

of speech with freedom of the press is a foolish and misleading notion. Freedom of speech is an individual democratic liberty; freedom of the press is a virtually meaningless phrase. The Chairman ... 'begs to differ' from our view that the press plays an active role in peddling prejudice. He differs but does not contradict. Instead, the Professor trundles out a familiar line often attributed to Voltaire but for which there is no conclusive evidence that it ever passed his lips.

"*Media Watch* has never ... advocated 'controlling opinions' as Prof Flint suggests. It is concerned with what is published. The manner is, in many ways, as important as the content. Our contention in the 'God's myxo' matter was that publication of an unreasonable opinion expressed in a deliberately offensive manner deserved condemnation from the Council.

"The thrust of the *Media Watch* item was quite simple. If the Press Council did not feel that the 'God's myxo' article was sufficiently offensive to uphold a complaint against its publisher, then we wondered what useful role the Council sees for itself in these matters."

Questions for consideration

1. Is the fact that the article is 'opinion' enough to exculpate it?
2. Should different standards be applied to someone's opinion that to a report? Even so, does this article still fall below the minimum expected standards for newspapers?
3. Does the fact that the columnist represents a major interest group offer any 'defence' for the newspaper?
4. Is an editor in cutting an article or asking for a re-write of an opinion piece engaging in 'censorship'. If so, where does 'editing' end and 'censorship' begin?
5. Is the offer of a letter to the editor sufficient in most cases where an offensive opinion has been published? Would it be sufficient in this case?
6. It is said that the test of free speech is defending not the easy cases but the difficult ones. Is this one of those 'difficult cases' where free speech needs to be defended?

Irregular verbal: A comment on opinion

Jack R Herman

Years ago, *Punch* ran a competition in which readers suggested variations on the English "irregular verbs", along the lines of:

I am strong-minded; you are stubborn; he is pig-headed.

Among regular and irregular by-lined columnists, the verb seems to be declined:

I am an opinion writer; you are a columnist; she is a chardonnay-sipping, elitist member of the commentariat.

What then distinguishes a columnist from an elitist? It seems the "three Rs" – the republic, refugees and reconciliation – are determining factors. Apparently, if you born to the purple, live in a mansion, enjoy the benefits of high office, or even of a column, but oppose the three Rs, you're safe. But, if you're a worker on the basic wage in the outer rim of the urban sprawl and think that asylum seekers have copped a raw deal or that an Australian should be Head of State, you're an elitist.

As Gerard Henderson has pointed out in his *Sydney Institute Quarterly*, Imre Saluzinsky, a senior academic, who has had a regular column in a broadsheet and his own radio program, is wont to call Catharine Lumby, a senior academic, who has had a regular column in a news magazine, and the odd spot on radio: 'an elite'.

Labelling of opponents as 'the elite' worked so well for Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, a group of (former) High Court judges, senior Cabinet ministers, Professors, heads of government instrumentalities, scions of incredibly rich families and radio stars on multi-million dollar contracts (apparently not an elitist among them), that the dedicated followers of conservative fashion have now deemed it necessary to continue this labelling, no matter how meaningless the labels have become, or how hypocritical it might appear.

Or label them 'members of the commentariat', which has lovely old-style Soviet overtones. Or, to use my favourite inversion of what should be a positive connotation but is now used as a derisive insult, a 'do-gooder'. Like, you'd prefer I was a 'do-badder'?

Of course, the ultimate blast of rhetoric in any modern *ad hominem* attack is to label your opponent as 'politically correct'. Granted that, in some quarters, the overuse of euphemism is a threat to clear communication, will someone please tell me what is wrong with preferring not to use terminology that is offensive to people being described?

Another genuinely confusing label is 'the media'. Blame 'the media' for whatever is wrong: vilification of your group; biased reporting of your pet national, political or economic theory; victimisation of poor politicians; leftist bias. But remember that 'the media' includes everything from broadsheet newspapers to tabloid commercial television to shock-jock radio commentators to pay-TV to the national broadcasters. A broad church indeed, and hardly one where a single view, viewpoint or bias is likely to prevail.

Especially in the 'commentariat', where voices of conservatism far out-number voices of progress. Even in the broadsheet print media; let alone on the radio airwaves and on pay-TV. I have a theory that these opinion-makers resent the ABC because, along with the broadsheet press, it's the one of the few places where there is more than a pretence of balance in opinions presented.

I guess that makes me, in their eyes, a shiraz-gulping 'elitist', even though I see myself as a just another point-of-view.

[The views expressed are those of the writer and should not be seen as the views of the Australian Press Council.]