‘RICH AND VARIED ETHICAL STANDARDS’: INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AS A UNIVERSAL VALUE IN A WORLD OF MANY CULTURES.

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INTRODUCTION

Intellectual freedom is a concept of central importance to a progressive society: at all levels of educational provision; in the media; in research and debate; in politics and business; and in information institutions such as libraries. We therefore need to feel confident in our understanding of its meaning and the precise nature of its significance. It is easy for those who work in a climate of intellectual freedom to assume that respect for intellectual freedom is the global norm. It is particularly easy if you live in a country whose citizens have enjoyed intellectual freedom for centuries; if you have access to global and local networks that can provide virtually any information that might be desired; if you work with like-minded colleagues from a number of other countries; and if you know you have valued the protection offered by Article 19 on Freedom of Expression of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

At the very least, under such circumstances, you might tend to assume that intellectual freedom is the norm to which humankind aspires. You might assume this even when you know that many societies, states, legal systems, religions and other belief systems seek to suppress all or some of its aspects. Therefore it is helpful every once in a while to be reminded that this not necessarily the case.

A gently probing question from an audience member after a lecture in Edinburgh on aspects of intellectual freedom delivered in 2015 was a reminder of this doubt that intellectual freedom is either universally, or even widely, accepted by the totality of humanity. When faced with this question, it was necessary to concede that intellectual freedom, although identified in Article 19 as having universal application is, however, far from universally accepted. The following is a sketch of a speculative and very tentative exploration of responses to the question. The intention is to provide a more solid and reliable basis for the concept ‘intellectual freedom’ than mere reassertion of Article 19. Before this is possible we need to say something about the use of the term intellectual freedom. The term includes freedom of opinion (although someone’s opinions need never be revealed and in that case cannot be challenged); freedom of expression (which is the term used in Article 19 somewhat confusingly to include freedom of opinion) and freedom of access to information (which is an essential underpinning for intellectual freedom). What is said in this essay applies very much to

each of these three, so the inclusive term intellectual freedom is preferred to the more commonly used freedom of expression.

We will begin by looking at the challenges that are offered to intellectual freedom when we treat it as a cultural expression. Secondly we will offer some remarks on what is suggested if we adopt a social psychology perspective. In both of these cases we will draw inferences from the seemingly unrelated, but in fact very revealing, example of human responses to homicide. Both cultural and social psychology approaches cast substantial doubt on the universality of intellectual freedom, but two further approaches can be offered as counter-balance. For the first of these we will look at relevant aspects of the philosophy of Information and Library Science (LIS) before finally turning to the science relating to brain development and childhood learning.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AS CULTURAL PHENOMENON

In May 2014 an organisation called the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) offered a stark challenge to an Article 19-based version of intellectual freedom. A Saudi Arabian court had found Raif Badawi guilty of breaching laws that control use of information technology, and of insulting Saudi religious figures. He had set up a website called Saudi Arabian Liberals, as a forum for political and social debate. More specifically he was accused of ridiculing Saudi Arabia's religious police, the Commission on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. His sentence included imprisonment, a very large fine, a ban on his media use and travel, and 1,000 lashes. Amnesty International and other NGOs condemned the verdict, and they were joined by a small number of principled politicians willing to risk offending the rulers of one of the world's most wealthy and influential countries. Margot Wallstrom, the Swedish Foreign Minister, was prominent among these. However, it is the response to Wallstrom made by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which offers the most interesting scope for discussion. In defending the verdict, it refers to the world's 'rich and varied ethical standards' (OIC, 2015). At first glance this seems like a ridiculous use of the language of the tourist brochure to defend a cruel and excessive punishment for what was a simple exercise of freedom of expression. However, if were merely to brush off the claim that ethical standards vary and that (by implication) we should celebrate this, that would be an inadequate response. Recent work on intercultural information ethics, notably by Brey (2007), Capurro (2008) and Bielby (2015) generally makes the important point that ethical systems, including those relating to information, are cultural phenomena that need to be understood in context.

For the sake of argument we could easily accept the OIC's use of the words 'varied ethical standards'. We can take the use of the word 'standards' in the sense of 'norms' rather than implying levels of quality in the way it is often used. So in this sense the OIC has the right to cite the existence of varied ethical standards when it talks of an intellectual freedom matter such as the Badawi case. Indeed it is not hard to identify deep-rooted cultural differences that potentially clash with what the Universal Declaration claims are the true values. It is communal values that inform and inspire ethical thinking in the societies of very large parts of the world: pretty certainly in most parts. What matters in such societies is family and the wisdom and love of the

father (and mother); the guidance of local chiefs, politicians, elders and cultural figures; the teachings of priests and other religious leaders, and the tenets of their faiths; and the directives of elected politicians, non-elected leaders and monarchs. In such societies people help and support each other, but they also control each other and suppress deviant ideas and impulses before they can even clash with orthodoxy. For the unquestioning such societies are comfortable and supportive. For those driven to ask questions, they are unbearably stifling and have to be challenged or quit in favour of some freer intellectual climate.

The expression of culture in behaviour and ideas varies greatly across the range of human concerns. We will use as an example of the interplay between society, the individual and ethical thinking, an example so strikingly different that it might seem totally irrelevant. This extreme example is cultural attitudes towards homicide; the killing of other human beings. On the surface, homicide seems to be rejected across the world. Most religions, cultures and judicial systems quite simply deal with killing as an unlawful action, except under rigidly prescribed instances of self defence or non-culpable accident. The duel and the blood feud have been effectively driven out of society in most European countries for some centuries now, although the feud is said to linger on in Albania, Georgia and one or two other places. It is important, however, to stress that cultural prohibition of killing by individuals is not completely universally established. For instance, the Masai of Kenya and Tanzania find it hard to accommodate to the justice systems of the countries in which they live. Among their difficulties is the sense in their culture that if a man is provoked beyond endurance, for him to kill the offending person in fair fight is natural and not particularly reprehensible. More extreme than this, amongst the Afar people of Eastern Ethiopia, it has been normal for a man to express his manhood by killing others. The killing need not be provoked or in any sense ‘justified’. Another man’s life, even when taken in a cowardly and deceptive way, could be celebrated by a knotted string attached to the killer’s belt. These are exceptions, but they remind us that there is some level of cultural propensity to kill which exists across societies and cultures.

We must also remember the irony that the judicial systems of various countries reserve to themselves the right to punish some offences, including not only murder, but rape and drug-dealing, by execution. What is more, public opinion as represented in commentary, opinion polls and referendums consistently favours capital punishment as an appropriate response to certain crimes. Iran, China and some states of the USA can be mentioned in the context of judicial killing. In all of these it is undoubtedly the case that judicial killing is to some extent culturally sanctioned whilst killing by an individual is not. Countries also maintain armies, have policies on national defence, and wage war with depressing frequency. Thus, we have the situation in which societies and the judicial systems they create have chosen to outlaw killing by individuals whilst all of them reserve this same right to themselves and employ large numbers of people trained as soldiers and equipped to kill. With this example in mind, we can go beyond simply accepting that cultures vary. We can agree with the OIC that the ethical reasoning and standards that cultures carry with them varies too. Furthermore, if we probe under the surface of ethical thinking, we can identify propelling forces that are neither entirely common to all humanity, nor the product of an untrammelled individuality.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Ironically, a beautifully clear and warm expression of the universalist viewpoint on intellectual freedom came from an atheist on the day in 1697 when he was about to be executed for the crime of blasphemy. Thomas Aikenhead, a student in Edinburgh, said:

> It is a principle innate and co-natural to every man to have an insatiable inclination to the truth, and to seek for it as for hid treasure. (Graham, 2008, p. 118)

Those who condemned him in court and put the rope around his neck were effectively seeking to refute this claim in the most way extreme imaginable only hours after he had made it. Aikenhead's claim depends on a vision of human beings as individuals obliged to take full responsibility for their own ideas and actions. To a large proportion of the world's population this would probably seem a ridiculous claim that could only be made by a rash fool. Their incredulity would be based, at least in part, on their cultural background. But there are more elaborately layered dimensions of social psychology that are likely to be relevant. There are a host of feelings, thoughts, beliefs, intentions and goals that are constructed in relation to human beings' relations with others, at a variety of levels from family and small groups to society as a whole. Such psychological factors influence behaviour and attitudes and undoubtedly condition the acceptance or rejection of an importance stance like support for intellectual freedom.

Rather than addressing the manifestation of social psychology directly in terms of intellectual freedom, we can usefully return to the example of homicide. The speculations about social psychology that emerge from the example can be argued also to suggest underlying patterns that might also relate to intellectual freedom attitudes and practices. Given that we accept that cultures have mixed attitudes towards homicide, we can ask the question as to whether this reveals some natural pattern in human psychology. It is in the military experience that we can perhaps find some clues as to whether killing is natural to humans, although largely suppressed by laws. It is clear that some soldiers can kill, but some are simply psychologically unable to do so. Indeed, a well known suggestion is that only 15 to 20% of men (and women too?) are capable of bringing themselves to deliberately kill another. (Grossman, 1996) This suggestion is largely based on the much-contested findings of S. L. A. Marshall regarding soldiers in the First World War. Marshall's contention was that most men in combat avoided firing directly at the enemy. A possible restatement of this is possible without entirely dismissing Marshall's contention. This would be to say that there is a proportion of up to 20% (including a few for whom killing brings a kind of psychological fulfilment), who can kill and who seem to suffer no psychological damage from it. Individuals from the remaining 80% sometimes can kill but they might well be those who today are identified as going on to suffer post-traumatic stress (PTS). In summary we could say that killing is natural for only a few and unnatural for the majority: that, indeed, there is a spectrum of human responses to homicide.

The variation of response and, indeed, confusion that applies to killing in its various forms might well also apply all other aspects of human propensities. Unfortunately we have no reliable way at present of knowing what percentage of people are inherently drawn towards the various aspects of intellectual freedom we listed earlier (freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, freedom of access to information). However, survey data does tend to suggest that the patterns of human psychology vary according to a frequently recurring 80:20 distribution. For instance we might be talking here about a similar proportion to Marshall's 15-20% who could kill, as embracing an extreme positions (that, indeed, of Aikenhead) in favour of intellectual freedom. What if, for the sake of argument, we were look less at the figure of 20% than the 80% majority which felt differently? This 80% is certainly not an undifferentiated mass: it will include shades of opinion. We might then ask if the survey evidence (fragmentary though it might be) could also be turned to suggest a further 20% from that majority who might firmly reject intellectual freedom. This would give us a spectrum (or even a Bell Curve) of difference with 20% minorities at either end and an apathetic central 60%. The curiosity of this majority would go little beyond the narrow promptings of the need for information for daily life and work, or hobbies and leisure activities, as well as the widespread enthusiasm for gossip and trivia. A diagrammatic representation might look like this:

Spectrum of Responses to Intellectual Freedom		
20%	60%	20%
Intellectual Passivity	Limited Desire for Knowledge	Free Minds
Accept Authority	Concentrate on Gossip and Trivia	Question Everything
Don't Ask Questions	Pursue Leisure Information	Explore Dangerous Ideas
Suppress Others	Acquire Work and Daily Life Information	No Limits

Is there any reported survey data which might offer a little support to the speculation embodied in this diagram? The answer is 'Not much': survey after survey in the intellectual freedom area reports c20% minorities with a strong opinion and a remaining 80%. Typical is a global survey of attitudes to online privacy (Big Brother Watch, 2013) that showed 21% of respondents not concerned and 79% revealing various levels of concern. One or two examples do, however show a distribution similar to that in the diagram above. For instance there is a survey of opinions on Internet censorship (Depken, 2006). From a responding population of 4,247 in the USA, 25% agreed strongly with some form of restriction on publishing on the Internet, and 28% disagreed strongly. The percentages are higher than the tentative speculation we have made here, but the pattern is similar. A more recent survey of privacy and security (Madden, 2014) suggests that 18% of respondents disagree strongly with government monitoring of phone calls and Internet communication, whilst a similar proportion agree strongly. Perhaps a more intense trawl of reported

surveys might reveal more, but the honest answer is that without fuller reporting and some slightly different surveys the speculation remains unproven. What is clear is that surveys, whether they report an 80:20 distribution or something more like a Bell Curve, confirm that Article 19 is an expression of faith rather than a solidly rooted response to human propensities and cultural conditioning. This might seem a rather a pessimistic view of humanity, However, we are not obliged to accept its implications, nor do we have to accept that cultural perspectives and social psychology are the only ways of looking at intellectual freedom.

'RICHNESS' IN ETHICAL STANDARDS AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY FROM AN LIS PERSPECTIVE

The OIC statement's use of the word rich clearly implied that we ought to accept that in some parts of the world intellectual freedom will be partially suppressed or wholly denied in religion, law and social practices. However, what if we argue that the consequences of suppressing intellectual freedom are deeply damaging to human progress? This is the beginning of a counter argument that says 'Yes, cultures and social psychology reject or ignore intellectual freedom, but we have to work *as if* humanity believed in free minds and free expression of what was in those minds'. This kind of progressive argument might not be scientific, but it does have a compelling logic in a world that depends on imaginative solutions to a host of problems in science, technology, economics and politics. Further good reasons for refusing to accept the dominance of cultures and psychological propensities emerges from the discipline of modern LIS. There are various LIS principles such as neutrality and equitability in services, or confidentiality between professional and information seeker, which are based on a progressive vision of information service. They have been developed in the crucible of professional debate and adopted by generations of librarians for good practical reasons.

Another significant professional principle is that of access to information, which relies in part on the distinction between text (or content) and format. Essentially, this suggests that library and information work is first and foremost about content, with concerns about format secondary. Thus, although most librarians devote some attention to the preservation and conservation of information materials (principally manuscript and printed documents) and some specialist librarians have these concerns at the very centre of their professional activity, it is what manuscripts, books, audio and visual recordings, digital and online materials tell us that actually matters. From this viewpoint no format or copy outweighs the importance of the message that is carried. This would obviously be open to the criticism of philistinism if applied to a medieval illuminated manuscript, but it carries the implication that copies of outdated popular works or school textbooks can cheerfully be pulped for recycling. This isn't the place to debate this in full, but if we accept that it is in fact central to library practice, it can drive our understanding of challenges to library practice from a strong perspective of professional ethics.

A revealing example is developed by Crowley (2015, p207) who cites difficulties over how libraries treat copies of the Qu'ran in their collections. This is not a specifically Islamic case: something similar might apply in the case of Christian and other scriptures. Indeed, Scientologists have called for special treatment of their

donations of material to libraries (Sturges and Gastinger, 2014). In Crowley's example, advice was obtained from an Islamic scholar by an American academic library to the effect that:

1. Non-Muslims should not handle the Qu'ran,
2. Physical handling of the Qu'ran should be with a cloth or glove,
3. The Qu'ran should not be placed on the floor or near feet,
4. The Qu'ran should not have other books or items placed on top of it,
5. The Qu'ran should be kept closed when not being read.

He also cites a suggestion from another source that all religious texts should be kept on a top shelf so that none was above the other. At first sight these stipulations do not look too problematic: they could be adopted without much disruption to the practices of a library. At the same time it is hard to swallow the final one of these suggestions because it depends on a horribly confused use of the word *above*. This utterly ignores the difference between *above* in a spatial sense, and *above* indicating a degree of respect. This could perhaps be ignored in the interests of harmony, but, the question remains: should librarians compromise their 'content over format' principle in the interests of peace and quiet?

The difficulty has two layers. The first concerns text. The plea for special treatment of copies of the scriptures is first based on the claim that they are 'holy' or 'sacred'; that is, true in a special way that demands distinctive treatment over and above that granted to any other text. This would be less of a problem if there were not many rival scriptures claiming this special status to the exclusion of the others. It would also not be a problem if there were no suspicion that all scriptures were flawed in one way or another and unworthy of special treatment as a category of text. This problem could perhaps be overcome by a resolution to offer special treatment to the texts as a gesture of tolerance and social inclusiveness but that does not overcome the problem of format. Respect for a text is basically a matter of good manners; thoughtful and polite speech and behaviour. But respect for a particular copy or a whole format requires actions that are based on what librarians might regard as a fundamental confusion between text and the format which conveys it. The question arises with scriptures as to which is holy: the oral tradition from which most emerge, manuscript copies of early versions of the text, printed copies, sound and audio recordings, digital versions? Is it all of these, or just some and is one version more holy than others?

This is not a frivolous question. The case of Farkhunda exposes the issue in stark clarity (Kargar, 2015). In March 2015, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Farkhunda, a volunteer teacher and student of Islamic law was accused by a mullah of burning pages of a Qu'ran. There was no evidence to prove this ever happened and the mullah seems to have quarrelled with Farkhunda because of her criticism of his selling of religious charms. A mob gathered, beat her to death, burned her body and threw it in the river. Police allegedly stood by while this atrocity happened. Some imams and mullahs later endorsed the murder. All this would be horrible enough if it were not for the fact that Farkhunda was one of those devotees who had memorised the whole of the Qu'ran. Which raises the question as to which was more holy, the allegedly burnt book, or the living human repository of the text? The example exposes the illogicality of the demand that printed paper carrying a 'sacred' text should be afforded special status. Respect for different cultures can sure only go so far and potentially catastrophic violation of the carefully worked out principles of a modern profession like librarianship looks too far.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND THE HUMAN BRAIN

There is another more fundamental and universal line of reasoning that emerges from the swiftly expanding knowledge of the human brain that is brought to us by twenty first century neuroscience. Neuroscientists use the evidence of case studies, non-intrusive experimentation and, crucially, the measurements that can be obtained from technologies that include electroencephalography, positron emission tomography (PET), functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and magnetoencephalography (MEG). These various forms of scanning allow experimenters to identify the parts of the brain that are active during many kinds of mental activity. This, in turn, offers insights into learning, problem solving and instinctual responses. For the non-scientist there is a positive outpouring of books, journalism and broadcasts that popularises neuroscience's findings. Anyone who scans the reviews of books in the quality newspaper press may well have noticed that in the last decade there has been a flow of titles introducing neuroscience to a popular audience, for example, Winston (2003), Ramachandran (2004), Rose (2006), and more recently Churchland, (2013) and Kaku, (2014). Articles in magazines and quality newspapers, many of them in the form of book reviews, are simply too numerous to mention. A valuable summary of the content of articles that have appeared in <u>New Scientist</u> has proved particularly useful (New Scientist: the Collection, 2015). It is necessary to admit that much of what appears in this popular literature is speculative, and some of it quite fanciful, but there are solid useful lessons there too. In particular, the growth of this popular literature makes it possible to offer a more specific rationale for the line of argument sketched out in Sturges (2006).

If we look at what popular neuroscience reports on discoveries relating to childhood learning we immediately find a great deal that applies to intellectual freedom. Evidence suggests that a flow of sensations into the child's brain that range from tastes and smells through to the visual and auditory reception of incredibly complex messages coded in language, number and other sets of symbols, does not merely inform, it develops and supports the ability to think. Babies can be observed responding to the messages from their senses as early as the moments when they first seek to attach their lips to their mother's nipple. Very quickly the baby begins to identify other sensations, recognise them when they occur, and even predict their recurrence. Soon this amounts to knowledge of their immediate surroundings and recognition for those who care for them. A process of change and growth in the brain is central to this development of understanding, but that in turn is reliant on the reception of a flow of stimuli. Neuroscientists can measure the increase of brain activity in the areas associated with the various senses during the early months of human life. The neural equipment of the infant human has the basic capacity to cope with the information that reaches it, but more than that, the brain requires it. The baby's brain is much more plastic than the adult's and the flood of sensations is responsible for the specific form it takes. Through all of this we can see an emerging sense of self and the acquisition of language reinforcing and developing each other, to form a human being with reasoning capacity and a set of useful memories.

The significance of all of this is that it is biological and universal. Scientific opinions on what is happening in a baby's brain (conscious and unconscious) will certainly

change and expand. The functions of the various organs of the brain and their neural connections are still only partially and imperfectly understood. What is, however, clear is that it is dangerous in the extreme to interfere with the processes by which the baby is exposed to stimuli and to limit the range and richness of the stimuli. The baby needs to be exposed to sounds, sights and other physical sensations, and it also needs talk, stories, songs and exposure to books. The baby exercises a kind of basic intellectual freedom which we can support and nurture by allowing it to follow its propensities but offering a banquet of sensations and communication from which it can choose. The alternative is unthinkable, because it points towards an imperfect developed brain less capable than it might be of independent and creative thought. The brain's processing speed slows down with age, but this does not hinder powerful mental activity because of the neural connections laid down in the earliest years of life and over a lifetime of learning and experience. Very recent research suggests that measurable levels of intelligence seem to be based as much as 40% on inheritance (genetic factors), but all children enter the world as active shapers of their personal environment and learning styles. This gives them the possibility to maximise their learning and compensate for the disadvantages of genetic inequality. A stronger and clearer case for intellectual freedom it is hard to imagine. By this line of reasoning intellectual freedom is indeed a human right of the most utterly fundamental kind. The child's brain demands, and intellectual freedom allows, the processes that the brain sets in motion to function to the best effect. Maybe the circumstances of later life mean that only a part of the adult population fully gains the advantage offered by an early exposure to information and ideas, and the freedom to meditate, speculate, and formulate concepts and new ideas. The logic of this is that educators, creators and information professionals must seek to maximise exposure to information and ideas so that the benefits are spread as widely and deeply as possible.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So, we concede that cultures have significant differences in their ethical approaches, and that this encompasses the information environments that they provide. Furthermore, when we explore some elementary aspects of social psychology, we concede that the adult population of the world might well be content with its position within a spectrum of responses to intellectual freedom (a spectrum including distaste for freedom and the difficulties inherent in it). However, conceding the possible truth of these propositions does not mean that it is wrong to oppose their implications from the perspective of LIS professional values. In support of this professional position is the suggestion that there remains a substantial rationale for treating intellectual freedom as a human right. This rationale is rooted in the implications of modern neuroscience. Research is beginning to support the long-established perception in progressive pedagogy that although the adult might well settle into positions in a spectrum of responses to intellectual freedom that include indifference and hostility, the same is not true of the child. The child does not make choices as to whether it wants to learn or not: it learns with hectic speed and intensity as a condition of its being. It is the child that benefits most from intellectual freedom. Therefore we support freedom of opinion, expression and access to information first for the child and then for the adult, in the confidence that if this does not always produce a new human being, it at least protects, nurtures and expands the most creative and effective segment of the adult population that intellectually free children can become. This is

why we cling to Article 19 and why all those who facilitate intellectual freedom are essential servants of humanity.

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