

# Social media sackings risk stifling journalistic expression

May 22 2015, by Collette Snowden

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Journalists are often expected to engage with social media. Credit: Esther Vargas/Flickr, CC BY-SA

The one defining ideal of journalism is the belief that journalists should "speak the truth" even when the truth may be contested, unpopular or

damaging.

The ideal of freedom of expression is the bedrock of journalism, hard won since "[freedom of the press](#)" meant being able to own and operate a printing press, free of government control and without a licence.

For nearly 500 years [journalists](#) have maintained a significant degree of autonomy despite the constant tension with the editorial, financial, managerial and regulatory structures around which they have to work.

The freedom that journalism claims has always been conditional. Yet, even as media organisations struggle to manage the changes associated with online technology, journalists have continued to maintain the importance of autonomy and freedom of expression.

Remember Charlie Hebdo and the global debate about media freedom? World leaders marching arm in arm in Paris in defence of this ideal?

Journalism has managed to work through the rise of the internet, mobile technologies, bloggers, citizen journalism and digital cameras. But [social media](#) is perhaps its biggest threat so far, not because of the content that pours from it, but rather the restrictions imposed by employers and by self-appointed guardians of public sensibilities.

With the expectation that they meet corporate and institutional guidelines 24 hours a day, the threat to journalism is of even greater self-censorship, and a complete loss of autonomy.

## **Spiral of silence**

Recent situations where journalists, such as Scott McIntyre, have been dismissed after posting what have been perceived as controversial, inappropriate or inflammatory statements on social media sites highlight

the potential for increased self-censorship by journalists.

This is particularly so in light of the perceived need to conform to organisational codes rather than simply obeying the law, producing a spiral of silence and creating new norms of obedience and conformity.

The "[spiral of silence](#)" effect is the tendency for people to remain silent when they believe they are in a minority. It's dangerous because it restricts the free flow of opinion, ideas and criticism.

The presence of a spiral of silence is powerful enough for people to censor themselves, without the need for rules or codes. Once silenced, people refrain from expressing contrary or non-conformist views, from questioning or challenging orthodoxy, or speaking up about corruption, malpractice or incompetency.

The creation or development of a spiral of silence works because people silence themselves when they fear isolation from the majority, as in the practice of [shunning](#) or being "[sent to Coventry](#)".

Or they fear more tangible reprisals, such as loss of status, public humiliation, the application of restrictions (i.e. "black listing"), loss of opportunity and loss of employment.

Authoritarian regimes are very good at creating the environment for a spiral of silence to occur, but the conditions in which it develops can also be more subtle.

The evidence from the current hearings of the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Ballarat](#) and the [Select Committee on the Recent Allegations relating to Conditions and Circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru](#) show how a spiral of silence can develop in a system.

The compelling evidence of how people suppress information out of fear also demonstrates the dire consequences of silence and self-censorship.

## Suppression of radical potential

Until recently, most people were able to comment in online forums or on social media without it being related to their employment, or being subjected to public humiliation.

Now social media is becoming just another channel of controlled communication, through which organisations publicly represent their brand and seek to control what they say about themselves and what is said about them.

Controversy in social media, unless it's carefully managed and strategic, is considered damaging and, therefore, something to be constrained. But not all brands need the same protection. And a media organisation that cannot sustain the occasional controversy looks pretty fragile.

As for the public's capacity for robust debate, if it cannot handle debate then we are in serious trouble. Outrage will not break the public. Concern that it will may be indicative of more serious motives, related to ensuring that social media becomes another controlled form of media.

This desire to control the content of communication is nothing new. Communication scholar and journalist, [Brian Winston](#), argues that this pattern occurs with every new communication technology.

Beginning with an initial flurry of excitement, innovation in communication technology is embraced enthusiastically for its capacity to transform and expand communication. But as the transformative effects begin to be felt, the "[law of the suppression of radical potential](#)" kicks in.

At this point the transformative power of a medium is constrained by existing interests, which tend to want to defend the status quo or seek control of the new medium.

For journalists, the control of social media content is especially concerning. They are now expected to be active on social media, building presence and brand as individuals and for their media organisations.

Yet they are also constrained by social media codes – such as [the one](#) that precipitated Scott McIntyre's dismissal – then the irreconcilable contradiction encourages self-censorship.

Based on all the evidence we have about the effects of spirals of silence, self-imposed constraint is likely to spill into all aspects of a journalist's work.

And that's where the real damage will occur, for without even the limited autonomy they have now to speak and write freely the capacity of journalists to report news and information will be further diminished.

There is also the bigger question: if the profession that has fought to defend its freedom of expression for five centuries is forced into a self-imposed silence, what about the rest of us?

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