

# The totalitarian urge to censor

Those who favour restrictions on free speech ally themselves with dictators, argues **Jennifer Oriel**.

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Like many a journalist past, Nick Cohen has raised the battle flag against censors. The reason is simple; people who love language should never salute its executioners. Five-time author and resolute liberal, Cohen hedges his bets by writing for the left-of-centre *Observer* newspaper and right-of-centre *Spectator*. But the message of this variegated sympathy is perennial; liberty is the fullest expression of humanity, and freedom of speech its principal arbiter.

Cohen's latest enterprise, *You Can't Read This Book: Censorship in an Age of Freedom*, depicts a celebrity censors' ball that spans the globe. In one corner, fatwa-pushers chatting up the academic left; in another, red star comrades selling internet censorship to totalitarian teetotallers; and swishing down the stairs fashionably late, but perfectly coiffed, Julian Assange, in a dance of the seven veils.



The take home message of Cohen's book is that censorship is a big and corrupt business, not a personal weapon to protect vulnerable underclasses from wicked words.

Cohen's empiricism focuses largely on individuals and events, but it is in the realm of international relations that the suppression of free speech is most clearly apprehensible as a global utility.

Freedom House and the Committee to Protect Journalists provide comprehensive empirical data on international censorship in their annual classifications of press freedom.

According to Freedom House's 2012 report, the proportion of countries with a free press has fallen to its lowest rate in a decade. Only 14.5 per cent of the world's population lives in countries with a robust and free media. In significant part, this is because the world's most oppressive countries are frequently its most populous.

CPJ's 2012 list of the world's most censored countries reveals a stark politics of censorship. All of the top ten most censored countries have authoritarian governments. The top ten countries also appear on Freedom House's list, classified as 'not free'. However, the political and cultural context of these authoritarian governments, namely Communism, socialism and Islamism, is not identified in the reports. It is a stand out omission.

Of the ten most censored countries on CPJ's list, two are Islamic states (Iran and Saudi Arabia), one is a civic state with a 90 per cent Muslim population governed by Sharia personal codes (Syria), two are Communist states (North Korea and Cuba), and two are former Soviet states (Belarus and Uzbekistan). Belarus remains market socialist, while Uzbekistan is ruled by a dictator with political connections to the Soviet period.

Freedom House's data on press freedom by region is equally revealing. Within the designated region of the Middle East and North Africa, only Israel enjoys free press status. 69 per cent of the countries in this region are classified as not free. In Western Europe, 92 per cent of countries are classified as free and the remainder, partly free.

The connection between the suppression of the media and oppressive governments becomes readily apparent when crossreferencing multiple indices of liberty, such as the World Press Freedom Committee's guide to insult laws and Freedom House's annual survey of political rights and civil liberties. With predictable repetition, the same countries appear as repeat offenders across lists.

If media freedom is the canary in the mine for a country's political liberty, Australians have reason to be concerned. The government is currently considering the Convergence Review, which recommends the establishment of a meta-regulator controlling the hitherto self-regulated Australian press. It is based on the findings of the Finkelstein inquiry which many rightly criticised publicly as a report argued from deeply flawed methodology with consequently baseless recommendations.

The Convergence Review repackages Finkelstein's core recommendation of a meta-regulator,

while claiming to reject it as ‘an option of last resort’. Its authors propose an industry-led body for media standards with an additional communications regulator to oversee classifications. However, by mid-way through the report, the so-called independent industry body emerges as an entity partly funded by government and subject to the discretion of the communications regulator on matters of industry codes of standards, complaints and investigation procedures, breaches of codes, and compliance. Yes, the authors really do describe a partially government-funded entity subject to the powers of a statutory regulator as independent, and a system regulated by government finance and statutory authority as deregulated.

The obtuse reasoning of the Convergence Review is somewhat predictable, given that the most audacious mendacity in contemporary global politics is articulated in arguments to justify the suppression of speech. The recent publication of *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide*, by research fellows Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, chronicles a frenzy of censors lining up to prosecute people who criticise religion. Apparently, one can insult an idea.

Where Cohen hones in on the treatment of Salman Rushdie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Marshall and Shea expose blasphemy codes as an international order. They reveal that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has been gradually supplanting the political liberties of the West with an alternative UN Declaration of Human Rights. The OIC’s Cairo Declaration kindly permits you and I to speak as long as we are not ‘contrary to the principles of the Sharia’.

In 2011, the UN Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 16/18 after a decade of lobbying from the OIC. UN press releases carefully pointed out that the Resolution had been modified from the OIC-contrived ban on defamation of religion to condemning religious stereotypes. However, the Resolution contains many clauses that could empower the prosecution of writers, such as condemnation of actions which ‘exploit tensions’ about religion or belief. In the wake of Resolution 16/18, how is a writer to describe, for example, the mistreatment of women under Sharia law, exposure of which invariably causes tension among those who support it? How could the mere sensation of tension have become prima facie evidence of a human rights violation and a transnational rationale for censorship?

The opponents of Resolution 16/18 are diverse and include people of all faiths and beliefs. Mudar Zahran, a Muslim academic and political refugee from Jordan, has called for its abolition, describing it as ‘a UN-endorsed violation of human rights, co-sponsored by the US, and prompted by the OIC, an organisation of 57 Muslim nations, most of which hold the world’s worst records on freedom of speech.’ In writing this, Zahran is committing the ultimate act of tension; telling the truth.

Cohen, Marshall and Shea’s expositions of censorship unearth an indivisible truth. People who seek to censor free speech under media, blasphemy and anti-vilification laws fail to grasp that freedom of expression has an external existence. It is extant. In censoring free speech, people who consider themselves the cognoscenti of Western tolerance and diversity have become enjoined to a global political movement led by the world’s worst violators of human rights.



After they have won all their cases against freethinkers, after the newsprint has been cleansed of human nature and discomfiting truths, after the satisfaction of trammelling an opponent has dimmed and the champagne glasses are emptied, all the censors will have left is people who agree with them; a quiet and absolute accord inducing the ultimate silence; the death of thought.