

Editors must edit without fear of being attacked



By [Anton Harber](#)

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I once asked a South African editor why he ran a cartoon that he agreed was offensive. He said he had felt obliged, as he did not want to censor a well-known and much-respected cartoonist. His colleagues would have given him hell for infringing on the cartoonist's right to free speech, he said.

There is a fundamental and critical difference, I said, between editing and censorship.

Editors have to decide all the time what to give space to and what to leave out, who to criticise and who to praise, and how to treat stories. That is their job. More than that: it is their obligation. We rely on them to make those decisions in an intelligent, informed and fair manner.

They can decide to be provocative or offensive. Sometimes editors have to carry material they know will likely cause hurt and pain and one hopes they do it with good cause and careful consideration, weighing up the public and the private interest.

Sometimes they will deem it necessary to infringe on someone's privacy or dignity and they will need to justify such a decision.

Editors must do their job

One hopes, too, that sometimes an editor will decide that to carry something might lead to violence, or promote racism or hurt someone unduly and the story does not justify it. If the editor does not make that decision, then he or she is not doing their job.

Editors must edit.

Censorship is when such a decision is forced on one, when one drops a story out of fear or compulsion, when one's editorial decision is not based on the value, relevance and veracity of the story, but when someone else has the power to supersede such decisions.

Then information that the public should know is suppressed, and one is on a downward spiral.

If I was an editor, I would not have run the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons in solidarity this week with the murdered cartoonists.

I would want to show support and there are many ways to do this. But I would not want to carry material I was not comfortable with. Editors have to edit.

Find another way

There would be no point in selecting only the mild cartoons, as that defeats the point. If one is showing it to allow the public to form their own view on the material, or to give the finger to the killers, then one has to show the most provocative and offensive material. Better to find another way to show one's revulsion at the killings, I would say.

The danger is that editors will now make decisions on such material based on the fear of being attacked and putting their own and their staff members' lives at risk. If this is the case, then the killers have won.

And if they sense that they have succeeded in imposing their views on you, they will take it further and make other demands about what you do or do not do as an editor.

Soon your journalism will become bland and predictable, because you fear to challenge those who threaten or hold power over you. Soon you will be holding back on stories you know should be told because you need to protect yourself and your colleagues. That is why when one condemns the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, one cannot have any buts or maybes.

Solidarity

Too often this week I have heard people say that the massacre of the cartoonists was wrong... but the magazine did cross a line, but the cartoons were offensive, but the French are hypocrites on free speech, but, but, but...

There can be no qualification in the condemnation of those who kill writers, cartoonists, journalists, satirists or anyone for that matter, because they don't like what he or she said.

One has to show solidarity with those who died for their views and revulsion for those who kill because they did not like those views.

One has to recognise the value that journalists, cartoonists, satirists, artists and writers bring to our society - even when they find a need to be provocative or offensive. One has to nurture and protect them, and allow them to get on with their work of irritating us.

And editors must edit.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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