

The Tyranny of Silence

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Even amidst death threats and Islamist violence, [Flemming Rose](#) remains a staunch advocate for freedom of speech. In a Europe with ever-increasing speech restrictions, he argues for the equivalent of a global First Amendment.

On October 13, 2014, both the [Cato Institute](#) and the [Newseum](#) in Washington, DC, hosted Rose, author of the recently published book, *The Tyranny of Silence*. Rose and his paper maintain high security generally. But surprisingly, the only apparent security at these two events consisted of security guards from institutions holding them. Cato had approximately 75 people in attendance, including a young man from [FIRE](#). The Newseum had a smaller audience, consisting of about 35 people, most of whom were older and likely Newseum members, as only members were sent prior notification. Both audiences were attentive, responsive and had numerous questions for the editor during Q&A. Additionally, both events were taped for online viewing.

Rose is an editor of [Jyllands-Posten](#), a Danish newspaper, notorious for its 2005 publication of twelve cartoons of the Muslim Prophet Mohammad. Considered blasphemous, the drawings provided Islamists with an excuse to riot across the Muslim world and destroy Danish embassies, killing approximately 200 people.

Preceding these events, Danish author [Kåre Bluitgen](#), wrote a children's book on Islam's Prophet and wanted to include illustrations. Bluitgen sought to commission several illustrators for the Mohammad images. Two declined and one agreed on the condition of anonymity. The illustrators cited safety concerns stemming from death threats to [Salmon Rushdie](#) in the United Kingdom and the murder of [Theo van Gogh](#) in the Netherlands, both of whom allegedly "blasphemed" Islam. Questions arose as to whether fear caused the illustrators to engage in self-censorship concerning Islam, and whether individuals in the media should cater to a small minority that reacts violently to discussion deemed offensive.

Jyllands-Posten asked members of the illustrator's union to draw Mohammad as they saw him. The newspaper accepted submissions for seven to ten days. It subsequently published twelve illustrations along with an article addressing free speech and self-censorship. "No one could have anticipated" what would follow, Rose explained. The cartoons were the purported cause of violence that erupted throughout the Middle East, making Rose and his newspaper the center of a media storm. All context was lost.

Rose had sought a debate about ideas and a civil way to maintain a dialogue. Yet jihadists threatened to bomb the *Jyllands-Posten*'s offices and murder the cartoonists, forcing several of them into hiding. Both Rose and *Jyllands-Posten* have had to maintain heavy security ever since.

Several Muslim organizations filed a complaint against *Jyllands-Posten* accusing it of violating [the Danish Criminal Code](#). The statute prohibits public ridicule of religious dogma or public statements that cause a group to feel “threatened, scorned or degraded” due to race or religion. However, using a narrow legal interpretation of the statute, the Danish government decided not to pursue the case, stating that it did not meet the necessary pre-requisites for prosecution.

Rose stated that self-censorship in Europe has worsened since the *Jyllands-Posten*’s publication of the cartoons. Rose was confronted with numerous anti-free speech arguments. “Isn’t it hurting the religious feelings of people with deeply held beliefs?” “Isn’t it a smart business decision not to use language in newspapers that might offend readers?” “Isn’t it just good manners not to insult someone’s beliefs?” (*paraphrasing*) But Rose, without missing a beat, had an articulate and persuasive answer for each point. He insisted that the omission of language regarding Islam did not constitute simply a business decision, as all readers occasionally face offense. Nor did it stem from good manners, as the motivation was not to be polite. Rather, it was self-censorship based on fear and intimidation.

Rose ardently advocated for the equivalent of a worldwide First Amendment, arguing for a free marketplace of ideas including religious doctrine. “Religious feelings cannot demand special treatment” he proclaimed, noting that people might have other deeply held beliefs where they could claim equivalent offense.

European laws balance freedom of expression against other rights such as the right to privacy and the right not to be offended. Therefore, European countries have various laws prohibiting hate speech, religious denigration, and racism. However, “almost absolute” freedom of speech, with exceptions for incitement to violence and defamation of individuals, “makes America unique.” Free speech is “not a balancing test” against the so-called right not to be offended. Offensive speech is constitutionally protected if it’s true or mere opinion.

Rose aptly noted that hate speech restrictions have not reduced violence. Indeed, riots have always erupted in countries where hate speech, blasphemy laws and other speech restrictions exist, but have been violated. Proponents of hate speech laws claim that hate speech leads to violent acts, but there is no evidence to support their claims. In countries where freedom flourishes, offensive expression incites minimal violence.

Rose also noted a seeming paradox: where immigration rises causing an increase in diversity of race and religion, there’s a decrease in the diversity of ideas allowed expression.

When asked if he thought there is a proper role for government censorship, Rose answered with a resounding “no!” Rose noted that while [Kurt Westergaard](#), cartoonist of Mohammad with a bomb in his turban, became victim of an assassination attempt, some believe he deserved his fate. And, the Netherlands’ Minister of Justice professed, “if we had hate speech laws, then Van Gogh would be alive today.” Rose thinks both of these positions are outrageous because they condemn speech while justifying the violence in response to it.

Rose explained that many people fail to distinguish between words and deeds. And, “America is becoming more isolated” as tyrannical countries tighten speech restrictions. While American

laws allow freedom, increasingly the citizens are plagued with peer pressure and political correctness, pushing for self-censorship.

Yet, “the right not to be offended” is the only right Rose believes individuals should not have in a democracy. Freedom should be paramount.

Refusing to be silent in the face of Islamist intimidation, Rose exercises that freedom courageously and without qualms.