

Living in outrageous times

Peter Bradley argues that we should tolerate offence but be less offensive



Scarcely a day passes without reports of fresh demands that someone should be sanctioned for what they've said, or denied a platform for what they might. It seems sometimes as if social media, and Twitter in particular, were created solely to make it easier for us to cause and take offence.

I am myself easily offended. I react badly to all kinds of attempts to influence my opinions and choices through the multiplicity of media – the deceit, the banality, the clichés, the mediocrity. I find them all offensive. But while I too often wish I could impose my high-minded values on my fellow citizens, my more democratic instincts - and a modicum of self-knowledge - remind me of the persistent fallibility of my judgment and of the many truths, now hidden, which might one day illuminate it.

These two instincts – that I am right and that I may be wrong – co-exist more or less harmoniously: I recognise that suppressing ideas and opinions which I find offensive ultimately makes yet more

remote the prospect of my own enlightenment.

I acknowledge too that I am not entirely defenceless: I can screen out as best I can the stuff I find offensive – I don't have to read the Daily Mail or watch Made in Chelsea on TV – and, if I feel strongly enough, I can seek to persuade others that they shouldn't either. But I can't deny their right to choose.

This is really just a reiteration of John Stuart Mill's classic defence of the right to free speech – that its suppression can keep us from truths we have not considered and, importantly, from testing and perhaps reinforcing our own convictions against those of others. The only circumstances in which he believed censorship can be justified are those extreme few in which one person's right to free expression comes into conflict with another's right to protection from its harmful consequences.

The culture of offence

So it is right that the law should safeguard people from incitement to violence against their person or defamation of their character. But offence is another matter. We're living in an age in which we're encouraged to believe that if we are not actually victims, we're certainly at risk – from politicians, bureaucrats, immigrants, foreigners and the legion of others who conspire against our wellbeing. We're constantly on the alert for offence, if not to ourselves then to others, and for the opportunity to blame and punish someone for it. Moreover, the merest perception of offence has often become an acceptable surrogate for the real thing. You can be convicted – and often pay a heavy price - not just for what you mean to say but also for how your meaning can be misconstrued or reinterpreted by someone else.

This culture is dangerous not just for the judged but for the judges too. If so much is apparently offensive, how are we to distinguish between what is really malicious and threatening and what is simply misconceived? How can we have the courage to express or test provocative opinion or original thinking without the fear of being condemned for offending someone, somehow, somewhere? In an age in which divergence from the narrow norms of 'public opinion' carries risk, real debate – the kind which actually helps us to develop our ideas and values as well as to defend them – becomes difficult to achieve. That in turn, I believe, is one of the reasons why our politics has become so vacuous.

The culture of offence also subverts the freedoms it purports to uphold. The idea that we can only really sustain our own values by suppressing those of others is deeply worrying. It's not just that it's oppressive of the rights of today's dissenters just as the treason and sedition laws bore down on previous generations of radicals and free thinkers. It also suggests that we lack confidence in the ability of our own values to resist the challenge of others.

It's especially troubling to find a growing intolerance in the very institutions where you'd expect free expression to be most highly valued. Why do some academics and students fear that they are

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somehow complicit in ideas they reject simply by failing to prevent others from expressing them? And it surely must be possible for those who wish to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinians to criticise the government of Israel without denying platforms for Israeli academics or, worse still, Jewish artists as universities and arts organisations have recently.

Do they not accept the logic that we can't have freedom of expression within the law for some but not for others? Do they not recognise the simple principle that tolerance of someone else's right to free speech is not the same as validating the views they express? Do they not recognise that in silencing non-conformists they are practising the same kind of moral righteousness which, in other societies of which they no doubt disapprove, would deny them their own freedoms or worse?

It isn't just that commitment to our own rights should make us more tolerant of those of others. We should be conscious too that even if our intentions are pure, suppressing bad ideas does not destroy them any more than it does good ones; rather it drives them into dark places where, like bacteria, they fester, mutate and ultimately emerge more able and more likely to do us harm.

There are far better ways of dealing with what we regard as the unacceptable if we are genuine in wanting to disarm it. We can simply ignore it; we can subject it to ridicule; we can challenge it through force of reason; we can contest it by presenting a better alternative. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to withdraw the privileges of association if their conditions have been seriously transgressed. But we cannot ban it.

Editing ourselves

But just as we should resist the temptation to censor and suppress so, I believe, must we exercise proper self-denial in the way we express ourselves. Perversely, alongside its judgmentalism, our culture also promotes the idea that anything goes. We should recognise that tolerating offence does not constitute a licence, tacit or otherwise, to cause it gratuitously.

It is absolutely legitimate to challenge orthodoxy and authority sometimes in terms which offend vested interests. That's a small price the powerful pay for their privileges. It's right and often courageous to test the boundaries of what is or can become culturally 'acceptable'. But those who do so should be wary of the kind of self-indulgence or triumphalism which, in causing offence for no good reason, actually undermines their challenge to convention.

For example, in my view, the way the comedian Frankie Boyle assaults conformity can be stimulating and valuable even if it is also often uncomfortable and sometimes misjudged. But because I see no underlying purpose in Jimmy Carr's comedy, I find it gratuitously offensive. I don't want to censor either. I just choose not to listen to Jimmy Carr.

Many will disagree about the merits of Boyle, Carr or both. That is precisely why any form of outright censorship in matters of taste is so inappropriate: there simply is no objective standard. So

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the first question about what ought to be acceptable is not whether some people might take exception to it – someone, somewhere is bound to – but whether there is a justification for the offence it might cause.

The key to all these conundrums is surely self-control – both in resisting the temptation to anathematise those with whom we disagree and in taking responsibility for what we're about to say – which, in the age of instant and global self-expression is a demanding but necessary discipline. Though we haven't yet mastered our new technology, and the responsibilities which go hand in hand with its opportunities, we have to hope that we will if we are to make best rather than worst use of it. A good start would be to withdraw the right to anonymity which encourages otherwise quite normal people, as well as trolls, to commit random acts of unkindness which can have devastating consequences for others and sometimes for themselves.

We have both to take and to give less offence if we are to avoid devaluing the language and emasculating the ideas it's capable of expressing. Even if limiting free expression offered a solution, it would address only one symptom of a much wider malaise. The internet, like the printing press, is only a means of communication: what makes us aggressive, malicious or indifferent in the way we use it are the principles which guide the way we live. A society which puts competition before cooperation, individualism before civility and vengeance before kindness will, in my view at least, manifest these kinds of problems. It's a question of reconsidering our values not of suppressing our means of expressing them.

My personal choice to switch off Jimmy Carr doesn't impose my taste or prejudices on others nor deny them the right to enjoy his comedy. If I'm wrong about him, the loss is mine. If, however, enough of his fans come to agree with me, he'll either change his style or go out of fashion.

Isn't that the way it should be? Isn't that the process through which over time we refine or sometimes redefine our cultural values and behaviour? We should acknowledge too that a certain amount of healthy political correctness has in the course of a generation helped bring about radical change in the way we regard, speak about and treat a wide range of groups in our society. We managed that transformation by broadening our horizons not by stopping our ears. The changes we still need to make will similarly flow from challenge and debate, reason and persuasion but never from censorship and suppression.

Peter Bradley is director of [Speakers' Corner Trust](#) and a former Labour MP.

This article is based on his contribution to a panel discussion entitled You Can't Say That – [Free Speech in an Age of Offence](#) which was organised by the Institute of Ideas and took place at the Free Word Centre in London on 4 December 2014. You can [listen to the full debate on the Free Word Centre website](#).

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