

## **Freedom of speech, extremism and the emotional public sphere**

*Prof. Barry Richards, Bournemouth University*

What are the responsibilities of the media in relation to violent, potentially violent or anti-democratic extremisms? How much coverage should they receive, and in what contexts? Do extremists thrive on the 'oxygen of publicity', or are they exposed and weakened when they appear on the mediatised national stage?

A number of influential attempts to understand the dynamics of extremism have focussed on the emotional appeal of extremist ideologies and leaders. More recently there has been a general 'turn to affect' in the social sciences - an increasing recognition of the importance of emotion in driving human behaviour in all areas, not just those associated with emotionality. This has not yet had much impact on communication and media studies, though it is firmly established in some areas of cultural studies and sociology. A focus on the emotional dimensions of messages, their sources and their audiences can bring to light some consequences of public communications which might otherwise be overlooked or underplayed, especially where unconscious emotions are concerned. For example, new light may be cast on familiar debates about where the limits of freedom of speech should lie, or about when to provide or to allow platforms for extremist groups.

In this paper I will set out an emotion-focussed approach to the questions of when or whether extremist groups should be excluded from the national stage. To develop this argument, I will introduce the concept of the 'emotional public sphere', which I will define as the constant emotional accompaniment to the public sphere as traditionally understood, the sphere of democratic debates and deliberations. This concept draws attention to the likely or possible emotional effects amongst the public of particular statements, or of censoring particular statements. I will consider a number of examples of controversial cases, of both suppression and permission, including the IRA voices ban, the 'Danish cartoons' affair, and most recently the appearance of Nick Griffin on the BBC's Question Time, to explore how in these different contexts the emotional impact of a statement (or of its suppression) is key to understanding how and where to draw the line of exclusion from democratic debate.