
Book Review

Anine Kierulf & Helge Rønning (ed.) (2009). *Freedom of Speech Abridged? Cultural, Legal and Philosophical Challenges*. Nordicom. ISBN 978-91-89471-76-4.

Lawrie Hallett

Communication and Media Research Institute
University of Westminster

Published by Nordicom (The Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communications Research), at the University of Gothenburg, this book is a wide-ranging collection of eleven essays, which together consider the concept of free speech and the pressures placed upon it by the changing context of globalisation and new-media developments. It explores the concept of universal human rights and the tensions between these and specific cultural values.

In his opening chapter of the collection, “*The Contemporary Challenge to the Concept of Universal Human Rights and Freedom of Expression*” joint editor, Helge Rønning, from the University of Oslo, begins by making the point that whereas twenty years ago “*there was a feeling that the struggle for freedom of expression was gaining ground around the world*” (p. 9) today “*freedom of expression movements ...find themselves in crisis*” (*ibid.*). The chapter, which effectively sets the tone for the rest of the volume, highlights two key events, which the author suggests can be seen as emblematic of the parallel elements which have set back the causes of human rights and freedom of expression over recent years.

The two events in question are the 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the 2001 “9/11” attacks. As the author explains, the fatwa was closely linked to the rise of radical Islam and an increasing questioning of the universality of human rights, whereas the so-called ‘War on Terror’ which followed 9/11 has allowed governments to restrict personal liberties in the name of national security. Two further chapters in this book, “*Twenty Years On – The Lessons of the Fatwa against The Satanic Verses*” (by Arne Ruth) and “*Anti-Terror Surveillance and Freedom of Expression*” (by Joakim Hammerlin) explore these particular foci in more detail.

This book is split into sections which consider its subject matter under three

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2010 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 7(2): 140-142. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

distinct sub-headings, those of Philosophy, Law, and, finally, Globalisation & Cultural Perspectives. These sub-sections effectively move from the more general and more theoretical, to the more specific and more practical elements of the debate, with many of the examples used being drawn from the Nordic countries.

The first section, focusing on Philosophy, begins with Ulf Petäjä asking the fundamental question “*What is the Value of Freedom of Speech?*”. Thereafter, Cathrine Holst and Anders Molander, drawing on the work of the Norwegian Government’s Commission on Freedom of Expression (1996 to 1999), examine the positioning within constitutional democracies of freedom of speech in an article entitled “*Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Discourse. Examining a Justification Strategy*”.

The second section of the book examines freedom of speech in the context of the law. Co-editor, Anine Keirulf opens the section with “*International Challenges to National Law. Media Free Speech in Norway*”, whilst Olaf Jørgensen explores “*The Right to Privacy and Public Figures. On the Limits to Freedom of Expression*”. Finally, Thomas Bull uses another Scandinavian example, that of Sweden when he writes about “*Freedom of Expression in Sweden. The Rule of Formalism*”.

The final sub-section, “Globalisation and Cultural Perspectives” is the largest and most wide-ranging, comprising of five articles. In addition to the two chapters about the Satanic Verses and Anti-Terror Surveillance, Walid Al-Saqaf, in “*Internet – A Challenge to Arab Regimes’ Control of Information. Yemen as a Case Study*” considers some specific challenges raised by IP networks and the world-wide-web, while Fredrik Stjernfelt looks at impacts on the press in “*Pressure On Press Freedom – The Current Religious War On Freedom Of Expression*”. Finally, in “*Lessons Of Being Drawn In – On Global Free Speech: Communication Theory And The Mohammed Cartoons*”, Risto Kunelius considers another press-related issue, one which of course is of particular relevance in Scandinavia.

Looking specifically at media-related elements of this title, it is perhaps not surprising that there are numerous references to various impacts which have arisen from the emergence of the Internet. Helge Rønning notes the double-edged nature of the medium as “*an inherently democratic means of communication*” (p. 10), and “*a very advanced tool for surveillance*” (*ibid.*). He takes the view that it is this latter feature which has begun to come to the forefront over recent years, in terms of both governmental and private corporate interventions. In the author’s view, “[t]he danger to the principle of freedom of expression is greatest when the corporations that produce content filtering technology work alongside undemocratic regimes to set up nationwide control schemes” (p. 11).

As has already been noted, more traditional media do not escape attention either. For example in Fredrik Stjernfelt's article, the author questions the *"increasing tension between old standards of enlightenment, on the one hand, and aggressive religion on the other"* (p. 129), pointing out that, even within the Western World, there are considerable differences of opinion as to where the line should be drawn between religious tolerance and freedom of expression. In this chapter, the author also manages to highlight the political tensions that surround this debate, concluding that *"to defend itself against the religious pressure against free speech, the political culture of the democracies must purge itself of culturalism and insist that basic human rights must never be eroded by the collective, cultural rights claimed by various groups..."* (p. 137).

One of the strengths of this book is the way in which it manages to be focused in terms of its subject matter, but also diverse in terms of the examples it considers. Perhaps not surprisingly for an edited volume, some of the chapters are more difficult to get to grips with than others. Certain aspects of the subject matter are undoubtedly complex, for example in relation to the constitutional and legal frameworks which have evolved around it, but many of the chapters are nevertheless informative even for the non-specialist reader.

Freedom of Speech Abridged recognises the increasing pressures and tensions which are emerging as a result of various impacts of globalisation, through which previously more separate cultures and religions are increasingly brought into greater close contact with each other. It also considers the role of media and media technologies on the development of an international public sphere, within which such tensions can be either amplified or ameliorated. Fundamentally, this is a book about limits on freedom of speech, what they should be and where they might justifiably be drawn. More specifically, its focus considers why such limits are needed, the structures required them and how they might be implemented.