Thank you to Stand Up To Racism for having me here today and for organising this event, along with a whole series of events that are happening this week.

By way of introduction, my name is Isobel, I am Head of Policy at Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), which is a community funded organisation that works to empower British Muslims to become actively engaged within politics and media, and to tackle Islamophobia.

It is a real honour to be asked to speak at a Holocaust Memorial Day event and I feel there is a lot of weight on my shoulders. And we should all feel that weight –

* The weight of more than 6million Jewish, Roma, homosexual and disabled men, women and children during WWII
* Between 1 and 3million killed in Cambodia
* 100,000 lives lost in Bosnia
* Almost one million dead in Rwanda
* Meanwhile, Darfur has seen the death of an unknown number of people – with estimates from back in 2013 suggesting excesses of 300,000.
* More recently, ethnic cleansing in Rohingya has seen over 10,000 dead according to Doctors Without Boarders

This is the weight of acts of violence of such grotesque nature and scale that it makes me queasy even to think about.

It makes me think of a Persian poem by Sa’adi that is inspired by a Hadith in Islam and is actually inscribed upon the walls of the United Nations building in New York.

It’s called Bini Adam:

بنى‌آدم اعضای یک پیکرند
که در آفرینش ز یک گوهرند

چو عضوى به درد آورَد روزگار
دگر عضوها را نمانَد قرار

تو کز محنت دیگران بی‌غمی
نشاید که نامت نهند آدمی

In a nutshell, it states that humanity are all parts of the same body. And like a body, if one part is in pain, the rest of the body feels it. Therefore, any person that does not feel the pain and suffering of another, has no right to be called human.

Well, I hope that the fact we are all here tonight is evidence that we all feel it.

But feeling it is not enough.

We need to take action.

After WWII, several international bodies such as the EU emerged to ensure that the atrocities of the Holocaust could never ever happen again. But, again, it is not enough to ensure that the Holocaust never happens again – we have to stop the conditions that allowed those atrocities to happen in the first place. And I’m sorry to say, we may already be close to those conditions again.

In September last year, a woman in a hijab was taking her children to school in Leicester. A man ran her over with his car, then backed up and ran over her again, before hitting a 12-year-old girl who was also wearing a hijab.

This is just one of 250 reports that MEND’s Islamophobia Response Unit has received since its inception in April – and one of the few that have gone to court and we can now talk about.

Once again, events are making me queasy.

We currently live in an atmosphere of hatred and mistrust that has escalated over recent years and which has been fuelled by ‘fake news’ and biased, distorted and manipulative media reporting.

In a climate lacking in respect, stigmatised communities become vulnerable to hatred – hatred that in many cases has escalated to violence and even to deaths, as has been demonstrated by last year’s attack in Finsbury Park.

I am using the example of Islamophobia because this is my area of expertise, but Muslims are not the only community that is vulnerable – anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and all forms of hatred are usually directed at the vulnerable in society; those who are least able to defend themselves.

 “[Their] youth lies in wait for hours on end, spying on the unsuspicious German girl he plans to seduce… He wants to contaminate her blood and remove her from the bosom of her own people. [They hate] the white race and [want] to lower its cultural level so that [they] might dominate.”

The above quote is demonstrative of a rhetoric that is rampant amongst far-right propagandists; the idea that refugees and minority groups are attempting to slowly conquer Europe. However, this is not a quote about Muslims nor refugees. It is, in fact, a quote about Jews, taken from *Mein Kampf*, by Adolf Hitler. It originally read “The Jewish youth”.

In 1947, an anti-racist documentary entitled “Don’t Be a Sucker” made the point that “[t]he Nazis knew that they were not strong enough to conquer a unified country. So they split Germany into small groups. They used prejudice as a practical weapon to cripple the nation. We human beings are not born with prejudices. Always, they are made for us. Made by someone who wants something.”

This divisive rhetoric is used by those who want power. Certainly, instigating fear and hatred directed at scapegoated and vulnerable communities is a tried and tested method for galvanising political support.

So, we cannot fall for it – and we should point this out wherever we see scapegoating for the sake of political or economic power.

I want to address just one arena where prejudice and hatred are allowed to flourish and replicate, and that is within the media.

Following the Leveson Inquiry, newspapers lost their ability to pursue sensationalist stories through unethical practices, including phone hacking, following families of subjects and general hounding of celebrities.

In the aftermath, a section of the press turned their attention to minorities, refugees and Muslims – because, let’s face it; fear sells.

Indeed, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recently highlighted discriminatory reporting in both the **Daily Mail and the Sun**, claiming that they “*are responsible for most of the offensive, discriminatory and provocative terminology*”. Concluding that “*hate speech in some traditional media continues to be a serious problem*”,[[1]](#footnote-1) the report emphasised articles such as the Sun’s *“Rescue boats? I’d use gunships to stop migrants*”, in which the columnist, Katie Hopkins, likened migrants to cockroaches.

Opinion and debate is an important facet of a strong democracy and should be encouraged. The media therefore, plays a valuable role in providing a platform for strong democratic debate. However, there must be a distinction between fact and opinion.

Comment pieces within print and online media news outlets are frequently replete with heavily distorted or invented ‘facts’ or opinions that are presented as fact. As such, common sense would dictate that content that presents itself as objectively authoritative should be held to the same requirements of accuracy as any other news item.

However, there is a complete vacuum in protection against opinions masquerading as news, pieces titled as ‘opinion’ are currently exempt from many of the clauses contained in the current regulator, IPSO’s, editors’ code of practice. This has led to authors such as Trevor Kavanagh being permitted to discuss the “Muslim Problem” and no remedy for the Fatima Manji case after she was berated by Kelvin MacKenzie for presenting on Channel 4 News in a hijab following the Paris attacks.

This is just one area where IPSO falls short and is ultimately pointless.

* IPSO will only address discrimination complaints brought by the individual affected by a published story. In practice, this means that there is no protection against whole groups – such as Muslims or refugees. Meanwhile, even in respect to accuracy, the individual most-closely affected must bring the complaint. This means that a person cannot defend themselves against inaccurate reporting if they are in a coma, for example.
* The corrections demanded by IPSO for breaches in the editor’s code of practice are typically severely delayed and far less prominent than the original inaccuracy. A case in point is that IPSO has never ordered a front-page correction for a front-page breach. We all remember the Sun’s “1 in 5 Brit Muslims support Jihadis” headline? It was proven to be entirely untrue and after months of campaigning by MEND and others, the Sun printed a tiny correction buried on page 2 under the headline “IPSO Ruling Upheld” – who is likely to read that?
* Then we have inaction. We all must have seen the Times’ Muslim foster care story? It, again, was proven to be completely wrong and yet, IPSO refused to investigate on the grounds that it could negatively impact the child in question – this is after the court case, the national debate and all the stories had already been published. Taking no action to verify the information published is an abdication of IPSO’s responsibility.
* In the Fatima Manji case, IPSO came under severe criticism when board member Trevor Kavanagh publicly defended MacKenzie and stated that Manji had [“made a fool of herself.”](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2035066/gary-lineker-forgets-that-were-not-racist-we-just-dont-like-being-conned/) A cross-party group of MPs and peers subsequently wrote to IPSO, expressing concern that it was supposed to be judging a complaint whilst a board member was bullying the victim.

There is a solution, and we already have everything needed in place. Folllowing the Leveson Inquiry, Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 was agreed in a cross-party agreement on 18th March 2013 as the crucial piece of the legislation which underpins the Royal Charter and Leveson system. Section 40 has currently been passed by Parliament and is awaiting enactment by the Government.

After the approval of any piece of new legislation, the Government sometimes has discretion over when it comes into force, to allow any required bodies or committees to be formed where necessary. This discretion is not intended to allow the Government to reverse its decision or undermine the law already passed by Parliament. However, this is how that discretion has been used in relation to Section 40.

As such, by blocking implementation the Leveson system through delaying the triggering of section 40, the Government is permitting the media industry to avoid regulation, and is thus facilitating the perpetuation of distorted and misrepresentative reporting with virtual impunity.

The Nazi used the guise of free speech.

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—*
*Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—*
*Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

It’s time to speak out and it’s time to act.

-Martin Niemoller

If you want to get involved in holding our media to account, go on to MEND’s website where we have media toolkits, and download our app where you can receive action alerts with clear instructions on what to do when stories such as the Times foster care case come out.

Also, subscribe to the HackedOff Campaign and ByLine Media who are leading the way in campaigning for a free and accountable press.

Thank you very much for listening and I hope we can all use Holocaust Memorial Day as an inspiration.

Never Again.

But for Never Again, we have to act.

1. “ECRI Report On The United Kingdom”, *Council of Europe,* October 4, 2016, accessed 20.12.2017, <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/united_kingdom/gbr-cbc-v-2016-038-eng.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)