

GANDHI ORATION
University of New South Wales
Journalism in the Age of Terror
January 29, 2016

Ladies and gentlemen, in preparing for today's lecture, I read quite a bit about Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and discovered what an extraordinary, but also colourful and at times infuriating character he really was. For those of us who know his legacy, and that must surely be a pretty hefty majority of the people in the world today, he is a saintly Indian liberation hero who preached non-violence. But more than most historical figures, Mahatma Gandhi has become something of a two-dimensional figure, almost a caricature of himself that in my view does him no justice. He is as mythologized as he is misunderstood, but quite rightly he is also lionized as one of the greatest political thinkers and peace-makers of the 20th Century.

He was first and foremost a lawyer and politician of course. But few people know that he was also a journalist, and in that regard I feel a particular admiration for Gandhi. He began his professional life in South Africa, defending the Indian community against the injustices of the Apartheid state, and to support that cause he also launched and edited a weekly newspaper, explicitly aimed at informing South African Indians, and encouraging debate. He continued as an editor in India with two more publications. And while all his papers were aimed at supporting his political ideas, as I'll discuss shortly, they were all underpinned by an unwavering commitment to fact.

If we can boil Gandhi's philosophy down to one fundamental idea, surely it must be that peace, security and dignity can only be guaranteed when we respect the human rights of all. It's an idea that underpinned his strategy of non-violent resistance. Gandhi was no fool. He might have been a pacifist, but he also understood profoundly just how powerful non-violence really was as a way of confronting the British authorities who controlled Indians with their military and police.

He said "the first principle of non-violence is non-cooperation with everything that is humiliating". He knew how infuriatingly impossible non-cooperation would be for the British to manage.

But he also understood that fundamental respect for human rights is the only way to produce a stable, prosperous system that doesn't require continued violence to survive.

Now let me go one step further, and argue that even for Gandhi, the most fundamental right – the one that underpins all others – was the freedom of speech; the right to self-expression. Without that, Gandhi would be unknown to us. He would never have launched his newspapers. His voice would have been rendered useless. The power of his words would have evaporated. Let me repeat - Freedom of speech is the right that underpins and protects all others.

Gandhi understood that when he began his newspaper career in South Africa. The papers became a tool that helped him inform the Indian community, as a way of encouraging debate, and most

crucially, as a way of challenging and questioning the Apartheid state. But as an editor he also understood the power of the media, both as a democratic tool, but also as a destructive force.

Here is what Gandhi said about Journalism: "The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy."

I know there are a lot of people who'd agree with that sentiment, and in particular a lot of politicians who believe that an untrammelled press is more dangerous than it is helpful, particularly at a time of conflict.

But then Gandhi went on: "If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within."

Here Gandhi is echoing the words of another great thinker – the French philosopher Albert Camus who said "a free press can of course be both good and bad. But a press that is not free can never be anything but bad."

This brings me to the subject of this evening's talk – Journalism in the age of Terror, and in particular the disturbing ways in which all the belligerents – governments and extremists alike – are not only doing their utmost to impose control over the media. They are using it as a weapon in ways that we have not seen for more than a generation,

and in ways that I think seriously damage our democracy – the very thing that has made Australia in particular one of the safest, most stable and prosperous places on the planet.

Perhaps one of the most egregious attacks on press freedom was the assault on the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris early last year. I first heard about the attack while we were in prison. You won't be surprised to learn that it triggered a debate inside the prison walls as lively as it was outside, particularly about limits to free speech. Many of the Moslems I shared a cell with believed that the magazine had overstepped the mark by insulting Islam, and they believed that although the actions of the gunmen who attacked the magazine were extreme, they also felt the cartoonists had it coming; that because they insulted Islam, they had committed an offense that somehow excused the attackers.

And yet in a wonderful opinion piece published a few months ago in *The Australian*, the British Egyptian commentator and former political prisoner Maajid Nawaz wrote "if our hard-earned liberty, our desire to be irreverent of the old and to question the new, can be reduced to one basic, indispensable right, it is the right to free speech."

If we take that away, if we somehow limit the freedom to think and to express those thoughts, we undermine the freedom of association, freedom of religion, and just about any other human right you can think of. That's why I argued to my Moslem friends that although they might have been offended by Charlie Hebdo's cartoons, it is far

more important that we protect the right to criticize, to challenge and to question conventional thinking, than it is to legislate against causing offense.

As the title of my lecture suggests, what disturbs me in particular is the way that both governments and extremists have come to regard the media as a key battleground in the War on Terror, but as I will explain later, I am also deeply concerned about the way that the media its self has responded to this challenge.

Firstly, lets have a look at what sets this War on Terror apart from the wars of the past. In the pre-9/11 days, most conflicts were over physical stuff – land, water, oil, even ethnicity – the kinds of things you could draw a front line across. The battleground and the combatants were all relatively clear-cut. Journalists – particularly foreign correspondents – were generally seen as neutral players with a role on the battlefield as legitimate as humanitarian workers. It was dangerous of course. It always is when you're working in an environment with big explosions and bits of metal flying around. But even in more poorly defined guerrilla wars where political power was being fought over in places like the Central American through the 1970s and 80s, or Africa's post-colonial wars, reporters were thought of as inconvenient observers rather than players or hostile combatants.

Of course propaganda and censorship are as old as war its self, but that has generally been a struggle to control the story rather than targeting the story-teller.

But now, we have The War on Terror. A good friend once rather dryly quipped that it is as a war on an abstract noun. It means whatever anyone wants it to mean. We in the west think it's pretty clear what this is about. It's about stopping the slaughter in places like Paris, or the random bombings in Kabul and Baghdad, or closer-to-home incidents like the Lindt Café attack.

But consider what some of the Islamists I met in prison told me. For them, the War on Terror means stopping the drone strikes that hit a hospital in Afghanistan, or wedding parties in Waziristan, the barrel bombs that fall in Aleppo, and yes - the random arrests, the beatings and torture in Cairo's prisons.

This is not a war over anything tangible, with clear lines and distinct uniforms. This is a war over competing world views. It's a war between Western Liberal Democratic ideas and a particular branch of radical political Islam. And in that war of ideas, the battlefield extends to the place where ideas themselves are prosecuted - in other words, the media. So journalists are no longer simply witnesses to the struggle. We are, by definition, a means by which the war itself is waged.

That is not an abstract concept. In one of the very first shots in this battle of ideas, the United States air force bombed Al Jazeera's bureau in Kabul in November 2001. Officially the US said it was a mistake, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that it attacked the bureau because it wanted to shut down the access that Arabic service

journalists had to sources in the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Whatever you might think about the rights or wrongs of those groups, the United States appeared to strike at a media organization, because it disapproved of the ideas it was presenting.

On the other side of the ledger, a few months later the Taliban kidnapped the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, and beheaded him before posting the video online. It was another spectacularly gruesome act that attacked a media worker not because of anything Pearl was reporting, but simply because he was a journalist who represented a world that the extremists were opposed to.

And in posting the execution online, the Taliban also used new media to propagate their own message – that anyone who challenges their view of the way society should work will be executed. What the Taliban began, Islamic State has mastered with their sickening snuff videos, and their use of social media to both recruit and to terrorize. In this war, new media has become as much a weapon of terror as any bomb.

Of course the first instincts of any government – indeed of any society – that finds its self under attack is to close ranks, to prioritize security over all else, to silence dissent and control public opinion. In practical terms, that often means limiting free speech and censoring the press to stop anything that might be seen as subversive from entering the public discourse.

But lets go back to Democracy 101. We are familiar with the usual three pillars – the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. But remember – in the classic model of democracy, the media is the fourth estate. It's there to hold the other three to account, to keep the public informed of the policies that are being enacted in our name, and to help oil public debate. It is an integral part of a properly functioning democracy.

A joint paper published by academics from Georgia State University, The University of Wisconsin and the World Bank Institute in 2011 was titled "Media Freedom, Socio-Political Stability and Economic Growth". It's authors found a direct line between those three ideas. They argued that Media Freedom promotes socio-political stability by pushing the government to act in the interest of the people. That stability provides a favorable business climate, which in turn promotes investment. So, one of the big lessons since World War II is that a genuinely free media means more political stability, more social harmony and more economic prosperity.

I suspect that won't come as much of a surprise to those of us who happen to live in one of the most stable, harmonious and prosperous places on the planet. And yet in the War on Terror, we seem to be losing sight of that key idea.

Governments the world over are using that "T"-word to clamp down on the very freedoms that made us so successful in the first place. There are the easy examples of course – last October, police in Turkey raided the headquarters of a media group and closed two

newspapers and two television stations that had been highly critical of the government. The group's owners have been charged with supporting terrorism.

In China, North Korea, and Russia – all the usual suspects – we've seen similar attacks on press freedom.

And then there is Egypt. My two colleagues and I were arrested and charged with being members of a terrorist organization; of supporting a terrorist organization; of financing a terrorist organization and of broadcasting false news to undermine national security. What we were actually doing was covering the unfolding political struggle with all the professional integrity that our imperfect trade demands – and that included reporting that was both accurate and balanced. And in this case, balanced reporting involved interviewing members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who only six months earlier had been ousted from power after forming the country's first democratically elected government. In other words, we were talking to the opposition.

I couldn't have objected to being imprisoned if we had actually committed some offence; if we had broadcast news that was false, for example; or if we really had been members of a terrorist organization. But at no stage in the trial did the prosecution present anything to confirm any of the charges. Once again, this wasn't about what we had actually done, so much as the ideas we were accused of transmitting.

Egypt has gone on to introduce new legislation that makes it a criminal offence to publish anything that contradicts the official version of a terrorist incident. If you check the facts, discover that the government has been trying to cover up some inconvenient truths, and publish what you know, you can be hit with a fine equivalent to \$50,000.

But in case you think this is happening in places with less developed democracies, think again. In the UK, the ruling Conservative Party has pledged to introduce what they call Extremism Disruption Orders. These will restrict the movement and activities of people the Government thinks are engaged in "extreme activities", even if they haven't broken any law. Innocent people could be banned from speaking in public, from taking a position of authority or restricted from associating with certain individuals simply because they hold views that run counter to what the Government thinks are "British values", whatever those are. News organizations could also run foul of the law, simply by quoting someone who is the subject of an EDO.

Let me give you a passage from one article called "Shaking the Manes" that I'd wager would possibly have the British attorney general reaching for an EDO.

The author wrote "no empire intoxicated with the red wine of power and plunder of weaker races has yet lived long in this world, and this ... "empire" which is based on organized exploitation of physically weaker races of the earth and upon a continuous exhibition of brute force, cannot live if there is a just God ruling the universe... It is high

time that people were made to realize that the fight ... is a fight to the finish”.

Guess who wrote that. It wasn't an Islamic State commander or a Taliban leader or some radical preacher. It was Mahatma Gandhi back in March 1922, calling for an end to British dominion over India. We all know Gandhi's unshakeable commitment to passive resistance and non-violence, but a prosecutor wanting to silence dissent could twist phrases like “the empire cannot live” or “the fight is a fight to the finish” as a call to arms, and put the author in prison. Well, guess what. The prosecutor did. Gandhi was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of sedition although he was released after two years on health grounds.

And lest we all start to feel a little bit smug about our own country, lets go back to three pieces of legislation introduced by the Australian Government over the past few years that all seriously undermine media freedom in ways that I don't think have been properly understood.

The first was section 35P of the ASIO Act — the new section that deals with the disclosure of information relating to Special Intelligence Operations, or SIOs. Essentially that prohibits reporting of any undercover operations involving security agents. No responsible journalist wants to expose an ongoing operation, or put security agents at risk, but the new law goes far beyond that. The 35P offence carries a five-year gaol term; double that for “reckless” unauthorized disclosure if we ever report on an SIO. And because

there is no time limit on an SIO designation, you can be imprisoned for reporting on one regardless of how far in the past it happened. And that's despite the fact that reporters will never know what operations have been designated an SIO because that little detail is also secret. So simply looking for information about the work of the security services runs the risk of breaking the law and landing you in prison.

The second piece of legislation is known as the Foreign Fighters Bill. The killer line here is the new offence of "advocating terrorism". The media union – the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance – argues that it suppresses legitimate speech and advocacy, but the MEAA is particularly worried that it could include news stories that report on banned advocacy or even fair comment and analysis.

The third legislative tranche was the Data Retention Bill requiring telecommunication companies to keep metadata for at least two years so that it can be accessed by a variety of agencies, including security organisations and the police. The problem for journalists is that gives the authorities both the tools and the legal cover to explore their contacts with sources. The government has introduced a fig leaf protection that establishes public interest advocates who are supposed to help judges decide whether to issue a search warrant to investigate a journalist's data, but the journalists themselves won't be consulted because the whole process is done in secret. And anyway, there is no provision requiring the authorities to seek a warrant for a journalist's sources. If you're a civil servant and you have information on some misdeeds within your department, and decide that you have

a moral obligation to expose it, simply picking up the phone and calling a newspaper makes you a potential target of the security services. It makes confidential whistle blowing almost impossible without risking a prison term.

The Government keeps claiming that none of these measures are directed at silencing the media. That might be true, but each in their own way has a corrosive effect on the ability of journalists to do the job that basic democratic theory demands of us. How can we the public keep track of the government's security policies – surely one of the most critical areas of the government's work – when the media can't report on abuses of that policy for fear of winding up in gaol? How can we have a rational public debate about what constitutes Aussie values, when we can't quote people who hold views from across the social and political spectrum? How can we encourage insiders to blow the whistle on government misdeeds when we can't ever guarantee that our sources will remain safe?

The combined impact might not be immediate or immediately obvious, but in an eloquent speech at the Melbourne Press Freedom Dinner last year, Laurie Oakes argued not only that those new laws seriously damage our democracy; he said the media itself allowed them to pass without seriously interrogating the impact that they'll have on our work.

And that brings me to the other side of the equation. If governments have eroded democratic principles in the name of national security, then we, the media, have become increasingly slack in challenging

and questioning governments, and in defending the freedom of the press. We in the media have been abrogating our own responsibilities in a democratic society.

I'd like to go back to a classic essay that George Orwell wrote in 1946 called "Politics and the English Language". Orwell argued that lazy writing repeats political phrases that obfuscate more than they reveal. It uses clichés that are pre-loaded with meaning far beyond their dictionary definition without ever challenging the underlying assumptions.

Orwell was writing as Europe emerged dazed and bloodied from World War Two. He was concerned with the way the world had walked into the most blood-soaked conflict in human history, and he believed that the abuse of language was a large part of the problem. In Orwell's view, the underlying meaning of politically loaded language had created a kind of social psychology that allowed governments on both sides to take their people to mass-slaughter.

Let's go back to the more recent Paris Attacks of last November for a look at how this can happen.

In any crisis, there is a tendency for the media to close ranks with government and society. That's a normal reaction, but it is also dangerous. In responding to the attacks, almost the entire political class has used the language of war, and the media has followed suit. In France, Le Parisien's headline said "This time it's war". Le Figaro's headline was "War in the heart of Paris".

And yet a disciplined news organization would shy away from using that kind of language in its reporting because of the way it limits our thinking. When you talk of war, it comes with a vast array of cultural baggage... the kind of meaning that has been built up over centuries of conflicts, and institutionalized myth making. It comes with connotations of heroism and sacrifice. It also implies the tools of war – tanks, army divisions, helicopter gunships, drone strikes, Special Forces and so on – the kinds of national defense strategies that were designed for conflicts with other countries. It suggests that the right response is a military one; that we will make ourselves safer by attacking or even invading another country. It makes politicians look strong and decisive of course. But it isn't necessarily rational.

Recent history has told us that those tools have been pretty ineffective in dealing with the much messier, more poorly defined struggle with terrorism. It's hard to see how more drone strikes in Syria or Iraq might have stopped the terrorist attacks in Paris. There are plenty of sensible analyses of the invasion of Iraq that suggests it helped create the environment that allowed Islamic State to flourish, making us and Iraqis both poorer and less safe than we were before the invasion.

So if you're trying to tackle a massively complex problem that has political, social, and economic origins, it makes sense to use the kind of language that allows us to think a little more widely. If the media avoids the language of war, it doesn't necessarily stop us from using military means to deal with the problem, but it does open up the

possibility of more subtle security tools like policing, intelligence or economic policies.

It's fine to quote politicians and analysts when they advocate for an invasion, or condemn the attackers as psychopaths as John Kerry did when he visited Paris not long after the attacks. And yet too often in the coverage, we saw loaded adjectives like "psychopaths" find their way into copy. Those kinds of words imply the attackers are beyond comprehension or somehow afflicted by madness. This isn't about becoming an apologist for mass murder. But that kind of rhetoric absolves us of understanding how the attackers came to think it's a good idea to shoot up a rock concert. And if we don't understand it, if we flatten the attackers out into two-dimensional psychopathic demons, we can never develop the kinds of economic, social, and – yes – security policies that might be genuinely effective in stopping the terrorists.

Even the word "terrorist" is a problem. In its style-guide, the BBC tells its journalists never to use the "T" word in their reporting. It's fine to quote somebody else describing an attack as terrorism, but never to use the descriptor your self. That's because of the old cliché "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". And if our reporting is to be genuinely independent, neutral, and fair, we've got to stick to that very difficult middle ground in the words we use.

Let me give you another example. In the days after the Paris attacks, French and Russian aircraft attacked what were routinely described as "Islamic State positions". It's one of those phrases that sound

straight forward enough. It brings to mind a sandbagged command post defended by machine-gun nests. Or a checkpoint manned by armed Islamic State fighters. Or an ammunition store full of weapons and supplies.

They might be all those things – some of the targets probably are. But anyone who has worked in the region would know that they are far more likely to be something like a house in the middle of a village where armed men have been seen going in and out. It could be a mosque where Islamic State gunmen gather for Friday prayers, but that also acts as a community medical center. Or as happened last year, a petrol station where militant pickups are filling up, next to some local farmers. Those attacks are inevitably going to have civilian casualties and seriously damage local infrastructure, hurting people who've been caught up in the conflict simply because they had the misfortune to live in a region that Islamic State decided to occupy. It's a fair chance the attacks might also create extremists out of the victims' relatives, who are otherwise trying to get on with their lives. Without any extra information, the phrase "Islamic State Positions" obscures more than it reveals. I'm pretty sure that Mahatma Gandhi, with his commitment to journalistic truth, would have demanded to know the detail of what is being done in his name.

And yet very few reporters have bothered to ask what exactly is being hit in the air strikes. Again, I am making no judgment about the rights and wrongs of our military strategy. I've seen enough conflict to know that wars will always cause civilian suffering, and that military planners have to be ready to accept those casualties if we

decide that it's the best approach to winning a war. But we must be aware of what is being done in our names, and ask whether air strikes made in an angry attempt to appear tough and decisive and to make us feel safer, might actually create more problems, more insecurity, and encourage more suicide bombers than they actually eliminate.

Of course, politicians would love us to slavishly follow their slogans and platitudes with all the baggage that they carry. But journalists have a moral responsibility not to use that kind of language even if we're accused of being unpatriotic or somehow "un-Australian". In fact, it seems to me that the most patriotic thing the media can do at a time of national crisis is to be fiercely skeptical of our politicians, to always question and challenge and doubt what we are told.

The failure to do that has led us to disaster before. When he wrote "Politics and the English Language", George Orwell fully understood the way the German media accepted the rhetoric of the Nazi party before World War Two, and helped lead the country not only into that brutally destructive conflict with Britain and its allies, but also into the mass slaughter of Europe's Jewish population.

More recently, the media famously failed to do its job in questioning the intelligence that the Bush administration used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Remember – the invasion was premised on the idea that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The phrase became so embedded in our psyche that we reduced it to its letters. At the time, it would have been hard to find anyone who

didn't know what 'WMD' stood for. The Western press dutifully, and I think quite shamefully lined up behind the American administration, often unquestioningly parroting its language.

In a stinging piece for CNN marking the 10th anniversary of the invasion, Howard Kurtz wrote, "major news organizations aided and abetted the Bush administration's march to war on what turned out to be faulty premises. All too often, skepticism was checked at the door, and the shaky claims of top officials and unnamed sources were trumpeted as fact."

From August 2002 until the war began on March 19 the following year, Kurtz found more than 140 front-page stories that focused heavily on the US administration's rhetoric against Iraq: "Cheney Says Iraqi Strike Is Justified" for example; "War Cabinet Argues for Iraq Attack"; "Bush Tells United Nations It Must Stand Up to Hussein or U.S. Will"; "Bush Cites Urgent Iraqi Threat"; "Bush Tells Troops: Prepare for War."

By contrast, pieces questioning the evidence or rationale for war were frequently buried, minimized or spiked. If we look around at the language that dominated the papers in the wake of the Paris attacks, it looked disturbingly similar.

But here's another problem. I'd argue that adopting the language of war plays perfectly into the hands of Islamic State, who's attacks are carefully calibrated to attract just that kind of coverage. Remember – in this world of instant communication through Twitter and

Facebook, everything the militants do is designed to generate just the kind of panicked, hyped-up coverage that we've been delivering.

As I discovered in Egypt's prison system, a lot of radical Islamists who support Islamic State WANT a war. It's something that was well explained in a now famous essay in the Atlantic magazine called "What ISIS wants", and brilliantly articulated in a monologue from Waleed Ally. Theirs is a millennial cult that sees the coming conflict as the final battle – the end of days. And so by adopting the language and the posture of war, we are not only failing to tackle the causes of the violence – we are feeding it. Maajid Nawaz, the British writer and former political prisoner in Egypt I mentioned earlier, went so far as to argue that adopting the language of war just as Islamic State wants, we are framing the problem in accordance with their world view. In an article in The Australian, he argued that instead of talking of the conflict as a war, it would be better to see it as a global Islamic insurgency. Recognizing it that way frames the way we react to it, and could avert World War III from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It will be no surprise then to learn that late last year, the head of Al Qaeda Ayman Al Zawahri declared that war with the west had just begun.

Once again, I'm not here to suggest that a military approach by our politicians is necessarily wrong. It's an option and as much as Mahatma Gandhi might abhor it, it will always remain so. And there will be plenty of strong arguments about why using the military

might be the right thing to do. What I am arguing is that the media has a duty and a responsibility to remain skeptical and to challenge everything we are told. We have to avoid blindly adopting the politically loaded rhetoric of our leaders. When we are under attack, it is the easiest thing in the world to adopt jingoistic language, to close ranks, to shun outsiders, to flatten the attackers into two-dimensional demons and ultimately fail to get to the bottom of the problem. Our critics can and do accuse the media of being unpatriotic and that too makes it tough to hold to our professional standards. But if journalists don't, we abrogate the most basic responsibility to our democracy... a free press capable of asking the difficult questions and airing alternative views – even if they're uncomfortable or politically incorrect.

But that can't happen if the media is acting simply as an echo chamber for existing political interests. If our politicians have a responsibility to defend the fundamental elements of our democracy, we – the media – have a responsibility to uphold our end of the bargain too.

Gandhi understood the role of the media. He was the editor of three English weeklies. In South Africa he launched Indian Opinion, while in India he ran Young India and Harijan.

An Indian Professor K. Swaminathan said in a 1976 talk, that although the papers varied according to their readers, there was a common refrain running through them all: the insistence on truth and non-violence, on fairness to all and the public good. Professor

Swaminathan said these provided the first principles, the firm universal framework for Gandhi's journalism... the regard for truth in the abstract, which in practice meant a reverence for fact.

The media can't operate as a charity of course, but we have always had an obligation to, in Gandhi's words, the public good. And that includes keeping our audiences and readers informed about the world around us. Frankly, I think some of our oldest news organizations are failing dismally.

Just a few days ago, I checked the World News page on the Daily Telegraph's website. Here are the Telegraph's top five World News headlines from that day, presumably in order of what the paper thinks is most important to its readers:

"Blow up doll sparks water rescue"

"US Airlines refund tickets over zika fears"

"Matador took baby into bullring"

"Why women guard their hot blokes" and...

"Co-worker drank my breast milk"

These kinds of headlines might generate clicks and website traffic, but they do nothing to help win the trust and respect of our audiences and readers. It's no secret that journalists sit right at the bottom of the surveys that measure public respect for various professions. We are right down there somewhere around used car salesmen and pornographers. And my apologies to any used car salesmen in the audience... We are seen as gossip mongers; as the salesmen of sleaze; as hopelessly biased purveyors of opinion rather

than the independent reporters that most people believe we ought to be. And yet we badly need that public support if we are ever going to win the argument with the political leaders who would build legislative walls around what we can and can't say.

I think our own experience in Egypt is enlightening here.

As you know, we were accused of supporting a terrorist organization. The Egyptian investigators alleged that we had used our role as reporters as a cover to work as propagandists for the Muslim Brotherhood. It's a characterization that a lot of people probably wouldn't have been particularly surprised by. They'd have seen it as consistent with the way they understand a lot of journalists operate.

But as the facts of the case began to unfold, an extraordinary groundswell of support emerged. It began with our professional colleagues, including some of our fiercest rivals. Hundreds of people from organizations like CNN and the BBC stood with their mouths taped shut, holding signs declaring free AJ staff... and remember – this is in fiercely competitive newsrooms that would normally rather eat their own babies than acknowledge the opposition.

Then came the public, first in the hundreds, then the thousands, then the millions and even the tens of millions. The Free AJ Staff hash-tag eventually got almost three BILLION impressions on Twitter – a truly extraordinary number by any measure. Although to be fair, some members of my family were probably responsible for at least a billion of those.

And then came the politicians. They lined up behind us with an extraordinary unanimity that is genuinely rare in these days of partisanship and point-scoring. Over the course of our campaign, we had several parliamentary motions supporting us, and each one got unanimous cross-party support.

The point I'm trying to make is that vast support emerged because everyone came to understand that we had always remained true to our highest ethical standards, not just in our reporting of Egypt, but throughout our careers. If anyone of us had lapsed at any point in the past; if we had somehow given in to the more base instincts of our profession and published blatantly biased or inaccurate reports, our critics in Egypt would have jumped on them with glee and trumpeted it from the rooftops. Nobody – our colleagues, the public, the politicians, none of them – would have had any confidence in our professional integrity, and they'd have started to wonder if perhaps the allegations were true. Our support would have crumbled to dust, and we'd still be in prison.

I'm telling you this story because for all the cynicism about journalism and the media in general, I believe there is still an understanding amongst the public that what we do is, in fact, pretty fundamental to the way our societies work. They know – you know – that for all the criticism that gets leveled at the media, democracy doesn't work unless there is a free exchange of ideas and information; and a watchdog keeping track of those who'd make decisions in our name. People backed us partly out of outrage at what

we were going through at a personal level, but also because they recognized and believed in the fundamental importance of the values that we three came to represent – freedom of speech; freedom of the press; and the rule of law in a properly functioning society.

And yet while we have a responsibility to lift our game and restore some measure of public confidence, politicians must also recognize what we stand to lose if they are too swift to criminalize free speech or limit the work that the media does.

It is about nothing less than defending one of the most fundamental pillars of our democracy.

So finally, let me quote from Mahatma Gandhi once more: “In a true democracy,” he said, “every man and woman is taught to think for himself or herself.”

That cannot happen if the media isn’t allowed or is simply incapable of giving every man and woman the information they need to think for themselves, and take part in our democracy.

Thank you.
