



SYDNEY

# PEN magazine

May 2019

## Free voices: Melissa Lucashenko

### When free speech and freedom kill



- Vale Judith Rodriguez: a passionate and committed life
- Seeking the alchemy between storyteller and young reader
- Indigenous stories and storytellers may be lost in the digital age
- Journalism, hate speech and terrorism

# Creating respectful places for balanced public discourse



**O**n 15 March 2019, an Australian terrorist, motivated by Islamophobia and white supremacy, massacred 51 people in two Christchurch mosques. Sydney PEN is appalled by the viciousness of the attack and condemns violence in all its forms.

But we also acknowledge that this type of hatred has been given space to exist in Australian society and has even been encouraged by certain elements within the media and politics.

In recent times, we have seen our current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, argue against providing detained refugees adequate medical care calling them potential pedophiles, rapists, and murderers.

Our Sudanese-Australian population has endured sustained harassment from members of our federal government and the Victorian Liberal Opposition who demonised them as part of a racist electoral strategy in the recent Victorian state election.

Then Immigration Minister Peter Dutton claimed it had been a mistake to allow Lebanese Muslim refugees into the country. He also said Melbourne residents were “scared to go out to restaurants”, because of “African gang” violence and that “illiterate and innumerate” asylum seekers would take local jobs or languish on the dole.

Senator Pauline Hanson described the Islamic religion as “a disease we need to vaccinate ourselves against”. Not long after that, she entered the Senate chamber wearing a burqa as part of a publicity stunt. Shortly afterwards, her dog-whistling, “It’s okay to be white” motion was voted for by government senators.

This was shortly after another senator, whose name doesn’t deserve to be mentioned, called for a return to the White Australia Policy and invoked the Final Solution in a speech in parliament regarding how to treat immigrants. That same senator blamed the Christchurch massacre on Muslim migration.

One Path Network, a Muslim video production studio and media company in Sydney conducted a

report into how five Murdoch newspapers covered Islam in 2017: *The Australian*, *Herald Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Courier Mail*, and *The Advertiser*.

There were 152 front pages relating to Islam or Muslims in a negative way.

There were over 200 articles written about Yassmin Abdel-Magied, the Muslim-Australian writer who Tweeted on Anzac Day: “LEST. WE. FORGET. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine...)”

Thirty-eight percent of Andrew Bolt’s 473 opinion pieces in 2017 were about Islam. This is the same man who in 2018 wrote a column headlined “The foreign invasion”, which claimed Australians were being swamped by a “tidal wave” of non-English speaking immigrants.

That same year, conservative politicians were arguing for amendments to Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, claiming their free speech was threatened by the clause that prevented them from offending, insulting, humiliating or intimidating another person.

Within this discourse, state and federal police in Australia have become increasingly concerned by the rise of right-wing extremism.

It is clear our national conversation regarding immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Muslims and migrants has become poisonous and deeply divisive. Discriminatory and racist language is becoming more common. Worse still, such language is no longer seen as taboo by some – particularly white – Australians.

We need to strike a balance between our value of free speech and our responsibilities as citizens to create a respectful space for public discourse and ensure all members of society can live without being subjected to racism, discrimination and harassment.

Free speech comes hand in hand with acknowledgement that all human beings are born free and equal and are entitled to dignity, respect and rights without distinction of any kind.

In the wake of the Christchurch massacre Sydney PEN encourages all elements of Australian society to contribute to a more respectful, balanced representation of Muslim members of our community.

**Mark Isaacs**

# When free speech and freedom kill

Acclaimed Indigenous writer Melissa Lucashenko delivered PEN's Free Voices address on The Day of The Imprisoned Writer in November, 2018, in the Green Theatre, at the University of Technology, Sydney.

I'll begin by confessing that I'm not a huge fan of keynotes. I have a bit of paper directly in front of where I sit in my study in Mullumbimby and written on that piece of paper in large capitals is two things – No More Travel is the first. And the second is No More Keynotes. So, I'm just going to tell you a few brief stories about Freedom, and Free Speech in liberal Western democracies in 2018.

I'll preface my handful of little stories by saying that I finished writing this piece on Sunday, which was Armistice Day. As I wrote, I had in the back of my mind the wartime experiences of my brother, a Vietnam veteran recovering from PTSD, and my uncle, a veteran of the Pacific war.

I was also thinking about an Aboriginal ex-serviceman who was murdered in a racist attack in Brisbane earlier this year. All Aboriginal men like them in Queensland have historically been denied the right to speak freely. But more, they and most of us have been denied the right to hear and speak our Aboriginal languages, because as Aboriginal people in Queensland our ancestors were often savagely beaten and, at times, even exiled to far-off missions for doing so. When we protested this oppression, nobody listened. So "free speech" is not an idea that has always been meaningful for my people.

## 1. Being Very Careful Around White People

All visible people of colour in the West – mostly people whose skin is darker than a brown paper bag for instance, which for those of you who don't know used to be a racist test of acceptable skin tone in the USA – all of us have stories about being careful around white people. Usually many, many stories.

Depending on which Western liberal democracy we live in, or from which particular ethnicity, our levels of caution fall somewhere on a spectrum from vague concern to constant hyper-vigilance. I only remembered, writing this a few weeks ago, that

there was an Aboriginal man in Brisbane who was hospitalised with schizophrenia in the 1970s after a lifetime of racist abuse. This bloke tipped over, as very many of us do, from vigilance into paranoia, and began talking to his doctor about the government persecuting him and coming for his kids and so on. Except, it turned out after he'd spent years in the nuthouse, that he hadn't tipped at all. The government had stolen his kids. The government was persecuting him. This black



Indigenous writer Melissa Lucashenko: conscious of the need to protect her safety





**Emeritus Professor Henry Gates: arrested trying to get into his own home by a white police officer**

man lost years of his life after being misdiagnosed by a white professional who didn't know enough, and didn't care enough, about the circumstances of his Aboriginal patient's life, to realise that he was, in fact, sane. He spoke, but he wasn't heard. A common experience for our mob.

While that's one Australian version of Being Very Careful Around White People, another story comes from the USA, and it's a story you probably already know.

On 22 July, 2009, Barack Obama had been President for nine months. On that day police in Cambridge, Massachusetts, arrested an African-American man attempting to break into a house in broad daylight. "Arrested for what?" the black man asked angrily. "For being black in America?" Unfortunately for the cop involved, it eventually became clear that the arrestee was Emeritus Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., one of the most highly respected scholars of African-American history alive today. Professor Gates, who is the founder of the website *roots.com*, was "breaking into" his own house in a leafy, upmarket suburb.

To quote Ed Pilkington in *The Guardian*, Professor Gates is "a prolific writer, television presenter, director of Harvard's WEB Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, mate of Oprah Winfrey – the list of Gates's connections and accomplishments goes on and on. But when he returned home last Thursday from a trip to China...he was, well, just another black man engaging in nefarious activities."

When I read this, I was instantly reminded of Marcia Langton who wrote in the 90s of returning to Australia from overseas and thinking, "Oh God, I'm just a boong again."

So, Professor Gates spent four hours seething in the watch-house, no doubt composing many pointed editorials as he sat. When he was allowed out on bail, fellow Harvard academics were at hand to drive him home. The incident quickly blew up in the media, of course. The Mayor of Cambridge rang Gates to apologise, as well she might. Newly elected President Barack Obama was required to do something about this transparent racism and yet, for fear of white-voter backlash, he couldn't condemn it outright. He did describe the arrest as stupid, given that Gates was in his own home, and had shown ID to the cop to prove it. And Obama did draw parallels to police harassment of Black and Latino Americans over many decades.

Professor Gates threatened a lawsuit if the officer didn't apologise for lying about the incident; the officer refused. The cop, in fact, referred to being "surprised at how Gates had reacted and behaved" upon being asked to prove ownership of his own house, while standing in it.

Tensions increased. One third of white voters blamed Gates for his arrest in his own home. A dangerous impasse had been arrived at and so, in a bid to cool tensions, Obama invited Gates and the officer to discuss it "over a beer" with himself and Joe Biden at the White House. The offer was accepted and the beer was drunk.

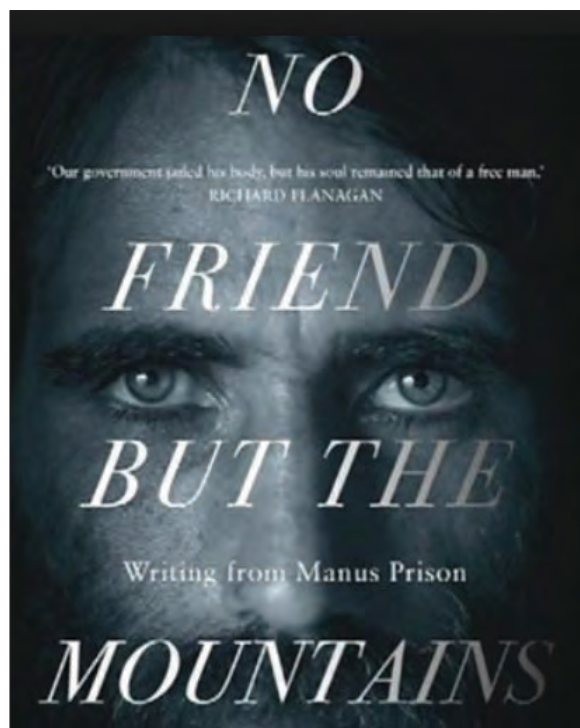
Professor Gates said afterwards that the officer was a likable guy when he wasn't arresting you and – although this incident made it abundantly clear to people of colour that Professor Gates was not in fact free to verbally protest his arrest after showing proof of ownership – the crisis nevertheless seemed to have been averted. The incident cost Obama six percentage points in popularity with white voters, though, and is seen as the beginning of a long decline in his standing with that group. We all now know where that decline in standing has led us.

What's the moral of this story? The moral is that for people of colour, even when you are an Emeritus Professor at Harvard, and even when you are President of the USA, you can't necessarily speak freely. You especially can't speak freely about race. And as always, it is wise to be very careful around white people; that goes double for white police with guns pointed at you in your own leafy suburban home.

## 2. What We Talk About When We Talk About Manus

In September 2011 the twin towers fell and, ever since, terror has been the headline in the West. For Aboriginal people, though, terror arrived in 1788. Lachlan Macquarie demanded the beheading of Aboriginal people in order to, and I quote, "strike terror into the hearts of the natives" in New South Wales, not very far from where we sit tonight.

If we focus on the best-publicised terrors of this



**Iranian refugee and writer Behrouz Boochani: held in detention on Manus Island for five years**

century, the Twin Towers and the wars of revenge that have followed September 11, we quickly observe the flight of citizens from affected countries. And so we have had the scourge of the Tampa incident, and are still mired in the deep shame of Australia's policy of deliberate cruelty to refugees.

It's no accident that many of the Syrian, Iranian and other refugees who have fled to Australian shores are now imprisoned in a distant place under the technical jurisdiction of another government. Even when our governments seek to lie and cover up the truth, enough of us care to not give in, to not stop talking about the abuses of innocent fellow humans under our watch.

Behrouz Boochani has written *No Friend But the Mountains*, about the five years he's been in jail just for being a refugee. The book, as I'm sure you all know, was written one text at a time on a mobile phone, since any paper copy would have been destroyed by guards. He is not free to leave Manus Island. He is not free to speak, or to write. Nor are workers in these places. Boochani has written of one camp worker who resigned.

He says, "When she witnessed instances of suicide and self-harm she would immediately go to the Salvation Army office to notify them. During those times they were warned about talking to the media; they were told not to talk to any journalist or media organisation about the situation in the Manus prison camp."

She told Behrouz she remembered the warning she received about speaking out and what would happen

to staff if they did. She said the strongest memory she had was a feeling of desperation, helplessness to do something about what she had seen while she was working there. She said she had a hopeless realisation that there was nothing she could do to help.

Because for all their championing of so-called free speech, the government has actively attacked NGOs who speak out. Our government has tried desperately to kill the information flow that underpins Australian goodwill towards refugees: it has tried to paint the refugees as undeserving of care, or ordinary human empathy.

As an Aboriginal person, I know well what it feels like to be on the end of such dehumanising government propaganda. This means that what we talk about when we talk about Manus is often of very little of substance. A public servant, Michaela Banerji talked about Manus, and our government sacked her for it. Banerji took the Federal Government to court and she won compensation for unfair dismissal. The Appeals Tribunal overturned a decision by the Commonwealth insurer to deny her workers compensation. During the tribunal's deliberations, it referred to the Australian Public Service (APS) guidelines: "APS employees have the same right to freedom of expression as other members of the community, subject to legitimate public interests."

The Tribunal went on to liken Commonwealth efforts to restrict anonymous comments from public servants as resembling George Orwell's "thought crime".

You might think, great, the democratic safeguards triumphed. The rule of law protected her free speech. But it took Michaela Banerji five years to get a result. That is, for five years the same government which bleats piously to us about free speech when it comes to the far-right attacking Aboriginals or Muslims or immigrants, or LGBTI people, fought this Australian woman trying to exert her right to free speech from her home in Canberra.

And the government hasn't changed its spots, despite sustained pressure from the Australian public. Even as the refugee policy is increasingly on the nose, Greens senator Nick McKim was refused entry to Nauru just a few short weeks ago. So that's what we talk about when we talk about Manus. Not celebrating human rights. Not the welcoming of new citizens to build new futures here, safe from the wars we played a part in creating. But the torture of children, and the gross hypocrisy of those in power, for whom free speech is nothing more than an empty platitude to be trotted out when its expedient and ignored when it isn't.

### 3. Are You From Mexico?

When Trump was elected I thought, here we go again. I grew up under Joh (Bjelke-Petersen, Queensland's longest serving Premier) and life in a police state is still quite normal to me in fundamental ways, especially as a blackfella for whom not that all that much has necessarily changed.

I thought, though, that Trump might be gone



**Left: Writer Lionel Shriver “sees the right of white people to continue to dominate the public discourse as natural, and inalienable”. Right: Saudi Arabian writer Jamal Kashoggi murdered in Saudi consulate because of his editorial opinions.**

within the year. How wrong I was. I also thought that the history of the USA being a refuge for immigrants, and the presence of many Jewish people in the major institutions of the US, would mean that the Jewish community would be relatively insulated from the rise of the far-right. I was stunned to see anti-Semitic brackets appearing around the names of Jewish public figures in print. I was equally astounded at Trump’s behaviour on Holocaust Day last year when he literally didn’t mention the Shoah. Or Jews. In 2018 we can read headlines in the Washington Post saying ‘Trump’s America Is not a Safe Place for Jews’.

Before the intensifying of attacks on the mainstream media, Jews, and African-Americans though, Trump and his crew of far-right bullies had turned first to easier targets – the Mexicans, the Muslims, and the undocumented immigrants.

The first target of Trumpian policy in government was legal immigration from majority-Muslim countries. An Iranian-Australian colleague of mine was caught up in this racial attack, stranded at an American airport with no idea what was happening. An educated, articulate woman my own age, she must have found it terrifying and bewildering.

Like most observers on the Left, I was deeply angered at the speed with which the old civil order had shifted in the US. Free speech has long been used as weasel words by the Right to undermine democracy, but Trump fast took it to a whole other level. And let’s not forget that Trump, that warrior of free speech, that crusader against so-called political correctness, has written in his autobiography of giving his Grade Two music teacher a black eye. Just let that sink in a moment. He characterised that incident in the book not as some kind of childhood psychopathy or pathology, but rather as “a tendency to stand up and make my opinions known in a very forceful way.”

Trump’s exhortations to his base since being nominated by the Republican party have included

the following statements:

- February 1, 2016, in Iowa: “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously. Okay? Just knock the hell. I promise you I will pay for the legal fees. I promise.”
- February 22 in Nevada: “I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They’d be carried out on a stretcher, folks. It’s true. ... I’d like to punch him in the face, I’ll tell you.”
- March 9 in North Carolina: “We had some people, some rough guys... And they started punching back. It was a beautiful thing. I mean, they started punching back. ... In the good old days, this doesn’t happen because they used to treat them very, very rough. And when they protested once, you know, they would not do it again so easily. But today, they walk in and they... get away with murder, because we’ve become weak.”
- February 29 in Virginia: “Get him out of here please. Get him out. Get him out. ... Are you from Mexico? Are you from Mexico? Huh? Are you from Mexico?”
- March 11 in Missouri, hours before the Chicago rally: “Part of the problem and part of the reason it takes so long is nobody wants to hurt each other anymore. Right? And they’re being politically correct the way they take them out. So it takes a little bit longer. And honestly, protesters...they realize that there are no consequences to protesting anymore. There used to be consequences. There are none anymore.”

Let’s just reflect on that one second. The problem in Trump’s America is that there are no consequences for protesters. And “nobody wants to hurt anybody anymore”. That’s a problem, apparently.

Trump had, of course, already targeted Mexicans



and Latinos very early in his campaign, painting them as rapists and criminals. "Free speech." "Political Correctness!" I knew, by the time Lionel Shriver came to Brisbane and mocked the humanity of Mexican-Americans, that her words were not free speech in any meaningful sense of the word. They were, rather, part of a deliberate shoring up of white supremacist discourse. Shriver is very much part of a movement that sees the right of white people to continue to dominate the public discourse as natural, and inalienable, and threatened when protested by people of colour. The world before Trump was changing for the better, and Shriver, a Republican, didn't like it.

I thought about the best way to counter her white supremacy. At one point I considered confronting Lionel Shriver with a spear in my hand in the Green Room at Brisbane Writers' Festival two years ago. I imagine that most of you in this room find that shocking. I would say in response that your naïveté is shocking. Your belief that the language of so-called "free speech", weaponised as a tool of white supremacy, doesn't kill actual Aboriginal people and other minorities on a regular basis, is what shocks me and my community, again and again and again.

We in the Aboriginal community have the world's highest recorded suicide rates. Those suicide rates arise in large part from our exposure to the toxic racism of mainstream Australia, which is fed by and delights in the abuse of so-called free speech to harass, belittle and torment us. Elijah Doughty, an Aboriginal teenager in Western Australia, was run down and murdered by a white man who took time off work to hunt him. White supremacy is real. Racism and hate speech have consequences – sometimes mortal consequences for us. That's why I took it up to Shriver, because I didn't want her or anyone else to think that they could come to Brisbane spouting racism in a deliberate and juvenile display of privilege, and not feel any personal blowback. There are tiny Latino children mouldering alone in detention in the USA tonight because of the policies Lionel Shriver implicitly supported in her keynote – the demonising of the relatively powerless by those with the privilege of amplified white supremacist speech. And what's good for the gander is certainly good for the goose. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

The thing about the chimera of free speech as it is currently misused, is that it isn't free at all. It costs us dearly. When Andrew Bolt distorts or simply ignores facts in his attacks on Aboriginal people, or when the Australian government lies about how many and what sort of refugees are locked up in offshore hell-holes, what kind of freedom is being protected? I see the results every week in my community: the trauma visited upon those who are subject to hate speech is real. The last thing that governments and the Right want is free speech, from Beijing, to Istanbul, to Canberra, to Washington.

Genuine free speech is a vital part of liberal democracy, and yet it is not unfettered. Before I wrote this talk I had two quotes in my mind about free speech – Voltaire's famous "I will defend to the death your right to say it" and the slave-owner Jefferson who said "The

freedom of the press cannot be limited without being lost."

I had struggled, believing that these two statements accurately summarised the arguments for free speech in the 21st century. My difficulty was the contrast between the state abuses that genuine free speech most definitely protects us from, against the serious and ongoing damage which hate speech does to my people. Imagine my surprise when I learned last month that free speech is not synonymous with a free-for-all. That hate speech doesn't qualify as free speech after all.

Genuine freedom of expression is an antidote to tyranny. We all know this. That's why governments and state actors all over the globe try to stop it. That's why Jamal Khashoggi is dead, hacked to pieces inside a Saudi consulate. That's why Aboriginal people here were routinely beaten and jailed for speaking our own languages, or protesting our genocide. And that's why multibillionaires like Rupert Murdoch and his like take very good care to control what media we have access to, to the degree they can exercise control.

Researching this talk, I found that contrary to the rhetoric we hear so often, free speech was never meant to be unlimited, nor allowed to descend into a vicious propaganda tool of the mega-wealthy. Researching the history of free speech, I was reminded that (philosophers John) Locke and (Jean Jacques) Rousseau both argued that we gain our civil rights in return for accepting the obligation to respect and defend the rights of others, giving up some freedoms to do so. I read Article 11 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen:

*The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.*

What does "defined by law mean" in the current political climate? Well, if we take US and Australian media law in this instance, we find that the idea of freedom of speech is subject to gross manipulation. It is abused by those with the money to distort and weaponise it in the interests of a far-Right agenda. As Yale Professor Jim Sleeper has argued, pseudo "free speech", which he calls "hollow speech" and "hostile speech", is an act of civic mindlessness, removed from all social responsibility. And worse, hollow speech is prosecuted by exactly those with an interest in denying genuine free speech to citizens. Sleeper draws our attention, rightly, to the money and the power behind the arguments for pseudo-free speech. He writes of the US media: "Progressives seem to have forgotten that 'that immunity favours people who are wealthy enough to acquire these assets'. " They've settled for a "'trickle down' theory of civil liberties," in which "the big victors are the rich and powerful, but the rather pathetic hope is that just enough protection will trickle down to prevent the government from entirely annihilating the left."

Sleeper quotes Seidman, "the real control is...

exercised not by speech producers, but by speech aggregators and amplifiers, who are themselves protected by the First Amendment" because they present their "platforms" as "the press."

Breitbart News is exactly one such platform. Sleeper also goes on to write about how Canada legislates free speech differently, and better.

Which brings me to a disturbing and somewhat baffling ignorance about the connection between hollow speech and white supremacy. When (former Trump White House chief strategist) Steve Bannon came to Australia he was feted by our media, including the ABC. Yet according to Michael Wolff in *Fire and Fury*, the airport chaos in January last year – and the legitimate terror and bewilderment that was visited on my Iranian friend and many tens of thousands of other passengers that resulted from the Trump "Muslim Ban" – was wholly deliberate. They wanted to see chaos. The ban had been crafted by a small policy team of immigration hardliners within the Trump administration, primarily Bannon, and it caught the bureaucrats by complete surprise. When asked by White House staff why the ban had been implemented so haphazardly, and on a busy Friday when airports would be congested, Bannon reportedly said to Wolff "that was the point".

They did it that way, they targeted Muslim travellers "...so the snowflakes would show up at the airports and riot," Bannon said, according to Wolff. Just exactly who are the terrorists, again?

It would take an astonishing level of naiveté to believe that the authoritarians in power, men and women prepared to incite violence at American political rallies, and in airports on the basis of race and religion, that these people, or their Australian counterparts, have any kind of serious commitment to genuine free speech. Yet that is what we are asked to believe, again and again. I refuse to be played as a patsy in this dangerous game. I urge you to be similarly sceptical. For scepticism is sadly lacking, when it comes to these kinds of weasel words.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me – most of us heard that as children. But try being a 12-year-old Murri boy in Queensland hearing a drip-feed of racist abuse day in and day out for years on end, despite the best efforts of parents and teachers to control the toxic environment you find yourself in. Try being that child, pushed to the brink of suicide by the racist language of other children, aimed at you as surely as any stick or stone is ever aimed at anyone. Try being one of the thousands of Aboriginal teenagers who will abandon school this year due to racist taunts, and leave early, under-educated, and often illiterate, and find their ways to juvie and then prison as surely as water flows downhill. Try being a LGBTI child facing similar abuse. Don't tell me words will never hurt us.

I want to mention one last thing. You'll remember that Professor Gates was arrested in his own suburban house by a white cop with a gun; I hope you also

realise that being in the presence of a white cop with a gun is a very, very dangerous situation for any Black person and in particular for a Black male in the USA. But cops with guns aren't the only dangers for Black American Professors in the 21st century speech. White civilians can be as dangerous.

If you hadn't heard of Professor Gates, I imagine most of you have heard of Professor Cornell West, who came to Australia last year on tour. Professor West is another distinguished Black academic, from Harvard. Last year, almost eight years exactly after the Gates incident, Professor West took part in a counter-protest against torch wielding neo-Nazis in Charlottesville. The event saw American neo-Nazi's chanting "blood not soil", and "you will not replace us", and "Jew will not replace us". This is the mob Trump described as "including some very fine people", by the way.

I have no doubt these Nazis with their burning torches believed that as they chanted these vile things that they were exercising their right to free speech. According to an interview with the website *democracynow.com*, Professor West had gone bravely to the counter-protest with the intention of getting arrested and drawing attention to the counter-protest. He had also gone along to hear a sermon given by a friend, the Rev Dr Traci Blackmon, when he and many others found themselves held hostage inside a church by the Nazis. The progressives were trapped and they were literally outnumbered 10 to one by Nazis.

Professor Cornell told *democracynow* that "people he was with that night were attacked with swung torches, pepper spray and lighter fluid... You had a number of the courageous students, of all colours, at the University of Virginia who were protesting against the neo-fascists... The neo-fascists had their own ammunition. And this is very important to keep in mind, because the police, for the most part, pulled back. The next day, for example, those 20 of us who were standing, many of us clergy, we would have been crushed like cockroaches if it were not for the anarchists and the anti-fascists who approached, over 300, 350 anti-fascists. We just had 20. And we're singing This Little Light of Mine.... you know, when... the anti-fascists, and then, crucial, the anarchists, because they saved our lives, actually. We would have been completely crushed."

When I was putting the finishing touches on this talk the other night, I went, for my own interest, to Google the name of the young Aboriginal ex-serviceman who was murdered in Brisbane last July. I Googled these words: Brisbane, murder, knife, aboriginal, army. And what came up on the screen was not his name but rather a Wikipedia list – a list of massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia, beginning in April 1794 at Toongabbie, where an armed party of settlers pursued a group of Aborigines who were taking corn from the settler's farms. Party. Settlers. Pursued. It sounds better than a nigger hunt, doesn't it? Better than attempted genocide. Type in today's murder and this is what comes up. The events of 1794 throw a long shadow in our country.

I lied to you earlier; I didn't write this talk at





**Professor Cornell West joined anti-fascist protesters in Charlottesville and feared for his life.**

my desk in Mullumbimby, because I don't live in Mullumbimby. I don't tell anyone where I live anymore. I live with a heightened level of caution these days. Do I live in 1794 in Toongabbie? No. Is it 1938 in Europe? Is it 2017 in Charlottesville? No, it isn't that, either. Are we Mexican? Are we Mexican? Huh? Are we? No. But if we are Black, or Jewish, or LGBTI, or Muslim, it can often feel a lot like we are. The swastika tattoo projected on this screen that you have been looking at for the last few minutes is not taken from Charlottesville 12 months ago. Nor is it from Warsaw in 1938. It is the Facebook profile picture of the bloke who pulled out a machete in Brisbane in July and stabbed an Aboriginal brother to death in the street. It's the Facebook profile of someone whose online friends ordered me three months ago to stop sharing the swastika image with his name on it, and to stop talking about neo-Nazis as a real and present danger in Queensland. These extremists told me that the alleged murderer has a lot of friends and those friends are "very loyal to him" and that I was "seriously just asking for trouble." I blocked those people on Facebook, and despite my hatred of firearms, I walked into a gun shop that week for the first time in three decades.

I'm increasingly cautious around white Australians because a small minority of them are neo-Nazis,

fanatics who want to maim me, or possibly kill me. And a majority of white Australians are too naive and too closeted by their white privilege to understand this. (These are the sort of people who, when asked if Mein Kampf should still be published after the death of six million Jews and god knows how many others, reply with statements like "it's a grey area.") And to conclude, if you ask that minority of far-right fanatics who want to hurt me, or at the very least silence me with terror, they'll tell you they are true blue patriots, passionate about Australia, and that they love their country and its freedoms. They'll tell you that they despise political correctness. They'll very likely tell you that people like me should be put down, like animals. And I'm 100 per cent sure that, just like Lionel Shriver and Donald Trump and Steve Bannon and Andrew Bolt, and all the other bleating reactionary hypocrites who want the freedom to be openly racist without any negative consequences whatsoever, that they are infatuated with, that they simply adore, both the principle and the practice of "free speech."

# A passionate and committed life

The esteemed Australian poet Judith Rodriguez, who died last November, was described by her friend, novelist and poet David Malouf, as “a boldly independent woman with a warm heart and a cold eye, speaking up and out in both a public and private way...increasingly politically engaged in the conflicts and contradictions and comforts of family living.”

The life and work of Judith was remembered at a celebration in her honour at the Faculty of Arts & Social Services, the University of Technology, Sydney, on the eve of *The Day of Imprisoned Writers* when David Malouf launched her last book of poetry, *The Feather Boy and Other Poems*. Judith was unable to attend due to ill health. She died seven days later. Three months later she was celebrated at a memorial service at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne.

Judith has been described as a fierce campaigner for social justice, a lover of the written word, an inspiring poet, and a true internationalist who lived a life of commitment and service both within and beyond many borders.

David Malouf said *The Feather Boy* offers a “rich picture of how Judith’s later work developed and deepened.” He commented that the poems demonstrate how “she has remained for over 60 years one of the most significant voices of her generation.”

Judith Rodriguez was born in Perth, Western Australia on 13 February, 1936, but grew up in Brisbane. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Queensland and later completed a Master of Arts at Cambridge University.

She taught English at La Trobe University from 1969 until 1985 and in 1986 was writer-in-residence at Rollins College, Florida, an experience commemorated in her ninth collection *Floridian Poems* published in 1986. Three years later she accepted a lectureship in writing at Victoria College, which in 1993 became part of Deakin University, where she taught until 2003. That year, she collaborated with Australian composer Moya Henderson on the opera *Lindy*, about Lindy Chamberlain, which premiered at the Sydney Opera House.

Judith Rodriguez’s first poetry collection was published in 1962 as part of *Four Poets*, the others

being fellow Brisbane poets David Malouf, Rodney Hall and Don Maynard. Her collection *Water Life* (1976) won the inaugural South Australian Biennial Literature Prize in 1978, while one of her most highly-regarded collections, *Mudcrab at Gambaro’s* (1980) received both the Sydney PEN Golden Jubilee Award for Poetry and the Artlook/Shell Literary Award in 1981. In 1994 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia, for services to literature, and also



---

Judith Rodriguez: devoted to human rights and social justice

---

**There are no words for this**

Let the young man hang.  
Let the children lose their trust  
Let them despair and run amok  
And send them back.

Let the woman lose hold of her child  
On the deep, among known bodies.  
Let oceans take as flotsam  
These lives.

1835: a captain — saved—  
leaves his shipful of women  
to drown off Boulogne, not one  
alive, taken off—

his orders to land them  
in New South Wales/ What's changed?  
Let oceans take them or slavers  
Or years damn them

It's simple: they're different. Plus.  
Illegals, they choose their fates:  
There are words for it—human waste  
And the words for us?

received the FAW Christopher Brennan Award.

David Malouf read her poem "There Are No Words for This". Other poems from *The Feather Boy* were read by novelist Debra Adelaide and poets Robert Adamson and Adam Aitken.

Judith Rodriguez was a passionate supporter of PEN. She joined PEN Melbourne in 1984 and was President in 1990–91, edited the newsletter from 1991 to 1995, and was Vice-President of PEN Melbourne for over 15 years. While at Rollins College in Florida, Judith attended her first PEN International Congress in New York. From the 1995 PEN International Congress in Australia, Judith was PEN Melbourne's Congress delegate and reported on most of the congresses until 2017.

She was elected a Member-at-Large of the PEN International Board from 2001 to 2006, a member of the Search Committee from 2006, and its Chair 2008–2009, re-elected and Chair 2009–2012. In 2017 she was elected an International Vice-President of PEN.

Jennifer Clement, PEN International President, said: "The news of Judith's death is not just heartbreaking for PEN and its members, but also for me personally. I have



---

**Untitled (1978)**

lost a dear friend and confidant. Judith dedicated her life to the promotion of literature, and the defence of the voiceless. While we mourn this monumental loss, her legacy will continue through her extraordinary poetry and through PEN's work for years to come."

Carles Torner, PEN International Executive Director, said: "Her poems stay with me for days and months." He admired her sense of humour and deep commitment to PEN's mission. "When we were debating about campaigns for writers in prison or forced to exile, or about linguistic rights, her presence in the room was always giving us serenity, hope, wisdom."

Writer and human rights advocate and Judith's friend, Arnold Zable described her "as a gem, with many facets. A poet, musician and artist, she was also an activist and advocate. As an activist, her outlook was global. She was an internationalist. A citizen of the world. A woman of warmth and good cheer, she loved a joke, and loved emailing them to friends. But she was hard as diamonds in her support of the persecuted and the displaced."

He says that for a quarter of a century they sat at the same table at PEN committee meetings. "Judith often rushed in, after another commitment: perhaps a teaching engagement, a gathering of the Shakespeare society, a meeting with a poetry group. Immediately, it was down to business. The nitty-gritty. No nonsense. No fuss. Has there ever been a poet who could decipher the language of constitutions with such ease? A poem one day. A formal document the next. Judith could do both."

According to poet Jennifer Strauss, Judith believed in the power of education to open up people's lives. "She also understood that poverty, which lies at the root of so many forms of disadvantage, is a major form of oppression in that it destroys people's potential by



limiting access to the best education of which they are capable, and in doing so denying them all too often things like understanding one's situation in the world, being able to articulate one's ideas fully and defend them publicly, finding decent work, the things that nourish personal autonomy and a degree of control over chaos."

She says she thought of Judith when, at a recent exhibition of works by Escher, she read that Dutch graphic designer Escher loved these methods because they imposed order over chaos. "It seems to me that she was also striving to impose order, in this case over the ethical, social and individual chaos created by injustice and poverty.

"On the other side of that coin, she gave such pleasure through poetry, another cause she championed. The obvious example of this lies in her work as poetry editor of *Meanjin* (1979–82) and Penguin Australia (1988–97). In that role she was determined to recognise and support the voices of new poets, who so often find it difficult to break into establishment publication. Less obvious perhaps (but of great importance to me) was the way she championed by example the cause of women poets in the early 1970s."

Jennifer Strauss wonders if that sounds a bit over the top: women poets needing a champion? So she invites us to name some major woman poets of the 1960s. Judith Wright certainly. The incomparable Gwen Harwood?

"Gwen Harwood had written poetry for many years, and her first poem was published in *Meanjin* in 1944, but her work did not start appearing regularly in journals and books until the 1960s. Her first collection, titled *Poems*, was published in 1963, followed in 1968 by *Poems Volume Two*. But note that some of the most acclaimed of those collected poems had needed a male pseudonym to get past the male dragons at the gate of first publication."

She says domestic verse was permissible for women, but "domestic" from a reviewer was both a pat and a put down. Venture out to the political, as Wright did with *The Two Fires* in 1955 and a distinguished male poet and academic will regret that you have abandoned womanly concerns and are at risk of being that worst of all things a woman can be, a shrew.

"When *Nu-Plastic Fanfare Red* burst into my consciousness with a clarion call in 1973, I felt dizzy with delight. Here was a woman poet who didn't give a damn about how she was supposed to write, would be opinionated about public issues if she wanted to or fill poems with 'domestic' detail if she wanted to. Because for her the domestic world was seamlessly joined to the world of 'great questions' and she didn't care if the Sydney school of New Poetry considered asking the latter a no-no."

Among other acts of assertion, Jennifer Strauss demonstrated that the experience of mothering, not motherhood as an abstraction but living as a mother

situated specifically in occasion, time and place, was as much a fit topic for poetry as any other.

"I'd not found poems like that in my journeys through Australian poetry, but they were what I wanted to write at that time – and Judith showed me it could be done." And so she cited *Water A Thousand Feet Deep*.

Judith Rodriguez is survived by her children Sibila, Ensor, Rebeca, and Zoë Rodríguez and her second husband, Tom Shapcott, whom she married in 1982.

Sandra Symons

### Water a thousand feet deep (for Ensor)

I stand washing up, the others have gone out walking. Being at the best, I am homing in on the worst: to choke in indifferent waves, over ears in ocean — skim of earth's sweat — what immensities of salt fear drench us and tighten — with children to save or lose, the choice, as from old gods, which to consign to destruction: how to riddle out waste and defiance? what line cast?

what crying hope hold to? for there is no deciding, it acts itself, the damning sequence secret as origin and universe, life as an improvisation on terrors ...

the tearaway undertow. But I never lose grasp on my son or stop swilling plates and setting them to drain;

till blatantly the door. The boy ran ahead of the rest and is home. I let him in panting, he trails me insisting Hey, Mum, so close, there is so much floating known here between us, have we trod the same waters? Hey, Mum, is there water a thousand feet deep? Yes, I say, emptying the sink, and give him figures, the soundings of ocean trenches, which are after all within measure. As if in the context of fathoms he'd made a mistake and it mattered.

# Indigenous stories and storytellers may be lost in the digital age

How do you maintain the storytelling traditions and the spoken literatures of an oral culture in the digital era, asks Daniel Browning, journalist and radio broadcaster who produces and presents *Awaye!*, the Indigenous art and culture program on ABC Radio National.

**W**es Marne, 96, has been telling stories, he says, “since Moses played fullback for Jerusalem”. But this Aboriginal elder, long resident in western Sydney where there is a high concentration of Indigenous people, worries about the future of storytelling.

“You can talk as much as you want,” he says, “but if no one’s going to listen...”

As our networked devices ping with diverse global stories told from multiple perspectives, there is a risk that certain voices might be drowned out or lost completely in the noise.

Uncle Wes, born in 1922 on his Bigambul country in southern Queensland, learnt the art of storytelling around the campfire and in the bush listening to his revered grandfather, who he describes as “a master of the spear and the woomera”.

An initiated man who danced at the last great gathering of the border tribes in the early 20th century, his traditional name was a Bigambul term for “white water man”.

When he was nine, Uncle Wes and his family moved south on to the oddly named Deadbird mission, near Ashford on the NSW northern tablelands.

The former drover, fencer, miner, tannery worker and Korean War veteran came to Sydney in the early 1960s.

Uncle Wes remembers when he was first asked to speak in NSW public schools 16 years ago, the invitation came with a warning: no talk of massacres or genocide or stolen children.

“Only dreamtime stories”, he says.

Over the past two decades there has been a wave of first-person storytelling in the form of life writing, with small independent publishers such as the Aboriginal-owned Magabala Books and the UQP imprint Black Australian Writers fostering a “new” Indigenous literature.

Follow *The Rabbit-Proof Fence* by the late Doris Pilkington Garimara bridged the gulf of national



Alexis Wright

forgetfulness and denial in a universal story of homecoming.

Speaking to a Fairfax journalist in 2002, Doris Pilkington concluded that “this forgetting, the absence of memory” was one of the biggest legacies of the stolen generations.

Perhaps the finest but least conventional ripple in that wave of Aboriginal life writing is *Tracker* by Alexis Wright.

Although published in book form, *Tracker* could still claim to be a “spoken” literary work.

A political history as much as a biography, the “story” of the land rights campaigner and Aboriginal statesman Tracker Tilmouth is told through multiple voices and from multiple angles, forensically transcribed from field recordings by the author herself.

While there is a wealth of Indigenous life writing, what of the spoken word?

The spoken literature of an oral culture – such as dreaming stories, language and oral history – represents a body of cultural knowledge that will disappear



Uncle Wes Marne



Doris Pilkington Garimara

without our intervention.

*These stories are the collective memory of hundreds of generations and can unlock what it means to be on this continent, at this moment in time.*

*Digital technology can empower individuals and communities to tell their story.*

But Wes Marne fears the stories that his grandfather told him will go with him, because there is no one to pass them on to.

“They don’t want to listen to culture. It’s too busy, there are many other distractions out there.

“Instead of listening to a story, they’ll go down to McDonalds and join the boys and the mob down there. Or walk the streets all night. And there’s no future there”.

Like a finely tuned musical instrument, the human voice is capable of an extraordinary range of emotional tones.

When we listen closely to the voice we can hear subtle variations in tone, a lingering breath, an editorial cough or a sudden inhale.

There is an entire vocabulary of non-verbal communication – posture, eye and hand movements can be as expressive as the spoken word.

But there is something special about being in the presence of a storyteller as they yarn.

It is not enough to just simply record the stories and deposit them in a library for future generations – because the telling itself is part of the story.

## A book swap that helps close the gap

The Indigenous Literacy Foundation has just announced the launch of its 2019 Great Book Swap project that aims to raise awareness of social justice and inequalities and raise funds for its literacy programs operating in more than 280 remote communities.

This year the Foundation hopes to engage 35,000 students across Australia to help raise \$350,000 in order to send 35,000 new books to remote Indigenous communities.

“This year all participants can learn a little more about Indigenous cultures representing Walmajarri, Arabana, Tiwi and Kriol culture and languages,” says Karen Williams, Executive Director of the Foundation.

At Numbulwar School on the remote western coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory, every student is offered a choice of a book from the Book Supply program to take home.

Both Wubuy and Kriol are spoken in the community, with English being the language used at school, where every year each class teacher holds an afternoon tea for their students’ families. This enables them to meet everyone — but the key part of the event is the handing out of books.



# Seeking the alchemy between storyteller and young reader

When she was a child, Jennifer Rowe says she always knew she wanted to be a writer. Now the acclaimed author is committed to the development of literacy in children.

Writing under her own name and the pseudonyms Emily Rodda and Mary-Anne Dickinson, she has published more than 100 books, most for children, and sold more than 20 million internationally. When her daughter was seven, she would tell her stories at night before bed. Then Jennifer thought she should write them down. So it began.

She says her ideas come from everywhere every day. "My son said 'You're interested in such small things, Mum'. And I am."

However, she says she thought about *Deltora Quest* (her most popular children's series) for two years before she started. "I thought I could write a series of short books that would tell a story in a bite for children." She says she had no idea the *Deltora* series would sell so well and no idea it would sell overseas.

She remembers coming across a group of boys in a school who were immersed in computer games and recognising they were lively and full of intelligence but not focused on books.

"I thought, 'I'm going to show you that you can get more fun out of a book because it will be about your own imagination'."

She says after the third *Deltora* books was published, she started to get "badly written, badly spelled letters on grubby bits of paper".

"And I thought, 'I've done it'. These were the kids I was really hoping for."

Often she would meet them in book signing lines in bookshops and libraries. "They were often boys although sometimes girls. I met some (fans) who are now at university doing literary courses."

Jennifer Rowe says her youngest children were not so interested in the books in the house. "I realised children like my son needed fairly complicated, exciting stories told in simple terms, stories that included word games, brain teasers, codes (as featured in the *Deltora* stories). I had noticed the folklore tropes in the video games played by my children. I recognised that children in the eight to 12 age group were into high fantasy."

And so it was high fantasy that the writer went for, and fairly short chapters that ended with a cliffhanger.

Jennifer Rowe was awarded a Companion of the Order of Australia in this year's Australia Day Awards for



Writer Jennifer Rowe: developing interaction between storyteller and reader is "a sort of alchemy"

"eminent service to literature as an author, particularly in the children's fiction...". She says, "I'm so glad that by inference the whole field of children's literature ... is recognised by this. It's often disregarded, underrated, thought of as not being very important but in fact to me, it's vital."

She was raised with two younger brothers on Sydney's north shore. Her father was Jim Oswin, the founding general manager of ATN7 in Sydney. After school, she studied for her Masters of Arts in English Literature at the University of Sydney. After graduation she got a job as assistant editor at Paul Hamlyn Publishing, and later moved to Angus and Robertson Publishers where she remained for 14 years, working her way up to the role as Publisher.

During this time she began writing children's books, getting up at 4am to find quiet time to work before the bustle and demands of the day began. Her first book, *Something Special*, was published in 1984 and won the Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year for Younger Readers Award, an award she has won five times.

In 1988 she became Editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly*. She left the Weekly in 1992 to



Reading stories to children fosters literacy. Image Shutterstock.

become a full-time writer.

She says that as a child she was a great reader but there were not many books in the family home, and neither her parents nor her brother were keen readers. “Mum read books to me when I was very little, but once I had taught myself to read, which happened quite early, that stopped. I didn’t mind. Our house was always full of stories, told or sung rather than written. I would always ask for books as gifts, though, and I belonged to several libraries, so that I was able to get quite a few new books to read each week. My grandmother had kept my mother’s old books in a cupboard under her stove, and whenever I stayed with her I had a feast of Ethel Turner and LM Montgomery.”

Like her brothers, her own sons were not great readers at first. “My second child was bored by books, he did not read for fun until I gave him a ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ book, from the bestselling interactive series where the reader decides the outcome of the story. Within a year he was reading, books like *The Hobbit* and anything by Roald Dahl. He’s remained an avid reader ever since.”

According to researchers Louise Phillips, of the University of Queensland,

and Pauline Harris, of the University of South Australia, children learn to be literate in a variety of ways in their homes, communities and schools.

They cite recent research that indicates there are 10 main ways of engaging in literacy-building activities – print and information, communication and entertainment technologies, arts and crafts, making marks on paper, screens and other surfaces like sand and concrete, reading and creating images, and talking, telling and acting out stories that were real or imagined.

Dr Phillips and Professor Harris point to the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research that has found daily reading to young children improves schooling outcomes, regardless of family background and home environment, and the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) that indicates a strong correlation between parents reading and storytelling with children in the early years and reading achievement at age 15, with those students performing one to two years above their peers.

However, it is not just being read to that matters. The adult-child interactions are also very important. The researchers, along with Jennifer Rowe, say there are practical things parents can do to encourage broad literacy and learning in children such as reading aloud to children, even newborns and sharing stories at mealtime since oral storytelling provides a bridge to written stories.

Above all, as Dr Phillips and Professor Harris say, the experience should be enjoyable, playful, and encourage children’s active involvement. Literacy should be engaging for children, not a chore.

Jennifer Rowe puts it this way: “Try not to talk about reading like it’s broccoli, something good for you. I don’t care if children read comics or the backs of cereal boxes. It’s a matter of finding the right book, one they will enjoy.”

One children’s book she had written about computer games and ogres was still in manuscript form when she started reading it to her sons. It was *Power and Glory* about a young boy who, on getting a new video game for his birthday, is set to blast the bad guys.

She describes this sort of interaction between storyteller and reader as a sort of alchemy. “I find it very fascinating.”

**Sandra Symons**

# A duty to be the voice of the voiceless

Before the 91st Academy Awards ceremony on 24 February, PEN America's Eurasia Project Director Polina Kovaleva spoke to Academy Award-nominated Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland on artistic freedom, the international film community, and her advice for young filmmakers. They also discussed the importance of advocating for censored or imprisoned artists, including Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, Russian theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov, and Turkish film directors Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioglu.

**POLINA KOVALEVA:** Your movies tend to contain political statements, exploring themes ranging from feminism to ecology to religion, etc. Do you believe politics are intrinsic to artistic expression, and what role do you feel political repression plays in that relationship between art and politics?

**AGNIESZKA HOLLAND:** I don't think that filmmakers or artists in general have to be political, that it is a duty—it depends on the situation, on the temperament, on the way they see the world. I think that you have to be free in your artistic expression, and being free also means that you may avoid political issues. But I also think that the time comes when it is difficult to be only an artist, or only a filmmaker, and also be a citizen and to have to see what's going on in the world and react to that. Of course, it's my personal opinion. I will be certain to not dictate to other people what they have to do. I think this dangerously flies towards propaganda, even very noble propaganda, but still propaganda. I personally am interested in political issues. They are important to me; I see how much they influence human life, and for me it's totally natural to make political subjects the subjects of my movies.

**KOVALEVA:** I'm also interested in the American film and literary community, which is very influential, it's not a secret. What responsibility do they have in speaking out against issues of censorship in foreign countries? How would you suggest that filmmakers, screenwriters, and others can be involved in advocating for freedom of speech even if they themselves might not have experienced censorship directly in their own country?



---

Agnieszka Holland

**HOLLAND:** Filmmakers and artists and writers altogether have a bigger duty towards society than just ordinary people, because they have to feel and see more than somebody who is doing another job, whatever it is. And when you see something you have to react. So, in times like now, when the wave of populism is growing and different kinds of totalitarian regimes strengthen, the filmmakers or writers have to react. This is a moment when we cannot just lock ourselves in our comfort zone, in our bubble, and believe that we have to speak only on what concerns us. I think that in times like now, we have to be very vigilant and very careful, and try to point out any case



of human and artistic rights violated. Because we have the voice, and we have the audience. And this voice and this audience put us in a responsible position. We cannot neglect this responsibility.

"This is a moment when we cannot just lock ourselves in our comfort zone, in our bubble, and believe that we have to speak only on what concerns us."

Take, for example, those filmmakers who are imprisoned, like Oleg Sentsov in Russia, or if they are on trial, like two documentary filmmakers in Turkey right now. They are on trial and they are at risk to go to prison because they did the film! The point of the accusations for the Turkish regime is the film. It's not only censorship. It's more than that. They not only banned the film but they want to imprison the filmmakers. I cannot imagine that European and American filmmakers, living in more or less free countries, and not experiencing this kind of treatment, they will not react. We have to support those who are persecuted—for me, that is absolutely clear. If we are not doing it, we are just, I don't know how to tell it, we are just terribly selfish. We are not exercising our responsibility.

**KOVALEVA:** Thank you for mentioning Oleg Sentsov. I would also name Kirill Serebrennikov who is under house arrest in Moscow under ridiculous embezzlement charges. Do you think that the American and European film communities can effectively collaborate on advocacy actions to make a difference in these cases, even when confronted with a regime as intransigent and resistant to international pressure as Putin's?

**HOLLAND:** European filmmakers have been doing it from the very beginning. We are frustrated that with our voices we are unable to change Oleg's situation or Kirill's situation, but we feel that at least what we can do is to not forget them and to express our opinion and our support every time we have any kind of occasion, at all festivals, galas, or awards. It is in giving media interviews, in reminding about them on social media, and of course in supporting them financially. So this is the minimum duty we have, and it is our duty to be the voice of the voiceless.

But when I tried to get this kind of support in the American Academy, it didn't pique their interest. It would be good to remind them that their voices can be heard, and that if they have this problem, then we, the filmmakers of the world, would do everything possible to give them our support. It's something in this vocation, something in cinema, which is very international. We are all connected somehow. American cinema is very connected with European cinema and with cinema from other places. Alfonso Cuarón is Mexican, as are Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro G. Iñárritu, Pawlikowski is Polish, Lanthimos is Greek. We are working in all countries, we are exchanging ideas, and we have to also be aware that we are some kind of family and we have to support each other. However, I don't think that we have to express our opinion only if it concerns a filmmaker. I think that we have to defend

freedom of speech or fight against censorship and fight against the violation of human rights as soon as we are aware of it, as filmmakers, as artists, as citizens—as human beings.

**KOVALEVA:** Thank you, Agnieszka, for these beautiful words. My last question is about the contemporary response to some of your films in Poland. For example, your branding as a "targowiczanin," or traitor, and the response to Spoor (Pokot), which was received by many journalists as anti-Poland, anti-Christian, and anti-ecology. Has it affected the way you produce art, the way you view other artists, or how you view your country?

**HOLLAND:** I am criticising the current government and the current regime in Poland openly. It means there's a lot of things that I don't approve of, and that's in the first place the destruction of the judiciary system in the country. They destroyed the checks and balances—it's in a state practically of not existing or not functioning. The fact that they took over public media and turned it into some propaganda tool, that they tried to intervene in the cultural institutions, like museums or theatres, and they tried to change not only the heads of those institutions, but the content of those institutions according with their ideological purposes. It means they are changing history. They try to dictate what you have to write for the stage, and what you don't. What concerns the cinema is money, and as a result politicians and national governments are using the tool of economic censorship. It means those who they like receive grants, and those who they don't do not receive them.

I cannot personally complain though: I received a grant for my last film, which was screened in Berlin recently. But I have been criticised by officials, by the minister of culture, for example, he several times has said pretty harsh words about me. But, you know, I don't care so much. And yes, they try to discourage people, and many people who don't have my freedom and my position internationally. They are afraid to say openly what they think. It's important to note though that we are not in the situation of Russia, we are not in the situation of Turkey. This kind of unpleasant relationship between the power and the filmmaker or artist is unfortunate and it can complicate our lives, but it is not the same thing as being put on trial.

**KOVALEVA:** In this sense, what would your advice be for these young filmmakers who don't have the same international acclaim as you?

**HOLLAND:** My advice will be—always be yourself. I don't think that fear is good inspiration for a filmmaker. I don't think you can be a good artist if you are not free at least with yourself. I am not giving the advice that you have to be courageous, or you have to sign this letter, or you have to express openly this opinion. I don't think I have the right to do so. But I can show the example, I can act in some way and the people see it, and if they find it right and if they find it courageous, they can follow. I would like to be more the inspiration than somebody who is casting the rules.

# Corporate censorship is a serious, and mostly invisible, threat to publishing

When states suppress ideas, we condemn it.  
What should we do when companies do the same,  
asks American author and researcher Gabriel M. Schivone.

With some 687 million books sold in the U.S. in 2017, book-selling has been on the rise since taking a dive following the 2008 recession. Still, there's the odd politician, religious group, or police institution eager to advance an agenda by labelling a particular book persona non grata – or, since it's a book, "liber non grata."

In recent months, South Carolina's Charleston County Fraternal Order of Police vowed to "put a stop" to the sentiment behind Angie Thomas's young adult novel *The Hate U Give*, urging the book's banning from a summer reading list; the story follows a black teenage girl who takes up activism after a white police officer pulls over the car she rides in and brutally murders her childhood friend in front of her.

In November 2017 the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City demanded that an independent bookstore chain "publicly rescind their support for *P Is for Palestine*," an alphabet children's book highlighting Palestinian culture and liberation under Israeli occupation. Earlier that year Arkansas Rep. Ken Hendren proposed an ultimately defeated state legislature bill banning all writings published between 1959–2010 by radical historian Howard Zinn.

Invariably civil libertarians jump to the fray to condemn such measures, rightly, as censorship, like when the New Jersey ACLU challenged the state's prison system on its decision to restrict Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* from reaching prisoners' hands, leading to the ban's reversal in January 2018. Ironically in many cases, the censor's intended goal has the opposite effect, because book sales often increase under the threat of a ban, as happened in the Zinn-Hendren case and others throughout history. Mark Twain, always his own shrewd publicist, was thrilled when the Concord Public Library banned *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* weeks after publication, thanking them for the "generous action" that "doubled its sale" and swelled readership.

When state or civil authorities blacklist books, the act is correctly labelled censorship. But what is the word when parent corporations act out political or

ideological dissatisfaction by ordering their subsidiaries to snuff out information in the form of books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, movies? There isn't a word or phrase that fully captures this form of censorship, at least not a negative phrase.

On the other hand, it's not hard to call to mind examples of civil or government censorship, all perceived nefariously. Like me, you might think first of all the states that notoriously organised public book burnings – from Nazi Germany to South Africa. Next are the states throughout the world that continually ban books to try and stop offensive ideas from taking root in people's minds. In the US, this type of censorship is closer to home.

For example, the Tucson, Arizona public school district tried to terminate its astonishingly successful Mexican American studies program, which looked at history and art through the viewpoint of Mexican American contributions, on the basis that it encouraged "ethnic solidarity." (This is the actual phrase written into state law Arizona Revised Statutes 15-112 – "Prohibited courses and classes," under the subcategory of "enforcement.")

I've written elsewhere about how the "cultural genocide" committed by Arizona's state-wide ban on a partly Maya-based Mexican American studies (also Nahuatl-based) in high schools relates to the US-backed physical "acts of genocide," as defined by the UN, against Mayan groups in Guatemala in the early 1980s.

These state-directed book bannings and burnings are thankfully near universally condemned, with some exception such as when the same Tucson district successfully banned Middle East Studies in 1983 under false anti-Israel bias allegations. In January 2018, a federal judge issued a permanent injunction against the Arizona law that banned Mexican American Studies from ever being enforced again.

But many times book censorship still succeeds without a whimper. This kind of censorship is largely disregarded and often tacitly tolerated and self-induced among editors: corporate censorship. On the surface, there's a logic in corporate censorship that may seem at least arguable.

When corporate executives at, say, Netflix cancel your favourite shoot-em-up action show or a boy-meets-boy love story, seemingly without cause, there's a knee-jerk feeling of dissatisfaction that eventually gives way to complacency. Just as corporate executives giveth us the stories we like, so can corporate executives taketh them away. They can do what they want; it's their property.

But not so fast.

Is it – or should it be – a universal right for corporations to censor their so-called property in all cases, under all circumstances? One case from the 1970s may command some second thoughts on a corporate safe zone cordoned off by copyright laws and cultural misconceptions, one that calls into question the entire endeavour of corporate censorship.

Two social critics and media analysts, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, wrote several books together. Their first book about US state and media representation of global massacres, *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact & Propaganda*, was, in 1973, set to publish by an academic publisher, Warner Modular Publications, then a subsidiary of Warner Communications (now WarnerMedia).

Former *Washington Post* managing editor Ben Bagdikian's 1983 book *The Media Monopoly* covers the scandalous affair that ensued from Warner Modular's attempted publication of the Chomsky-Herman book that brought about the publisher's fatal downfall. An enterprising journalist, Bagdikian was the messenger of the 1971 Pentagon Papers leak by former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg that spurred public outrage over the secret, expanded war effort in Southeast Asia as well as the fact that the government had known for years that the war was unwinnable while costing thousands of US soldier deaths alongside millions of Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, and others.

The literary conflagration began to smoulder in August 1973 when a Warner executive, the company's chief of book operations William Sarnoff, glanced at an advance mock-up advertisement for the Chomsky-Herman book set to splash across *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Saturday Review*. Alarm bells went off in Sarnoff's mind as he imagined more government leaks that would embarrass President Nixon and, by association, the Warner parent company.

Given that Warner's corporate officers had contributed to Nixon's 1972 presidential bid and the aptly acronymed Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP), Sarnoff was surely on edge about anything that could trigger more political incendiary under Nixon, then under intense media, congressional, and legal scrutiny over the Watergate corruption scandal.

In May, the Nixon administration had lost its aggressive pursuit of Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers leaker, whom Nixon's national security advisor Henry Kissinger called "the most dangerous man in America". Now, the Chomsky-Herman book's provocative title

and marketing was enough to spur Sarnoff's fears of another government leak that could embarrass the company.

Sarnoff phoned the publisher of Warner Modular in Andover, Massachusetts, Claude McCaleb, demanding an explanation. McCaleb tried to assuage his boss's concern by clarifying that the book was not at all a document leak. The title merely carried critical analysis by two academic professionals – from the Wharton School of Finance and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – of publicly available material. Two hours later, Sarnoff called again, ordering McCaleb to New York immediately to hand-deliver him a copy of the book to his Rockefeller Plaza office. McCaleb dropped off a copy of the book in the morning and headed to an academic convention where more advance copies of the book were to arrive.

---

**When state or civil authorities blacklist books, the act is correctly labelled censorship. But what is the word when corporations order their subsidiaries to snuff out information?**

---

At the convention booth, he received word from Sarnoff: "Report at once." McCaleb could only wonder what was in store for him once he arrived, which 19 years in academic publishing didn't prepare him for.

Bagdikian, who died in 2016, boldly took on corporate censorship first-hand from his experiences working in the belly of the beast of corporate monopolists; he named the cabal, collectively, the "new Private Ministry of Information and Culture," a riff on George Orwell's sci-fi dystopian novel *1984*.

"A corporation dependent on public opinion and government policy," Bagdikian writes, "can call upon its media subsidiaries to help in what the media are clearly able to do – influence public opinion and government policy." And while it's not always necessary or possible for media subsidiaries to benefit their parent company's public image, they can at least refrain from publicly criticizing them, which is the line of orthodoxy that guided William Sarnoff in his quest against the publication of *Counter-Revolutionary Violence*.

It didn't matter to Sarnoff that, not 20 years prior, co-author Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar turned 2,000 years of scientific understanding about human language on its head. Or that Chomsky would go on to rank on the Arts & Humanities Citation Index as the highest-cited (living) source on earth next to Shakespeare, the Bible, Freud, Karl Marx, Cicero, and others. Such accomplishments are no match for a corporation's public image perceived to be at stake.

As soon as McCaleb stepped into Sarnoff's corporate office after being summoned from the convention hall, Sarnoff flew into a rage. McCaleb patiently reminded Sarnoff of the agreement they made when he and his





**Noam Chomsky: co-author of *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact & Propaganda***

staff were hired: Warner Modular enjoys discretion to publish the titles they choose, and their sales would reflect their success or failure. It's unclear whether Sarnoff read the copy of *Counter-Revolutionary Violence* that McCaleb delivered when he berated the book as "a pack of lies, a scurrilous attack on respected Americans" and an "undocumented" book "unworthy of a serious publisher."

Despite the defamation charges Sarnoff levied, he agreed with McCaleb that the book was not libellous. Sarnoff veered to other complaints that Warner Modular published too many left-wing writers. McCaleb pointed out that his catalogue included right-wing writers like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek.

Sarnoff responded to McCaleb's overall line of reasoning not with concessions or further discussion of possible compromise but, instead, by cancelling all the ads for the book and the entire first print run, which had already begun coming off the press.

But destroying the book wasn't enough. Sarnoff shut down Warner Modular completely, annihilating the publisher as an institution and all the books in its catalogue, in order to prevent this one book from being published.

And the fate of the books themselves, the 10,000-volume print run that had started? The books were all "pulped" – literally liquidated by tossing the books into "the hogger" that swallows and digests books whole, turning them into a milky cellulose substance that is remoulded into clean paper. In a way, pulping books is more effective than burning them, since books are like bricks and require a lot of overhead to destroy them completely.

Ideas, by their nature, do not seem containable. But in the curious Warner Modular case of corporate censorship, they were. Imagining the demise into liquid pulp matter, I think of the ending scenes of James Cameron's action classic *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* when the fearsome T-1000's seemingly unbreakable

poly-alloy body dies screaming and thrashing in an industrial melting pot of liquid fire before disintegrating quietly into a bright, burning saffron eternity. To this day, *Counter-Revolutionary Violence* is out of print and largely unknown.

Last October I met Chomsky in his cosy, well-lit University of Arizona office at the end of a long, dim, narrow hallway with exposed piping running along the ceiling. All these years later, Chomsky looks at the Warner Modular episode with a fresh sense of derision – as if it was just yesterday that Sarnoff secured the publisher's undoing with one fell slam of his phone. "It was interesting that virtually no civil libertarian thought there was any problem with [destroying Warner Modular to stop the book from being published] because it's not state censorship," Chomsky said. "It's just corporate censorship."

The fate of *Counter-Revolutionary Violence* is not an exceptional statistical error but the reigning rule of thumb among owning-class corporations. Filmmaker Michael Moore, while at work on his celebrated 1989 documentary, *Roger & Me*, about General Motors' destruction of Flint, Michigan, reviewed several cases of corporate censorship, each as outrageous as the Warner Modular affair. The examples describe the bitter ruination that follows when books, as paper-bound bundles of ideas, conflict with business interests and get sent to the hogger under all the crushing weight that corporate executives, and the culture that precedes them, can apply.

When the first edition of *The Media Monopoly* hit bookstores in 1983, some 50 corporations dominated the scene, and the biggest merger at that time was \$340 million.

Bagdikian put the social math this way: "The 50 men and women who head these corporations would fit in a large room." Yet by each book edition that followed every few years, the number shrank nimbly as corporations merged and concentrated themselves among few owner hands but stretched their power and influence across an ever-expanding blob of subsidiary companies.

By 1990, in time for Bagdikian's third edition of the book, 23 companies reigned over the industry. Today, all of six firms control the media scene where the biggest merger to date, AOL Time Warner, was \$350 billion – 1000 per cent higher than what media owners in 1983 could manage to do.

This isn't to suggest a media conspiracy among corporate parents and subsidiaries all headed by the William Sarnoffs of the world that control, by force if necessary, every editor's move. "Instead," Bagdikian writes, "there is something more insidious: a system of shared values within contemporary American corporate culture and corporations' power to extend that culture to the American people, inappropriate as it may be." That culture creates a system that is at least as effectively governed as the rule of force, or even of official censorship, if not more canny.

Bagdikian eloquently describes what's at stake here.

"Americans, like most people, get images of the world from their newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books, and movies. The mass media become the authority at any given moment for what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is fantasy, what is important and what is trivial. There is no greater force in shaping the public mind; even brute force triumphs only by creating an accepting attitude toward the brutes."

For Bagdikian, who feared more than corporate profits and domination, "the gravest loss is in the self-serving censorship of political and social ideas." In truth, the occasions of official censorship by executives like Sarnoff are rare and "most of the screening is subtle, some not even occurring at a conscious level," Bagdikian writes, "as when subordinates learn by habit to conform to owners' ideas." Taking one area of media, he cites an American Society of Newspaper Editors survey, which found that 33 per cent of editors admitted they wouldn't publish criticism of their parent company.

The phenomenon is also not unique to the United States. When George Orwell's fancifully satirical novel *Animal Farm* was set to be published in England in 1946, his preface titled "The Freedom of the Press" discussed what drove his invention of the book, observing that the "sinister fact" about censorship in England "is that it is largely voluntary," and adding: "Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban."

In the case of corporate censorship, "voluntary" almost seems a vulgarly mild, if not outlandishly inaccurate, term to describe the act of killing a book's publication, not to speak of its entire publisher. Although Orwell's main point regards the way self-censorship functions as "intellectual cowardice," which is "the worst enemy a writer or journalist has to face," later in the preface Orwell touches closer to the structural business interests that also governed one end of the publishing world in his country: "The British press is extremely centralized, and most of it is owned by wealthy men who have every motive to be dishonest on certain topics."

In a twist of original "Orwellian" irony, Orwell's preface itself remained suppressed for decades, down the "memory hole" he coined in 1984, until it was discovered posthumously among his papers, and proved his argument by ensuring that his ideas about reality, which served the basis for his fiction, wouldn't be read by the public.

A woeful effect of the monopolist system and its free-censorship culture firmly in place is that official acts of corporate censorship are hard to track, and the prevalent cases of self-censorship are perhaps impossible to identify or prevent. And, to top it off, the encompassing shield of copyright law ultimately protects the censors as the legally untouchable owners and operators of censorship – so much so that the word itself appears as Orwellian "doublethink" where, thanks to effective indoctrination, two contrary beliefs are accepted at the same time. In other words, censorship clearly is at play when executives like Sarnoff blackout their McCaleb editor underlings before

they might criticise the parent company, until the McCalebs learn to censor themselves so the Sarnoffs don't have to. But simultaneously, none of it is really censorship in the end because all the conflicts occur within the corporate dominion that legally owns it. This at a time when corporations already enjoy far greater liberties than individuals.

As Chomsky has pointed out elsewhere, so-called "free trade" agreements are really "investor rights agreements" because they can sue governments for loss of profits and move freely, unregulated, across borders, causing economic crisis for small farmers and workers in Mexico and Central America, when border industrial surveillance regimes are heavily built up to staunch people's mobility.

Meanwhile, the more familiar cases of censorship by states and civil institutions are easier to grasp, so we focus on them. The result: an almost imperceptible politics of censorship emerges that blurs – indeed divides and separates – the lines between what we may call "worthy" and "unworthy" kinds of censorship. In a way, corporations wield the censorship that dares not say its name.

Media mergers and conglomeration accelerated under Reagan, and continued apace under Clinton through the present day. As corporate conglomeration has skyrocketed, the means and scope of corporate censorship have grown more powerful.

Bagdikian foresaw the danger early on: "If a small number of publishers, all with the same special outlook, dominate the marketplace of public ideas, something vital is lost to an open society. In countries like the Soviet Union a state publishing house imposes a political test on what will be printed. If the same kind of control over public ideas is exercised by a private entrepreneur, the effect of a corporate line is not different from that of a party line."

As media mergers have grown very rapidly over a single generation's time, the power of Bagdikian's observation has reached its direst point of caution today. Disregarding this history legitimises the delusion that things have always been that way.

Too often there is a one-sided conversation going on where corporate censorship subordinates state censorship as a kind of scapegoat or red herring while the business end of ideological control proceeds as usual, unchallenged. Until the same gut rejection of state censorship broadens to include its powerful corporate counterpart, the conversation on censorship remains limited, and ultimately unfinished.

*This article first appeared in Electric Literature. Sydney PEN republishes it with thanks.*

Gabriel M. Schivone is the author of *Making the New "Illegal": How Decades of US Involvement in Central America Triggered the Modern Wave of Immigration* (Prometheus Books, 2019). He is currently a 2018 Visiting Scholar in the Agnese Nelms Haury Program at the University of Arizona.

# Freedom in the world: unpacking 13 years of decline

The Freedom in the World 2019 Report, produced by Freedom House, has recorded global declines in political rights and civil liberties for an alarming 13 consecutive years, from 2005 to 2018. The global average score has declined each year, and countries with net score declines have consistently outnumbered those with net improvements.

A widespread problem: The 13 years of decline have touched all parts of the world and affected Free, Partly Free, and Not Free countries alike. Every region except Asia-Pacific has a lower average score for 2018 than it did in 2005, and even Asia declined when countries with less than 1 million people – mostly small Pacific Island states – are excluded. Not Free countries as a group suffered a more significant score drop than Free or Partly Free countries, which also declined.

Faltering post-Cold War democratisation: The end of the Cold War facilitated a wave of democratisation in the late 20th century, but a large share of countries that made progress during that time were unable to maintain it. On average, countries that earned a status upgrade – from Not Free to Partly Free, or Partly Free to Free – between 1988 and 2005 have faced an 11 per cent drop in their numerical score during the 13 years of decline.

Consolidated democracies slip: Social and economic changes related to globalisation have contributed to a crisis of confidence in the political systems of long-standing democracies. The democratic erosion seen among Free countries is concentrated in consolidated democracies – those that were rated Free from 1985 through 2005, the 20-year period before the 13-year decline.

Despite a continued downward trajectory overall, there were several more countries with net improvements in 2018 than in 2017, and a somewhat smaller number with net declines. This does not mean the threat to democracy is coming to an end. Hostile forces around the world continue to challenge the institutions meant to protect political rights and civil liberties, and the damage accrued over the past 13 years will not soon be undone.

## Freedom in the World 2019 Freedom Status Changes

Hungary: Hungary's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to sustained attacks on the country's

democratic institutions by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which has used its parliamentary supermajority to impose restrictions on or assert control over the opposition, the media, religious groups, academia, NGOs, the courts, asylum seekers, and the private sector since 2010.

Serbia: Serbia's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to deterioration in the conduct of elections, continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine the independent journalists through legal harassment and smear campaigns, and President Aleksandar Vucic's de facto accumulation of executive powers that conflict with his constitutional role.

Nicaragua: Nicaragua's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to authorities' brutal repression of an antigovernment protest movement, which has included the arrest and imprisonment of opposition figures, intimidation and attacks against religious leaders, and violence by state forces and allied armed groups that resulted in hundreds of deaths.

Uganda: Uganda's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to attempts by long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni's government to restrict free expression, including through surveillance of electronic communications and a regressive tax on social media use.

Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free because the 2018 presidential election, though deeply flawed, granted a degree of legitimacy to the rule of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had taken power after the military forced his predecessor's resignation in 2017.

## The United States in Decline

Challenges to American democracy are testing the stability of its constitutional system and threatening to undermine political rights and civil liberties worldwide. As part of this year's report, Freedom House offers a special assessment of the state of democracy in the United States midway through the term of President Donald Trump. While democracy in America



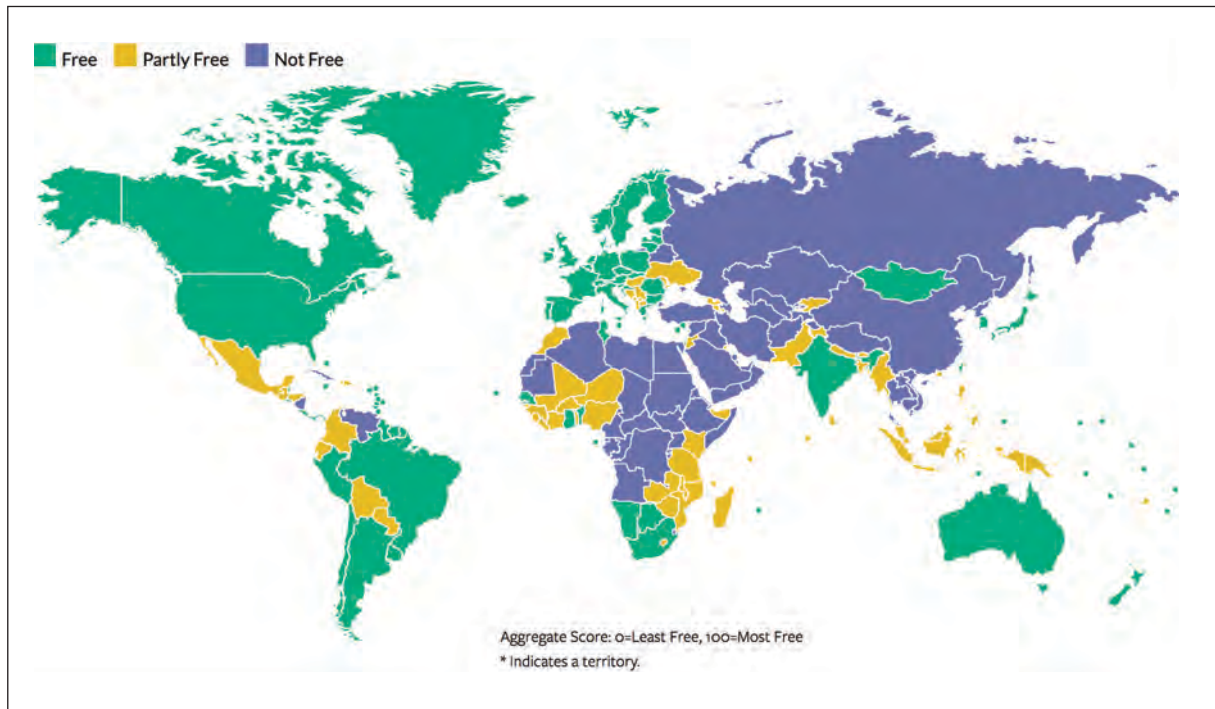


Illustration showing a world map of countries allowing maximum political rights and civil liberties.

remains robust by global standards, it has weakened significantly over the past eight years, and the current president's ongoing attacks on the rule of law, fact-based journalism, and other principles and norms of democracy threaten further decline.

Having observed similar patterns in other nations where democracy was ultimately overtaken by authoritarianism, Freedom House warns that the resilience of US democratic institutions in the face of such an assault cannot be taken for granted.

Freedom House has tracked a slow overall decline in political rights and civil liberties in the United States for the past eight years, punctuated by an unusual three-point drop for developments in 2017. Prominent concerns have included Russian interference in US elections, domestic attempts to manipulate the electoral system, executive and legislative dysfunction, conflicts of interest and lack of transparency, and pressure on judicial independence and the rule of law.

This year, the United States's total score on the 100-point scale used by Freedom in the World remains the same as in the report covering 2017, with two indicators changing in opposite directions:

- The score for freedom of assembly improved, as there was no repetition of the protest-related violence that had led to a lower score for the previous two years. In fact, there was an upsurge of civic action and demonstrations on issues ranging from women's rights and immigration policy to the problem of mass shootings in schools.

- The score for equal treatment before the law declined due to government policies and actions that improperly restricted the legal rights of asylum seekers, signs of discrimination in the acceptance of refugees for resettlement, and excessively harsh or haphazard immigration enforcement policies that resulted in the separation of children from adult family members, among other problematic outcomes.

The United States currently receives a score of 86 out of 100 points. While this places it below other major democracies such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, it is still firmly in the Free category. Nevertheless, its decline of eight points in as many years is significant. The United States' closest peers with respect to total Freedom in the World scores are Belize, Croatia, Greece, Latvia, and Mongolia.

*Freedom House is an independent watchdog organisation dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world. It analyses the challenges to freedom, advocates for greater political rights and civil liberties, and supports frontline activists to defend human rights and promote democratic change. Founded in 1941, Freedom House was the first American organisation to champion the advancement of freedom globally.*

For the full report, go to: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>

# Journalism, hate speech and terrorism

The difficulties facing traditional journalism are not just about finding ways to deal with the outrageous statements of rogue politicians, but also in handling the coverage of even more unscrupulous players – those who deal in hatred and terror, reports Aidan White, founder and president of the Ethical Journalism Network

**I**n the digital age it is astonishingly easy for people to put their messages – in text, audio or video – online and for all to see. Among them are tech-savvy extremists who produce and circulate the propaganda of terror and war and who are ruthless in their exploitation of the communications opportunities provided by the internet. And very often news media assist them in the process.

The use by traditional media of screen-grabs or footage of barbaric executions posted on the internet by the propaganda cell of Daesh, also known as Islamic State, raises questions about the role of media in covering terrorism.

These brutal and bloodthirsty films including decapitations, shootings, and burning people alive can be viewed uncensored by anyone with access to the worldwide web and who knows where to look. But when they use the material, even in a sanitised form, do media help Daesh achieve their propaganda objectives?

It's a question that worries many inside journalism who know that groups like Daesh have two audiences – one that they wish to shock and intimidate and a second that they wish to inspire. Their objectives are to strike fear into the heart of communities with whom they are at war and at the same time to radicalise and recruit to their cause alienated and restless young men and women.

In recent years many news media across all platforms of journalism have published images from the literature and videos of terrorist groups on their web and mainstream platforms with too little consideration of the potential impact.

Too often it seems media have been unaware or have ignored how the production and dissemination of horrific violence in the name of Jihad is in terrorists' hands and they are ruthless in their use of the public relations opportunities that digital technology provides.

While the impact of the propaganda output of

Islamic State is difficult to quantify, their video clips are attractive to media users. They are sophisticated and slick in their production and stemming the flow of such material provides a serious challenge to policymakers, particularly those trying to counter the threat of radicalisation of young people.

Belatedly some media have decided to act. Recognising the propaganda trap facing them and noting how Islamic State have used films produced by lone attackers in Germany and France pledging allegiance to the cause of violent Jihad, media in France have decided to take action to deny further publicity to these individuals.

Several news organisations including the influential daily *Le Monde* announced in July 2016 that they would stop publishing photos of people responsible for acts of violence and terrorist killings.

They said it was to avoid giving “posthumous glorification” to people responsible for brutal killings who want to be seen as heroes and whose notoriety may encourage fresh individuals, psychologically disturbed or not, to follow their lead.

There is no suggestion here that the press should cover up the truth; terrorist outrages must still be reported. And it is immaterial that images and names of the perpetrators of violence will appear on social media.

This is a principled step by editorial leaders to eliminate unintended collusion with terrorism which is welcomed by many in journalism, but it does nothing to answer the question of how to stem the flow of propaganda material to social media outlets.

Those who seek death and glory will continue to have their stories told online and there will still be an audience to celebrate their actions no matter how brutal they are.

The question facing journalists and others who wish to limit the spread of these toxic messages is how to do so without compromising journalism's duty to tell



**From the left: Thomas Spence (Trustee), Kjersti Løken Stavrum (Trustee); Randi S. Øgrey (Trustee); Jeanette Gustafsdotter (Trustee); Dorothy Byrne (Chair); Salim Amin (Trustee); Aidan White (Founder & President); Ashok Gupta (Treasurer); Zahera Harb (Trustee); Bernt Olufsen (Trustee); Chris Elliott (CEO & Director); Aida al-Kaisy (Programme Consultant); Tom Law (Director of Campaigns & Communications).**

the truth and without undermining free expression. This challenge is not just one that faces journalists, but affects everyone working across the open information landscape.

Confronting the problem of hate speech is easier said than done, not least because there is no clear international definition of what it is. Journalists have to judge themselves what constitutes intense hatred and incitement to violence.

It has always been a tricky question not least because in many parts of the world journalists are recruited as foot soldiers for nationalism, propaganda and war-mongering. Over the years many have played a deplorable role and in some extreme cases — in Rwanda and Kenya, for example — they have contributed to acts of unspeakable violence and genocide.

While most journalists understand that they have a duty to tell the truth and to report on what is being said and who is saying it, they often fail to balance that responsibility against the need to minimise harm. But how do journalists judge what is acceptable and what is intolerable? How do they embed in their daily work routine a way of assessing what is threatening?

One way developed by the Ethical Journalism Network is to help journalists to test the outrageous statements and provocative material that comes their way. Journalists must consider the wider context in which people express themselves and focus not just on what is said, but what is intended. In particular, journalists must question whether speech aims to do harm to others, particularly at times of political tension and social unrest.

The EJN's five-point test for hate speech set out here tries to provide journalists (although it could be also useful for others) with a template for testing controversial words and images:

### **One: The position or status of the speaker**

Journalists and editors must understand that just because someone says something outrageous that does not make it news. Journalists have to examine the context in which it is said and the status and reputation of who is saying it.

When people who are not public figures engage in hate speech, it might be wise to ignore them entirely. A good example is Terry Jones, the Christian pastor in Florida who, in 2010, was an unknown person with marginal influence even in his rural backwater but who became an overnight global media sensation simply for announcing that he wanted to burn the Koran.

On reflection most ethical journalists might say he was entitled to no publicity for his provocative threats. Journalists have to scrutinise speakers and analyse their words, examine their facts and claims, and judge carefully the intention and impact of their interventions. It is not the job of journalists to adopt counter positions, but claims and facts should be tested, whoever is speaking.

### **Two: The reach of the speech**

A private conversation in a public place can include the most unspeakable opinions but do relatively little harm and so would not necessarily breach the test of hate speech. But that changes if the speech is disseminated through mainstream media or the internet.

Answering the question of the newsworthiness and intention may be helped by considering if there is a pattern of behaviour or if it is a one-time incident. Repetition is a useful indicator of a deliberate strategy to engender hostility towards others.

### **Three: The objectives of the speech**

Normally, well-informed editors will quickly identify whether the speech is deliberately intended to promote



violence or diminish the human rights of individuals and groups. They should ask if such speech is subject to criminal or other sanctions.

As part of the reporting process, journalists and editors have a special responsibility to place the speech in context – to disclose and question the objectives of the speaker. It is not the journalist's intention to diminish people with whom they disagree, but reporting should provide context to help people better understand the motives of the speakers.

The key questions to ask are: What does it benefit the speaker and the interests that he or she represents? Who are the targeted victims of the speech and what is the potential impact upon them, as individuals and within their community?

#### **Four: The content and form of speech**

Hate speech can be provocative and explicit using well-known forms of abuse, or it may be nuanced and delivered in a subtle manner but with clear messages to the audience. Lots of people have offensive ideas and opinions. That's not a crime, and it's not a crime to make these opinions public, but the words and images they use can be devastating if they incite others to violence.

Journalists ask themselves: is this speech or expression dangerous? Will it incite violence or promote an intensification of hatred towards others? It might be newsworthy if someone uses speech that could get them into trouble with the police, but journalists have to be wary – they, too, could find themselves facing prosecution for quoting it.

#### **Five: The economic, social and political climate**

Hate speech is particularly effective and dangerous when times are hard, social tensions are acute and politicians are at war with one another. People who live in uncertain and insecure conditions are often vulnerable to messages that blame others for their troubles. Journalists must, therefore, take into account the public atmosphere at the time the speech is being made.

The heat of an election campaign when political groups are jostling for public attention typically provides the background for inflammatory comment. Journalists have to judge whether the expression is fair, fact-based and reasonable in the circumstances. Where journalists have doubt about directly quoting hateful speech they may report that insulting comments were made without quoting the exact language used.

It is important for journalists to ask themselves: what is the impact of this on the people immediately affected by the speech? Are they able to absorb the speech in conditions of relative security? Is this expression designed or intended to make matters worse or better? Who is affected negatively by the expression?

*The Ethical Journalism Network is a coalition of more than 70 groups of journalists, editors, press owners and media support groups from across the globe. Registered in the United Kingdom, it is supervised by a Board and an international network of advisors. Its supporters represent many different cultures and media traditions, but they share the conviction that the principles of ethical journalism are universal and a precious resource that builds respect for democracy and human rights. This report published under Creative Commons licence.*

## **Conference to discuss being at home in today's world**

Today, deterring conditions for human rights and freedom of expression causes millions of people to be on the move. Writers, journalists and artists who speak truth to power and safeguard civil rights and free speech, increasingly become targets of governments and other actors attempting to silence them. Many are forced to flee, to overcome barriers, cross borders, and to seek refuge far from home.

Exile is by definition about loss, suffering, of being uprooted from one's native land, family, culture, identity. But can displacement from the familiar also mean new beginnings, new possibilities, new ways of belonging? Can home be a concept that encompasses multiple locations, in a more diverse, dynamic and interdependent world? With the space to express oneself freely, can language and other artistic expressions be the refuge an artist needs to dwell and create freely, and continue to be a voice for change?

Both PEN and ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network) are dedicated to creating opportunities for writers and artists to move freely – intellectually, culturally, physically. Cities are becoming important sites for hospitality, solidarity and creativity, and since 2006, more than 200 writers, journalists and artists have found safety and the opportunity to continue to work and be vocal in an ICORN residency.

Under the title 'At Home, Everywhere', more than 300 writers, artists, activists, city representatives, sister networks and experts from around the globe will meet in Rotterdam on 29-31 May for the biennial ICORN Network Meeting and PEN International Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) Conference, to explore what it means to be at home in today's world, and what it means to be bereft of it.

# If we are not free to hear divergent points of view, we are not free

Gioconda Belli, the award-winning Nicaraguan poet, writer and activist and President of PEN Nicaragua, has won this year's Oxfam Novib/PEN International Award for freedom of expression, along with Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour and Italian writer and journalist Roberto Saviano.

Each year the award is given in recognition of writers' and journalists' significant contribution to freedom of expression and free speech despite the danger to their own lives.

Ms Belli has faced accusations of terrorist activity and writes under great risk in Nicaragua, a country in which over 300 people were killed in protests against President Ortega's government last year.

Dareen Tatour was released from prison in Israel last September, having been held under house arrest since October 2015. The charges against her were related to a video in which she recites one of her poems "Resist, my people, resist them." After several years under house arrest and several months in prison, Tatour was finally released in September 2018.

Roberto Saviano, who could not attend the ceremony, has written extensively on organised crime in Italy and across borders. He has faced death threats for years and travels with bodyguards appointed by the Italian government and lives much of his life in hiding.

The award ceremony was held as part of the opening night of the Writers Unlimited festival at The Hague in March. As Booker-prize shortlisted novelist Madeleine Thien said: "We are in uncertain times. Asking questions of any orthodoxy is increasingly unacceptable, even in places we imagine to be free. And for some, even many, access to what others might consider ordinary or even banal, is forbidden. Across the political spectrum, fear has mixed with scorn. We seem to insist on – and even take pride in – our atomization, and to deny our contingency, our brevity, our shared future. But if we are not free to hear divergent points of view, we are not free."

In accepting her award, Gioconda Belli said:



**Roberto Saviano: faced death for decades**

"I come to you from the nightmarish experience of seeing my country mauled once again by the jaws of tyranny. In the last month, freedom of expression has suffered very severe blows in Nicaragua.

"Two of our most important independent media standard bearers have been viciously attacked. Carlos Fernando Chamorro was once the director of the Sandinista newspaper *Barricada*. He parted ways with Daniel Ortega and the FSLN in the 90s and began publishing an independent newsletter, *Confidencial*, and producing two TV shows, *This week* (Esta Semana) and *Tonight* (Esta noche). At dawn on 19 December, 2018, police forces broke into his office building, vandalized its contents and carried away



From left to right: Jennifer Clement, Gioconda Belli, Dareen Tatour, Michiel Servaes

his most essential equipment. That same night, with no court order, they took possession of the building and everything in it. They have remained inside the premises since then.

“On 21 December, a TV station, 100% News, was also overrun by riot police, boarded up, taken off the air, and both its director and owner and its news editor were taking prisoners charged with absurd accusations such as “inciting hate”. They are now in solitary confinement and no member of their families have been allowed to see them.

“More than 50 journalists have been forced to go into exile because of persecution and threats.

“I cannot accept this prize for myself. It belongs to the independent media in my country, to the men and women who have shown incredible courage risking their safety and freedom to keep the Nicaraguan people informed.

“I thank the opportunity I have to appeal to you to not forget what’s going on in Nicaragua. The Ortega government at the first sign of popular defiance dropped all pretence of fairness and ethics and turned its guns against an unarmed population that took to the streets, first to protest a reform to a social security law but then to reject the repression and killings with which the government responded. More than 325 people, mostly students have been killed since April. More than 600 have been jailed and accused of trumped up terrorism charges and more than 30,000 Nicaraguans have fled to neighbouring countries, mostly Costa Rica. We need your sympathy, your voices, your empathy.

“Our brave journalists are beginning to set up shop in neighbouring Costa Rica and Miami to continue broadcasting their programs.



Madeleine Thien: living in uncertain times

“We’re rooting for them. I hope you do too.

“Thanks to Oxfam Novib and PEN International for this prize that honours the work PEN Nicaragua has been doing on behalf of freedom of expression, and that honours me as a writer who keeps believing against all odds in the power of the word.”



# Bookseller encouraged children's love of books

Albert Ullin OAM was the founder and longtime owner of The Little Bookroom, Australia's oldest specialist children's bookshop.

**T**he nomination for the Dromkeen Medal, which Albert Ullin received in 1986, stated: "his tireless advocacy of quality books for children through the interactive role of The Little Bookroom, his work on The Children's Book Council and his convincing and sincere approach with the media, have all combined to give children's literature the esteem and stature in the community it deserves".

Albert was born Albert Heinrich Ullmann in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1930. His parents imbued in him and his younger brother Claude a love of art, music and books.

Frankfurt had the second largest Jewish population in Germany at the time, and when the Nazis came to power in 1933, the family relocated to Milan, Italy and then Melbourne in 1939.

Albert served his book-selling apprenticeship in Speagle's Bookshop and Robertson & Mullens before establishing The Little Bookroom in October 1960.

Albert befriended and nurtured the talents of many emerging illustrators and authors, including Ron Brooks, Donna Rawlins, Peter Pavey and Graeme Base. He supported many Australian picture-book artists by purchasing their original artwork, building up an enviable collection over the decades.

He gifted his collection to the National Gallery of Victoria several years ago with his expressed hope that the illustration of children's books would one day be recognised as mainstream art. *Bunyips and Dragons*, an exhibition of most of these works, was held at NGV Australia in 2015.

Albert was a friend and advocate for school and public libraries, and served, among other things, as the president of the Victorian Branch of Children's Book Council of Australia. One of his legacies is the Maurice Saxby Creative Development Program, which this year awarded five emerging writers and illustrators from around Australia the opportunity to learn from mentors in the children's book industry.

Throughout his book-selling career, Albert frequently travelled to book fairs and gatherings in the United States and Europe. He was particularly thrilled to meet his idol, Maurice Sendak, on one trip to New



Albert Ullin

York, and exchange correspondence with him.

Albert was awarded Member of the Order of Australia for service to the promotion of children's literature in Australia and overseas in 1997.

The Little Bookroom thrives today in Nicholson Street, North Carlton under the excellent management of Leesa Lambert and her family. A recent book launch at the shop celebrated the publication of a picture book by young Indigenous writers and illustrators who had flown in from remote Western Australia for the occasion. They leant on "Albert's signing desk" to inscribe copies for purchasers – he would have loved it.

Albert is survived by his sister-in-law Margaret, nieces Sophie and Emmie-Lou and nephew Nicholas, and their children who will miss his ever-curious mind, cheeky spirit, warm heart and charming continental flair.

**Sophie Ullin and Margaret Robson Kett**



# Mother languages vital to literacy

Every mother tongue deserves to be known, recognised and given greater prominence in all spheres of public life. This is not always the case, according to Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, on International Mother Language Day on 21 February.

**M**other tongues do not necessarily have national-language status, official-language status, or status as the language of instruction," Audrey Azoulay said. "This situation can lead to the devaluation of a mother tongue and to its ultimate disappearance in the long term.

"On this 20th anniversary of International Mother Language Day, we must remember that all mother tongues count and that they are all essential to building peace and supporting sustainable development."

A mother language is vital to literacy because it facilitates the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills, as well as basic numeracy, during the first years of schooling. These skills provide the foundation for personal development. A mother tongue is also a unique expression of creative diversity and identity, and is a source of knowledge and innovation.

Much remains to be done. Learners' mother tongues are rarely the language of instruction during the first years of schooling, Ms Azoulay said.

According to UNESCO, nearly 40 per cent of the world's population lack access to education in a language that they speak or understand. This situation persists despite studies showing that the command of a mother tongue facilitates general learning and learning of other languages.

Indigenous peoples have always expressed their desire for education in their own languages, as set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. And so the theme of this year's International Mother Language Day was Indigenous languages as a factor in development, peace and reconciliation.

Indigenous peoples number some 370 million and their languages account for the majority of the approximately 7,000 living languages on Earth. Many Indigenous peoples continue to suffer from marginalisation, discrimination and extreme poverty, and

**"Our language is shedding tears all over because its own children are deserting it, leaving it alone with its heavy burden."**

**From a Wolof poem by  
Useyno Gey Cosaan (Senegal)**

are the victims of human-rights violations. "It is essential that Indigenous peoples have access to education in their own languages," Audrey Azoulay said.

In Australia, the Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF), whose work is supported by Sydney PEN, promotes the publication of books written by people in remote Indigenous communities, some reflecting traditional legends and stories. Many of the 88 project books published so far are written by children, while others are parenting or educational books written in consultation with community elders. The majority of the publications reflect up to 18 Indigenous languages.

All potential publishing projects of the ILF go through a proposal process that must meet the Foundation's vision and strategy and be approved by its Board. Each is different. Some involve working with the community; others involve translators, linguists, authors, illustrators, editors and artists.

Community members help decide which language to use for the books. So far, 52 of the books are written in an Indigenous language (and English), and another 22 books include keywords in first language. Many Aboriginal languages are used: traditional languages, vibrant languages, sleeping languages and new languages, from Walmajarri in the Kimberley region,

to Arabana in South Australia, to Kriol in the Katherine region.

"These books are so important for the future of the children and for the elders of the community. To have their language recognised and respected is something that their culture can look on and be so proud of. We're proud of the kids, they have worked so hard on their books and are proud of them," said Helen Unwin, Principal of the Yakanarra School in Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia.

As Denise Angelo, linguist and literacy consultant on the Binjari Buk series, said

"Many of us take it for granted that our first experience with books will be in the language we speak. But this is not the everyday experience for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who speak Indigenous languages, traditional languages or a 'new' language like Kriol."

James Tager, Deputy Director, Free Expression Research and Policy of PEN America, points out since many ethnic minorities struggle with governmental policies that either ignore or deliberately erode their linguistic identity, PEN has drawn attention to some of the issues that language rights defenders, activists, and everyday citizens may face for peacefully advocating for – or simply speaking – their mother tongue.

He said Tashi Wangchuk, a young Tibetan entrepreneur and language rights activist, is currently serving a five-year sentence in a jail in western China, for charges of "inciting separatism."

His true crime? "Tashi is a language rights campaigner who has publicly advocated for Chinese authorities to restore Tibetan language education. In late 2015, Tashi spoke publicly with *The New York Times* about his peaceful advocacy. In his interviews, Tashi made it clear that he wanted to work within the system and that he was not an advocate for independence," Mr Tager said. "But that wasn't enough for authorities embarrassed by his public advocacy. Tashi was arrested, kept in pre-trial detention for months, tortured, and finally convicted of 'separatism' in a one-day trial."

In 2011, after over a decade of consultation and development, PEN International released the Girona Manifesto on Linguistic Rights, a 10-point declaration intended to formalise a global commitment to language rights. (See box) PEN continues to urge UN bodies – most notably UNESCO – to adopt and incorporate the Manifesto.

As James Tager said, language rights advocacy is not just about safeguarding the world's cultural heritage. "It is also about affirming the right of every individual to live their lives in their native language: to communicate their feelings and beliefs. To argue and commiserate. To say I love you. When we recognise this fact, the importance of International Mother Language Day becomes obvious."

**Sandra Symons**

## Girona Manifesto on Linguistic Rights

### Promoting Literature, Defending Freedom of Expression

1. Linguistic diversity is a world heritage that must be valued and protected.
2. Respect for all languages and cultures is fundamental to the process of constructing and maintaining dialogue and peace in the world.
3. All individuals learn to speak in the heart of a community that gives them life, language, culture and identity.
4. Different languages and different ways of speaking are not only means of communication; they are also the milieu in which humans grow and cultures are built.
5. Every linguistic community has the right for its language to be used as an official language in its territory.
6. School instruction must contribute to the prestige of the language spoken by the linguistic community of the territory.
7. It is desirable for citizens to have a general knowledge of various languages, because it favours empathy and intellectual openness, and contributes to a deeper knowledge of one's own tongue.



- Keynote address: Kerry O'Brien

# The challenges of reporting news in the age of digital disruption

There are four fundamental pillars that provide the foundation of democracy – a representative parliamentary system, an independent judiciary, an apolitical police force, and a strong media. In his special address to the Walkley Fund for Journalism dinner on 5 April, Kerry O'Brien, chair of The Walkley Foundation, examined them, particularly the important role of the media in today's world.

Forty-three years ago I went to the Philippines for the ABC's *Four Corners*, to cover a disaster story – a tsunami that hit the island of Mindanao, killing 8,000 people. After witnessing close up the nature of President Ferdinand Marcos's brutal despotism, I stayed on to tell another story, of how Marcos had used martial law, which he'd introduced ostensibly to deal with the threat of communist insurrection, to establish a dictatorship under which a powerful oligarchy of obscenely wealthy families – the so-called Marcos cronies – dominated the country. Marcos was well on the way to becoming the richest of them all.

In the four years since he had declared the state of emergency, 50,000 people had been arrested, 6,000 of them were still imprisoned across 13 detention centres under the very broadly defined charge of subversion. Others simply disappeared without trace. The judicial system's credibility was gone. The Congress, devoid of debate, was being converted into a museum. Once critical newspapers were now propaganda sheets for a corrupt President.

Given that we'd been warned about the President's army of nondescript spies and informers through the streets, cafes and hotels of Manila and driving its taxis, I felt exposed as I stood in front of our camera in the square of the city's Catholic cathedral, reading a litany of torture techniques from the only remaining news publication in the country that still called the government to account, a weekly Catholic journal called *Signs of the Times*. That litany included:

"Application of lighted cigarettes to various parts of the body including the ear and the genital area. Electric shocks on different parts of the body including the genital area. Stripping and sexual abuse and sometimes rape of female detainees. Beating with fists and/or gun butts and rubber hoses. Forcing the head into faeces-contaminated toilet bowls. Holding the victim's head under water until he inhales water or loses

consciousness. Squeezing fingers with bullets inserted between them. Pressing hot irons against the sole of the foot." I spoke with some of those who were tortured.

Ten years later I was back with another *Four Corners* crew to record the army coup that finally deposed Marcos and paved the way for a democratically elected government. With cameraman Chris Doig and sound recordist Tim Parrot, I stood in the dark side street running alongside Malacanang Palace, listening to Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos take off on the other side of the palace wall, in a US-supplied helicopter for exile in America and access to his billions in looted gold held in Swiss accounts.

Those two experiences were an important part of the understanding I've built up over decades of how power corrupts, and how absolute power really does corrupt absolutely. I also came to understand the fundamental importance of journalism – that arguably, strong and well-resourced journalism is the primary bulwark against abuse of power, and without being melodramatic about it, the primary bulwark against authoritarianism that can so easily lead to fascism.

I saw the corruption within the Askin government in New South Wales close up in the sixties and early 70s, the corruption of police in NSW, Victoria and Queensland in that same period, the institutionalised corruption that flourished in Queensland in the Bjelke-Petersen era.

The press in Queensland, with a few notable exceptions was largely ineffectual in the face of Bjelke-Petersen's abuses – he'd introduced an outrageous gerrymander – and it wasn't until his 18th year that Chris Masters' *Moonlight State* program on *Four Corners* comprehensively exposed the rot within, leading to the Fitzgerald Royal Commission, and the whole house of cards came tumbling down.

There are four fundamental pillars that provide the foundation of democracy. A strong, genuinely

representative parliamentary system, an independent judiciary, an apolitical police force upholding the law with integrity, and a strong media.

There's nothing perfect about a democracy. And its imperfections are not only a reflection of the politicians we elect. They're a reflection of all of us and as every person in this room knows, we humans are all imperfect – we're imperfect in the way we run our big corporations and our small businesses, our trade unions and our regulators, even our churches. Certainly our churches. The institutions we've trusted the most. And of course, we're imperfect in the way we practice our journalism.

In 2011, the year I rejoined *Four Corners* as anchor after stepping down from 7.30, the program celebrated its 50th anniversary and the new ABC Chairman, Jim Spigelman was there. He looked on as we reflected on our own glory, and liberally congratulated ourselves, then he gently suggested that we might also reflect on our failures.

I was stung by that in the moment, as were others, but whatever had provoked him to say so, he was right. *Four Corners* had an enormous legacy to be proud of, half a century in the making; even more so now as royal commission after royal commission is forced on largely reluctant governments, in an age where that brand of journalism is becoming increasingly difficult to practice. But, without whipping ourselves, we should never lose sight of our inadequacies at the same time we celebrate our successes.

Every year at the Walkley Awards, we honour a craft that holds power in its various manifestations big and small, to account. We should also, all be prepared to reflect on our own failures.

The Walkley Foundation, as part of its brief to promote quality journalism, seeks to highlight the immense importance of public interest journalism, as practised by quite a long honour roll of investigative reporters and researchers. But that form of journalism is still only one strand of the craft.

The journalism that is most commonly practised in this country today, as it is in all genuinely liberal democracies, is arguably failing at least as often as it's succeeding. In every under-staffed newsroom where media releases are published with little or no basic fact-checking, it's failing.

In every doorstep where camera operators are sent to record the shallow and self-serving lines of politicians without a proper, strong journalistic presence, it's failing. In every regional centre where the presence of well-trained local journalists is too thinly spread, it's failing. Every time we're on the phone when we need to be on the beat to see a situation first hand, we're failing.

Every time we devalue or disrespect the critical skill of sub-editing – in whatever the medium – we are failing our craft.

Every time media organisations reduce the ratio of wise older hands in the newsrooms of Australia to the younger journeymen and women, and the novices,



Kerry O'Brien delivers keynote address at the Walkley Fund for Journalism dinner. Photography: Oneill Photographics

because experience is more expensive, robbing the young of their mentors – the kinds of mentors that journalists of my era took for granted and flourished from – we're failing.

Has journalism faced a bigger test of its effectiveness in the past 25 years than in its reporting of climate change – an issue arguably bigger than terrorism, bigger than the rise and hopefully (speaking personally) the fall of Donald Trump, bigger than so many other challenges that preoccupy so much of our waking hours and fill up so much of our journalistic space and time – because ultimately, it actually goes to how our planet survives.

Hold our political leaders to account for their failures on this front? Certainly. But we can't let ourselves off the hook either. Tough subject to cover. Complex to explain to our readers, our viewers and our listeners. Very tough to hold their interest and keep them accurately informed and engaged over years of obfuscation and manipulation, and the fake information fed by vested interests, and the deniers or so-called agnostics, shrieking from their self-constructed pulpits.

But on any honest reflection, by any yardstick, we have to acknowledge our part in a failed democratic process with regard to climate change. I'm not urging hair shirts and self-flagellation (that's the Catholic coming out in me) – but we should always be about seeing the whole picture of what we do, not just the bits we like about ourselves and our work.

I was a correspondent in the US for the Seven Network as the age of 24-hour news began to dawn. Because we had the Australian rights to CNN at the time, I saw their operation from the inside. I was struck by the amount of time their journalists spent spruiking in front of camera positions around the country as the live cross became increasingly ubiquitous. I was struck by the amount of time that was sucked up by journalists and other commentators filling the airwaves with cheap

talk. Much cheaper than boots on the ground, in filling the big black hole of 24-hour news.

Twenty years ago, I returned to CNN in Atlanta as part of a study for the ABC on how news was being gathered in major television newsrooms in Britain and America. And I noticed a large graph on the wall framing the main stairs in the news centre, and the sign above it that read 'CNN's Chart of Human History'. When I took a closer look I realised it was actually a ratings chart. And the biggest event in human history according to CNN up to that point, was the day the police chased O. J. Simpson through the streets of Los Angeles after his wife had been murdered.

I'm not just talking about CNN here. I'm talking about the nature of modern news-gathering that's under more severe pressure than ever before. I'm talking about the age of satellites in television, which while it introduced a greater and more immediate sweep of news coverage, also heightened the shallowness and the promotion of news – even serious news – as entertainment, or infotainment, as it quickly came to be called.

This coincided with another phase of the revolution – the arrival of technology that delivered colour to daily newspapers, followed closely by the marketers who began more and more to dictate what stories should be run to reach this demographic or that demographic – so newspapers could withstand the onslaught of instant television news.

And now we're all struggling in the internet age; the age of digital disruption – well, traditional media outlets are. The new giants of this media age are doing very nicely indeed. And there's another huge debate being had about all that.

This is the age of the podcast – all those people around the world in their Gucci fitness uniforms listening to in-depth news and analysis as they power walk, or sit in traffic snarls on their way to work, or even as they go to sleep.

We're actually awash with information – and on this front there are no borders. We can access just about anything we want if we know how, or have the resources to do it. Including fake news—and misinformation of the most toxic kind, feeding the prejudices of the naïve, the ignorant and the fearful. We've watched the deeply worrying rise of Donald Trump. We're watching the rebirth of illiberal democracies in Europe. But we can't be too derisive from the safety of distance because we're all only too aware of our own endemic vacuum of leadership in this country.

With all this noise around us, The Walkley Foundation, a small but growing institution, is endeavouring to keep its eye on the ball. The protection and promotion of quality in journalism is our game – at the most basic level as well as at the pinnacle.

We're not just about acknowledging the best and the brightest through an awards process that had small beginnings more than 60 years ago and now more than ever provides the gold standard that anchors arguably

the single most important cornerstone of democracy – we are endeavouring to underwrite that gold standard in a very foundational way, to promote mentoring where it's in short supply, to assist regional journalism to lift its horizons again, to provide a leg up to quality freelance journalism whose income base has all but collapsed.

### Launching the Walkley grants

We've established the Walkley grants to assist freelance journalists with worthwhile projects that might otherwise never see the light of day. And it's my pleasure tonight to announce the winners of the inaugural grants. When we opened these up to applicants in February, we offered \$50,000 from the Walkley Public Fund. 117 journalists pitched for grants of up to \$10,000 to fund public interest reporting.

Well, we can now give even more than we'd hoped. I am delighted to announce that the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas has provided an additional \$25,000 to support the Walkley Grants for Freelance Journalism, making a total pool of \$75,000. The aim of the Judith Neilson Institute is also to celebrate and encourage quality journalism.

And now let's hear which journalists will be funded. The judging committee chose 11 projects, which will span topics including the environment, health policy, big banks, sport, development, school funding inequality, migrant food workers, refugees and the impact of border policies, and more. In alphabetical order, they are:

- Carol Altmann
- Jessica Cockerill
- Michael Cruickshank
- Nicole Curby
- André Dao, Michael Green & Tia Kass
- Erin Delahunty
- Nina Funnell
- Vivienne Pearson and Margaret Paton
- Kylie Stevenson and Tamara Howie
- Dale Webster
- Brian Wilson

Although I've attempted to put the successful practice of strong journalism in this country into proper context tonight, I'm still looking forward to enjoying the stories of soaring journalism we'll shortly hear from some of this country's finest exponents of the craft

Thank you for joining with The Walkley Foundation in its pursuit of excellence. Thank you for your ongoing support.





SYDNEY

# PEN magazine

## Make a difference, join us

Any true democracy respects and protects freedom of expression. Without this, social justice is at risk.

Yet this freedom is great danger. Every day, people are persecuted simply for speaking out, and governments and others in positions of power continue to gag, imprison, murder and silence individuals who have the courage and honesty to speak and to write about what is happening in the world around them.

By being a member of Sydney PEN you will be supporting the work of an historical Australian organisation, with a focus on advocating for these rights in our Asian and Pacific region.

You will be the first to receive invitations to hear our guest speakers, participate in local letter-writing evenings, and receive campaign alerts to take action.

Join Sydney PEN or renew membership online:

<https://pen.org.au/collections/membership>

---

### Sydney PEN

#### Management Committee

Mark Isaacs (President)  
Zoë Rodriguez (Vice-President)  
Sandra Symons (Vice-President)  
Jenelle Dellar (Secretary)  
Aleesha Paz (Treasurer)  
Debra Adelaide  
Gillian Appleton  
Emily Banyard  
Melissa Bruce  
Susie Eisenhuth  
Daniel Rowland  
Dragana Zivancevic

#### Writers' Advisory Panel

Geraldine Brooks  
JM Coetzee  
Tim Flannery  
Helen Garner  
Kate Grenville  
Tom Keneally AO

David Malouf AO  
Frank Moorhouse AM  
John Tranter  
David Williamson AO

#### Life Members

John Bennett  
Angela Bowne SC  
Mona Brand (1915-2007)  
JM Coetzee  
Bruce Dawe AO  
Deirdre Hill  
Nicholas Jose  
Tom Keneally AO  
Mabel Lee  
Ruby Langford Ginibi (1934-2011)  
David Malouf AO  
Frank Moorhouse AM  
Wilda Moxham  
Chip Rolley  
Vincent Serventy AM (1916-2007)

Roberta Sykes (1943-2010)  
Katherine Thomson  
Stella Wilkes MBE (1914-2008)  
Rosie Scott (1948-2017)

#### Editor

Sandra Symons

#### Copy Editor

Aleesha Paz

#### Art Director

Laura Drewe

#### Printer

UTS Printing

**Sydney PEN is supported by the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney**

---

#### Front cover Illustration

Woodcut 'Carrying A Candle' (1978) by Judith Rodriguez

COPYRIGHT AGENCY  
**CULTURAL  
FUND**

**UTS**  
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY