

# After Charlie: Free speech and the political economy of communication

**Martin Hirst**, *Deakin University, Melbourne*

Three significant events at the start of 2015 have put freedom of speech firmly on the global agenda. The first was the carry-over from the December 2014 illegal entry to the Sony Corporation's file servers by anonymous hackers, believed to be linked to the North Korean regime. The second was the horrible attack on journalists, editors, and cartoonists at the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January. The third was the election of leftwing anti-austerity party Syriza in Greece on 25 January.

While each event is different in scope and size, they are important to scholars of the political economy of communication because they all speak to ongoing debates about freedom of expression, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I name each of these concepts separately because, despite popular confusion, they are not the same thing (Patching and Hirst, 2014). Freedom of expression is the right to individual self-expression through any means; it is an inalienable human right. Freedom of speech refers to the right (and the physical ability) to utter political speech, to say what others wish to repress and to demand a voice with which to express a range of social and political thoughts. Freedom of the press is a very particular version of freedom of expression that is intimately bound with the political economy of speech and of the printing press. Freedom of the press is impossible without the press and, despite its theoretical availability to all of us, this principle is impossible to articulate without the material means (usually money) to actually deploy a printing press (or the electronic means of broadcasting and publishing).

Freedom of expression is immutable; freedom of speech subject to legal, ethical and ideological restriction (for better, or worse) and freedom of the press is peculiar to bourgeois society in that it entails the freedom to own and operate a press, not the right to say or publish on a level playing field. Access to freedom of the press is determined in the marketplace and is subject to the unequal power relationships that such determination implies.

It is fitting to start with the Charlie Hebdo massacre because the loss of 17 lives makes this the most chilling of the three events and demands that it be given prominence in any analysis. No lives have been lost yet because Sony's computers were hacked and the election of Syriza has not (yet) led to mass deaths in Greece.

## Freedom and responsibility in the wake of *Charlie Hebdo*

The contradiction between freedom and responsibility in the news media has never seemed wider or deeper subsequent to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. Freedom of the press means writing what you like and having an editorial policy that follows the dictates of the owner of the press. Press responsibility means not stoking the fires of hatred or using the press for anti-democratic means. At least that's the theory; in practice it is often murky and difficult to know where freedom begins and responsibility ends (or vice versa).

Millions of keystrokes, oceans of ink, a lifetime's worth of televisual analysis, a galaxy of pixels and a seeming social media tsunami have been deployed in trying to explain—not to justify—the attack on journalists and cartoonists at the satirical Paris magazine; but so far the contradiction remains stubbornly unresolved.

Further questions have been raised too: such as the 'nature' of Islam and the place of satire in a liberal democratic society. It seems everyone has an opinion—some more informed than others. The far-right proto-Fascist anti-immigration forces of Western Europe certainly received a boost and have moved to take political advantage of the situation.

Commentators from both left and right seem to conflate the issues of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; or to deny that one or both is even a problem worthy of discussion. The almost sacred right of satirists to mock religion has been vigorously defended and just as vigorously decried. On one side, Islamic leaders (and even the Pope) weighed in by denouncing blasphemy and arguing that religious belief should not be subject to ridicule. On the other hand, militant (and misguided) secularists such as Richard Dawkins have seemingly joined with the racists of UKIP and Fox News in blaming the entire Muslim world for the actions of three deranged gun-slinging gangsters.

In all, there is a level of intellectual, emotional, and philosophical confusion surrounding the 'right' (if there is one) response to what was a disgusting attack on a section of the French press in the name of Islam by a small Al Qaida-linked terror cell.

And it seems that responses have a geographical variation too. The deepest chasm seems to be between Anglophone and Francophone responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. Are they racist or a very clever expression of French secular satire? But responses across the world were varied; from protests in Pakistan, parts of the Middle East (and in Australia) defending the Prophet and criticizing the satire of *Charlie Hebdo*, to a march in Paris proclaiming "Je suis Charlie".

The contradiction brought to light by the latter event was brilliantly captured in an image that we probably weren't meant to see: world leaders lined up with Francois Hollande in solidarity with the free speech martyrs. An impressive show of strength at the head of a million-strong march.

Or so it seemed from ground level, until the stark reality of the isolation of these 'leaders' from the masses was exposed in an aerial shot showing that Hollande and his allies were cut off from the masses by a phalanx of heavily armed gendarmes and French special services troops.

That image also caused outrage when the Saudi ambassador to France was photographed with Hollande in the same week that a Saudi blogger, Raif Badawi was jailed for 10 years and given the first 50 of 1000 lashes with a cane for the crime of free speech.

The presence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shoulder-to-shoulder with Hollande also angered people who understood the brutality of Zionist repression in occupied Palestine, including the murder of 17 journalists during last year's bombing of Gaza.

The actions of the French government in undermining its own claim to be a champion of free speech were also highlighted when pro-Palestine demonstrations were banned in Paris on fallacious security grounds.

Was the French government right to ban the burqa as a sign of its commitment to the separation of Church and State, or is this a sign of racism and an overreach of secularism?

Was it enough to condemn the killers, or did we need to go further and embrace the humor of Charlie Hebdo uncritically? This was the dilemma of *Je suis Charlie* and its doppelganger *Je ne suis pas Charlie*. This question divided friends as well as causing some division among progressive political currents too. The issue of secularism versus the right not to be offended has also proved problematic.

Free speech fundamentalists—those who argue that this ‘right’ trumps all others and can never be compromised—were also caught up in the contradictions.

If freedom of expression is the holy grail of all rights then how can the suppression of Islamic hate speech be justified?

If non-Muslims have the right to offend Muslims by mocking their Prophet then they too should accept the right of Muslims to offend them. However, there are roadblocks on this supposedly two-way street.

Even the Pope got involved in this muddy water splash fest by suggesting that nobody has the right to mock another’s religious beliefs. The prospect of reintroducing blasphemy laws where they don’t exist or re-energizing them has been raised. Surely, this is anti- freedom of speech?

It was pointed out by many that in some liberal democracies the publication of many of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons would be illegal because of racial vilification and hate speech legislation. But defenders of the magazine also argued strenuously that the whole tradition of French satire and Charlie Hebdo itself were a manifestation of humanitarian leftwing ideology which has been just as critical of the State as of Islamic fundamentalism.

There are no easy solutions to the problems raised by *l’affaire de Charlie Hebdo*, but an understanding grounded in the political economy of communication can provide some guidance and perhaps point in the direction of answers

Now that there is some critical distance between the very emotion-charged events and their immediate aftermath, it is time for sober analysis and some reflection on the questions raised, but only partially addressed so far, about the humor of Charlie Hebdo, the role of satire and the ‘right’ to criticize or offend, the impact of Islamophobia and racism and the socio-political repercussions of the murders, protests and solidarity actions.

## **A B-grade ‘buddy movie’ creates a storm of protest**

The details of who exactly was behind the hacking of Sony’s computers between November 2014 and January 2015 are still not definitively nailed down. We can assume it was either:

- (a) some Anonymous-style hackers messing with the corporate ‘man’—in this case a multi-billion dollar movie studio;
- (b) an organized inside job designed to provide some guerilla marketing juice to an otherwise pretty ordinary B-grade Hollywood flick; or,
- (c) sophisticated North Korean military grade hackers with an ideological beef against the studio.

At the heart of the conundrum was a Seth Rogen comedy called *The Interview* (2014) about a CIA plot to use a couple of hapless reporters to assassinate Kim Jong-un, the supreme leader of North Korea.

Option (c), above, has always been the preferred theory regarding the Sony hack. As early as June last year the North Korean government issued a warning that it did not like the plot of *The Interview* and considered production of the movie an ‘act of war’.

A group calling itself “Guardians of Peace” (GOP) began raiding Sony’s servers on 24 November and repeated the attacks a number of times. Not much damage was done during the hacks, but a truckload of sensitive material found its way into the public domain, including racist, misogynist, and homophobic emails between several top Sony officials.

However, the key point here is not that the attack occurred, or that sensitive emails were leaked; rather it is that Sony Pictures were able to turn the issue into one of free speech and *The Interview* became a cause célèbre among some American movie-goers.

It became a matter of national pride that Americans could go into movie theatres and watch the film and it became a show of cinematic defiance that the dastardly North Koreans could not stop ordinary Americans from enjoying Seth Rogen and James Franco making idiots of themselves in an otherwise forgettable waste of celluloid.

Sony Pictures had initially withdrawn *The Interview* from public release fearing a backlash or worse if it was screened—just how North Korea was going to launch terrorist attacks across middle America was never explained.

A wave of patriotism (the last refuge of the scoundrel) produced a tepid backlash and freedom-loving Americans were able to watch the film while pretending to defy North Korea.

Of course, conservatives jumped on the anti-Pyongyang bandwagon and proclaimed a great victory for American freedom of speech when it was not even clear that it was under any kind of realistic threat. On Christmas Day 2014, Sony Pictures relented and allowed *The Interview* to be shown in some cinemas. It seems the back down came after President Obama claimed it was a First Amendment (free speech) issue that North Korea should not be allowed to dictate what was shown on American movie screens. But it also became a commercial issue for the cinemas that were contracted to have first release rights to the film. Cinema owners supported their own right to show the movie, but not Sony’s decision to allow simultaneous distribution across other channels, such as on-demand Internet streaming. It seems a bit confected to argue that somehow the North Korean regime can influence First Amendment rights in the United States via some long distance proxy threat, but it played well in middle America where patriotism is highly valued.

Like the *Charlie Hebdo* case, *The Interview* example also raises questions about the role of satire in modern communication practices; but the third example—coverage of Syriza outside Greece—is slightly different: it raises issues more directly related to the political economy of journalistic ideologies.

### **The Syriza election: The news is not good if you’re outside Greece**

Results in the Greek election on 25 January did not really cause any surprises. The dramatic rise of social democrat alliance Syriza had been well documented and the party’s victory was expected. The Syriza platform of repudiating Greece’s debt to the European Union and a promise to reverse domestic austerity measures ensured the party’s popularity and electoral success. However, for reporters outside of Greece, making sense of the Syriza victory meant interpreting it through the

lens of EU macro-economic policy and within the framework of Angela Merkel's scare-mongering about the impact of a Greek default on the loan debt.

Since the election (if not also before), Syriza has been constantly demonized as a far-left party intent on destroying capitalism across Europe and with a populist politics likely to infect Spain—via Podemos—and bring down the entire Eurozone. By adopting this approach—and again the Anglophone media is most culpable—journalists reinforce the political economy of global news flows that go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century trade routes and important centers of commerce. The lived experience of Greek workers—those who voted for Syriza and presumably have some understanding of its politics and policies—was downplayed, or ignored completely, by most of the global media in favor of a narrative that puts the interests of the IMF and the World Bank ahead of ordinary Greeks.

In this framing of the Syriza story, European capitalism is essentialized and plays the role of victim to Syriza's success. Any potential (class-based) common ground between the workers of Greece and the other nations of Europe is written out of the history and the role of the Greek proletariat in deciding its own fate is likewise ignored. Instead, news consumers outside of Greece are presented with a scenario in which the actions of Greek voters are seen as selfish and even misguided. It becomes the story of how Greeks have been 'tricked' by the rhetoric of Syriza's charismatic leader Alexis Tsipras and Tsipras himself is portrayed as an ex-Communist with megalomaniac designs on political power.

None of us should be overly surprised by this highly ideological rendering of Greek democracy. It fits the pattern of ahistorical and normalized support for capitalism that is an essential component of the journalistic mindset, caught up in idealistic notions of press freedom and the fourth estate. Of course, we understand the political economy of the media and its links to capitalism; what might be surprising to some is just how deeply ingrained it is in the mental processes of journalists themselves. If they bother to visit Greece the evidence of their eyes will confront their instincts, but for correspondents writing about European events some distance from Athens, there is no dissonance in their reasoning.

The challenge for us is to draw the links between these three seemingly disparate events and to investigate the political economy that generates the contradictory ideologies involved.

## **Political economy and the dialectic in journalism**

In his under-rated book, *The Dialectic in Journalism* (1989), the late journalism scholar John C Merrill proposed the freedom/responsibility dichotomy as the last unresolved antinomy within the news profession. As a Hegelian, he believed that the contradiction would resolve itself at the level of ideas, leading to a new, universal journalistic norm that he described as the responsible exercise of freedom. In an ideal world, we might perhaps think that such a resolution of inherent conflict is possible. But our world is far from ideal.

For political economists of communication, the unresolved contradiction between freedom and responsibility in journalism practice is not so easily characterized as a mere battle of ideas. Instead, we might theorize it as exemplifying the dual nature of the news commodity. The contradiction between freedom of the press and the news media's social responsibilities—often formulated as a series of ethical 'rules'—is firmly embedded within the social relations of news production. News is a commodity, subject to the laws of motion applicable to universal commodity production. Thus, it has both a use and an exchange value. However, the specificity of the news commodity is that its

information value is determined by its ideological value in the class struggle. That is, the more that a news commodity's use value assists in the reproduction of the ideological conditions favorable to the continuing reproduction of capital, the more value it has for the capitalist. But, the contradiction here is that the exchange value of the commodity (despite its likely use value) may be reduced if the news is not penetrating the market and thereby creating value for advertisers (the commodification of audiences). Falling exchange value may also affect the news service capitalist whose share of surplus value depends on the product having good market reach.

Merrill was not a political economist; if anything his libertarian free-market ideology would hold political economy in contempt. Consequently, he failed to see that any Hegelian resolution of the dialectic in journalism—the contradiction between freedom and responsibility—would only lead inexorably to the next site of tension. It is the role of political economy scholars in the communication field to move beyond Merrill's Hegelian optimism and to account for the material circumstances in which the conflicting ideologies of freedom of expression, freedom of speech and freedom of the press become evident.

## Author Bio

Martin Hirst is Associate Professor in journalism and multimedia at Deakin University in Melbourne. He has a 40+ year engagement with practical and academic radical political economy and has been a scholar in journalism studies for 20 years. He is author and co-author of several books on journalism ethics and new media that engage with the traditions of the political economy of communication. He is widely published in collections on journalism theory and practice. He is a regular contributor to academic journals and media commentary. Dr Hirst's PhD, *Grey Collar Journalism: The social relations of news production* was completed in 2003.

## References

- Merrill, JC (1989) *The dialectic in journalism: Toward a responsible use of press freedom*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Patching, R and Hirst, M (2014) *Journalism ethics: Arguments and cases for the twenty-first century*. London: Routledge.