

POLITICS AS USUAL: Limits Thereto

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Is free speech something we all truly believe in and accept, or do we all have little caveats attached to that belief?

Caveats that are unsaid but yet somehow understood? Do we say to ourselves 'I believe in free speech' but then turn around and say, '?? but you can't say that,?' or 'I believe in free speech but there are limits.?'

If we are honest with ourselves, I think we all make statements like that, either in our heads or even out loud, an implicit acceptance that some things simply should not be said.

There is tacit agreement amongst the general public about what is acceptable and what is not, but there is no universally accepted list of topics that are verboten. It is just accepted that some things 'cross the line?', so to speak.

But who decides what that line is, and when someone has crossed it? Who decides who gets to offend and who gets to be offended? I think that conflict, between freedom to say what we want and the realization that not everything we say should be said, is what we as a community and as a country are struggling with right now.

The reaction to the horror of the Charlie Hebdo murders has been to clamp down on certain kinds of speech; to muzzle individuals for spouting their views. It seems reasonable given the circumstances, but I wonder about where it will lead us.

I thought about this the other day as I endured the truly horrendous movie, 'The Interview?'. Aside from the fact that it was absolutely awful, the movie was offensive, and not just to any semblance of the notion of art. It was offensive. Period.

The Interview was subject to much threats, hysteria or what have you from the good folks in the Politburo of North Korea. They were furious. Threats were made of a nuclear kind. A hacking scandal ensued. Actors were embarrassed (shock!) and Sony backed down 'albeit briefly' and did not run the movie in the theatres.

Cue the outrage about foreign powers dictating to us about what we can say or not say, and how Sony Pictures were 'weak' or whatever for not running the movie. Personally, I think it was all a big bit of nonsense to get people talking about a movie that otherwise no one would have seen.

Leaving aside the absurdity of that situation, let's look at the movie objectively. It was about murdering the President of North Korea (and that that was a good thing). Humiliating him. Then murdering him. As a comedy.

We just decided that because it was about Kim Jong-Un it was funny. But think about it this way - would we think it was funny if it was Obama? Or Harper? Would a movie like that even be made? Perhaps, but probably not. The larger question would be 'why not?'

And I think that's my point. We say that we believe in free speech but often our actions belie those beliefs.

Right or wrong, it's fairly clear that we believe some free speech is more worthy of protection than others, that our right to poke the bear is limited to certain kinds of bears.

But before we trot off merrily into an Orwellian future of laws for thought-crimes, we need to understand that it is oxymoronic to say that there are limits to free speech. It is free. Or it is not.

We need to reconcile that fact.