

# Charlie Hebdo And The War For Civilisation

By [Media Lens](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In 2003, a top security expert told filmmaker Michael Moore, 'there is no one in America other than President Bush who is in more danger than you'. (Michael Moore, 'Here Comes Trouble - Stories From My Life,' Allen Lane, 2011, p.4)

Moore was attacked with a knife, a blunt object and stalked by a man with a gun. Scalding coffee was thrown at his face, punches were thrown in broad daylight. The verbal abuse was ceaseless, including numerous death threats. In his book, 'Here Comes Trouble', Moore writes:

'I could no longer go out in public without an incident happening.' (p.20)

A security company, which compiled a list of more than 440 credible threats against Moore, told him:

'We need to tell you that the police have in custody a man who was planning to blow up your house. You're in no danger now.' (p.23)

But why was Moore a target? Had he published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad?

The problem had begun in the first week of the 2003 Iraq war when Moore's film 'Bowling For Columbine' won the Oscar for best documentary. At the March 23 Academy Awards ceremony, Moore [told](#) a global audience:

'I've invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us. They are here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction, yet we live in fictitious times. We live in a time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange alerts: we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush. Shame on you! And anytime you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up! Thank you very much.' (p.5-6)

About halfway through these remarks, Moore reports, 'all hell broke loose'. On arriving home from the ceremony, he found three truckloads of horse manure dumped waist-high in his driveway. That night, Moore witnessed for himself the extent to which US corporate journalism defends the right to offend:

'...as I flipped between the channels, I listened to one pundit after another

question my sanity, criticise my speech, and say, over and over, in essence: “I don’t know what got into him!” “He sure won’t have an easy time in this town after that stunt!” “Who does he think will make another movie with him now?” “Talk about career suicide!” After an hour of this, I turned off the TV and went online – where there was more of the same, only worse – from all over America.’ (pp.9-10)

This is the reality of respect for free speech in the United States. If, on Oscar night, he had held up a cartoon depicting President Bush naked on all fours, buttocks raised to a pornographic filmmaker, would Moore still be alive today?

War – Total, Merciless, Civilised

In stark contrast to the campaign of near-fatal media vilification of Moore, journalists have responded to the Charlie Hebdo atrocity in Paris by passionately defending the right to offend. Or so we are to believe. The Daily Telegraph’s chief interviewer, Allison Pearson, [wrote](#):

‘Those that died yesterday did so on the frontline of a war of civilisations. I salute them, those Martyrs for Freedom of Speech.’

Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy agreed, [describing](#) the attacks as ‘a war declared on civilisation’. Joan Smith [wrote](#) in the Guardian:

‘I am feeling sick and shaky. I have been writing all day with tears running down my face. I don’t suppose I’m alone in reacting like this to the massacre at Charlie Hebdo, which is an assault on journalists and free speech.’

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen [tweeted](#):

‘I am shaking with rage at the attack on Charlie Hebdo. It’s an attack on the free world. The entire free world should respond, ruthlessly.’

The Western tendency to act with ruthless, overwhelming violence is, of course, a key reason why Islamic terrorists are targeting the West. Glenn Greenwald [asked](#) Cohen:

‘At whom should this violence be directed beyond the specific perpetrators, and what form should it take?’

Sylvain Attal, editor of new media at TV station France24, [replied](#):

‘response must be both merciless and respectful of our legal system. Period’

End of discussion. American journalist and regular Fox News talk show host, Geraldo Rivera, [raved](#):

‘The French extremists say they are committed to Jihad and are willing to die

for their cause. We should make their wish come true. No mercy'

The 'entire free world', then, should resort to ruthless, merciless violence to defend 'civilisation', a term some naïve souls have associated with compassion, restraint, and even the bizarre [exhortation](#):

'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'

Cohen [retweeted](#) Anand Giridharadas, who writes for the New York Times:

'Not & never a war of civilizations or between them. But a war FOR civilization against groups on the other side of that line. #CharlieHebdo'

Thus, we live in a time when a 'war for civilisation' is seen as something more than a grotesque contradiction in terms.

Much, but thankfully not all, media coverage has been this extreme. To his credit, former Independent editor Simon Kelner [managed](#) a rather more nuanced view.

Journalism – Part Of 'The Murder Machine'

In The Times, the perennially apocalyptic David Aaronovitch wrote:

'Yesterday in Paris we in the west crossed a boundary that cannot be recrossed. For the first time since the defeat of fascism a group of citizens were massacred because of what they had drawn, said and published.'

The Guardian took a similar [view](#):

'Wednesday's atrocity was the... bloodiest single assault on western journalism in living memory.'

But, in fact, the bloodiest attack on journalism in living memory, at least in Europe, happened on April 23, 1999 when Nato bombed the headquarters of Serbian state radio and television, killing 16 people. The dead included an editor, a programme director, a cameraman, a make-up artist, three security guards and other media support staff. Additional radio and electrical installations throughout the country were also attacked. The New York Times witnessed the carnage:

'The Spanish-style entrance was ripped away by the blasts, which seemed to hit the roof just under the large girder tower that holds numerous satellite dishes. Although the tower and blackened dishes remained, the control rooms and studios underneath had simply disappeared.' (Steven Erlanger, 'Survivors of NATO Attack On Serb TV Headquarters: Luck, Pluck and Resolve,' The New York Times, April 24, 1999)

Presumably this had been some kind of terrible mistake by the civilised West crossing a boundary that could not be recrossed. No, Nato [insisted](#) that the TV station, a 'ministry of lies', was a legitimate target and the bombing 'must be seen as an intensification of our attacks'. A Pentagon spokesman added:

'Serb TV is as much a part of Milosevic's murder machine as his military is. The media is one of the pillars of Milosevic's power machine. It is right up there with security forces and the military.' (Erlanger, op.cit.)

Amnesty International [responded](#):

'The bombing of the headquarters of Serbian state radio and television was a deliberate attack on a civilian object and as such constitutes a war crime.'

In all the corporate press discussion of the Paris killings, we have found no mention of Nato's bombing of Serbian TV and radio.

In August 2011, Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, [condemned](#) Nato's bombing of Libyan state broadcasting facilities on July 30, killing three media workers, with 21 people injured:

'I deplore the NATO strike on Al-Jamahiriya and its installations. Media outlets should not be targeted in military actions. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1738 (2006) condemns acts of violence against journalists and media personnel in conflict situations.'

Again, Nato [confirmed](#) that the bombing had been deliberate:

'Striking specifically these critical satellite dishes will reduce the regime's ability to oppress civilians while [preserving] television broadcast infrastructure that will be needed after the conflict.'

In November 2001, two American air-to-surface missiles hit al-Jazeera's satellite TV station in Kabul, Afghanistan, killing a reporter. Chief editor Ibrahim Hilal [said](#) al-Jazeera had communicated the location of its office in Kabul to the American authorities.

In April 2003, an al-Jazeera cameraman was killed when the station's Baghdad office was bombed during a US air raid. In 2005, the Guardian [quoted](#) the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ):

'"Reports that George Bush and Tony Blair discussed a plan to bomb al-Jazeera reinforce concerns that the US attack in Baghdad on April 8 [2003] was deliberate targeting of the media" said Aidan White, the general secretary of the IFJ.'

According to the Daily Mirror, Bush had [told](#) Blair of his plan:

'He made clear he wanted to bomb al-Jazeera in Qatar and elsewhere. Blair replied that would cause a big problem. There's no doubt what Bush wanted to do - and no doubt Blair didn't want him to do it.'

Similarly, during last summer's blitz of Gaza, Israel killed 17 journalists. An investigation led by Human Rights Watch concluded that Israeli attacks on journalists were one of many 'apparent violations' of international law. In a 2012 letter to The New York Times, Lt. Col. Avital Leibovich, head spokeswoman to foreign media for the Israel Defense Force, [wrote](#):

'Such terrorists, who hold cameras and notebooks in their hands, are no different from their colleagues who fire rockets aimed at Israeli cities and cannot enjoy the rights and protection afforded to legitimate journalists.'

'Sorry For Any Offence'

Aaronovitch warned that 'appalling' as previous attacks on Western free speech had been, 'they were generally the work of disorganised loners', whereas the Paris attacks seemed to have been more organised. What then to say of lethal attacks on journalists conducted, not by a group of religious fanatics, but by democratically elected governments?

Given this context, corporate media commentary on the Charlie Hebdo massacre all but drowns in irony and hypocrisy. The Telegraph [commented](#):

'But the march in Paris reminds us, at the very least, that the men of violence are not just a minority, but a fragment of a fragment. And it may be that it also acts as a turning point. The US is to hold a conference at the White House on countering violent extremism...'

In fact, as LSE student Daniel Wickham [clarified](#), 'men of violence' were *among* the marchers. Certainly the White House is a good place for people to do some serious thinking about violent extremism and how to stop it.

A Guardian leader [observed](#):

'When men and women have gone to their deaths for nothing more than what they have said, or drawn, there is only one side to be on.'

True, but if it is to be meaningful, support for the right to offend must not defer to a self-serving view of a world divided into 'good guys' and 'bad guys', 'us' and 'them'. Like the rest of the media, the Guardian protests passionately when 'bad guys' commit an atrocity against 'us', but emotive defences of free speech are in short supply when 'good guys' bomb Serb and Libyan TV, or threaten the life of progressive US filmmakers. Far fewer tears are shed for Serb, Libyan or Palestinian journalists in US-UK corporate media offices.

The Guardian added:

'Being shocking is going to involve offending someone. If there is a right to free speech, implicit within it there has to be a right to offend. Any society that's serious about liberty has to defend the free flow of ugly words, even ugly

sentiments.'

The sentiment was quickly put to the test when BBC reporter Tim Willcox [commented](#) in a live TV interview:

'Many critics though of Israel's policy would suggest that the Palestinians suffer hugely at Jewish hands as well.'

This mild statement of obvious fact brought a predictable flood of calls for Willcox to resign. The journalist instantly [backed down](#):

'Really sorry for any offence caused by a poorly phrased question in a live interview in Paris yesterday - it was entirely unintentional'

A BBC spokesman [completed](#) the humiliation:

'Tim Willcox has apologised for what he accepts was a poorly phrased question... He had no intention of causing offence.'

Glenn Greenwald [describes](#) the prevailing rule:

'As always: it's free speech if it involves ideas I like or attacks groups I dislike, but it's something different when I'm the one who is offended.'

Chris Hedges [notes](#):

'In France a Holocaust denier, or someone who denies the Armenian genocide, can be imprisoned for a year and forced to pay a \$60,000 fine. It is a criminal act in France to mock the Holocaust the way Charlie Hebdo mocked Islam.'

A point emphasised by the recent [arrest](#) of a French comedian on charges of 'defending terrorism'.

The irony of the BBC apology, given recent events, appears to have been invisible to most commentators. Radical comedian Frankie Boyle is a welcome exception, having earlier [commented](#):

'I'm reading a defence of free speech in a paper that tried to have me arrested and charged with obscenity for making a joke about the Queen'

The Guardian leader concluded:

'Poverty and discrimination at home may create fertile conditions for the spread of extremism, and western misadventures abroad can certainly inflame the risks.'

The term 'western misadventures' is a perfect example of how media like the Guardian work so hard to avoid offending elite interests with more accurate descriptions like 'Western atrocities' and 'Western genocidal crimes'.

A leader in The Times observed of the Charlie Hebdo killers:

'Their victims knew the risks they ran by defying the jihadist strategy of censorship through terror. They accepted those risks. They understood that freedom is not free, and so should we all.' (Leader, 'Nous Sommes Tous Charlie,' The Times, January 8, 2015)

Fine words, but in 2013 Times owner Rupert Murdoch [apologised](#) for a powerful cartoon by Gerald Scarfe that had appeared in the newspaper. The [cartoon](#) depicted the brutal Israeli treatment of Palestinians but was not in any way anti-Semitic. Murdoch, however, [tweeted](#):

'Gerald Scarfe has never reflected the opinions of the Sunday Times. Nevertheless, we owe major apology for grotesque, offensive cartoon.'

In its response to the Paris killings, The Times perceived 'a vital duty for Muslim clerics who must embrace a new role actively deradicalising their followers. It also imposes an urgent responsibility on Muslim political leaders'.

Did the paper have any positive role models in mind?

'One controversial figure who appears to have understood this is Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. In a remarkable speech to imams last week to mark the birthday of Muhammad, he called for a "religious revolution" to prevent the Islamic world being "lost by our own hands".'

The Times went on:

'Mr al-Sisi is not unique. Najib Razak, Malaysia's prime minister, has championed moderate political Islam at home and abroad.' (Leader, 'Freedom Must Prevail,' Times, January 9, 2015)

Thus, Sisi, leader of a military coup, someone who oversaw the [massacre](#) of 1,000 civilian protestors on a single day in August 2013, is hailed as a 'champion' of 'moderate political Islam'.

There is so much more that could be said about just how little passion the corporate media have for defending the right to offend. Anyone in doubt should try, as we have, to discuss their *own* record of failing to offend the powerful. To criticise 'mainstream' media from this perspective is to render oneself a despised unperson. In response to our polite, decidedly inoffensive challenges on Twitter we have been banned by champions of free speech like Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger, Jon Snow of Channel 4 News, Jeremy Bowen of the BBC, Peter Beaumont of the Observer and Guardian, and many others.

Even rare dissident fig leaves on newspapers like the Guardian dismiss as asinine and, yes, offensive, the suggestion that they should risk offending their corporate employers and

advertisers. Not only is no attempt made to defend such a right, the very idea is dismissed as nonsense unworthy even of discussion.

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