritarian belief that behaviour if properly conditioned, will improve human behaviour. What is so mistaken about it is that these idealistic ideas can easily turn into their opposites, and often have. It's precisely a mistake in a diverse society, to focus so hard on distinctions. It was Freud who said that it's the small differences between people that induce them to quarrel the most. The real tendency of political correctness is not to inculcate respect for the marvellous variety of humanity but to reduce each group into sub-groups, and finally atoms, so that everyone is on guard against everyone else.

At the time that Ronald Dworkin was writing a defence of free speech as a universal human right in 1993, Umberto Eco was one of 40 intellectuals in France who publicly called on all Europeans to be on their guard against the recent manoeuvres of the extreme right. In an interview, he discussed the power of context in the use of words, pointing out that the same words acquire a different meaning depending on the place or context in which they are spoken or printed.

It is our duty as intellectuals to draw the line between what is tolerable and what is not. By undertaking not to contribute to journals or to take part in radio and TV broadcasts or in seminars organised by those who are associated with the extreme right, we are simply asserting our choice not to be seen supporting trends we consider dangerous for democracy. (Eco 1993)

He went on to say, significantly, that 'in order to be tolerant, one must first set the boundaries of the intolerable.' So, what, in his view, was in-

tolerable? 'I see nothing shocking,' he said, in a serious and incontrovertible work establishing that the figure for genocide of the Jews by the Nazis was not 6 million, but 6.5 or 5.5 million. What is intolerable is when something which might have been a work of research no longer has the same meaning or worth, and becomes a message suggesting that 'if a few less Jews than we thought were killed, there was no crime' (Index 1994).

What Eco and his fellow signatories were particularly disturbed by was the extent to which dangerous ideas on the Right, including racism and xenophobia, were becoming commonplace – and, what is more, newly seductive. And it is because I share this view and their anxiety that I think it is necessary to address one of the most difficult debates in an area which is full of difficult debates, which I conduct with myself as much as with anyone else. Should free expression be an absolute matter? And, in particular what is to be done about hate speech?

Hate speech and freedom of expression

At the end of the Maastricht summit in December 1991, the European Community's Council of Ministers was moved to issue a condemnation of racism and xenophobia, observing that 'manifestations of fascism and xenophobia are steadily growing in Europe. Explanations for the continued existence, and indeed resurgence of racism in Europe strike a tentative note. A UN report concludes that 'the primary causes of racism are deeply embedded in the historical past and are determined by a variety of economic, political, social and cultural factors' – a conclusion so broad and vague that no one can take issue with it. The report comments on a paradox of history: that racism actually increased as democracy expanded.

Defenders of free expression would say that what is needed, in fact, is more, not less attention, to the ideas of racial and religious superiority – that hate speech must be confronted to be understood, that dialogue and democracy are more effective in understanding the anatomy of hate, and for that freedom of expression, even the expression of hate is necessary. While sympathising with these views, they seem again to lack force in the face of much of twentieth century history. They require us to believe too simply in the power

of democracy and decency and above all rationality, in the ability of a long, slow onslaught on racism to have an effect; to believe, in the face of so much discouraging evidence, that there is always progress, however slow.

At the end of the twentieth century, we have after all been faced again in Europe, former Yugoslavia, with an outburst of primitive hatred and destruction based on racial, political and religious differences, which has all but destroyed a country. It is just half a century since the Holocaust. If that terrifying monument to the dark power of hate speech in our own time failed to alter consciousness constructively, then what are we to say about the ability of the otherwise unregulated human being to evolve benignly according to the lights of liberal perfectibility?

In the face of these enormities of history, the political correctness debate has rather muddied waters. By focusing so much on detailed individual cases, some of them absurd, it seems to me the wider implications of what hate can produce have been diluted. The problem of hate speech surely is that it can go beyond its immediate targets and create a culture of hate, a culture which then gives permission to hate on a much wider scale.

On November 4, 1995, Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel was assassinated by Yigal Amir a twenty-five-year-old law student. It became clear as the story was revealed that others share at least some of the blame for the assassination, and escaped justice. What part did right-wing Israeli radicals chanting 'Rabin is a traitor, Rabin is a murderer' at Likud rallies play. Or placards showing Rabin's features overlaid with the concentric circles of a rifle target?

Even more serious perhaps is the part played by the mainstream rabbinical leadership. In 1995 three prominent orthodox rabbis sent a letter to 40 colleagues, saying 'Would it not be appropriate to warn the prime minister and other ministers that if they continue to turn the resident of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and Gaza over to the rule of murderers, according to Jewish law it will be necessary to put them on trial and punish them? Only one leading rabbi, Yoel Nun, spoke out loudly against the killing, and he has been denounced by some of the other sages and even had his life threatened, resorting in the end to an escort of bodyguards to protect himself.

Words can turn into bullets. Hate speech can kill and maim, just as censorship can. So the first question I am forced to ask, as a dedicated opponent of censorship and proponent of free speech is this: IF words can so effectively turn into bullets, is there a moment where the quantitative consequences of hate speech change qualitatively the argument about how we must deal with it. Certainly the free speech absolutists sometimes seem to disconnect too easily the expression of hate speech (which must not be censored) from its consequences (about which we may have to do something). Article 20 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, as you may remember, seems to be consonant with such a view.

The second question I ask myself is this: Is there no distinction to be made between the words of those whose hate speech is a matter of conviction, however ignorant, deluded or prejudiced, and hate speech as propaganda, using lies calculatedly and systematically to sow fear, hate and violence in a population at large. One has only to run through press cuttings from newspapers in former Yugoslavia to find plenty of examples of how hate speech has fuelled that particular nightmare of our time.

'I feel no shame in lying, if it is in the interest of Serbia and the Serbian people': that was the chief editor of Belgrade Television speaking. 'If it's necessary for Croatia, I'll lie' said one of the leading commentators of *Vecernji List*, the Croatian daily with the highest circulation. 'When the homeland is at stake, I am prepared to lie', another senior Croatian journalist bravely affirmed. Nowadays, no one on any side has any doubt about the large part in fomenting the war and its atrocities that hate speech in the media, played, mostly using lies for its arguments.

If you drive through Bosnia, as I did when I monitored the Bosnian elections in 1978, you pass through scorched landscape and shattered villages. Because this was a kind of civil war, its working is revealed all the more clearly. Here the Others, who propaganda hate speech had indicated as the legitimate object of your fears and fantasies – people you must drive away, slaughter, eliminate – are people well known to you; your neighbours, even kin by marriage, now made alien and terrifying by the unreason you have been infected with. The houses, streets and villages from which Muslims or Serbs were driven

were not simply the ruins of selling arson and looting; after the fighting they had been systematically crushed and collapsed with dynamite and bulldozers. So hate speech results in the end in one of the ultimate forms of censorship – that of obliterating the memory of a place, as if these lives and communities have never been.

Is there in fact a point of necessary intervention somewhere in the continuum between the ugly, offensive but more localised public expression of hatred, in which the instigators of hatred become the authorisers, become authority itself? And, if so, what is to be done? I don't have any simple answers, but I believe that it's the job of Index, now addressing such a different world from the one in which it was founded, to be a pivotal forum for an argument which is one of the most important of our time.

I have laid out some of these troubling debates to you because I believe that we avoid them at our peril. I am a passionate believer in free expression, and I know all the dangers of making exceptions to the absolute right to free speech. But a lot of the issues around censorship are ill understood at least in the country where I come from. There's little debate or education on these matters. If we want to communicate our belief in free expression, to carry people with us on the issue, we have to address the things that trouble them. And trouble them they do.

A poll taken in Britain, for instance, in 1993, indicated that over 65% of the people polled wanted more, not less, censorship. And this was over issues such as violence on television, pornography – versions of hate speech, if you like. These people are not dictators, not even petty bureaucrats who want to control things. They are people who want to live decent lives and provide a decent culture for their children. And the debates around free expression are not at present part of their lives – the dangers of censorship and who decides what to ban, the dangers of suppressing even speech one abhors, the fact that one person's taste is another's cause of offence.

The role of libraries

There's a wonderful story by Italo Calvino called "A general in the library" (1995) that tells us about the power of the word and the redeeming quality of free expression. It begins

One day, in the illustrious nation of Panduria a suspicion crept into the minds of top officials: that books contained opinions hostile to military prestige. In fact, trials and enquiries had revealed that the tendency now so widespread, of thinking of generals as people actually capable of making mistakes and causing catastrophes was shared by a large number of books, ancient and modern, foreign and Pandurese.

I believe that libraries have a crucial part to play in supporting and disseminating the importance of free expression. I believe they are uniquely positioned, whether public, private, university or school libraries, as places where the word stands for itself, with a bit of space around it, where people find books and journals, newspapers and on-line texts and read them on their own, privately, and can think about what they are reading, without pressure from teachers, parents, and government officials, looking over their shoulder.

But I believe that libraries have an even more significant role. For the fact is that, whether we like it or not, there are conflicting moral values in our societies. Different societies, and different cultures within the same society, place significantly different emphasis on the rights of the individual vis à vis the community, and this has huge implications for free expression. Might it even be possible, as Michael Ignatieff (1998) has said, that freedom of speech

is neither universal or natural, that human nature may be too plastic, too malleable, and too potentially vicious a thing, and the varieties of conceivable human society too various, for it to be possible to found an ethics on facts about us as a species. We share a body, it is true; but we do not live inside it in the same frame of mind. What is suffering in one culture may be ecstasy in another; what is humiliation in one may be only humbling in another.

The implications of the complex multicultural world we all live in at the end of the twentieth century seem to me fairly enormous. Free expression, that thing we believe makes our lives matter, the basis of all other human rights, is not in particularly good shape. If you look at the global picture, despite the fact that in some areas of the world – the old Soviet Union, South Africa, Chile – official censorship and suppression has gone, new countries have taken their place – Kenya, Algeria, and Burma, to give just a few examples.

Just as serious is the scant recognition, anywhere, that freedom of speech is not a gift from heaven, but a choice, a conviction, a way of acting, using ideas which are continually put to the test. In other words, keeping free expression alive requires constant vigilance. It is hard work.

But there is something else that, in our post-modern, post-Communist multicultural world is hard work. We need to increase our understanding of the Other, people who do not share our cultural or even our moral beliefs. This does not mean abandoning our passion for our own beliefs. On the contrary, it demonstrates our confidence in them. But, as the horrible lessons of Yugoslavia have taught us, we need to treat dialogue as an exercise in mutual persuasion rather than a display of force or cultural elitism. What we need is non-murderous moral argument.

Libraries can be places where such dialogue takes place. I think some of them already are. They can be places where the diversity of cultural lives is displayed. Arts and cultural events can be a powerful way of developing understanding of others when direct confrontation on divisive issues simply gets nowhere. And libraries can be places where precisely these difficult debates on free expression can be explored.

Libraries can and should be places where the right to choose is pre-eminent, where genuine pluralism is a reality – and where librarians can guide people through the minefield of material that some will find offensive. Libraries can't stock everything, and will always be criticised for what they do and what they don't buy, but they can be open about selection procedures. Libraries can also be quietly subversive – witness the Russian librarians of the music archive who labelled as defective the recordings by politically unacceptable musicians to protect them from destruction. Libraries can be places where young people, often the most passionately opposed to censorship gather to read and listen to writers and talk and argue. Or places where writers and journalists talk about the problems of self-censorship or about the justifications for trade sanctions for books. Libraries can also be places where distinctions are properly made between political – which any attempt at change must be – and party political.

What I am suggesting is that libraries can, specifically and uniquely, become the places where the importance of free expression is taught – edu-

cation in the widest sense of the word. I believe that in most of our communities, the significance of free expression, which we in this room value so highly, is low on this broad educational agenda. Indeed, I would go further.

Some people involved in human rights, including myself, have written on the apparent failure of the human rights community to alert international public opinion to prevent atrocities (Rwanda and the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa come to mind), but perhaps there is a more basic failure. The starting point may be to make ordinary people aware of their own rights, so that they not only defend these for themselves but also appreciate what lack of such rights means in other societies.

Americans often have such awareness. Libraries world-wide could play a major role, I believe, in encouraging people to know their own rights. It's possible they will be more successful than we, the human rights community, has been in making the right to free expression something people really care about. Unless and until people learn to care about it more, and understand its significance in their own lives, the defence of free expression will always be left to a minority, and will often be defeated by crude and often superficially powerful arguments which appeal to people who have never been presented with alternatives.

Mario Vargas Llosa (1996) said: "Freedom cannot be guaranteed, as we know, not to any country, not to any person who does not know how to take it up, exercise it, defend it". The power of the word seems to me self-evident. It's an illuminating paradox that it is in those countries where freedom is suppressed that literature is seen as more dangerous and powerful than in freer and more democratic countries. Librarians are the keepers of words. My in-tray at Index, with its tales of atrocities committed round the world in the name of censorship reminds me daily of what I said at the beginning of this paper – how difficult it is, even with the best intentions, to tolerate opinions we dislike, find shocking, oppose. The fact is that partisan, angled seeing is inescapable for all of us. The issue is how much we let other people have their version of life, their own partisan, angled seeing, without harassing, silencing, terrorising or killing them. I believe that you can play a major role in allowing

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those who speak different, even antagonistic moral and political languages, actually to hear each other.

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