

Index on Censorship's submission to the 'Independent' Review December 2019.

Part 1.1 - featuring artists who have been silenced or marginalised, or have self-censored because of Prevent

The racialisation of risk

Homegrown directed by Nadia Latif and written by Omar El Khairy, was commissioned by the National Youth Theatre (NYT) to explore the motivation behind radicalisation of young Muslims in the wake of the three London school girls joining ISIL. Homegrown aimed to throw light on “the socio-political landscape of radicalisation, homegrown extremism, and even the simple conversation about Islam”. The play was [cancelled two weeks before it was due to open](#) which, Latif commented, had “massive emotional, political and social implications. It adds to this atmosphere of fear that we’re all living in.” As Latif points out, the political backdrop to the play, with Prevent Duty and Channel programmes in operation, created the environment “in which certain forms of questioning, let alone subversion, of the given narrative pertaining to radicalisation or extremism can be closed down.” In correspondence to Arts Council England who fund the theatre, made public after a Freedom of Information request, the director of NYT, citing one reason he decided to pull the play, said Latif and El-Kahiry “failed to meet repeated requests for a complete chronological script to justify their *extremist agenda* [my italics]”. *Index on Censorship* was given access to the email correspondence when writing a case study on the cancellation and saw no evidence of this

Index on Censorship worked with Latif and El-Khairy to launch of the self-published script of Homegrown. The title of the event ‘The Inconvenient Muslim’ described their position as artists attempting to convey some of the uncomfortable reality that leads to young people being radicalised. In an [article](#) published at the time, Latif and El-Khairy portray the UK arts establishment as being more comfortable with Muslim artists who help the British public “to tell the Good Muslim from the Bad”. They claim that while comic Stewart Lee and director of Four Lions Chris Morris are granted the freedom to express the “anger and disdain that characterises their work, the same can rarely be said for progressive non-white artists.” Theatre critic Lyn Gardner who came to the launch and reviewed the script, [wrote](#) that cancelling this play silenced the two groups who are rarely authentically and freely represented in theatre, namely Muslims and young people. “in sensitive and difficult times we need complex and challenging plays such as Homegrown.” The implications of this act of censorship are far-reaching: “If our theatre culture runs scared and bows to censorship, it is failing artists and audiences and in danger of making itself a complete irrelevance.”

Direct funding of the arts

Although not mandated by Prevent Duty to report on signs of radicalisation, those working in the arts have been woven into the programme of surveillance via Home Office funding for art projects. Grantees of The Building Stronger Britain Together programme (and formerly directly from the Prevent programme), have to monitor their participants for evidence that their work reduces the risk of radicalisation. This agenda-driven, strings-attached funding constrains freedom of expression and directly links the creative space to state surveillance.

Poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan withdrew from the Bradford Literature Festival (BLF) when she discovered that it had accepted funding from the Home Office programme 'Building a Stronger Britain Together' BSBT fund. The following [is an extract from her statement](#) explaining her withdrawal: "The government's Counter Extremism strategy relies on the premise that Muslims are predisposed to violence and therefore require monitoring and surveillance, rather than that the material and systemic conditions of economic, racial and Islamophobic violence need addressing as causes of individual perpetration of violence. If BLF were connected to BSBT then there was a suggestion that access to literature/something like a literature festival can 'reduce the risk of radicalisation', which in turn reinforces the logic that the onus for ending disenfranchisement and political violence lies with individuals, not the state or institutions that create the conditions and context of that violence (austerity, foreign policy, structural racism, surveillance)"

Lugman Ali, founder director of Khayal Theatre Company, in a statement for the review, described Prevent funding in the early years as a largely positive experience. They were free to challenge the casting of Muslims as security risks that they felt underpinned Prevent, and facilitate open and robust debate programmes. Their work was cited by the EU as a best practice case study and endorsed by government and policing bodies. However, with the reformulation of Prevent under the Conservative led coalition government of 2010, it became apparent that to criticise and challenge the assumptions and approaches of Prevent was taken as "tantamount to extremism". A Prevent official had intimated to Ali that ongoing government support would be contingent on them "accept[ing] government oversight and censorship of our productions." But they refused to "serve as cultural mercenaries" under this new "draconian, divisive and punitive". Ali stated that a substantial amount of Muslim artistic activity continues to be funnelled into Prevent, directly or indirectly, by widespread exclusion from other sources of more appropriate public funding.

An example of how this works: some councils are making it a condition of granting funds to arts programmes that artists attend Prevent Duty training and agree to the mandatory requirements to report signs of radicalisation. A community activist explains: "Artists are running workshops for young people, mostly young Muslims. Once the project comes to an end, the participants are asked to fill in questionnaires about their political and religious beliefs. It was explicit that the information was going to the Home Office. The art workshop is used to gather young Muslims and then the questionnaire is used to gather data on them."

Shutting down debate

When a theatre group that wishes to remain anonymous opened up space to discussion of Prevent-related issues that directly affected the young people they were working with, they were met with "veiled threats" of losing funding, as their work risked getting "too political". The theatre group has a long tradition of supporting under-represented voices through the arts and is funded to develop an engagement with democracy through free speech and debate of issues that impact on local communities. Ironically, however, they are effectively being warned off encouraging the development of what the government describes as British values for discussing the issues that are of most concern to them.

Arts education impacted – tertiary education

The Prevent Duty within tertiary arts education hinders the development of enquiring, boundary pushing and challenging voices in the arts, threatening the scope of what enters into public discourse in the future. “Effects” by James Oberhelm is an art installation addressing the geopolitics of the Middle East region and military casualties during wartime, proposed for the Glasgow School of Art Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Interim Show. Militant Islamic jihadist video material was included as one amongst many elements within the piece. The work was censored from exhibition by the senior management team at Glasgow School of Art in 2017. This was the first work to have been censored in the history of the course. A freedom of information request filed by Scottish Pen revealed that Prevent was cited in the censorship of Oberhelm’s artwork. Subsequently the school issued several directives, framed under the rubric of ‘ethical good practice’, within the official MFA Programme Handbook, which effectively sanctioned censorship of certain content, even though legal. The 2017 intake of MFA students were told by the programme leader that they would be prohibited from working with controversial material while on the programme, citing work considered insensitive, ethically irresponsible, offensive, inappropriate, or disreputable. In the petition calling for removal of the censorship clauses from the handbook, the students made it clear that a culture of content-policing, and coercive language around “acceptable” art production was unacceptable, and encouraged self-censorship. The Programme Handbook has since been revised to exclude these passages.

Arts education impacted – secondary schools

A secondary school art teacher described how Prevent has created an environment in school art departments where quashing debate around issues that are very relevant to young people is being normalised. “There are many, many incidents relating to any political art being covered or taken down from Art ‘A’ Level or GCSE student’s exhibitions, in an ad hoc and knee jerk way. There is censorship of anything that could be seen to be controversial...We are being told to police our students and report at the soonest opportunity something we might feel uncomfortable with, and yet we can’t be trusted to take a student through a GCSE and teach them how to use their voice in a meaningful way. Part of education is for students to learn how to express themselves, how to share their opinions. Every school has a debating society which debates things which aren’t so relevant to students – abortion, euthanasia – obviously important issues, but probably ones that students won’t have direct experience of. But when a student attempts to address an issue they may have experienced personally, such as being pulled into a certain kind of gang or violence, or making work in response to arriving in this country as a refugee, there is a danger that they might be shut down.”

On the flip side, a community activist told me that schools where there are large Muslim populations, students participating in various art classes, especially dance and music, is taken as evidence of Prevent working successfully, as examples of Muslim young people embracing British artistic practises. “Art is being used to identify who is a good and who is a bad Muslim.”

Part 1.2 – featuring artists have produced work that gives a platform to those who have been silenced or marginalised or have self-censored, because of Prevent.

Trojan Horse - A Lung Theatre production by Helen Monks and Matt Whitehead

Winner of the Amnesty Freedom of Expression Award at the Edinburgh Festival 2018, Trojan Horse challenges the official narrative over the 2014 so-called '[Trojan Horse Affair](#)', the leaking to the media of documents alleging a conspiracy to Islamise Birmingham schools. The affair was used by the government to justify the need for greater surveillance in schools and the teaching of British values in the classroom [which evolved into the Prevent Duty](#). The play is based on the testimonies of teachers and governors who were denied a full hearing in court, because the [case against them collapsed when it was revealed that the prosecution had withheld critical evidence during the trial](#). The play aims to redress injustice perpetrated at the highest level of government, and through building a groundswell of public opinion, to call for an independent inquiry into this miscarriage of justice.

The 2019 autumn tour around England, [included returning to Birmingham](#), where efforts were made to stop the play from being performed by the administration who took over the schools at the centre of the affair in 2015. The CEO of the venue that took the play was accused of having an extremist agenda for supporting the play. The play was translated into Urdu, available on headsets to each performance, and a dedicated Engagement Manager worked with people most affected by Prevent legislation to see the play. This involved working to overcome suspicion and distrust amongst the community, many coming to the theatre for the first time. It sold out for the four-night run in Birmingham, and the venue director believed they could have sold out at least another six nights.

Rehana Zaman - Tell Me a Story of All These Things

"The main narrative of my film Tell Me a Story of All These Things is an Asian woman talking about her own experiences in quite a candid way. That is thrown into relief by material from a Prevent e-learning training programme that is rolled out in higher education institutions. And then there is abstract imagery which is about the experience of having to constantly negotiate your own perspectives and pressures within your own community, and also how you are having to counter this 'ambient governmentality' – this atmosphere of scrutiny and paranoia that's being put towards you. I am placing these images in relation to one another and taking them out of context and making that material that people don't really talk about or isn't widely available, within the public sphere.

"The idea was to deconstruct the imagery that's used around Prevent, and around safeguarding and who needs to be protected and from who. This is rolled out in a series of very harmful stereotypes and clichés and are incredibly undermining and damaging to Muslim communities. It is deeply racialized and upsetting and it is hard to watch, but it becomes farcical. You have a cartoon image of a young vulnerable girl who is Asian – her saviour and guardian is a white male teacher. The people who are under suspicion within this cartoon training programme are a young Bangladeshi boy, a black youth and a head-scarfed Muslim woman. These are the three figures who are being scrutinised as potential threats. You feel there is this tacked on element of far right extremism which is thrown in as well but it is so crass in how those relationships are made and drawn out. They outsource this to design agencies to help create the programme and there is this very crude rendering of the ideas and sinister as it is being couched within the language of safeguarding.

“I had to take part in the e-learning training programme because I wasn’t allowed to continue with my contact at one particular university unless I completed it. Its presence within higher education in the arts is where it is most threatening to artistic freedom. Anybody showing any interest in religious material might be seen as a sign of radicalisation. It is having a huge effect on what enters into public discourse – especially younger, emerging artists who have been trained in publicly funded institutions they are the most vulnerable as they are accountable to their funded institutions.”

Extremism - Anders Lustgarten, 2016

“The police just took Jamal away. Because Miss Tomlinson called them. Because she had to. Because of Prevent. But now Miss Tomlinson and the police are gone, and all that’s left is a shell-shocked class. Who knew Jamal? What did he do? And what is gonna happen next? A play about fear, friendship and the creeping polarisation of our society. This play is a part of NT Connections, the National Theatre’s festival of new plays for schools and youth theatres” (as described in NT publicity text for the play).

The play *Extremism* dramatised a toxic dynamic between teachers and pupils, and between pupils themselves. Over the course of the dialogue, the children attack each other, repeating stereotypes and misinformation gleaned from parents and media, turning on each other. Lustgarten says: “Tensions and alliances permeate all classrooms – add in monitoring by teacher and state – that is unforgivable as a violation of trust.” Many recent plays look at individuals caught up in radicalisation, focusing on their vulnerabilities and susceptibilities, their psychological disposition, and a home life that makes them vulnerable to radicalisation. Anders Lustgarten’s play instead portrays Prevent as the protagonist.

Believers are but Brothers - Javaad Alipoor

Writer and performer [Javaad Alipoor’s describes the inspiration](#) for his award winning theatre work: “I originally wanted to make a show about ISIS brides. I found out these young women who had gone to the Islamic state and married jihadis had Twitter accounts, so I started following and engaging with them. What struck me was the register of their propaganda. One tweeted out this picture of a guy I called Game of Thrones Jihadi. He’s ripped. He’s got this vest on, pecks, scar-bitten, a big gun. The slogan around him was words to the effect – ‘Sisters what kind of a man do you want? Some boring guy who works in an office, or this brother who will die for you’. There was always this offer – fuck this grey, boring England and come and live in a Hollywood film. What the white narrative wanted to do was take agency away from these women who had done these awful things because they had been tricked into it. But actually an offer is being made. You get some power when you go. At the height of the Islamic State almost all the women’s Sharia policing department in the capital in Raba was made up of European Muslims. You get to push other women around.

“When I started looking into it I realised that it’s not my show to make and I ended looking at the similar narrative for men which goes: there is a certain type of young Muslim man for whom the complex identity of being a Muslim in the west is too much. So he withdraws to this black and white world... [But] if you do your own research and engage with these people, the way they use social media to try and get the message out, is very similar. It’s not ‘come

to something simple', but 'come to something more exciting'. So again, facetiously – there were two lads from Plymouth who were killed in a drone strike in ISIS controlled Syria and the headline in The Star was something like 'What could make these two lads who worked in a phone shop in Plymouth go off to join the Islamic State?' The clue's in the question!

“So this became a show about young men – fantasy, religion, technology; and about the way masculinity has changed since the 1970s. I think there is a bunch of us who are alright with the fact that women and sexual minorities have more rights, and a bunch who fucking aren't on board with that at all. And some of the ways that that works out is culturally inflected, whether you want to talk about the alt right, or ISIS, or Hindutva in India. Obviously, the Muslim identity is part of that; but it isn't saying there is a problem with Muslim young men, there is a problem with young men.”

Conclusion

Whether or not the government intended Prevent to create a hostile environment in which anyone from the Muslim community is portrayed as potentially dangerous, the way it has been implemented in educational establishments, local governments and through community funding has sown profound distrust. We believe these examples are simply the tip of the iceberg and that partial reform will not win back community trust that has now been severely eroded. Rather than demonising and criminalising an ever increasing range of speech and expression the government should focus proper attention on the systemic causes of radicalisation and violent extremism in order to create a fairer safer society. We advocate, with many others working in civil society, that Prevent should be abolished.