

Book Review

Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Being Offensive Killing Free Speech?

Reviewed by Jonathan Bishop, Centre for Research into Online Communities and E-Learning Systems, Swansea, UK

Trigger Warning
Mick Hume
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320 pp.
ISBN 978-000-8125-45-5

ABSTRACT

Trigger Warning is a book authored by Mick Hume that has as its general thesis the claim that we are living in a time where extreme reaction to statements that would once been free speech is the norm. The book draws very heavily on the situation around Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris. This can be seen as a strength to some, but equally other examples could have been referred to. On the whole, Hume's book is a must read for those interested in the effect that extreme reactions to offensive material is having on free speech.

THE MEDIA: CHARLIE HEBDO, THE BBC, THE SUN AND THE NEWS OF THE WORLD

The coverage of the Charlie Hebdo situation, where a French magazine's premises were attacked by Islamists following it publishing content it knew would offend Muslims, is a significant part of this book. It discusses how the satirical publication had a history of disseminating grossly offensive content, and despite the high profile deaths there were little changes as a result. The "Je Suis Charlie" sentiments in support of free speech were short lasting, as the "Je ne suis pas Charlie" sentiments reflected tolerance and respect. Despite Hume claiming it was not a "book about the Charlie Hebdo massacre," there are at least 20 out of 320 pages in the book dedicated to the topic. The finale of the book in relation to Charlie Hebdo occurs in the last two

pages. Hume says that no belief-system should be immune from being “interrogated and offended.” Disappointingly this fails to acknowledge that some belief systems – like those based on the Third Testament and misused by Islamists – may not be as developed as one might want in a democracy. It is only in recent years that the Anglican Church accepted women’s rights to become Bishops, and it may take even longer for advocates of Islam to achieve the same. Achieving free speech takes time, and that is something the book fails to acknowledge. It was only in 1998 that the right the freedom of expression could be enforced in UK courts and against UK public authorities. Laws as old as the Public Order Act 1986 and as recent as the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 give the police the power to censor free speech they deem as likely to cause offense or which they consider amounts to anti-social behaviour. The book’s message – that it is becoming impossible to say anything without causing offense to people who take that offense to the extreme – is an important one, but one that in itself should not be taken to the extreme either.

INTERNET TROLLING

In the prologue of the book it was acknowledged that whilst politicians like David Cameron spoke in favour of free speech, the rhetoric did not match the reality. *“This was the same UK prime minister whose government was presiding over a state where people were being arrested and jailed for posting unpleasant jokes and messages online and singing naughty songs and football grounds, and whose justice secretary had just pledged to quadruple prison sentences for offensive internet ‘trolls’ found guilty of speech crimes,”* Hume said.

This point is a very important one when it comes to separating rhetoric from reality. The case of DPP v Chambers, known as the Twitter joke trial, ruled that it is only an offence to troll someone if it causes that person apprehension. The conviction of teenager Matthew Woods – for re-posting an offensive joke about missing April Jones – is a perfect example of where emotive morality overtakes the rule of law. Months after Woods’s conviction the Director of Public Prosecutions, Kier Starmer, published guidelines saying that those who post messages only for a restricted audience – as Woods had – then they should not be prosecuted.

FEMINISM

Trigger Warning touches on the issues of free speech surrounding the current societal reaction against feminists from men and women alike. It is critical of the fact some feminists have been banned from university campuses and protested against. Hume calls this “me speech” and says it is inappropriate for people to censor speech they find “uncomfortable” and to only allow people who “comply and conform and toe a fashionable line.” Feminists banned from campus include the feminist, Caroline Criado-Perez. Because of Criado-Perez a number of young people have gone to jail,

because she lacked the fortitude to cope with threatening messages on Twitter. One must ask whether the author wrongly overlooked at the reasons why feminists like Criado-Perez have been banned. Is it right for feminists to call for women to have more rights than men, then to expect people who disagree with them sent to jail? Sympathising with extremists like Caroline Criado-Perez and focussing on “Je Suis Charlie” over “Je ne suis pas Charlie” is a weakness of this book, which seems to be advocating no restrictions on speech at all, regardless of the consequences.

POLITICIANS

There are important “ur bias” narratives drawn out in the book in relation to the political establishment. Attention is drawn to the fact that on the day of the Charlie Hebdo killings, Ed Miliband stood shoulder to shoulder with Prime Minister David Cameron, saying the country should resist all attacks “our democratic way of life and freedom of speech.” Yet as Hume points out, at the same time the party was working on a policy to create a black list of people who were convicted of speech offenses online. It furthers this argument by pointing out how on the one hand Harriett Harman showed support for “free speech” following Charlie Hebdo, yet supported the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry to regulate the press more than other industries only weeks later. It further points out that David Cameron also supported the Leveson recommendations, despite saying at the time of the Charlie Hebdo killings, “my job is not to tell newspapers and magazines what to publish or what not to publish.” The sentiment seems to be that politicians believe in free speech only when it suits them. The book is disappointingly critical of using Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) for Internet trolling, which have now been replaced by “injunctions” under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. These injunctions against an unwanted behaviour carry a potential jail-term if broken. These should in fact be welcomed for the unruliest of Internet trolls because they do not get a criminal record. There are some people who are perpetually abusive to ordinary people online, who unlike feminists like Caroline Criado-Perez do not court publicity, might be put off doing so if they are likely to go to jail by not sticking to participating in a cordial fashion.

THE HOLY LAND AND SEMITISM

Another feature of the book is the situation around the Holy Land, including the Semitic races of Jews and Arabs. For most people the term “anti-Semitic” refers only to Jews, and the misuse of this term was evident from the book. It is reported by Hume that Tottenham Hotspur fans were arrested in 2013 for calling themselves the “Yid Army.” It was considered a public order offence by the police for the fans to name themselves this, despite the club having strong associations with the Jewish communities in London. The book furthers this issue by discussing how a group of people who denied that the mass killing of Jews in World War II amounted to a

holocaust has led to the term “denial” being used beyond the concept of “holocaust deniers.” In the same way the word “anti-Semitic” is used as a shut-up argument, so Hume argues “denial” has become a way to close down discussion, such as with regards to climate change denial, rape denial and inequality denial. Hume further points out that the fact that holocaust denial has become a crime is a measure of how the concept of free speech has changed. It is put that the UK policy of prosecuting all forms of criticism against Jews opens the door to criminalising people for many other forms of objectionable speech. In terms of discussing Arab Semites beyond Charlie Hebdo, the book discusses how rhetoric against free speech often argues allowing it can on the one hand incite hatred of muslims and on the other incite violence in Islamists.

DISCUSSION

This review was completed directly following the November 2015 Paris terror attacks. This came at a time when counter-extremism was on the agenda, with a Bill to the effect going through the UK Parliament. Prior to the Paris terror attacks, many people opposed what they called a “snoopers charter” because the UK Government wanted its police and security services to be able to intercept the communications of suspected terrorists. Following this many Members of Parliament indicated that they had changed their mind, possibly as a result of the fact some of the suicide bombers were known to the authorities and the fact the French security services had received a tip-off from the Iraq Government that an attack was imminent. This shows the message of this book – that people are reacting erratically to offensive content – is even more relevant here. People are being convinced to change their strongly held opinions, however undesirable, as a result of sudden mass media coverage. Prior to the Paris terror attacks in November 2015 there had been tens of attacks earlier in the year carried out by so-called Islamic State, but these were on the whole not reported. Equally, prior to the publishing of a photograph of a drowned Syrian boy on the shores of Europe, many people in the UK had xenophobic tendencies, yet many of these changed their strongly-held opinions as a result. It would seem from the events following the book’s publication that the problem of overreaction to what should be free speech has not changed, and in fact the problem has worsened with even more prosecutions for offensive comments posted online, wrongly being considered grossly offensive.