

The age of offence
Offence and Social Media

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHILIP SEARGEANT: I think the specific way that social media has had an effect on offense culture is a lot to do with the way social media has changed our notions of what public communication and private communication is.

IAIN WILSON: It's made it a lot easier to offend people if that's what you want to do. It gives you a direct route to a wide audience, cause offense, try and cause someone distress, or embarrass people, or try and make your point, perhaps in a way that you wouldn't make if you were talking to someone face to face.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Because these conversations are much more public, the audience that's able to view them is much more diverse in terms of its own beliefs, its own cultural norms, and so forth. And thus, whereas normally when you're speaking to someone personally or writing to someone, you address yourself very much to them and take into account what you know about their beliefs, their values, and so forth. That is very difficult to do on social media.

PETER TACHELL: Almost anything that anyone says could potentially cause offense to someone, but that doesn't mean to say that it should be unlawful. The best way to counter bad ideas is with good ideas.

IAIN WILSON: For social media or outside of the social media world, if someone is offended or perceives that someone says something offensive, it can be difficult to have the evidence of that perhaps during a heated discussion. When this takes place online, there is an indelible record of what's being said.

PHILIP SEARGEANT: Should we leave decisions about what we can and what we can't say to the big tech companies, despite the fact that they are not accountable in any way to us? They're not democratically elected. Their own motives are to do with running a business. And

it's for this reason that the issue of offense culture and particularly the issue of what counts as offense and who gets to decide what counts becomes such a contentious and such a political issue.

PETER TATCHELL: There are increasing calls nowadays to no-platform certain speakers on the grounds that what they have said or might say could be offensive. Now, I find that quite dangerous. I lived through McCarthyism in my homeland of Australia in the 1960s when anybody who expressed a critical view was denounced as a communist. And I even nearly lost my job because I publicly spoke out against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

ASH SARKAR: I don't think necessarily it's always used in quite the right way. And I think that it's really up to the left to work out, what are the other tools and tactics at our disposal? Now, having said that, it doesn't mean that everyone should get a platform. And there are clear cases where inappropriate people have been invited to take platforms which really, they're not suited for, or indeed they've been invited just because it will cause a controversy. And in those cases, I think the organizers of the events do share some responsibility for what happens.