

Tragedy compounds confusion



Behind the headlines By Bunn Nagara

There are usually more than two sides to an argument, despite the temptation to think there are just two bitterly opposed and incompatible ones

THE French weekly *Charlie Hebdo* had long prided itself on its notoriety for crude and vulgar satire in which nothing is sacred.

Four days ago, three gunmen murdered three of its cartoonists and its editor along with eight others, wounding as many who were in the way.

World leaders immediately condemned the killings. Media practitioners in the West held vigils and supporters of the stricken publication claimed to be one with the slain journalists: "We are Charlie Hebdo."

As some have noted, nothing can excuse or justify the brutal barbarity of the killings. There are and should be better ways to register disagreement and disgust with the publication.

The cold-blooded murders were clearly terrorist acts, regardless of how terrorism is defined, and perpetrators of such crimes deserve to be pulverised by the full weight of the law.

Those who instinctively rallied to the magazine's side also needed to find mutual reassurance. They needed a sense of closure if not also comfort.

However, everyone also needs a better sense of perspective: it is one thing to reject all violent reprisals against a publication's content, but quite another to suppose that all publications are just like *Charlie Hebdo*.

Very few of the magazine's supporters conducted journalism or satirical commentary the way it did, and accordingly very few faced the same kind and degree of risks it faced.

Now, despite all the declarations of solidarity with the targeted magazine, very few would still practise journalism or satire the way it does.

Yet there is a presumption that there is no difference between *Charlie Hebdo* and other Western publications. That is a fatal denial of reality.

Predictably, commentators in the West see the tragic murders as a clash of values: freedom of expression versus doctrinaire dogmatism.

But that would simply reduce a complex and nuanced world into a stark bipolarity. It would be to let the horror of the event be blindsided to the gravity of the issues.

Such simplistic assumptions are common enough in the Western narrative, both historically and contemporarily. It reached its height during the bipolar Cold War, where one side was the "free world" and the other just the opposite.

However, much of the real world consists of various shades of grey. It is a messy world constantly bombarded with contradictions and complexities, with which few theoreticians seem to be familiar.

When the fuss over publication of cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammad surfaced a decade ago, I mentioned the need for responsible journalism in a live broadcast discussion at Al Jazeera television.

A British professor based in Hong Kong in the same discussion said he did not understand what I meant by responsible journalism, meaning that he did not recognise or accept such a thing or its alternative.

And yet the reality of it was clear enough: despite all the newsworthiness of the issue at the time, few

mainstream media reprinted the controversial cartoons alongside their reports. That was responsible journalism.

Reprinting the cartoons served no great public interest, when they were available online to the curious. The cartoons themselves were not even funny, just offensive.

The Western media in particular could have cited freedom of expression and proceeded with reprinting them, but the vast majority chose not to. They exercised their own editorial discretion.

Were they afraid of the violent repercussions they might suffer from reproducing those images? One or two might have cowered in fear, but surely not all of them?

A problem with the superficial argument that *Charlie Hebdo* represented the values of the civilised world is that it habitually rushed in where its angelic fans feared to tread. It is also most uncivil to offend others wilfully with tasteless content.

It is one thing to say that the magazine's key staff did not deserve to be executed by terrorists. It is quite another to claim that doing what it did the way it did it could not conceivably have produced such violent consequences.

The first statement pertains to universal common sense and natural justice. The second is pure naivety.

When an infant crawls onto a highway, we may not be in a position to stop it because the infant has the persistence of an adult while the law of the land gives it the "right" to do as it pleases.

We may then wish the infant well, but we cannot seriously expect it to survive for long. We should certainly not see ourselves to be in the same position of crawling onto highways ourselves.

Charlie Hebdo was such an infant. An AP news report on Friday noted that it had no equivalent even in the Anglo-Saxon world that is purportedly so much at the forefront of freedom of expression.

The magazine is not like Britain's *Private Eye*, which has a more cultivated and relatively tasteful sense of humour.

Few other publications can match *Charlie Hebdo's* apparent knack for fomenting outrage.

In the current commotion in Paris, the magazine's content is somehow also seen as part of being French. But if the sense of proportion in French cuisine typifies the national character, then *Charlie Hebdo* is not typically French.

At the height of the West's freedom movement in the late 1960s, limits to freedom had already been recognised. *Newsweek* magazine ran a major interview of folk music hero Arlo Guthrie in which he explained that "freedom is meaningless without limitations".

But some hardcore freedom fans prefer to wallow in such meaninglessness. They see any criticism of their notion of freedom as a challenge to "democracy" and their near-religious fixation on "free will".

Science has already debunked the notion of free will. We are all constrained in our actions by our immediate environment, by gravity, by our physical attributes, by our intellectual capacities, by the available opportunities, by laws, by our fears or phobias and by our genetic make-up, just to name a few.

The Cold War that had been waged for decades at great cost had pitted one superpower offering its people just one party in power against another superpower offering its people a choice of just two parties in power.

In the United States and much of the democratic Western world, third parties are typically denied any real chance of gaining power. There would be no free lunch even in the "free" world, where most things are in fact more expensive.

Yet, at every opportunity or even none at all, the issue of "freedom" is replayed at full volume as if it had to be the main or sole issue.

Among the distortions this produces is lumping all defenders of legitimate rights and freedoms together with crude and lewd offenders of other people's sensibilities on one side, while also lumping all the offended parties and critics of irresponsible wantonness on the other side.

Such a situation is not conducive to a better understanding of anything. It is only a short-cut to further misunderstanding, disputes and outrage.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.