

# Making Censorship Backfire

By Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin

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*"[C]ensorship may not suppress alternative views but rather generate them, and, by doing so, undermine its own aims."*—Antoon de Baets (2002, p. 23)

In the age of instantaneous global communications, overt censorship is always a risky endeavor. Attempts to repress "dangerous ideas" sometimes have the opposite effect: that is, they serve as catalysts for expanding the reach, resonance, and receptivity of those ideas.

Judith Levine's book *Harmful to Minors* (2002), a scholarly assessment of US popular views and laws about sexuality, came under heavy attack from the right for allegedly promoting pedophilia and other evils. Although these attacks must have been personally offensive to the author, the controversy surrounding the book appears to have generated far greater sales for this academic book than anyone would have anticipated: it rose to number 25 on Amazon.com's bestseller list (Flanders, 2002).

Jeanne Heifetz, an alert parent, discovered that in recent years the New York State Department of Education had been systematically bowdlerizing classic literary

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texts for use on the state-wide Regents examinations, which public school students are required to take to graduate from high school. In a case of political correctness gone mad, the test preparers had expunged virtually any mention of race, religion, ethnicity, sex, nudity, alcohol, and anything else they thought might offend someone for some reason. Heifetz took the story to the *New York Times*, which ran it on the front page of its Sunday edition (June 2, 2002) under the provocative headline, "The Elderly Man and the Sea? Test Sanitizes Literary Texts." Public outrage was immediate and vociferous. Writers, publishers, and free speech groups protested; anti-censorship groups held press conferences; late-night television comedians reveled in parody; and the state's Education Department became the laughing stock of the nation for its attempts to correct the politics and manners of dead writers.

During the twilight years of the Soviet Union, the censorship and exile of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn provided the US and its allies with a major propaganda victory. The Solzhenitsyn affair not only exposed the tyranny of the Soviet censorship bureaucracy, it cast a global spotlight on the repressive character of the entire Soviet system. Solzhenitsyn's massive three-volume work *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974, 1975, 1978) became an international bestseller; moreover, it cultivated a market for *The Oak and the Calf* (1980), an exhaustive account of the author's personal struggles with the Soviet censors. The Solzhenitsyn affair, the house arrest of Andrei Sakharov, and the suppression of other dissident Soviet intellectuals galvanized internal, as well as external, opposition to the Soviet system. After years of exile in America, Solzhenitsyn had his Russian citizenship restored in 1990 and he returned to Russia in 1994. His banned works have now been published in his homeland and, for a time, the aging author even hosted a talk show on Russian state television. Travel agencies now promote tours of Solovetsky Island, the site of the gulag (Stanley, 1995; Tsygankov, 2001).

These are but a few of many examples that illustrate the backfire effect described by Baets. In each case, attempts at censorship led to far greater awareness of the target than would have occurred without the interventions of censors. Of course, not all censorship backfires; some forms of censorship remain quite effective even in a digital age. The interesting question is, why do some censorship efforts backfire while others succeed?

Answering this question contributes to the advancement of freedom of expression by identifying strategies that activists can use to resist or counter censorship. To be sure, formal legal protections against censorship remain necessary cornerstones in all struggles against censorship; however, neo-liberalism is rapidly eroding, abridging, and, in some instances,

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eclipsing the effectiveness of the classic free-expression franchises of Western liberalism. Justice today is neither blind nor swift; and it usually carries very high price tags (Moyers, 1999; Soley, 2002). One practical defense against attempts to suppress or marginalize unpopular views is to develop an understanding of how censorship works in order to understand what catalyzes backfire. As more people learn how to activate this process, overt censorship is less likely to occur; and when it does, it is less likely to be effective.

The literature on censorship is vast and continues to grow at a very rapid pace. Much of it is devoted to history, legal analyses, case studies, and theory; however, relatively little is aimed at equipping free expression advocates with strategies to arm themselves against censorship. Useful information can be excavated from between the lines of historical and autobiographical accounts of the methods of censors; that is presumably one of the reasons why such accounts are published retrospectively, for example, Nikitenko, *The Diary of a Russian Censor* (1975) and Curry, *The Black Book of Polish Censorship* (1984). Our intent, however, is more direct and proactive: not merely to describe censorship, but to identify ways of subverting it.

We begin by briefly outlining two relevant theoretical approaches: one drawn from propaganda studies, the so-called “boomerang effect,” and the other drawn from nonviolence theory, the concept of “political jiu-jitsu.” We then describe how these concepts can be extended to provide insight into how struggles are waged between censors and their opponents. We offer three short case studies that illustrate how these dynamics work: the McLibel case, the Salman Rushdie case, and recent attempts by partisans on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to limit free exchanges of ideas. We conclude with some tentative generalizations.

### **The Boomerang Effect and Political Jiu-jitsu**

Propaganda—the systematic promotion of a particular point of view, often through dissemination of selective or false information—can be considered a face of censorship, since

contrary views are hidden or misrepresented. Propaganda, like other forms of censorship, sometimes backfires, generating antagonism rather than support for the view that is being promoted. This has been dubbed “the boomerang effect.”

In a kind of double irony, the boomerang concept itself boomeranged as it migrated from its origins in US military strategy documents into the annals of critical sociological theory and media activism. That is, the boomerang effect, a concept developed by the US government during World War II in an effort to ensure production of effective war propaganda, created a template that has subsequently been useful in criticizing and countering US propaganda. The boomerang effect has also gained some traction in critiques of corporate propaganda: advertising and public relations.

In their classic formulation of the boomerang effect, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1949) give four reasons why people may respond “inappropriately” to propaganda: 1) the authors of the propaganda may misjudge the psychological state of the audience; 2) different people respond differently to the same message, so some will respond negatively; 3) different themes in a piece of propaganda may send contrary messages; and 4) people’s personal experiences may be contrary to what is portrayed in propaganda, leading them to reject everything that is said. Published after the war, Lazarsfeld and Merton’s account of war propaganda entered sociological discourse at a juncture when there was already a well-established critical literature on propaganda analysis. Pioneered by Alfred McClung Lee and Dorothy Briant Lee during the 1930s, critical propaganda analysis was both a theoretical and activist enterprise: an extension of the popular education movement spearheaded by educational reformer John Dewey. The Lees sought to arm citizens against propaganda and demagoguery by educating them in the “ABCs of propaganda analysis”; their explications of the devices or “tricks of the trade” that propagandists use to deceive the public remain

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widely respected. Within the post-war context, Lazarsfeld and Merton’s account was typically read and taught as a critical analysis of propaganda, not as an affirmation of its use. At worst, it was interpreted as the work of reluctant propagandists recruited to the service of a just war.

“Blowback” is a related term that has been used to describe a similar dynamic in the realm of policy studies. In fact, while US commentators refer to foreign policies that have unintended negative domestic consequences as blowback, Israelis use boomerang effect to describe the same phenomena (Cosmos, 2002). In the US context, the term has a strong critical edge; see, for example, Simpson (1988) and especially Johnson (2000), whose analysis is widely cited by the left to explain Al Qaeda’s 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

Nevertheless, critical media and policy analyses remain minority and oppositional positions in the US. As a result, there is a relative paucity of critical studies of government or corporate censorship, qua censorship. To our knowledge, the boomerang concept has never been directly applied to censorship studies. Certainly, no one has systematically examined how the backfire dynamic can be deliberately used to advance free expression.

Nonviolence theory offers a more promising theoretical entry point, because it is directly oriented to the empowerment of activists. Consider a group of peaceful protesters who come under brutal assault by police. Many of those who witness or hear about such an assault respond with outrage, generating more support for the protesters and weakening resolve among the police. For example, in 1998 Indonesian

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students were active in protesting against dictatorial ruler Suharto. On May 4<sup>th</sup> at Trisakti University, police opened fire, killing four students and two others. Rather than deterring protest, the killings generated enormous outrage and immensely escalated the scale of protest overnight. This was the turning point in the struggle that led to Suharto's resignation.

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protesters are not violent themselves. If there is perceived to be violence on both sides, no matter how imbalanced, observers are less likely to identify with protesters, even if they perceive their cause as just. This is the reason that police try to provoke protesters or use agents provocateurs to foment violence. If even a few protesters are violent, violence against protest movements is seen as more legitimate.

For violence against peaceful protesters to backfire, it is necessary for others to be aware of what is happening. In 1930 in India, Gandhi led a march to the sea with the intent of making salt, which was in violation of the British monopoly. At the culmination of the march, many satyagrahis—nonviolent activists—submitted without resistance to brutal beatings by the police, with many of the satyagrahis sustaining serious injuries. British authorities claimed that the protesters were faking their injuries. But US journalist Webb Miller independently reported the events, helping to change opinion in Britain and the United States. Gandhi's tactics generated massive support in India, weakened British colonial resolve, and garnered support from third parties (Dalton, 1993; Weber, 1993).

Martin Luther King, Jr. and his associates consciously used Gandhi's nonviolent tactics to model their leadership of the US civil rights movement during the 1960s. Participants in

civil rights marches were instructed not to retaliate even in the face of overwhelming police brutality. The quiet dignity of the black protesters, chronicled on network television news programs, evoked great public sympathy among both blacks and whites, while representations of the ignorance and cruelty of Southern law enforcement officers like Bull Connor incited revulsion, especially in the heavily populated Northern and Western states. Nonviolence cultivated sympathy among the eye-witness observers in the press, who in turn created and disseminated sympathetic images and narrative accounts of the struggles against segregation in the South. Police violence helped turn the tide of public opinion against racial injustice. Conversely, white support for the movement ebbed significantly after King's murder as some black militant and black power advocates began espousing violent tactics and images of rioting, burning, and looting of businesses in the ghetto neighborhoods of major US cities became part of the nightly television news reports (Branch, 1989, 1999).

In November 1991 in Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, East Timor, hundreds of peaceful mourners were killed by Indonesian troops. Western journalist Max Stahl recorded the massacre on videotape and smuggled it out of the country. When broadcast on international television, images of the atrocities galvanized support for the East Timorese liberation struggle (Kohen, 1999, pp. 160–187).

On a lesser scale, the same process can be seen in the beating of Rodney King, which rebounded against the Los Angeles police. Although there are numerous reports of police beatings, the assault on King was captured on videotape, making police denial far more difficult to sustain.

Gene Sharp, the world's leading nonviolence researcher, coined the term "political jiu-jitsu" for the process by which violent attack on nonviolent activists can backfire. As in the sport of jiu-jitsu, the strength of the attacker is turned to his/her disadvantage. Sharp (1973) documented nearly 200 different methods of nonviolent action, including petitions, banners, mock awards, protest disrobings, motorcades, teach-ins, social boycotts, sanctuary, peasant strikes, prisoner strikes, boycotts of elections, sit-ins, guerrilla theater, selective patronage, and alternative markets. Political jiu-jitsu is part of

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what Sharp calls the dynamics of non-violent action, whose typical steps include 1) laying the groundwork, 2) challenge that brings repression, 3) solidarity and

discipline in the face of repression, 4) political jiu-jitsu, and 5) redistribution of power. Sharp's framework is based on examination of large numbers of struggles; political jiu-jitsu describes a process that has been frequently observed in history. For example, on March 21, 1960, South African police opened fire, without warning, on black protesters, killing a number of them. This event, called the "Sharpeville Massacre," triggered outrage across the world, leading to sanctions and greatly increasing support for opponents of apartheid.

The idea of political jiu-jitsu can readily be applied to struggles against censorship. Sharp divides nonviolent action into three general categories: protest and persuasion; noncooperation (such as strikes and boycotts); and

intervention (such as sit-ins). Many of the methods of protest and persuasion are the simple exercise of free speech, such as signed public statements, banners, skywriting, symbolic lights, and skits. Nonviolent action is defined as action that goes beyond ordinary political action, such as voting or handing out leaflets (a public speech is a routine event in many countries, but in a dictatorship it would count as nonviolent action). Whether or not an action is labeled “nonviolent,” the process of political jiu-jitsu can occur.

Within Sharp’s framework, writing and publishing would ordinarily be viewed as routine exercises of free speech in liberal or post-liberal

societies. They rise to the level of nonviolent action when censors, with or without credentials, intervene in these exercises either prior to or after a creative work enters the public sphere. Under such conditions, political jiu-jitsu may occur in reaction to censorship.

What are the keys to triggering political jiu-jitsu? Sharp does not give a precise answer, but some elements in the causal chain can be inferred. First, there is revulsion against violence in itself. Second, there is a sense of injustice, as when people are physically assaulted even though they have not caused harm to anyone else. Or the injustice may be manifest in flagrant discrepancies between official policies and corrupt practices. Third, there is a marked disproportion between an act—a peaceful protest—and the response to it—a major assault. In the Sharpeville Massacre, some protesters threw stones (without causing serious injury); lethal force by the police was seen as an excessive response. Sharp (1973, p. 660) points out that “the extreme disproportion between the repression and the demonstrators’ behavior shocked world opinion.”

The same elements are present when censorship backfires. Some observers are repulsed by the very fact of censorship. Others are incensed by the injustice involved. Still others respond to the disproportion between the acts—speaking, writing, publishing, or creating works of art—and the heavy-handed responses of those who would suppress these acts.

Most censors know that censorship can backfire. There are many strategies that they use to inhibit or prevent backfire. The first and most obvious method is to try to reduce awareness that censorship has occurred—that is, censors censor the fact of censorship. As in Orwell’s *1984*, the rewriting of history is most effective when carried out in secrecy. For example, when controversial works are submitted to book publishers or film producers, it is easy to reject them on the grounds that they are not of sufficient caliber or that they will not sell. “Market censorship” (which virtually never operates under its own name) is considered a legitimate form of censorship in capitalist societies—just good business! Authors of works rejected as unworthy or unprofitable are expected to accept their failure without complaint. If an author is too prominent to be silenced this way, a publisher may

publish the book but privately ensure that it disappears leaving few traces. Publishers in the US call this “privishing.” It is a tactic used “to kill off a book that, for one reason or another, is considered ‘troublesome’ or potentially so” (Colby, 2002, p. 16). Publishers do this by cutting off the book’s support system: reducing the initial print run so it cannot make a profit, providing little or no advertising, failing to send out review copies, and canceling promotional tours.

Another way to censor the existence of censorship is through threats, such as threatening to sue for defamation, which may lead the writer to self-censor or the publisher to

bypass a book as too hot to handle. Many court settlements of whistleblower cases include so-called gagging clauses, enjoining all parties to say nothing about the details of the settlement, including the existence of the non-disclosure clause. Such clauses are typically

imposed by the employer as a condition of the settlement. Threats can be implicit too, as when a scientist is instructed by the boss not to present a paper to a conference or to remove sensitive comments; the implication is that refusal would lead to more serious measures.

To counter censorship of censorship, there are two key components: documentation and publicity. Documentation of the existence of censorship is essential, otherwise there is little prospect of convincing anyone that censorship has occurred. Without adequate evidence, claims of censorship can be counterproductive, rebounding on the credibility of the claimant. In many cases, collecting evidence is difficult, time-consuming, and risky. Direct evidence may be impossible to obtain, especially since the censor is bound to cloak actions in legitimate terms and often believes in the rationalizations offered. One way to reveal censorship is to expose double standards. For example, CNN, which routinely airs issue-oriented advertising, refused to accept advertisements from non-profit groups opposing passage by the US Congress of the 1996 omnibus Telecommunications Act. Similarly, other US media outlets systematically ignored or undercovered debates about the bill, which was written at the behest of lobbyists for major media and telecommunication conglomerates. Activists, using alternative media, exposed the double standards, but the bill passed.

The second key component is publicity: a wider audience must be informed about the censorship in order to mobilize support. As in Gandhi’s salt march or the Rodney King beating, the combination of documentation and publicity provides a powerful way of overcoming censorship of censorship. Authors who already have some visibility can sometimes use the mainstream media as a bully pulpit to make their case; less well-known figures can use alternative media or the Internet to publicize their grievances. Western supporters of Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Pasternak, and other Soviet dissidents successfully used the ideological climate of the

Cold War to advance their work. Authors with strong cases can appeal to anti-censorship groups, librarians' associations, and professional organizations in their particular areas of expertise for support. Attaching a censorship case to established political causes can also work. An author whose manuscript is considered potentially "troublesome" because, for example, it contains damaging information about the use of growth hormones in beef production might align him or herself with campaigns dealing with breast cancer or environmental issues.

Another standard method for justifying censorship is attacking the censored. For example, a censored author might be castigated as incompetent, immoral, disloyal, unreliable, unstable, paranoid, or greedy. No work is ever perfect. A trivial error, perhaps even the work of a careless typographer or editor, may be used as a rationale for discrediting an entire book. In some countries, censored authors and journalists are imprisoned, tortured, or killed. Some attacks are directed against individuals, such as denigration of Noam Chomsky, whose books, articles, and talks are largely excluded from the mainstream US media (Croteau and Hoynes, 1994). Other attacks are generic, such as media scapegoating of prisoners, homeless people, anarchists, or drug addicts, while providing little or no opportunity for representatives of these groups to express their viewpoints in mainstream forums.

An effective response to attacks is valorization of the censored, for example, through documentation of quality, evidence of good intentions, and endorsements from valued sources. To counter attacks on a banned artist, it can help to show previous favorable responses to the artist's work, prizes received, endorsements by other artists, and evidence of

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modest income or charity towards others. It is unfair, but those who are censored are frequently held to a higher standard of behavior than are others. The reality of political jiu-jitsu is that nonviolent activists are expected to behave far better than those who assault them. The slightest breakdown in nonviolent discipline or evidence of self-seeking behavior can be used to discredit an entire movement. Likewise, those who complain about censorship are often expected to be without blemish. Those who intend to push boundaries should expect this sort of treatment and be prepared. Nevertheless, living a flawless life is no guarantee against personal attack. Misrepresentations, circulation of rumors, and manufacturing of evidence are grist for the mills of censors.

Personal attacks can backfire. By revealing the attacks and proving that they are groundless, the victim of the attack can mobilize greater support. In responding to attacks, however, it is usually better to avoid the temptation to counterattack. Like violent retaliation, verbal retaliation or, even worse, attempts to censor the censor, surrender the high moral ground that those who have been

unfairly attacked occupy. It can open the victim up to the charge of holding double standards.

The backfire effect can also be stopped or reversed if a victim resorts to formal procedures such as grievance hearings or litigation. An employer can claim that due process was followed in dismissing an employee, even if the dismissal occurred immediately after the employee had released documents about corporate malfeasance to an outside auditor, thereby challenging one of the most pervasive forms of censorship, the legal or de facto ban on employees revealing on-the-job information to outsiders. If the employee decides to fight the dismissal in court, it is an unequal battle, since the corporation has far more money and time to wage the case. Yet many people see official channels—grievance procedures, auditors, ombudsmen, courts, Congressional committees—as balanced venues for seeking the truth. Therefore, once the matter enters such channels, the prospects for invoking political jiu-jitsu are minimal.

Dissidents are often encouraged to use official channels. In the US, where television shows give the illusion that justice is regularly and swiftly dispensed, courts are often an avenue of first resort. Whistleblower laws encourage disclosures to official bodies but not to the media, although official bodies are quite unlikely to help and media exposure is widely known to be more effective (De Maria, 1999; Devine, 1997). Views may differ about the value of using official channels. If, however, the primary goal is to invoke political jiu-jitsu, then official channels should usually be avoided or used strategically as forums for gaining wider publicity about the injustice the plaintiff has suffered. Our first case study illustrates how this kind of strategic use of the courts worked effectively in a famous recent struggle between two determined Davids and a corporate Goliath.

#### **McLibel: A Defamation Suit Backfires**

London Greenpeace is a small anarchist group independent of the well-known environmental organization Greenpeace International. In the 1980s, London Greenpeace produced a leaflet called "What's wrong with McDonald's?" that criticized, among other things, the nutritional value of McDonald's food, the wages and working conditions of employees, and the clearing of rainforest for beef production.

McDonald's management had long taken a strongly proprietary stance in regard to its name—for example suing pre-existing family restaurants named McDonald's—and taking aggressive action towards critics (Donson, 2000). The company hired spies to infiltrate London Greenpeace. It collected evidence and sued five individuals for defamation.

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[It should be noted that British defamation law is much harsher than US law (Hooper, 2000).] Three of the targets of the suit decided to withdraw, but two—gardener Helen Steel and postman Dave Morris—chose to fight the case. With little money, they ran the case themselves, learning the law as they went along. The case ended up being the longest running legal action in British history. McDonald's won the case. The judge ruled that some claims in the leaflet were false and awarded

£60,000 against Steel and Morris (they have appealed). But for McDonald's, it was a public relations disaster. Steel and Morris's defense generated enormous sympathy, enabling them to obtain some free legal advice and to call many witnesses at no cost to them. The judge ruled that many of the damaging claims in the leaflet had been proved true. More importantly, the case generated enormous publicity, almost all of it hostile to McDonald's. Worse still for McDonald's, supporters set up a website called McSpotlight, which grew like topsy and soon contained masses of information critical of McDonald's. As a consequence of all this activity, the original leaflet, "What's wrong with McDonald's?" was read by millions of people, far more than if McDonald's had ignored London Greenpeace entirely. The case, commonly called McLibel (Vidal, 1997), has become an object lesson to other corporations on the dangers of suing critics.

The McLibel case illustrates how censorship can backfire. McDonald's sought to censor its critics through the threat of defamation action. This certainly had the potential for a jiu-jitsu effect, given that the response by McDonald's was grossly disproportionate to the action by London Greenpeace—a high-powered lawsuit to stop limited circulation of a leaflet by an obscure anarchist group. If everyone in London Greenpeace had acquiesced, then only a limited number of activists and supporters would have known about McDonald's attempt to suppress criticism—probably about as many people as had received the original leaflet. By refusing to succumb, Steel and Morris took the essential first step in making the censorship backfire.

The second essential step was making people aware of the attack. In tandem with their legal efforts, Steel, Morris, and their supporters publicized the case. We have argued that official channels can serve censors; if Steel and Morris had just gone to court without wider publicity, this would not have been very damaging to McDonald's. Instead, McLibel campaigners used the court process as the springboard for publicity, making every legal step a negative for McDonald's. Indeed, McDonald's sought to settle the case on a number of occasions but Steel and Morris refused to compromise on key points.

As members of an anarchist group, Steel and Morris might seem obvious targets for denigration. What seems to have protected them from attack was their commitment to principle. They challenged McDonald's on substantive grounds—the

matters in the leaflet—and grounds of free speech. There is no evidence that they tried to benefit personally from the case, for example to obtain money from the media (if they had, this could easily have been used against them). By sticking to their working-class roles, they emphasized the disproportionality between the rich, powerful, and unscrupulous attackers and the poor yet principled defenders.

It is important to note that Steel and Morris did not achieve this on their own. The efforts of numerous supporters were essential to making McDonald's legal action so counterproductive. Mobilization of support is key to making censorship backfire.

### ***The Satanic Verses: Book Censorship Backfires***

Publicity is a powerful means of triggering backlash, and publicity in censorship cases is relatively easy to generate if certain preconditions are met. First, the censored writer must be well-established, well-networked, or championed by someone who is—that is, the writer can be presented to the media as credible, with a meritorious case. Second, the cause celebre must resonate in positive ways with larger ideological agendas or with the perceived interests of media organizations and/or the professional values of journalists.

No recent attempt at book censorship has received as much global publicity as the case of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The story began in India when a Muslim member of Parliament, Syed Shahabuddin, who admitted he had not read Rushdie's book, petitioned the government of Rajvi Gandhi to ban the novel on the grounds of blasphemy. The Indian government, sensitive to religious conflict, issued a ban on October 5, 1988. After Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and South Africa quickly followed suit, black-marketed copies of the forbidden fruit were soon doing brisk business in the underground literary markets of all of those countries. Conservative interests in Pakistan escalated the affair by demanding that newly elected, Western-educated Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto force the United States to halt its publication of *The Satanic Verses*. When this ill-fated venture

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failed, anti-American riots broke out in Pakistan. The Pakistani fundamentalists then turned to Iran for help. In addition to irreverent, satirical, and salacious references to Islam, *The Satanic Verses* contained a thinly disguised portrayal of Ayatollah Khomeini, which represented him as the mouth of hell devouring his people. The Ayatollah was therefore highly receptive to the Pakistanis' appeals.

The Fatwa issued by Khomeini and the Iranian government in February 1989 condemned the author of *The Satanic Verses* to death. Any editors or publishers who were aware of the book's contents but knowingly participated in the project were also included in the death sentence. Moreover, Khomeini called on "all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be



regarded as a martyr, God willing” (Khomeini in Appignanesi and Maitland, 1990, p. 68). A million-dollar reward was offered for Rushdie’s assassination, a bounty that was doubled in 1997. The Indian-born Rushdie was a naturalized citizen of the United Kingdom living in England at the time the Fatwa was issued. The death threat forced him into hiding for a decade.

In 1990, Rushdie published an essay, “In Good Faith,” in which he apologized and professed his respect for Islam, but the Fatwa remained in effect. The Italian translator of *The Satanic Verses*, Ettore Capriolo, was wounded in an attempted assassination in Milan

in 1991; one week later, Hitoshi Igarishi, the Japanese translator, was stabbed to death in Tokyo. In 1993, William Nygaard, the book’s Norwegian publisher, was shot and severely

wounded outside of his Oslo home. Violent protests over the book in India, Pakistan, and Egypt also caused several deaths. The Fatwa was repealed by the Iranian Government in 1998. It was, however, reissued by an Iranian state prosecutor, Morteza Moqtadale. At that time, Ayatollah Hassan Sanier promised a reward of \$2.8 million. In February 2003, Iran’s elite fighting force, the Revolutionary Guards, re-ignited the controversy by renewing the call for Rushdie’s death and Ayatollah Sanier raised the bounty to \$3 million. While reformist and independent newspapers ignored the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the edict, the February 14, 2003 issue of the hard-line *Jomhuri Islami* featured a 16-page supplement on the Rushdie case with a front-page cartoon of the corpse of Rushdie in a coffin draped with the flags of the United States, Britain, and Israel—countries seen as supporters of Rushdie’s work (Dareini, 2003).

The Rushdie case was unprecedented. It was the first time any state has ever publicly announced its intention to kill a citizen of another country for a crime of ideas, as well as anyone associated with the publication of those ideas. Moreover, by authorizing and, in effect, deputizing all Muslims to carry out the death sentence without regard to the sovereignty of the nation in which the execution might take place, the Fatwa was in flagrant violation of international law and of international human rights accords (D’Souza, 1995).

International response to the Fatwa was immediate, extensive, and multi-faceted: protests were issued by the British and US governments and the European Union; international human rights and freedom of expression groups like Article 19, Writers and Scholars International, and P.E.N. championed the case; the Western press expressed outrage and kept the media spotlight on the Rushdie case for years; and prominent authors and other public figures spoke and wrote eloquent pleas on Rushdie’s behalf. Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. Intense international diplomatic pressure was put on the Iranian government; this pressure eventually prevailed even though religious hard liners refused to recognize the Iranian government’s official lifting of the Fatwa.

**Nevertheless, the Rushdie case revealed some significant fissures in the West’s own support for freedom of expression. Perhaps most striking was the cowardly stance taken by chain bookstores, which typically portray themselves as frontal troops in battles against censorship.**

For our purposes, the complex backfire that the Rushdie case produced is particularly instructive because: (a) it raises questions about what qualifies as successful political jiu-jitsu in censorship cases; and (b) it emphasizes the importance of context in launching and assessing political jiu-jitsu. Viewed from a Western perspective, the Fatwa against Rushdie failed. Without the Fatwa, *The Satanic Verses* would have been published without fanfare, received mixed reviews, and would have been largely forgotten by now. Instead, the book became an international bestseller and its author, for a time, became a

household name, even among people who do not read books (Shapiro, 1989). The Rushdie case was a shining moment for many defenders of free expression, including the European Union,

Article 19, P.E.N., Writers and Scholars International (publishers of the influential London-based *Index on Censorship*), and the American Library Association, among other organizations and individuals.

Rushdie himself became a virtual captive of the British government, which provided him with safe houses and round-the-clock guards until he moved to the United States in 2000. Rushdie reports that he suffered from depression during his decade underground and that his marriage broke under the strain. Yet, he continued to write and publish. Even by his own assessment, however, his bitter sojourn has been a triumph, albeit a dark one. As he puts it, “To live, to avoid assassination, is a greater victory than to be murdered” (quoted by McNamee, 1999, p. 5).

Nevertheless, the Rushdie case revealed some significant fissures in the West’s own support for freedom of expression. Perhaps most striking was the cowardly stance taken by chain bookstores, which typically portray themselves as frontal troops in battles against censorship. W.H. Smith, England’s primary chain, withdrew the book from some of its stores after a ritual book burning in a Muslim neighborhood and fire bombings of some stores. However, the US’s major chains—Waldenbooks, B. Dalton, and Barnes and Noble—went much further. They pulled the book from their shelves, citing fears of terrorism, thereby demonstrating that corporate conglomerates cannot always be relied upon in censorship battles even when there is high consumer demand. Several European publishers canceled their editions of the book, although most subsequently reversed their decisions.

Politicians also proved to be uncertain allies. Many political figures tempered their defenses of freedom of expression with qualifications. Some condemned the book while defending its right to be published, whereas others agreed that it was blasphemous and suggested it should not be read. Canada, a liberal, book-loving democracy, began banning procedures on the grounds that *The Satanic Verses* was hate literature, only abandoning the effort because the book did not meet the law’s terms.

Newspapers were more reliable supporters, joining writers and other intellectuals in exposing the book chains’ collective

failure of nerve. The American Librarian Association protested against the Fatwa and the book chains' self-censorship. Librarians across the US resisted pressures to remove the book from circulation, with some taking extra measures, including ordering more copies than usual, to

ensure that the book would be available to readers. Other intellectual and cultural institutions,

with few exceptions, also proved to be staunch opponents of censorship. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, named Rushdie an honorary visiting professor, an honor that the university has only conferred four other times in its history.

Viewed from a radical Islamic perspective, however, it can be argued that the Fatwa also succeeded to a significant degree, even though Rushdie survived and continued to publish. Rushdie did apologize for writing *The Satanic Verses*. A translator was executed. The book was in fact banned in many countries throughout the world. Two Muslim leaders in Belgium, who opposed Rushdie's death penalty, were murdered. Many non-Muslims agreed that the book was immoral and blasphemous. Radical Islam has continued its rapid growth, and the Fatwa against Rushdie helped draw, reinforce, and widely publicize the lines that separate the Muslim world from the secular values of the West. The stern discipline of radical Islam was modeled for its growing population of youthful followers, and the sacrosanct status of the Qu'ran was defended. Khomeini himself considered the Rushdie affair a success, claiming that it had saved Iran "from a naïve foreign policy" (Watson, 1989).

What lessons can activists learn from the Rushdie case? First, success and failure are "both/and" terms rather than mutually exclusive categories. Both sides won and lost some ground in the Rushdie affair. In highly polarized contexts, partial victories are sometimes the only possibility.

Second, when feasible—and it is often not in censorship cases—activists should select their fights carefully. Despite the praise of some world-class literary figures, *The Satanic Verses* and Salman Rushdie were not the ideal candidates for valorization. That is, Rushdie does not stand on the kind of high moral ground that Solzenitsyn occupied during the Cold War. There are many thoughtful people who campaigned against censorship of *The Satanic Verses* who did not like the book or admire its author. Remember, even Rushdie apologized for the book. There are other writers who have been targets of death threats by radical Muslims in recent years whose cases might have generated more unconditional support in the West. However, these cases have received little or no press in mainstream media. An example is the Bangladeshi novelist Taslima Nasrin, who was sentenced to death in 1994 for advocating the emancipation of Muslim women and greater religious tolerance (McNamee, 1999, p. 5).

Third, it is usually easier to rally positive media support for cases of book or other forms of media censorship than for other kinds of dissidence, protest movements, or

whistleblowing. The reasons for this will be examined more fully in the concluding section of the paper. Suffice to say here that common membership in the fraternity of print makes a writer who is censored—no matter how abhorrent his or her views—a kindred spirit, whereas other dissenters—no matter

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how just their causes—are routinely viewed with professional skepticism by journalists. Rushdie certainly benefitted

from membership in this fraternity. Moreover, the obsession with celebrity that migrated from the tabloids to the mainstream press in the early 1980s added cachet to Rushdie's case. The Fatwa made him famous, and his fame made him a celebrity whose surprise appearances at glitzy London parties (which he wouldn't have been invited to before *The Satanic Verses* furor) endowed Rushdie sightings with high news and cash value. In sum, understanding the professional ideology of the press, news values, and the economic and social structures of media organizations is an indispensable asset in gaining support from the press that can contribute to making censorship backfire.

### Middle East Conflict:

#### Boycotts and Blacklists of Scholars Backfire

The political conflict in the Middle East has recently incited attempts by partisans on both sides of the hostilities to censor, boycott, or blacklist scholars and their scholarship. While all of the reverberations of these efforts cannot yet be measured, it is clear that they have incited significant backfire that has damaged partisans on both sides. The academic boycotts are frequently referred to in the singular; however, there were actually two, one initiated by Oxford professors Colin Blakemore and Richard Dawkins and the other by Open University's Hilary and Steven Rose, mounted on a joint website ([www.pipo.org](http://www.pipo.org)). The boycotts became world news on April 6, 2002 when *The Guardian* (London) published a letter signed by 120 university scholars, primarily mathematicians and scientists, calling for a boycott of research and cultural links with Israel by the European Union and the European Science Foundation until Israel abided by United Nations resolutions and opened serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians. The petition was subsequently signed by many more scholars (almost 300 by May 17<sup>th</sup>), including some Israelis. A fierce debate ensued: the categorical condemnation of all Israeli scholars invited and quickly received charges of anti-Semitism. The controversy escalated further when two Israeli scholars, Gideon Toury of Tel Aviv University and Miriam Schlesinger of Bar-Ilan University, were dismissed from the editorial boards of academic journals owned by Mona Baker of the University of Manchester, who said she was honoring the boycott after a long and painful soul-searching reflection. Schlesinger's case was particularly newsworthy because she is a former chair of Israel's chapter of Amnesty International and a critic of Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

Leonid Ryzhik, a Russian-born University of Chicago mathematician, organized a counter-movement, "Don't boycott



Israel,” launched a website ([www.anti-boycott-petition.org](http://www.anti-boycott-petition.org)), and posted 2,200 signatures, including two Nobel Prize winners. The Ryzhik petition, which was also published by *The Guardian* (May 22, 2002), described the British petition as “immoral, dangerous, and misguided” and claimed that it “indirectly encourages the terrorist murderers in their deadly deeds.” The EU Commissioner for Research, Philippe Busquin, dismissed the British-organized petitions calling for the academic boycott as “counter-productive,” citing scientific cooperation as a means of encouraging dialog and negotiations in the Middle East (*The Guardian*, May 27, 2002). Some of the signers of the call for the academic boycott (including Dawkins) subsequently withdrew their signatures from the original petitions. Yet, Dr. Aaron Benavot of Hebrew University, who also organized a counter-boycott petition, reports that there is anecdotal evidence that the academic boycott is having an effect (*The Telegraph*, May 16, 2002).

The very idea of boycotts in matters of the mind struck critics, including some who opposed Israeli policy, as untenable because they run counter to the professed norms of academic freedom and scientific inquiry. One consequence of the backfire generated by the calls for academic boycotts of the Israelis is that they have made it far more difficult to articulate and publish legitimate criticisms of individual Israeli scholars and think tanks that do actually function as propagandists for Israeli policy.

In a more recent case, Middle East scholars in the US were targeted by a pro-Israeli, Philadelphia-based think tank, the Middle East Forum, which set up a website, “Campus Watch” ([www.campuswatch.org](http://www.campuswatch.org)), and posted dossiers on eight Middle Eastern studies professors because of their views on Palestine and Islam. Calling these scholars “hostile” to America, the website asks readers to report other Middle East lectures, classes, and demonstrations to the Forum’s director, Daniel Pipes of the University of Pennsylvania. Those listed on the site have reportedly received thousands of threatening and racist emails and have been put in the position of having to defend their intellectual integrity to the press as well as to their Jewish students. The site has, however, generated a nation-wide backlash. Protesting against what they characterize as “blacklisting,” hundreds of scholars have attempted to “turn themselves in” to the Forum in an organized act of solidarity with the eight scholars. Led by colorful University of California at Berkeley scholar Judith Butler, who is herself Jewish, the protest has migrated from the Web to the mainstream press where Butler’s message—that there is “a very fundamental mistake in

assuming that any position critical of contemporary Israeli policy is anti-Semitic”—has reached far beyond the academic audience originally targeted by the website (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 28, 2002).

It is an inconvenient fact of history that academics and intellectuals, despite their professed commitments to academic freedom and open inquiry, have often included individuals and

**No one has more passionate attachments to or deeper investments in securing the futures of particular ideas, theories, and paradigms than their authors; and no one is more tenacious in rooting out, exposing, and condemning what they sincerely regard as wrong-headed, inaccurate, or dangerous ideas than scholars or intellectuals who hold opposing views.**

groups who have been as eager as tyrants to silence opposing views. This is as understandable as it is lamentable. No one has more passionate attachments to or deeper investments in securing the futures of particular ideas, theories, and paradigms than their authors; and no one is more tenacious in rooting out, exposing, and condemning what they sincerely regard as wrong-headed, inaccurate, or dangerous ideas than scholars or intellectuals who hold opposing views. However, given the fact that free and open critical exchange of ideas is a constituent principle of post-Enlightenment secular scholarship, those scholars and intellectuals who move beyond vigorous criticism of adversarial views to advocating boycotts or blacklists have no moral ground to stand on. Boycotts or blacklists in matters of the mind invite and deserve backfire. Boycotts do, of course, remain useful tactics in the David and Goliath struggles in campaigns for justice in which grassroots organizations find themselves pitted against the staggering resources of governments and large corporations.

### Conclusion

An examination of cases in which censorship backfires provides some valuable lessons in how to make this happen. The first important point is that the censorship should be exposed to audiences who will be outraged by the act of censorship itself or by the disproportion between the act (speaking out) and the censoring response (a heavy-handed attack). It is essential to have solid documentation, which means that only some cases of censorship can be exposed in this way.

It is important not to be intimidated. Censorship is often backed up by threats of what will happen if those who are censored do not acquiesce. It can be rewarding to see these threats as potential opportunities. By exposing the threats, the backlash can be made all the stronger.

Targets of censorship need to be prepared for further attack—including personal invective—should they challenge the censorship. Once again, it is important not to be intimidated, because personal attacks can be made to backfire too. When coming under fierce attack, the first instinct of many people is to retreat, but a better response—both tactically and psychologically—can be to expose the unfairness of the attack.

The cases in which the backfire effect has worked best have been in the public sphere, where appeals can be made

directly to substantial audiences. When censorship is challenged by using an official channel—a grievance procedure or a court—it is much harder to mobilize support. Steel and Morris responded to McDonald’s use of defamation law by fighting a court case, but their real victory occurred through extensive publicity. Rushdie apologized, hoping to terminate the Fatwa through the channels it had arisen, but this was unsuccessful. It was massive publicity that turned the tide in his favor. In challenging the boycotts and blacklists of scholars, publicity again has been the key. Complaints to professional associations would have been too little and too late.

Making censorship backfire is not a task for the faint-hearted. It can require great energy and staying power, plus the psychological strength to survive personal attacks. The positive side is the support received from others, which can make all the difference. In order for censorship to backfire, lots of people need to express their concern. Those who have come under attack and survived often say that expressions of support kept them going. In this we all have a role to play.

#### **Appendix: Tips on Dealing with the Press**

Activists seeking to trigger backfire by valorizing victims in the press require a basic knowledge of the work routines of news organizations. They need to be aware of how the daily press cycles work in print and electronic media (Jensen, 2001). For example, if activists want their cause covered by a daily newspaper that is published in morning editions, they need to know that reporters are much more likely to take their phone calls and listen to their pitches early the preceding day. Similarly, they need to be constantly and acutely aware of the time pressures all news people work under. They need to cultivate good rapport with journalists. A cardinal rule in this regard is not to waste the journalist’s time.

Prepare well in advance of making contact with journalists. Gather the facts for the journalist and do so using the rhetoric of objectivity that journalists recognize and consider credible. That is, cite facts using recognized sources (e.g., statistics or citations from human rights organizations) and give endorsements of the victim’s worthiness from respected individuals or organizations. Present these facts in clear and concise form; ideally, make a one-page press release that answers the standard journalistic repertoire of questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how (Jensen, 2001). Well-written press releases submitted to newspapers from credible sources at appropriate times during the daily news cycle frequently appear in newspapers with only moderate editing—in effect, they can function as free advertising. But remember that in many countries, especially the US, all controversial stories must be vetted by lawyers before they are published. Weekly publications, magazines, journals, and newspaper supplements are, in many cases, better outlets for such stories because the journalist has a longer lead time to investigate the story, establish the subject’s credibility, and clear publication with his or her supervisors. Alternative media, websites, and specialized publications like *Index on Censorship* are good places to start since they are now frequently pipelines that feed mainstream media. In dealing with electronic media, the message must be reduced to two or three sound bites, which must be dramatic

and pithy, yet delivered in the cool modulations that television and radio demand. With television, visuals are also a must.

In cases of censorship, print media remains the first and best target for activists seeking to valorize the censored. Few journalists who cover controversial subjects—and censorship is always controversial—have escaped the blue pencils of excessive editorial caution or the nagging regrets of self-censorship. Almost all seasoned journalists have had stories killed or have had to abandon promising leads because of management’s fears of lawsuits or adverse effects on advertising revenues. Journalists are therefore generally

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sympathetic to the plight of others who are subjected to the knife of censorship, and this solidarity is especially strong when the censored are fellow writers. That is, journalists are likely to frame them as “victims” of oppressive states, ruthless corporations, or reactionary clerics. Cases of censorship resonate closely with what Peter Hamill (1998) describes as the romantic tradition in journalism: the identification with the underdog pitted against powerful but corrupt forces in heroic struggles

for justice.

Conversely, the framing conventions of news writing conventionally categorize demonstrations or protests as public disturbances; therefore, crime reporters are typically assigned to cover these events (Gitlin, 1980). Protest actions are therefore likely to be covered, if they are covered at all, using the same narrative formulas as crime coverage. Crime reporting relies very heavily on official sources for information (e.g., the police and other representatives of established authority). As lawbreakers, perpetrators are not considered credible sources by journalists; their side of the story typically is not reported. The views of protesters are also typically framed as deviant views by crime reporters and are rarely given a full or fair hearing. A similar dynamic applies to whistleblowers. Like crime reporters, business writers routinely rely on corporate sources (e.g., managers, public relations personnel, etc.) for information. They do not want to jeopardize their future access to information by writing damaging stories about their sources. In the case of whistleblowers, there are also legal liabilities. Corporations will typically threaten lawsuits against newspapers and individual reporters if they publish damaging information, even if the information is true. For many newspapers, the threat is enough to kill the story. Journalists learn not to waste time on stories that have little probability of making it into print or onto the air. Moreover, journalists, by the very

nature of their craft, are expected to be “team-players”—that is, news production is an organizational process that requires cooperation, collegiality, and at least minimal levels of trust. Whistleblowers are, however, always surrounded by a cloud of suspicion; employers will claim they are disloyal, dishonest, self-seeking, and unreliable, all vices abhorred by the professional ideology of journalism. So, where a censored writer is a natural ally, a whistleblower—even a whistleblower who serves a high moral cause—is at best a suspicious character who has to work very hard to achieve credibility with journalists and other defenders of the oppressed.

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