



[Protecting us from freedom](#)
by [Simon Belt](#)

In the 1960s and 1970s when I grew up, the retort '**sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me**' was often said in and around the school playground. Indeed, teachers would often send anyone who told tales about people calling them names, back out in the playground to deal with things themselves. The kids who told tales to teachers would usually have more harsh ribbing directed at them than anything prompting the tale telling in the first place.

Teachers are now encouraged to get kids to tell tales, and a whole army of teachers' assistant are now employed with a clear remit to look out for any form of bullying and teasing, and encourage kids to tell tales even when there are no tales to tell. This may well help our **Big Brother** feel less isolated and more included as the *therapeutic lingo* goes, but it surely can't be good for developing more resilient or self-confident adults.

Press coverage and commentary responses to stories around **Twitter storms** this last week reflects an extension of playground behaviour to online arenas and to adults. The idea of name calling people, or making ridiculous claims and digs via Twitter, often by complete strangers, is clearly bizarre and infantile postering, and occasionally includes the more serious threats of rape. Although I've not experienced it directed at myself on Twitter, I have experienced it through my

book

Face

activity, which comes across as rather detached to say the least. Maybe it's just a personal preference, but I find the 140 character limit of Twitter too restrictive for almost anything useful except maybe offering teasing links to articles published elsewhere, and just don't get how it can be taken too seriously as a form for discussing ideas.

So why are people getting so excited about Twitter this last week? Well, there was the case **Jack Riley**

who allegedly used Twitter to threaten a journalist with rape after she campaigned to keep an image of a woman on bank notes, and then the case of

Oliver Rawlings

who used some derogatory and sexualised language directed at Mary Beard after she appeared on Radio 2, well reported by the

[Daily Mail](#)

. It's clear that there are some rather time rich people who have a penchant for trolling people on Twitter with the sole desire to wind them up, and keep the responses going through continued use of inflammatory comments. They behave very much like the kids in the playground cranking up the insults for a receptive and eager audience.

I guess the only way I can understand the importance of some of the responses though is to think about the context this all occurs in, as just as you learn to deal with attention seekers in the playground, so we should learn to deal with them on the internet, and it's hardly a new phenomena. Ever since the early days of bulletin boards, the internet has had its **inflamers** of conversations and people have learned how to deal with them. Our sensitivities to such behaviours though seems to be the thing that has changed recently, whereby extreme examples, sometimes already covered by existing criminal law, are often cited alongside a whole swathe of other examples.

The example of the Co-op responding to a narrow based campaign led by UK Feminista to **Los e the Lads's Mags**

, also known in less flippant Newspeak words as censoring publications, has issued an ultimatum to the publishers to cover them up if they want them to continue to sell them. This illuminates the context quite well for me. There is an assumption that self-styled approvers should decide on behalf of the rest of society what we should be allowed to read or look at - because we aren't able to make those decisions ourselves. Further, the reasoning must be that we can't make those decisions ourselves because we aren't able to use the grey matter between our ears to good such good effect as our censors, and that expresses a profoundly diminished sense of capacity, or responsibility within individuals.

This **monkey see, or hear, monkey do** attitude is increasingly widespread amongst those looking to justify their position distinct from, and in opposition to, the rest of society. Another example comes in the form of the leaked staff handbook produced by Liverpool FC which details the increasing list of words not to be used by their staff who should listen out for others using so they can enact their zero tolerance policy towards the heathens who ignorantly use such words. And the increasing list of words and phrases that are on the banned list include: Nigger, Wog, Paki, Nip, Coloured, Gypsy, Poof, Fairy, Queer, Lezzer, Knob-jockey, Bender, 'You're gay', 'That's gay', 'Don't be a woman', 'Man up', 'You play like a girl', Princess, Queen, She-man, Midget, Cripple, Retard, Spaz, Downy and Handicapped. Words are increasingly being policed in a way that was pretty much the preserve of physical activity, diminishing context and most importantly the capacity of people to deal with words by using their own nous.

So will an **I feel abused** button on Twitter help us deal with this problematised world online? Well I can't see how it will, as when you hear how those who promote it explain how they'd like it to work, articulate its role is the language of victimhood requiring an external arbitrator to sort things out for them. This diminished sense of self, and seemingly endless desire for an external guardian to police and manage our relations, also elevates the word of and position of the reporter of abuse above that of the reported. There is an assumption that those reported of abuse should have accounts suspended until their 'innocence' is proved, else they should have their account deleted. The practicalities of having an army of people making judgements on 140 character tweets aside, this will occur outside of proper context and most importantly outside of a court of law whereby we are judged by our peers as a bedrock of our democracy.

There are many authoritarian moves to promote greater policing of the unwashed masses, but the trend to do so under the guise of opposing abuse does not make them any the more palatable to myself and promoting the idea that we are resilient and capable is needed more than ever. There is nothing of value in returning society to the Victorian values of protecting women from the coarseness of the common people and all their vulgarities, and for feminists to be leading the campaign does not make the irony in any way funny.