

**Sita Balani (SB)** The idea that people are being "cancelled" or no-platformed, I think is kind of interesting partly because in order for those things to happen, you have to have a platform to begin with, you have to have access to an audience. So in order for someone to say you don't get that audience anymore, you have to already have had access to it already.

**Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (SMK)** Salaams, Peace, and blessings, you're listening to Breaking Binaries Season Two, with me, your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan. Known online as @thebrownhijabi. As a society, we're obsessed with explaining our world through the use of straightforward opposing categories. So good or bad, moderate or radical, pretty or ugly, victim or villain The list goes on. All these sets of binaries, though, tend to be quite superficial, and they hide the real complexities, the politics and the nuances of how we've been encouraged to think, following from the conversations of season one, every episode this series, I'll be sitting down with a different friend to break down, break apart and interrogate a different binary and see how doing so helps us think more critically about ourselves and our world, and therefore, how we transform it.

This week, I sat down with Dr. Sita Balani, she's a lecturer in contemporary literature and culture at King's College London. In her research and teaching, she explores the relationship between histories of imperialism, and contemporary culture in Britain. Her work has appeared in Feminist Review, Identity Theory, Open Democracy, Photoworks and in the Verso Blog. We had a really interesting discussion where I actually learned so many new ways to think about free speech and censorship. And I feel like the lens that Sita provided and the questions that she offered for us to ask, have actually given me a whole new way to think about the blurred space in between and the questions that we don't actually need to answer when we're proposed with this binary. So I hope you enjoy this week's episode, and that you can take away from it as much as I did.

**SMK** Hi, and welcome back to season two. Today, I'm sitting with Sita Balani. How are you? Sita?

**SB** I'm good. Thank you. How're you doing?

**SMK** Yeah, all right. I just always do this thing where I'm speaking like a newscaster, and I can hear it in my own voice and I hate it! But that is good. I'm glad to have you. So basically, thank you so much for being here. I have wanted to do this with you for a while. And then I just feel like so much has been happening this year, that that obviously just you know, wasn't an option. And now you're here. So today we're going to be talking about breaking down the binary of free speech and censorship, the context in which I'm coming to this from I mean, these are two words I think have been thrown about since high school, like free speech was like this really important thing, censorship is a really bad thing. And then I guess the themes, and the way that I see those things has changed as I've, you know, when I was in university, there was, I remember, you know, there was like demos about certain people, you know, Nigel Farage is going to speak at the Cambridge union. And we were saying, "Don't let him speak" and people were saying, so you hate free speech? And I was thinking, "well, I don't know if that's what I'm saying here". And, you know, now I now do - kind of a lot of the work around Islamophobia really involves like, a real, real confusion, I feel, around these two concepts and how sometimes it feels like one is being used to hide the other side of that.

But before we jump into it, I guess can I begin by asking you to introduce free speech and censorship as in the way they're presented to us? As opposing forces. So what are they on their own terms? I guess?

**SB** Yeah, absolutely. So I think we're often presented with the idea of freedom of speech or freedom of expression, as a fundamental human right. So you'd hear about that as a human right. That's encapsulated in the UNHCR Declaration of Human Rights in international law and European law and so on. And then you'd hear about the opposite of that as things that is censorship. So things done by authoritarian regimes. Usually, that's how we understand opposition to free speech. So the persecution of artists such as Ai Weiwei in China, that was a kind of a flashpoint for people thinking about censorship. Obviously, journalists and writers all over the world are subjected to censorship for the things that they publish. There's like an organization like Pen International, it's been around for decades, that really focuses on campaigning for journalists who are subject to censorship, or persecution for their freedom of expression. But I think I was also I also understood in those kind of liberal terms, free speech historically through the banning of particular books. So the obscenity trial of the D H Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *The Well of Loneliness*, these were kind of like, meant to be sort of watershed moments in the development of the idea of freedom of expression in a Western context, right, so that we understand these two things, as freedom of speech, as this like, liberal, democratic, supposedly universal, right. And opposite - curtailing free speech as a form of censorship enacted by authoritarian states.

But even within a kind of so-called liberal democracy, even within this binary of free speech and censorship, there are already built into laws, built into the legal system of a liberal democratic society, even in their own terms, there are limitations built in so you can't say whatever you want about someone if it's not true, and that not have any consequences, right? So we have slander laws, we have libel laws to stop that. We have obscenity laws, we have laws about intellectual property. So you can't you can't print off an article and say you wrote it when you didn't like there's an intellectual property law that stops that.

**SMK** Yeah, no, I was just gonna say that's such a good point. And I don't know if you know, but like with those particular libel, slander, like, is there um, I don't know, is there any kind of caveat within that law that kind of talks about this ever being possibly infringing on free speech?

**SB** So in order, according to this kind of liberal framework, and as we know, like liberal frameworks are a set of like, prescriptive statements. So they say "this is how the world should be", they don't actually reflect the world as it is. So we should always remember that when we're talking about like liberal ideas, these are set of principles, basically, how they're actually enacted in reality, I think is often- I think, I'm sure we'll get to that - like, a slightly different thing. But in that principle, the idea is that if you're going to curtail free speech, there should be a good reason for it. So a state can say, this is a threat to national security. As such, we can curtail your speech, but you have to be able to give a reason, in theory, that the state or the government should be accountable for that decision. So it should also be possible to challenge any kind of attempt to limit freedom of expression. That's the idea. So those are the kind of background ideas of it, I think.

**SMK** Yeah, that's really helpful. Because I think already, it's clear that there are these fractures. And it's also clear that you know, it, it kind of depends right on how you're going to define which speech is, you know, tolerable and intolerable under that banner. So clearly, already, these things are hidden. And I guess just to help us begin to unpick it and kind of find a way through this mess, would you say there's like a central issue or a central assumption that helps us begin to unpick these these two things as opposites?

**SB** I suppose the kind of fundamental assumption that underpins the idea that free speech should be universal is that- is this kind of idea from liberal philosophy. So like John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is this kind of like classic text of sort of enlightenment philosophy. That says, truth drives out falsity. So

like good ideas drive out bad ideas. That the truth, the truth wins the day, that's basically the idea. And so that you shouldn't be scared to have completely free debate, there should be no risk inherent to that. Because the truth will out, essentially, is the idea because humans are supposed to be rational thinking, reasonable creatures, who through rational debate, we'll come to the best ideas, we'll find the truth.

**SMK** This is something that I remember very clearly, when I was at Cambridge, the Cambridge Union is sort of seen as like this bastion of debate in exactly these terms. And it was kind of this encouragement that, you know, you should never be afraid to debate a topic because, you know, if you win or beat the other argument, that will prove that you kind of had the truer, more, you know, more substantial argument. And I think that was exactly on these terms. And it was, and I always kind of couldn't weigh up why I felt so uncomfortable about that necessarily, which I think is what you're going to get to.

**SB** Yeah, and I do think it's a really compelling idea. Like we shouldn't pretend there's not something interesting, compelling about that idea. But I want to believe that I think the world would be better if that were true, I just don't think it is true. And I think we can see some evidence like of how this kind of perfect pure, rational public sphere isn't really the thing that we have. Right? So this idea and John Stuart Mill's look good, good strikes out bad, that the truth strikes out false information. But we've seen the exact opposite happen in media. So false information circulates much more widely than things that are verifiably true. So you actually see that like, the literal opposite is happening in front of us. But I think it'd be a mistake to like, still hold fast to the idea that the truth will always out when we can see if we look empirically at what's happening that doesn't seem to be the case.

**SMK** Yeah, that's such a good point. Because I think even just coming to my head is like, there's this strange, kind of, it's almost like we've conceded to this circumstances where, particularly the way that in the UK we talk about Donald Trump, it's like, oh, you know, "he is lying again, but such is the case" and that is really interesting because that kind of goes, as you say completely against this idea that the truth will always prevail because, you know, here he is potentially winning and term and you know how does that fit in there?

**SB** Yeah, absolutely. And I think part of the thing that's interesting about the way that this functions with someone like Trump is that his big platform is Twitter. And he's worth \$2 billion a year to twitter, just just his Twitter account, is worth that much to them.

**SMK** So they make revenue through advertising and his tweets, right. Okay.

**SB** His tweets produce more engagement than basically anything else on there.

**SMK** Wow, I never thought of it like that.

**SB** So there's not really any incentive to censor him on the part of Twitter, because he is worth a huge amount to their business model. And so, but his lies are incredibly lucrative lies, like a lot of people eat off the back of his lies, a lot of people make their lives off the back of his lies.

**SMK** Wow that's a really powerful way of putting it. Could it be argued that well Twitter is a corporation, so of course, they're going to be profit driven, but that doesn't mean the fundamental, you know, the truth that you know, if Twitter was a, you know, that the BBC, for example, being a much more "neutral", so-called neutral space, like they surely can't be accused of trying to make money off presenting things like this, and they still will talk about Trump's opinions and stuff. Does that mean they're like trying to platform- should they censor- you know, should they censor Trump?

**SB** Yeah, so I think we should, we should make some distinctions for sure, between the state and corporations, we should think about them not as identical to each other, obviously, like massively embroiled in each other. And certainly, I think it'd be ridiculous to say that the BBC shouldn't report on Donald Trump. But I do think that they should do so in a way that actually does in some way embody some of that kind of, like robust debate that we get told is such a great idea. So we get sold the idea of robust debate of like, rigorous challenge, but actually, it's not really what you see when you watch the BBC. And the BBC is not like- the state institutions are still like, massively run by a group of quite a narrow group of very elite people. So like, Laura Kuenssberg, who's the chief political correspondent, her great uncle with the last British Governor General of Nigeria. Like, these are colonial families who remain in power, basically.

**SMK** Yeah, I think also, there's the idea isn't there that that like, um, because the BBC is like inherently a neutral space, they will, because I think there is always this argument, you know, I have a couple of friends who are journalists who sort of talk about, because you always have to have, you know, "two sides" of the debate. But what that actually does is work in a really counterintuitive way where you kind of have, you then are kind of taking lies on on a basis of being as true as truth, if that makes it. It's a very, like, confusing thing. But I guess, you know, when you have an anti-racist speaking, you have to also have a racist. Like, just in terms of like "fairness" and that free speech principle, I guess.

And I think that it's really important for the way that it produces everything as an argument with two sides, saying that everything is assumed to be like, everything's assumed to be basically a debate at the Oxford Union. And like, that's actually not really how ideas work. Like that's a very particular model of thinking. There's a million other ways to think we don't have to think it a set of like, adversarial, news debates. That's not, most of us are capable of something more complex than that. But I think if you're constantly fed that as the only model for political disagreement, then that starts to seem inevitable. But in fact, it wouldn't, you don't necessarily have to have like, someone who thinks that wish there should be open borders versus Nigel Farage. You don't have to have that debate.

**SMK** Right. Right. And I guess, I guess a response to that would be though, by not having that debate, you're then censoring somebody, right? You're falling into that other side of the binary now where you're censoring. And so can you help us to kind of unpack why that's not exactly- by not having Nigel Farage on a debate on TV, that's, that doesn't feel like that's really censoring.

**SB** So I think we I think there's a kind of weird way in which what censorship actually- a more useful definition of censorship, I think might be one that begins from whether or not you can safely express your opinion or express an idea without fear of state, the state persecuting you. So if we begin with the idea- I don't think that's the only thing that censorship is. But I think it'd be good/useful to begin from the idea that censorship might be that you could be imprisoned, harassed or otherwise persecuted for expressing a particular opinion or idea. So that actually is very much a thing that happens that's an alive and well phenomenon in the world in Britain, that you can be criminalized for expressing certain things.

So we might think about drill music as being subject to kind of moral panic. Particular emcees are not allowed to perform particular songs in public, they have their videos taken off of YouTube, they are given suspended sentences on the basis of not then performing a song or not then saying particular words in a song. I mean, this is extraordinary, right? The idea that you might go to prison, because you said a word in a song and put it on YouTube, like that's, to me is a much more kind of a key example of censorship, than, who gets to go on the BBC, on some level, because not being

invited to speak to millions of people is not actually being censored. It's just not being given a particular platform.

**SMK** Right. Right. And that's interesting, because the way you describe that, I think, is the description that we would attribute to like, you know, some quote unquote, "foreign dictatorships" somewhere, where, you know, you can't say certain things in your songs. And if you do you go to prison. And I think people wouldn't be quite surprised to kind of know that about the UK. And I guess, there's also a way in which, like, I guess the way that we even know, like, what is and isn't allowed to be spoken freely about is kind of presented to us in ways that are very obscured and hidden. So those examples that you're talking about, I think they wouldn't ever present to us in a way that makes us question the state's motives, right? It's like the state is always justified. And then that's like a really good thing that they've done in order to protect people, right? Because these words have the power to promote violence or promote, you know, all sorts of kind of crime, quote, unquote. So in that sense, we only ever see it as like something really justified.

**SB** Yeah, and I think that justification it's kind of amazing how easily that justification of doing something like banning musicians from making music has been taken up in, for example, those forums like the BBC. So my friend, Adam, Elliot-Cooper, who I'm sure some listeners will be familiar with his work. He talks about going on to the BBC, I think it was or another news show, and someone saying, but "why, what are the benefits of drill music?", as though people have to justify the art they make to you and show it has a social benefit? Otherwise, they should be criminalized for making it like, you would never ask that of any kind of an artist, who had more social capital, you would never ask that no one, if you if you make, like kind of mediocre painting, but you happen to be quite successful. No one's like, what benefit does this bring it? But if you're an MC from South London and the police deem you to be in a gang, then the question is not, the question becomes what is the benefit to me of the art you make? Which is an extraordinary question.

**SMK** Incomprehensible, because I guess there's like, that kind of works as well against this, like, I think a liberal assumption that like, you know, art is like a really important, inherently good way that people express themselves. But now suddenly, you need to justify the production of your art. And you know, that suddenly makes it I don't know, this very utilitarian thing that previously were told it shouldn't be. So that's Yeah, that's very confusing.

**SB** So it's like who should get to make art, right? For whom is art a form of self expression? and for whom is art a kind of threat to the majority. And I think so even in that you can see that it's not an even playing field. It's not that everyone has the equal access to the tools to express themselves freely.

**SMK** Yeah. And I think there's even parallels there with like, I know that under under terrorism legislation, most of the people who have been convicted in the UK have been people who have written things is to do literature is to do with either possessing a book or you know, PDF, or writing, you know, an article or even a poem. And I think there's something really interesting in both those examples about a link being made between the power of speech and words, and a potential future violence that they could contribute to, that makes it therefore justified to stop the people speaking in the first place. And these aren't people as you say, that are being invited onto the BBC.

**SB** Yeah. And I think that's an interesting, that's an interesting kind of contradiction going on in the way that the British state deals with speech and what it thinks speech is capable of. So it believes that drill MCs, their speech can cause violence, right? So an MC talking about stabbing another person, it's the same as doing it - it's almost totally collapsed, those distinctions. I'm also not

suggesting that there's never any relationship between what happens like in that kind of artistic production and what might happen, like in reality, like, I don't mean there's no connection. But I do think it makes more sense to think of that as a kind of documenting of the violence that people live in. Rather than like, being a direct causation of it.

The same kind of is true of how the British state thinks about radicalization or the the idea that someone might be exposed to extremist ideology. And then from there, there's almost no difference between that and committing a violent act. It produces forms of criminalization on the basis that there is almost no difference between word and deed. But when you suggest that actually that you say, Okay, I take that to be true. So, Boris Johnson, says women, Muslim women who wear the burqa look like letterboxes and then someone in the street shouts that woman. Apparently there's no connection. Apparently that singular man is responsible for his actions and has nothing to do with what the prime minister said. So that already there's a kind of double standard, at the very least, that people are being held to here. In terms of whose speech is dangerous,

**SMK** Definitely, I think there was a story the other day about, a white supremacist had basically gone to legal firm of solicitors who are defending immigrants. And and I think it then came out that, you know, met police or counter-terror police had been warning the home office and Priti Patel to kind of ease up on the anti refugee and anti lawyers, whatever she calling them, like activists-lawyers, because it could lead to violence. And I thought that was really interesting, because that wasn't really picked up on but I don't know, I kind of also felt there was something in there about, like this connection between her speech as somebody who's actually literally the Home Secretary of the UK, like state-sanctioned, right, as compared to the speech of somebody else. And I think, yeah, I just found that really hard to kind of weigh up and see how they can deploy those discourses, but then not really apply them anywhere else.

**SB** Yeah, absolutely. And that was a great example of how direct that line was. Right. So how quickly that could be taken up within a kind of context that's already sort of like this kind of like febrile volatile public sphere at the moment. So I think Britain has a kind of edge on it at the moment, I think if you walk around, you can feel the tension is really high. Like I feel like very ordinary interaction seem like they could pop off. And part of that is there's a real incendiary use of language in the political sphere, that I think does actually have an effect. And I don't think that means that everyone should be more polite. But I do think it should be that we should acknowledge that the direction of travel is that some of the things that are said in public by political elites set a standard for what is acceptable, and that they justify and also deputize other people, people in the public to behave in particular ways.

**SMK** Yeah. And I think that point you making now is one of maybe the key things, right, that like power is an important part of this conversation. But you know, it's not to kind of just apply these kind of categories as arbitrary and always true, you know, no matter where you stand in society, I suppose like how can we think about power in the sense of- because one of the other kind of parallel conversations to this free speech and censorship or linked to this is around, I suppose, is no-platforming. And then that's kind of, I guess, mutated into like, cancel-culture as well. And these two things being linked that you're kind of preventing people from speaking or you're not allowing them to speak anymore? How and is that linked to power in a way as well?

**SB** Yeah. So we've got this kind of massive public conversation about what's called cancel culture, and about what's called like the, what seems to be being described as a kind of tyranny of wokeness. Right. And this is really just a reheating of the same conversation that was happening 10 years ago about political correctness, and no platforming. So we're just at a horrible loop. And then 10 years

from now, they will have come up with two new words. And we'll have to kind of have the conversation again, with whatever words have replaced wokeness and canceling. So I look forward to that. But it's worth saying that only because I think sometimes these things get presented as though they're brand new. And actually, we've been here before.

And so, the idea that people are being cancelled or no-platformed, I think is kind of interesting, partly because in order for those things to happen, you have to have a platform to be begin with, you have to have access to an audience. So in order for someone to say you don't get that audience anymore, you have to already have had access to an audience. So random guy at the bus stop can't be canceled, whatever is going on his head, you know, if you don't have a kind of platform, you can't have it taken away from you. So when a far right speaker is invited to speak on a University and students protest about that, and say that they don't think this speaker should be given a platform, that is because that person already has an audience. They're not being deprived of their right to freedom of expression, what they're being deprived of, is the particular audience that they were expecting that day. So I think it's important to make a distinction there between whether or not someone is going to be persecuted for the things that they say, or whether or not someone is being held to account for the things that they've said in the past.

**SMK** That's a really interesting point, because I think, you know, that example, you're given as well about university campuses, I think, often what happens if you kind of oppose a speaker coming, is this idea that but wouldn't it be better if you just let them come and you debate and you showed, you know, you showed Nigel Farage, how wrong he was by just you know, displaying your side of the, you know, the "pros and cons" basically. Right. So you display the other side of the debate. And I guess that links back to what you were saying, right, the beginning, that, you know, this, this kind of suggests that all opinions are on an equal footing. And I think what you just said that about, like, there, there are some, I guess opinions isn't really about word, but there are some narratives that will literally result in persecution and death, and people's lives being less livable, and there are some narratives that are counter to that and they don't carry the same way at all, or they try to kind of counter that. And so I think there's all there's also something there about just this, this kind of object objectivity, I guess, like this mutual space of ideas that that, you know, John Stuart Mill's was speaking about comes back.

**SB** And I think also the kind of arguments around the universities assume that there are only two players involved. So there's like the rowdy rabble-rousing students trying to shut things down, because they're snowflakes and can't handle being challenged. And there's the kind of like, honorable, conservative thinker who's being silent. In fact, I think these characterizations are ridiculous. But there's also a set of other actors. So universities management has a set of kind of roles to play there. The university's investments are often kind of a relevant factor. So when a speaker from the IDF (Israeli Defence Force), is coming to speak at university, do a bit of digging, and you'll probably find out that there are some investments that the university has in the Israeli military, or there's some shared intelligence going on there, or there's a recruitment sort of relationship there. So it's not, there's never a pure debate, I think that's really important. So there's never this kind of pure, as you say, neutral sphere in which debate can happen. There's always a set of material and political interests. Like before kind of accepting the liberal premise as the kind of neutral public sphere, we'd be better off saying, "Let's not think about what the ideas are yet. Let's think about who is a player who's an actor in this situation. What do they have a stake? Who's making money from this? Who's gaining something from there? Like who's involved? And what do they get from the situation?"

**SMK** Yeah. And I think that question leads perfectly into kind of the question, I guess, I want to open up now, which usually comes at this point in the podcast, which is, you know, it's very clear at this stage that free speech and censorship are very much constructed, and they obscure kind of important power dynamics in our lives. And so the question that you've touched on, I guess, I'll kind of throw it back to you. But in the sense of, why does this binary exist, then like, clearly it's hiding something but who does it benefit? And what does it justify and why and why is important for those things to be justified? You can approach it, I guess however you want or whatever example you might want to bring in?

**SB** I guess it's the way that the state uses limitations on freedom of speech is to maintain and shore up its own power, right. So we see that an authoritarian regime will silence voices and narratives, and ideas that challenge its legitimacy, but less obviously authoritarian regimes will do this too. Right. So we can see that from the kind of view of the state which is trying to always maintain its power, silencing dissent, is an important part of managing that power is also an important part of maintaining a kind of ideological dominance. So determining what ideas are acceptable ideas and what ideas fall outside of the realms of reasonable debate. So what you can and can't expect to hear without consequence.

But I think this current idea that there's a kind of rash of censorship in society, and that what's been referred to as cancel culture, right? So the idea that you can't say- that if you have a column in which you write a set of transphobic ideas every two weeks, in the Guardian, and then people object to that and respond publicly to you doing that - you know, there's this idea that this person has been cancelled, but this is a kind of what's being what's being advocated for there is not freedom of speech but freedom from consequence. People want absolute speech with no consequences. So this, I think that the free speech censorship kind of binary is hiding the disintegration of a sort of liberal elite who have come- who find themselves kind of irrelevant and challenged more and more. And so rather than being like, "oh, people don't like my ideas, what does that mean?" They're like, "I'm being cancelled. This is censorship". Whereas, actually having your Guardian column taken away is not censorship.

**SMK** Yeah, that's really interesting. And it reminds me of, do you remember, I think it was maybe 2016/2017, when Sarah Champion, wrote that article in The Sun that was like, you know, "Pakistani men are raping white girls". And it was like this expose a on grooming gangs. And one of the big discourses around at that time was that because of fear of being called racist, aka being canceled for being a racist, no one wanted to, you know, talk about the fact that like, there are South Asian men who are abusing these children. I think, what that kind of, I guess, by blaming this idea of like, "we would have been canceled if we said that", was so counterintuitive, because it was like, well, hang on, you're still saying it, so you haven't been cancelled clearly. But secondly, I think what you've just raised about the question of accountability became so important, then because it was like, actually, you're using this to justify a narrative, that means that there is no accountability had around kind of sexual violence or child sexual abuse. And, you know, there is no notion that maybe state institutions or criminal justice system that doesn't believe survivors, or, you know, austerity, that's cut services for young people and women and children, or any of those factors that make them vulnerable, needs to be held to account. And so I think that's a really helpful way that you've kind of given to us there to think about this in terms of people just wanting to speak a) without consequences, but also perhaps like deflecting consequences in other places and like displacing them.

**SB** Yeah, that's a really great example, I think, particularly because all anyone was talking about with race. And so the idea that couldn't be spoken about was obviously absurd. But also that you're right,



that was used to deflect from the massive failure of state institutions to protect young women, precisely because they viewed these young women as beyond the state's interest. Actually, they'd really made already made the decision, dozens of different state authorities that said, we don't really care, when knew perfectly well what would happen, we don't really care, and then to have that deflected and brought into this kind of awful culture wars type narrative does such a disservice both to those survivors, but also to the rest of us that have to exist in these conversations. We end up having to have this argument on their terms. Right. So we have arguments about like, "well, no one talks about race when they talk about Jimmy Savile." That's a perfectly good point. But I don't think it does justice to the, to the survivors in either if those situations

**SMK** Exactly! And I think that's such a good way of putting it, about kind of having to have the debate on other people's terms, or particularly on the terms of the state, because just thinking about what's going on in France at the moment in terms of kind of the way that perpetrators of violence are seen to be kind of as a result of not like not really understanding free speech well enough and being you know, it's like, "Muslims are hurt by free speech. But this is a fundamental principle of France. And if they're going to be funded in reaction to that, then they you know, are inherently Others." And I think there's just a lot that's conflated within that. And speaking to what you're saying, it feels like we never get to talk to talk about the actual the kind of important things within that in terms of structural racism in terms of kind of causes of violence, because instead we have to have it in terms of what the state are kind of telling us to have it on, which is, you know, "Muslims need to be able to deal with free speech" and then you get kind of bound up in this really long winded and kind of protracted pointless conversation. I seem to feel.

**SB** I've really felt that and even when I was thinking about this podcast, I kept- found myself drawn back into that kind of liberal debate as though the end game is always to say, should you or should you not be able to publish the cartoon? As though this is the fundamental question. And I think that the way it is constantly being pulled back to that, "should you be able to say offensive things?", in fact, this is a kind of invented problem, right? So we don't have to decide that. I think we shouldn't feel that we have to have an answer to that question. Because there are a lot more pressing questions than answering in a way you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't when you answer that question. It's bad for everyone when he wants the question in a way. and I think that refusing the terms of the argument might be a more important intervention to make.

**SMK** That's really helpful, because I think it often is also presented as like, we have to clear this up before we can- we can't talk about structural racism, we can't talk about, you know, colonialism, Islamophobia, or any of that until we've cleared this up, like, is it causing an issue or not? And it's kind of like, yeah, that doesn't feel helpful. And I guess so like, a question I usually ask. And I feel like you've already sort of answered in what you're saying, but perhaps you can give us some further advice is just, you know, this isn't a helpful way to think about things- these terms. So I guess you've already given us some other ways we can think about this, whether that's accountability, whether that's like thinking about the state trying to shore up on its power. But if I can ask you more directly, what for you is perhaps like a better framework that we can use to think about the things that are referred to when we're thinking about free speech and censorship?

**SB** Yeah, absolutely. So I think, yeah, as I said, I think we should begin with what's actually happening. So rather than start with the abstract, and then try and apply it to the concrete, it might be sometimes- I think it's more useful to start with the kind of concrete and ask the question of like, who profits from expression? So whether or not they profit monetarily or in some other way? What? Who profits? So often, if we're talking about speech online, it's that these tech companies profit. First thing to remember, I think is also to ask that question, because I think otherwise, we assume

that the things we're saying, again, these kind of pure forms of expression, but actually, if every time you tweet a message of solidarity, one of the things that you're also doing is making money for Silicon Valley, that seems worth thinking about.

**SMK** God, that's really distressing.

**SB** It's obviously a horrible idea, but it remains one that I think we have to kind of reckon with right. So if you ask the question, how much money has the digital mediation of the BLM movement made for Twitter? That's a really awful question. But I think it's a relevant one.

**SMK** Yeah, I think that also speaks to something that's come up in a few episodes around like the co-option of, you know, anti-racist politics or other other politics. And I think that there's been this feeling that lots of people have expressed in different ways that, you know, capitalism manages to kind of regurgitate anti racist politics in a way that really suits it. And I think this is one that I hadn't really thought about at all, actually. And this is really distressing, I guess, because the online platform seems to be the space where lots of us learn and share kind of thoughts. But to know that at the same time, it's kind of, you know, turning into this algorithm of like profit-making for somebody as you say, you know, sitting miles away, and definitely not invested in kind of who lives or dies, as basis of these politics. That's very distressing.

**SB** It is a terrible idea. But I feel like it's one that we often- when we think of whether or not social media is good or bad for us, like, but actually thinking about just like, what, what, what it does, who does that make money for? And then also thinking about what forms of state censorship are actually happening. So what is the state currently doing? And I think thinking about that, globally is also useful. So thinking about what the state in here is doing in relation to something like the Indian communication blockade of Kashmir, right? So cut off phone, internet, like all forms of contact is an extraordinary, an incredibly violent form of censorship that allowed for military occupation that allowed for the revocation of Kashmir's particular legal status that really like was a very visible to the rest of the world but also very hidden in terms of the everyday reality of it act of as a lot massive land grab for that form of like settler colonial expansion of the Indian state relied on censorship but relied on communications blockade. So that seems important to me to say like, if we're going to talk about censorship, we should be talking about that too.

**SMK** Right. No one talks about like the cancelling of an entire people and you know landmass,

**SB** Totally. So who profits, what forms of state censorship are actually happening? And then who has the power to spread their ideas without personal risk or consequence? So those are the questions that I would always want to ask of a situation.

**SMK** Mmm, that's really really helpful. I think that's kind of, it helps because it's a different way of approaching these conversations as well – particularly, and I know that a lot of people listening are University students, and I think, there's often like – you're always already on the back foot, if you're trying to make the case that maybe these things that are presented as free speech are not helpful, I think that that set of tools there is really em useful.

**SB** I guess just alongside the “who profits” in terms of social media, like, legacy media or traditional media or whatever we're calling it – the newspapers basically – actually thinking about, how they work and how limited that part of the public sphere actually is and what can actually be said there and how much rubbish they turn out.

**SMK** and also I think that question you asked earlier about accountability – becomes really interesting. I went to this event recently which I thought was awful – it was with many of the senior

editors of like The Times, The Express and all these papers and tabloids and the idea was like “you can ask them any question you want to”, and I was really thinking like what question can you possibly ask? because this isn’t a process of accountability is it, there’s no way – and I got thinking about what a process of accountability would even look like, because the only question I could really think of was like “how does it feel to have contributed to genocidal conditions?” but that’s just not a question that you’re even allowed to ask right, that’s not ok. So that just got me thinking about yeah what are these newspapers, how do they work, why do they work and as you say – and the thing I found myself confronting was, well, who are the shareholders? Who’s making money? Who owns them? And as secondary to that, well that’s who they’re accountable to. So why would I think me saying “you’re being mean and you’re leading to people dying” why would they care about that?

**SB** yeah absolutely! And I think we have sometimes been a bit confused – I say we, I’m going to assume if you’re listening to the podcast you’re part of the we that I’m talking about – sometimes forget what is and isn’t a democratic institutions. Like, corporations are not democratic institutions, they are accountable to their shareholders, not to us, so we need to think about what kind of power we give them. Now the state is technically supposed to be accountable to us, so we should think about what we demand from the state. Cos I think if we demand for the state to protect us from offensive speech, what we’ve done is consolidated power in the states hands

**SMK** ok so what sort of alternative routes are more productive then?

**SB** I wonder if we are going to petition the state for things, which I think we should, it might be things like a more regulated corporate environment, so if – I think that the possibility of a kind of more democratic public sphere of public speech would be much more likely if Google payed its taxes if the Murdoch monopoly was broken, if publications that did publish things they could be easily verified as false information and didn’t just have to print a retraction but they actually had to pay some consequences for that. I think one of the problems is that often when we talk about offensive speech or racist speech or misogynistic or homophobic speech they lead us down the kind of avenue of hate crimes legislation, and it think that over and over we see that is much more likely to be used against – like all parts of the criminal justice system – is much more likely to be used against vulnerable working class people – albeit ones with offensive ideas – rather than to be used against any of these layers that actually control the public sphere

**SMK** right, the state itself right, like – who watches the watchmen?

**SB** exactly, and like would you trust the British government to determine what is or isn’t racist

**SMK** absolutely not, but does that go back to what you said – and maybe I just genuinely misunderstood this – like if we’re talking about regulating corporate media and stuff, I mean whose doing the regulating?

**SB** I think that’s why there’s a difference between regulating how things – where things can be said and who can make money from them versus regulating the thing itself? So saying the entire media cant be owned by Rupert Murdoch, because that’s monopoly – and so there needs to be some way in which the state stops monopolies from being formed because that’s a danger to everyone right? Because it concentrates power in completely unaccountable hands, so stopping the monopoly of corporate media I think is different from saying, if someone shouts a racist epithet at me on the street I think they should be put in prison – I think those are asking two different things from the state.

**SMK** yeah and I think that's really helpful because a lot of the conversations that the guests on this podcast – I guess everyone's invested in trying to imagine an alternative future and a lot of that has been around decriminalising and alternatives to punitive systems and I think what you're talking about is kind of moving away from "bad people say bad things and need bad consequences, and good people say good things and deserve power" – to me I feel this has given me a set of questions also to add to the pile of questions to add when thinking of kind of how to build really strong resistance movements. Because its not just these arbitrary ideas that we are up against, we are up against very concrete structures and profit-makers.

**SB** totally! And I think saying that the consequences shouldn't be an increase in criminalisation, doesn't mean that were saying people shouldn't pay consequences. I really think that we should continue to say that these kind of media elites who have become almost self-appointed arbiters of what can and cant be said, they should go! The consequences of having boring, kind of tedious, self-involved, liberal ideas that don't advance justice or even thought, should bet that you lose your job as a commentator, I think that's quite a reasonable consequence. Should you be put in prison? No, right like I think those are different things?

**SMK** yeah yeah. That feels really helpful I mean I can only imagine the kind of exciting spaces that would open up for different types of conversations and different sets of questions because different people would get to ask them right?

**SB** totally! I think sometimes we get backed into a corner where we sound like we're the ones advocating for censorship, and actually I think we need to be really clear that the fight for justice is the fight against state censorship but its also the fight for like, better ideas.

**SMK** I agree and I think that's a really wonderful place to end it, we're here for the fight for better ideas and I hope that's what this podcast is all about so thank you for sharing your ideas around breaking down this binary because you've genuinely provided a really holistic set of questions and tools for people so I do hope we can all sort of move away from this with a bit more scepticism when it comes to these questions, thank you!

**SB** thanks a lot!

**SMK** Thank you for listening to this episode of Breaking Binaries. I hope you, like me, can take something from our guest this week. Look out for episodes fortnightly and if you enjoy, please share. The music you've been hearing is made by an old high school friend, that came through, so shoutout to Violence Jack at [@getviolencejack](https://www.getviolencejack.com) online. Thanks to all my guests for chatting to me every week and helping us to think a little more critically, and I hope, humbly, about our world.

I do believe that part of the way we transform the world is by transforming the ways we think about it. Thank you for listening. I've been your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, bye!