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HATE SPEECH

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& JASON SMITH**



**DEBATING MATTERS
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CONTENTS

Introduction

Key terms

The hate speech debate in context

Essential reading

Backgrounders

Organisations

In the news

KEY TERMS

Freedom of Speech

Hate Speech

Islamism

Radicalisation

INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

NOTES

1
1
2
4
5
5
6

Voltaire, the Enlightenment thinker, is associated with the sentiment that ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it’. However, new developments in everything from the rise of extremism and online hate speech have led to a rethinking of this argument. For example, recent incidents such as the murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich, south east London, by radicalised extremists, together with the rise of allegedly extremist anti-Islamic groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) has led some to conclude that as a society we need to reassess our ideas about free speech [ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. There was widespread uproar when alleged extremists Tommy Robinson, leader of the EDL, and Muslim cleric Anjem Choudary, were interviewed by the BBC and on other media outlets in the wake of the Woolwich murder [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Much of the debate has centred on the issue of hateful and offensive speech, and the extent to which proponents of controversial and unpopular views should be allowed to express their thoughts and ideas in the public domain. Their views, many believe, are too dangerous and extreme to just oppose in open debate, and their access to public platforms for their ideas needs to be restricted. Certain types of controversial views, it is argued, are dangerous because of their ability to influence others and therefore should not be given a public platform, whether that platform is a mosque, a student union, or the media [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Whilst many are loath to curtail freedom of speech, some have pointed to instances where the freedom to express offensive and extreme views publically has had directly negative consequences for society [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Should the right to free expression extend even to those views the majority find abhorrent or distasteful? Or do “We all have a responsibility, including the media, not to give airtime to extremist voices - idiots and nutters who speak for no one but themselves” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]?



HATE SPEECH:
“Extreme views should not be given a public platform”



Is freedom of speech an absolute?

The liberty to express oneself in the public and private domain has traditionally been seen as one of the pillars of British life. For many, free speech is an absolute right, and the most fundamental element of a democratic and free society. The extent to which one is able to express opinions, irrespective of how unpopular or offensive they may be, is seen as vital to a flourishing, mature and enlightened society [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Giving people with offensive views a public platform does not legitimise those views, but rather, hearing controversial opinions is a fundamental part of a liberal society it is argued [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Allowing the likes of Tommy Robinson, Nick Griffin and Anjem Choudary a platform, means that their views are made public and we all have the chance to scrutinise and discuss them openly [Ref: [Independent](#)]. From this perspective we have a responsibility to make sure that distasteful views are heard and challenged as a matter of principle, no matter how unpalatable they may be. However, others argue that giving offensive opinions a public platform gives them legitimacy. They suggest that it is important not to give traction to views which a large majority of the populace find offensive. A recent poll found that 59% of people think that Anjem Choudary should not get a media platform, and 49% thought the same about the EDL [Ref: [Mail on Sunday](#)]. In October 2009, Nick Griffin, Member of the European Parliament and leader of the British National Party (BNP) was invited onto the BBC's 'Question Time' programme. His appearance sparked outrage, with many arguing that to allow him a national platform was effectively a propaganda success for an extreme viewpoint that most do not agree with, despite the fact he was an elected representative. One commentator

claimed that the BNP had "...officially arrived in the political and media mainstream, aided and abetted by the BBC." [Ref: [New Statesman](#)].

Social cohesion and public protection

Freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 10 of the Human Rights Act of 1998, but critics claim that proponents of offensive views are clever enough to exploit this, stopping short of inciting hatred and violence directly, meaning that technically they are beyond the remit of the law [Ref: [The Sunday Times](#)]. In light of this the law needs to be revisited, it's argued, to ensure that these views are easier to police, and that the public are protected from them, if not through the law then through 'no platform', denying them the oxygen of publicity. The public expression of distasteful views has been argued to be detrimental to community cohesion [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Community programmes which aim to increase understanding between different racial or faith groups are undermined when individuals are permitted to express controversial, even vile opinions publically because they can lead to tension or violence. The former Minister for Equality, Lynne Featherstone, argued in the Government's published plan to tackle hate crime that: "Tackling hate crime matters, not just because of the devastating consequences it can have for victims and their families, but also because it can divide communities." [Ref: [HM Government](#)]. Historically there has always been debate about the limits of what one can and cannot say in public. Some argue that it is naive to assume that the right to free speech exists in a vacuum - with freedom comes responsibility and just because you can say anything doesn't mean you should [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. However,



opponents of this argument about protecting the public and communities state that to censure offensive views would be an affront to the intelligence of the public, who through open debate and discussion are more than able to decide to which views they do and do not want to subscribe [Ref: [Independent](#)].

Words v actions

Clarifying what type of comments will and will not be prosecuted, most recently in relation to online social networks, the Director of Public Prosecutions has said: "...posts that are offensive will face a rigorous assessment and will only be pursued if it is deemed to be in the public interest." [Ref: [Our Social Times](#)]. Other counter that: "The problem with hate crime as a category: it allows the state to prosecute people on the basis of their thoughts, not their actions. Like George Orwell's notion of 'thought crime', hate crime allows the authorities to police what's in people's heads." [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Others would counter that such arguments for free speech condone hate speech and lead to the intimidation and the further oppression of women, religious and ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups in society. We already have libel laws and bans on child pornography, so why not on speech that takes away a person's dignity and leads to unnecessary social tension? [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)].



ESSENTIAL READING

4 of 6

NOTES

FOR

Woolwich outrage: we are too weak to face up to the extremism in our midst

Charles Moore *Telegraph* 14 June 2013

If broadcasters want to give extremists a platform, they need to tell us why

Sunder Katwala *New Statesman* 6 June 2013

If The Government Is Looking For Extremists, Just Look Out Of The Window

Mohammed Ansar *Huffington Post* 28 April 2013

To Speak or Not to Speak: Would You Share a Panel With a Hate Preacher?

Tulip Siddiq *Huffington Post* 10 December 2012

AGAINST

Was the 'Today' Programme Right to Interview Tommy Robinson?

Jamie Bartlett *Huffington Post* 11 June 2013

After Woolwich, don't ban hate speech, counter it. Hate it, too

Timothy Garton Ash *Guardian* 30 May 2013

So Theresa May and Sayeeda Warsi want to ban the preachers of hate? On the contrary, bring 'em on

Matthew Norman *Independent* 28 May 2013

The Cambridge Union is not BBC 'Question Time' – let Marine Le Pen speak

Siraj Dato *Independent* 18 February 2013

IN DEPTH

Without free speech, this island seethes with resentment

Padraig Reidy *Guardian* 20 April 2011

Student Islamic societies must tackle hate speech

Carly McKenzie *Guardian* 26 April 2010



BACKGROUNDEERS

Bigots like Ukip's Godfrey Bloom must not be tolerated

Zoe Williams *Guardian* 7 August 2013

Punish criminals for their actions, not their thoughts

Jon Holbrook *spiked* 9 July 2013

Tommy Robinson, Islamism and the EDL: when should we listen to extremists?

Dan Hodges *Telegraph* 11 June 2013

The Truth about the 'wave of attacks on Muslims' after Woolwich murder

Andrew Gilligan *Telegraph* 1 June 2013

Hate mustn't be made a thought crime – only acting on it is

Janet Daly *Telegraph* 1 June 2013

Extinguishing the firebrands

Anthony Glee *The Sunday Times* 26 May 2013

We must have the courage to confront the preachers of hate

Telegraph 25 May 2013

Woolwich Reactions Poll

Mail on Sunday 24 May 2013

In a truly free society, I should have the right to read al-Qaeda's magazine

Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 8 May 2013

Challenge it, Report it, Stop it: The Government's Plan to Tackle Hate Crime

HM Government March 2012

Welcome to Britain, a breeding ground for talking hate

Nick Cohen *Guardian* 31 July 2011

How the BNP came in from the cold

James Macintyre *New Statesman* 22 October 2009

Hate speech laws in the United Kingdom

Wikipedia

5 of 6

NOTES

ORGANISATIONS

Anti-Defamation League

Index on Censorship



IN THE NEWS

6 of 6

NOTES

Mosque ban follows Twitter abuse by Cambridge man
BBC News 16 August 2013

Ofcom to probe Choudary comment
BBC News 15 July 2013

Controversy as EDL leader asked to speak at Oxford Union
Independent 4 July 2013

BBC accused as right-wing leader uses interview on Radio 4 to 'fuel the fire'
The Times 12 June 2013

EDL leader: It's not going to end pretty
BBC News 11 June 2013

BBC 'poisons' airwaves with EDL interview
Telegraph 11 June 2013

Woolwich attack: New drive to tackle hate material in schools, prisons and online
Mirror 3 June 2013

BBC news chief defends Anjem Choudary interview in face of calls to ban 'hate preachers'
Press Gazette 30 May 2013

Theresa May Suggests Anjem Choudary Could Be Banned, Liberty Campaigners Warn Against It
Huffington Post 27 May 2013

Woolwich attack: Extremist preachers should be banned from TV
Telegraph 26 May 2013

EDL marches on Newcastle as attacks on Muslims increase tenfold in the wake of Woolwich
Independent 25 May 2013

Anjem Choudary refuses to 'abhor' Woolwich attack
BBC News 24 May 2013

BBC and Channel 4 criticised for giving radical cleric Anjem Choudary airtime
Guardian 24 May 2013

Far right 'stokes radicalisation'
Evening Standard 13 March 2013



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