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John Steel and Julian Petley (eds)

The Routledge Companion to Freedom of Expression and Censorship

Abingdon: Routledge, 2024. 408 pp. ISBN 9780367205348

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“We write this introduction,” say the editors of this magisterial companion, “in turbulent times”. Indeed they do, with debates around freedom of speech and its limits closely linked to much of today’s political and social unease. Just ask American voters preparing for a presidential election. Or Chinese citizens trying to scale their country’s Great Firewall for a peek at the forbidden fruit of non-sovereign information. Or people brave enough to venture onto Twitter/X to offer a reasoned, if not unanimous, view on trans rights. The so-called culture wars rage all around us while states and non-state actors turn loose their bots and algorithms onto the web, and one is left asking: What Would John Stuart Mill Do?

In turbulent times, thank goodness for the steady hands of John Steel and Julian Petley, who pilot this 36-chapter tanker of a book through the choppy waters of calumny, censorship and cancel culture. The book is a companion by name and a companion by nature: thought-provoking and challenging, yet good company all the while.

The chapters flow on from one another with logical elegance. Beginning with freedom of speech’s philosophical groundings, the companion moves steadily from the abstract to the concrete. We are taken on a cross-disciplinary global tour that encompasses key contemporary debates, with chapters of interest for historians, political scientists, philosophers and literary critics, as well as students of journalism studies.

The philosophical ideas underpinning free speech offer a stimulating start. The early free speech triumvirate of John Milton, William Blackstone and J.S. Mill are given due prominence in this trip through the history of ideas in Part One, but the contributors’ tone is far from being overly deferential or hagiographic. The rigour of Mill’s defence for free speech in *On Liberty* is given forensic analytical scrutiny in Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij’s chapter, while the distinction between positive and negative liberties – an important distinction that recurs throughout this collection in slightly differing guises – begins to emerge. A chapter on Mill’s utilitarian bedfellow Jeremy Bentham is also illuminating, shedding light on a contrarian thinker’s deployment of a distinctive method to arrive at a typically bold conclusion. Bentham used purely utilitarian reasoning to justify a free and potentially scurrilous press, arguing that the harm that may occur from the odd libelling of a public servant was far outweighed by the benefits that accrued to society through a press that functioned as a security against the “misrule” of those in power.

Steel and Petley have ensured the book has a genuinely global sweep, and the alert cross-referencing between chapters - combined with the diversity of high-quality contributions - gives the book a sense of unity that is rare for large companions and handbooks to achieve.

This international scope of the book is captured by the heading of Part Two: Global Perspectives. It is an engaging intercontinental canter that includes two pieces on censorship in China, the complicated impact of France's commitment to secularism (*laïcité*) on free speech debates, and a probing investigation into the influence of conservative sensibilities on freedom of expression in Japan by Ryusaku Yamada. Noah Mellor's chapter on the Arab region challenges the notion that ideals of media freedom from the Global North can be transplanted into other areas, contending that local cultural factors can make for distinctive conceptions of freedom of expression.

Controversy is not hard to find in connection with contemporary debates around freedom of expression, and Part Three delivers a thorough exploration of these hot potatoes. So-called cancel culture, the "war on woke", Holocaust denial, the regulation of pornography, academic freedom and the impunity enjoyed in many countries by the perpetrators of crimes against journalists are all analysed in a succession of well-paced chapters.

The book's tone, including the editors' introduction, is generally anchored politically to the Left, and while genuinely broad in its scope, the companion might have delivered a soupçon of additional spice with a contribution or two from the other side of the political spectrum. The Right does not have a monopoly on the abuses and charades of free speech, and it is not always clear whether the nomenclature used to characterise some current free speech proponents on the Right - such as free speech "fundamentalists" or "grifters" pursuing their "war" on woke - is helpful in terms of stimulating the kind of measured debate that the culture wars urgently require from both sides as an antidote to the welter of *ad hominem* and polarising rhetoric that swirls online.

But as both a distillation of key issues and a stimulant to further debate, this is a timely and vital tract. Steel and Petley have assembled a superb collection that casts fresh light on a cornerstone issue of civilisation itself. In that sense it is a deeply important, civilised and civilising piece of scholarship.