

Brenda Power



Are you offended? Good, that's because the truth often hurts

Anyone remember Charlie Hebdo? I mean, obviously nobody in The Irish Times or in Amnesty International or among my good friends in the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, but anyone else? Anyone?

Charlie Hebdo was — and remains — a small, satirical publication based in Paris which specialised — and still does — in taking the unmerciful mickey out of Islamic extremism. Exactly two years ago yesterday, two al-Qaeda terrorists burst into the newspaper's offices and shot dead 12 people, including its editor. For the crime of offending Muslims, 12 people were executed.

Well, the whole world was outraged, though few outdid our own tireless guardians of free speech and open debate in their horrified indignation, mostly manifest by wearing "Je Suis Charlie" badges and looking solemn. Amnesty's Colm O'Gorman was one of the first to condemn the attack. "This is a dark day for freedom of expression and a vibrant press culture," he said. Amnesty International also noted "that freedom of expression extends to ideas of all kinds, including those that may be considered insulting or offensive".

Oh, yeah? Two years on, it is clear the said extension is only available to those ideas that insult or offend people other than yourself. Last week O'Gorman denounced as "irresponsible" the publication by The Irish Times of an article explaining the mindset and terminology of the so-called "alt-right" or alternative right. The alt-right movement was instrumental in the minor matter of electing the next American president and therefore, you would think, a legitimate subject for coverage by a national

newspaper. It is racist, misogynistic and white supremacist in its leanings, and its terminology reflects that thinking. Ventilating it, therefore, can only have the effect of exposing its repugnance to any halfway discerning intellect.

Sadly, O'Gorman and other whining lefties who condemned the publication of a fairly harmless and even mildly mocking article do not credit Irish newspaper readers with any discernment at all. Instead they must be protected from ideas they might not be smart enough to decode or dismiss of their own accord. Worryingly, a significant element of the outcry focused on the supposed political views of the article's author as much as on what he had to say. It is beyond ironic that an organisation going by the name of Amnesty, and originally set up to support prisoners of conscience, is reduced to policing the media in a western democracy for any whiff of challenge to the only permissible

perspective, and making prisoners of conscience of anyone who dissents.

O'Gorman justified his complaints by stating that he frequently "passionately disagreed" with the newspaper's content, but that this article had crossed a line. It is tempting to speculate the difference between "passionate disagreement" and "crossing a line" depends on your chances of winning the argument. Because being offended means never having to engage with an opinion you don't like.

Witness the row over the Irish Cancer Society's hard-hitting I Want to Get Cancer campaign. Those words are undoubtedly upsetting to sufferers from the disease, but that doesn't make them offensive. And even if some are genuinely offended by the ad, which has succeeded in provoking discussion of cancer and of lifestyle changes that might avert it, that's not a good enough reason to bin it. Graphic road safety ads upset and even offend victims and their families, but they are not the target audience. As with the cancer ad, the aim is prevention, awareness and offering tough realities about cause and effect.

Having cancer, or having a relative afflicted, doesn't give you a veto on how we talk about the disease, such as saying that personal choices around smoking, drinking, exercise and obesity can reduce your risk. Depressingly, though, the cries of "offence" are drowning out the message because not being offended, it appears, is more important than not dying of a preventable disease. And not being offended is more important than being told about a loathsome and potentially lethal ideology. Je Suis Charlie, eh? Vous êtes hypocrites, folks.

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THEY MUST BE PROTECTED FROM IDEAS THEY MIGHT NOT BE SMART ENOUGH TO DECODE OR DISMISS OF THEIR OWN ACCORD

MY WEEK MAEVE MURPHY

Like great music and cinema, Irish bars know no borders

TO RUSSIA WITH LOVE

On a Thursday in December, I am at the inaugural Sochi International Film Festival in Russia phoning my husband from my hotel room. It is the evening of the awards ceremony and I have dashed upstairs in my long evening dress to tell him the great news: I've won the President's Award for my film Taking Stock.

Across the road I can see Sochi's Irish bar, O'Sullivan's, and I think, aren't Ireland and Russia so similar? Full of passion, great writers, great culture. I was in there the evening before, when British musicians were singing Beatles songs with the Russians — and I was the only real Irish person in the Irish bar. As we left, one of the Russians translated on their phone: "Music knows no nationality." Neither do Irish bars, I thought.

These ordinary Russians were lovely people. Not the merciless KGB or bald-headed villains of the movies. Have we culturally dehumanised each other? Is that not why this festival was right to create a cultural bridge between Russian and UK/Irish film, to connect us in our shared humanity? Pull down barriers?

Luba Balagova, the president of the Sochi International Film Awards, said Taking Stock was her favourite film because she liked the humanity of it. It showed, through humour, that the everyday lives of people in London were not dissimilar to those in Moscow. I agree, saying my film is about ordinary people losing their jobs and shows a joyful resilient spirit not to be defeated.

PEACE OF MIND

"The President's Award — is that Putin?" my husband asks in jest. Alarmed, I immediately clarify the position on my Facebook page. Just to be clear, it's the president of the film festival's award. However, paranoia escalates later at the awards party when a British musician tells us that our hotel rooms will have been searched. And our phones bugged. And he felt certain earlier that he was being watched. Suddenly I am back in one of the old spy movies. Am I going to be approached as a sleeper?

The battle for Aleppo, which involves Russia, has been brutally raging, and civilians are being slaughtered. We feel it. At breakfast an American, who has

The film director enjoys a prize-winning trip to the first Sochi film festival — and its local pub O'Sullivan's, where the paranoia between east and west dissolves



bought himself a pretend Taser gun, has to be asked by the hotel manager to stop pretending to shoot people.

That evening a group of us chat in the festival canteen. Given the alleged Russian hacking of the American election, it feels like a weird time to be in Russia. I point out that, while military and political conflicts make front-page headlines, small events such as this film festival, which often go unnoticed, create a lot of value.

Balagova has also spoken of her desire to "unite human beings through cinema art". Linking human hearts is the slow-paced work of peace.

As Leonard Cohen said: "Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

WE'LL DRINK TO THAT

Just before Christmas I manage to get home safely, despite losing my boarding card in Istanbul. By the time I get back, the festive season is in full swing and this year my family version of the "Irish Diaspora returning home for Christmas" was an epic Skype call.

Ireland, in the form of my mother, was coming to London to see me and my brother, while the Murphy sisters in Belfast would be contacted by video call. Well, that was the plan. But somehow I was not informed of the Christmas Day Skype call time. So I missed it.

It could have signalled the start of another world war, but my sister and I decide, in the season of peace and good will, that some self control and benefit of the doubt would not go amiss. So peace and good will do reign and we all feel the better for it.

The new year brings a Syrian ceasefire and the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats/spies from America. No one approached me as a sleeper, which my husband said was odd, as over the holidays I'd become very good at lying in bed for long hours.

We see in the new year listening to Irish musicians playing in our local London Irish pub. I think back to O'Sullivan's in Sochi, and wonder whether Irish bars could one day have a role in brokering world peace.

Maeve Murphy is a screenwriter and director. Her film Taking Stock is available on Netflix

HSE FOR DUMMIES



Don't worry, we'll have a bed for you in 36 hours

So many bones to pick with Dippy

If you thought that the task of taking down and putting away the Christmas decorations last Friday was a chore, spare a thought for the staff of London's Natural History Museum right now.

They are just beginning to dismantle Dippy the diplodocus, whose replica skeleton has stood in the entrance hall since 1979, to make way for the real skeleton of an 83ft blue whale beached in Wexford Harbour in 1891.

All of Dippy's 292 bones will be flatpacked into 12 boxes, much like your Christmas baubles and fairy lights. But instead of being stored under the bed he will be sent on a national tour, and it will take four days to reassemble him at each venue. Mind you, if he is anything like our Christmas decorations and inexplicably emerges from those boxes in an almighty tangle with bits missing and broken, four days is a conservative estimate.

Sinn Fein TD John Brady has complained to gardai after a Harris's hawk almost snatched his family's pet dog in the grounds of Kiltruddery Castle during a New Year's Eve stroll. Brady's gripe seems to be with the falconer who didn't inquire about the dog's welfare, after it was released by the bird. As we know, hurt feelings are sufficient grounds to involve the police. Brady did admit the dog, a shih-tzu, would have looked like a rabbit to the bird.

Hold on — a Shinner with a shih-tzu? A hard man with a handbag dog? I am reminded of the Cavan comedian who joked that, where he came from, if you'd seen a person with a little dog in a bag they'd be headed for the river.

Ireland's age-old mystery solved

No debate about our overcrowded hospitals or our underperforming health service or our overactive flu virus was complete last week without somebody mentioning Ireland's "ageing population". This, clearly, is in contrast to every other country, whose citizens are getting younger and healthier by the minute.

In fact, we have an uncommonly youthful population, having Europe's top birth rate in 2014, even though Irish women leave it later than any other nationality in Europe to start having their

babies. As fertility expert Dr Simon Fishel warned last week, this reduces their chances of conceiving. All Irishmen have to do, it seems, is hang their trousers over the end of the bed.

However, we also have the second lowest death rate in Europe, which should be a good thing but is, in fact, the social problem known as an "ageing population". So if you are fortunate to be healthy and live long enough, it seems, your chances of getting old are greatly increased. Who saw that one coming?

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