

The problem with freedom of speech: "An Independent Mind"

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We are all in favour of freedom of expression but in reality it can mean different things to different people. At the Premiere for a wonderful new documentary the contradictions came tumbling out.

I was chairing the [Frontline Club](#) debate after a packed crowd at the [Soho Curzon](#) had sat enthralled and outraged by [Rex Bloomstein's An Independent Mind](#). The movie takes you through a series of portraits of artists and journalists who are fighting for the right to speak their minds.

It starts with the boisterous political reggae of [Tiken Jah Fakoly](#) from the Ivory Coast who fled his home country after death threats. Now he is a global musical campaigner for political reform in Africa. No-one could fail to be inspired by Fakoly's upbeat demands for democracy. And it's also easy to sympathise with the Algerian cartoonist, the Syrian poet, and the Guatemalan journalist portrayed with such sensitivity and power in this terrific film.

But what about the heavy metal thrash group from the Basque region of Spain whose lyrics appeared to support violence? And the coup de grace was the final interviewee. Bear in mind that Bloomstein's reputation as a great British documentary maker rests partly on some stunning historical and investigative films about the Holocaust. "An Independent Mind" closes with an interview with the British historian David Irving who admits his sympathy with Hitler but denies being a holocaust denier or Nazi. He spent a couple of very unpleasant years in an Austrian jail because of his views. Bloomstein pushes Irving in the interview but it is clear that he wants his views heard. Interestingly, more people in the audience were upset by the inclusion of the Basque nationalists than Irving. But as Bloomstein said, we can't exclude these views and opinions, we have to debate and defeat them in the open.

Playwright [Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti](#) was on the panel. Her play [Shameless](#) was taken off by the Birmingham Rep after [protests](#) by local Sikh activists. She said that freedom of expression was about allowing difficult and even dangerous views an airing because we had to protect what she called "the corrupt imagination" as well as the conventional wisdom.

I would still insist that we have more freedom of expression globally than say, 50 years ago, or even 20 years ago. But I suspect the rise of religious and community-based intolerance is now as big a threat to freedom of speech as authoritarian government.

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