

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.

There is still a liberal press in Britain and although Julian Petley outlines his concerns about them, he also argues that they are less negative and more open in their coverage of Muslims and Islam. He also highlights editorials from these newspapers during the coverage of the Danish cartoons debate.

But then we come to the question of why Britain's conservative media refrained from reproducing the cartoons. As Gary Younge quite correctly pointed out in *The Guardian (UK)*, 4 February 2006:

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'. As Julian Petley says: '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...

Of course we have been here before with the publication in 1988 of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Julian Petley's closing remarks in his paper refer to it. I think it is worth revisiting this period for a few minutes. In his book *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam*, (1990), Malise Ruthven offered a number of thought provoking theories about the Muslim campaign against Rushdie in Britain: that it had a great deal to do with inter-communal problems between Muslims and Hindus who originated from India; that it was a legitimate cry of despair by strictly religious people who were offended, but was subsequently taken over by the fundamentalist ideologues in an effort to control Muslim life in Britain; and that the protest had more to do with offended honour than matters of faith.

This penultimate point was taken up in the pages of *Free Press*, the journal of the CPBF. Writing on the formation of the Group 'Voices for Rushdie'. Elizabeth Block said of the group's founding statement that Voices rejected the attempts of fundamentalists in all guises to use the Rushdie affair to promote their own ends. The statement concluded: 'Salman Rushdie's right to write and publish is also our right to read, to think, to criticise, to dissent. In the face of appalling distortions of these issues by fundamentalists and racist forces, we cannot be silent.' These are indeed echoes of the debates we are having today.

Having touched on one of the responses of the CPBF to the Rushdie debates, I would like to discuss a few thoughts on the CPBF's responses to the cartoons.

The CPBF is an organisation linking trades unions and civil society who share concerns about media ownership and freedom. It is generally, but not completely, located 'on the left'. The publications of the cartoons in September 2005 created the largest amount of traffic on the CPBF's web site (www.cpbf.org.uk). In response to the increasing debate we put out the following statement on our web site 4 February 2006:

... The case has also been seized on by far-right groups to fuel race hatred, and, whilst certainly some of the papers which published the cartoons are politically conservative, this should not deter freedom of expression groups from stating their own positions clearly.

There are important principles, which need to be defended. One of these is that the right to freedom of opinion and expression is a fundamental right that safeguards the exercise of all other rights. It is a critical underpinning of democracy and applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb.

Some of the cartoons published in the Danish paper may well be offensive to many Muslims (and may well be offensive to others, including cartoonists – some of the published cartoons are of poor quality), but charges of offence and blasphemy should not be deployed to curtail freedom of expression. The CPBF's position is that restrictions on freedom of expression which privilege certain ideas or beliefs cannot be justified.

European newspapers are also being put under unacceptable pressures, which can compromise the freedom of the press. Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, said that the dismissal of the editor of *France Soir*, 'sends a dangerous signal about unacceptable pressure on independent journalism.' The IFJ points out, 'Arab governments calling for political action against media are guilty of undue interference in the work of journalists.'

Clearly the row over the cartoons has dramatically revealed how fragile some of these important principles are. We need to avoid generating ever-more anger and confrontation in this case, but at the same time restate firmly that freedom of expression and freedom of the press are important foundations of European democratic society and need to be strongly defended.

What emerged from the ensuing debate was that sections of the left believed that *Jyllands-Posten* was not an innocent party to this controversy but an active participant in fomenting a political culture in Denmark that is systematically anti-immigrant and has led to the electoral success of the Danish People's Party (for whom a halt to immigration is a key demand). 'People who are genuinely interested in freedom of speech would do better to confront their governments who have stepped up their attacks on press freedom as part of anti-terror laws rather than focusing on an incident that was deliberately designed to provoke Muslims in the current political climate...' ran an article on *Free Press* 151 (March-April 2006) 'Freedom of speech – The need for context' by Des Freedman. A different view was put in the same debate by the then editor Granville Williams who wrote in defence of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. He pointed out that, in terms of context, the cartoons were published as part of a specific Danish debate concerning self-censorship and were in fact published with an article on self-censorship and freedom of expression. Granville went on to say that in his view the defence of freedom of expression and the press in no way diminished our ability to challenge racism. He concluded that the controversy had certainly made him more aware that there was not one single global definition of freedom of expression and that different viewpoints and cultures need to be respected, but the basic core issues still remained: the right to publish and the right to offend have to be defended.

I think there is another question to be considered – was the publication of the story and the cartoons in the public interest? Having heard Flemming Rose's arguments which confirm the background to publication I believe it was. We could of course take

up the entire session debating what is the public interest? Does publication serve the interests of citizens? Journalists can be guided by ethical codes. The BBC has published such a code which refers to this and so has the National Union of Journalists. Both include the phrase: ‘There is a public interest in the freedom of expression itself.’

If we fast forward to the present we can see a new controversy shaping up. In January 2007 Channel Four broadcast a current affairs Dispatches documentary ‘Undercover Mosque’. It followed an under-cover investigation into ‘hard line Islamic fundamentalism’ being preached in some British mosques. Ofcom, the broadcasting regulator, received some 350 complaints, including one from the Crown prosecution service and the West Midlands Police (the area in which the film was shot). It is this complaint, which alleged the programme’s editing resulting in heavy distortion, that has aroused media and wider public interest. Channel Four remain confident that no-one in the film was misrepresented or taken out of context.

The complaints follow a period of intensive news media coverage of TV fakery and investigation into the misuse of premium rate phone services in games, quizzes and votes programmes, which has aroused considerable concerns about trust in the media. In addition one independent film company was shown to have misled pictures of the British Queen. The affair became known as ‘Queensgate’.

Whatever the outcome of Ofcom’s investigation similar arguments that appeared in the Rushdie and Cartoons controversies are already emerging and the argument is unlikely to go away.

To return to the cartoons and the title of Julian Petley’s chapter ‘Time to rethink press freedom?’ Julian Petley writes that ...

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 redefined 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...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... the British press can in no sense be described as a free market of ideas. 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.

In conclusion, I would echo Petley’s view that freedom of expression is best served by empowering the powerless rather than by muzzling the powerful and that newspapers and other media rather than being censored, should be allowed to ‘publish and be damned’ – damned in the marketplace, in the courts both of law and public opinion and encouraged to become more accurate and less abusive by a right of reply.

References

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Chapter Twelve: Conflicting Readings: The Cartoon Crisis seen from Pakistan

Elisabeth Eide

A view of ourselves as disconnected – as absolved from the obligation to know the “other” – is, given the nature of a system, to occidentalize by misinterpreting who we are, including the effects we have in the world.

Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington (1991,84)

Occidentalism seems poised to become the dominant discourse of the future. This means that attempts to theorise, understand and do something about it will become more common – and more necessary.

Ziauddin Sardar, 2004

The caricature controversy became a world issue which gave the Samuel Huntington phrase “Clash of Civilizations” extended attention in Pakistan, where one popular view was to see the caricatures as part of a Western conspiracy against the Muslim world. On the other hand, the leading Pakistani newspapers were significantly less unified in their approach than one might imagine from Europe.¹ The Pakistani background is complex. My ambition here is not to venture into fully-fledged explanations of the way in which the controversy happened, but to present a study of the press coverage in a country in which reactions to the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed were particularly strong.

A young nation

Pakistan won its independence on 14 August 1947 after a controversial and bitter struggle prior to the partition of India. The country was initially – contrary to popular belief – not to be “based on Islam”, but would serve as a “home to Muslims”, the largest religious minority in Hindu-dominated India. The founding father of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was a secular-oriented president. After his death in 1948 followed both military and democratically elected rulers who gradually tended to be more lenient towards religious parties, and from 1956 Pakistan was constitutionally an Islamic state. The president at the time of the crisis, General Pervez Musharraf, had ruled the country since his military coup d’état in 1999, launching his slogan “enlightened moderation”, which may rhetorically be interpreted as a wish not to follow the path of leniency toward extremism.

1 This researcher became a special observer during a stay as a post-doctoral researcher at The University of the Punjab, Lahore. I landed in Pakistan just when the “cartoon crisis” broke out and stayed for almost half a year. I also have previous experience from Pakistan from 1987-1988.