

British teenager arrested for Facebook comments criticizing Afghan war

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Azhar Ahmed, a 19-year-old from Ravensthorpe, England, was arrested last week by West Yorkshire Police and charged with a “racially aggravated public order offence.”

On March 8, following two days of saturation media coverage of the deaths of six British soldiers in Afghanistan, Ahmed wrote on his Facebook page:

“What about the Innocent families who have been brutally killed... The women who have been raped... The children who have been sliced up..! Your enemies were the Taliban not innocent harm[less] families. All soldiers should DIE & go to HELL! *THE LOWLIFE F*****N SCUM! gotta problem go cry at your soldiers grave & wish him hell because that where he is going.*”

Explaining Ahmed’s arrest, a spokesperson for Yorkshire police said, “He didn’t make his point very well and that is why he has landed himself in bother.”

The spurious “racially aggravated public order” charge had to be withdrawn, given that Ahmed had made no mention of race. But he was still forced to appear at Dewsbury magistrates’ court on March 20, charged under the Communications Act 2003 with sending a message that the court deemed to be “grossly offensive” under Section 127 of the Communications Act 2003.

Ahmed denied the charge.

The anti-democratic provisions contained in Section 127 stipulate that the test for “grossly offensive” is whether or not the message would cause offence to those to whom it relates, even though they are not the message’s recipients.

Ahmed’s arrival and departure from the court was accompanied by the jeering of an assembled crowd of around 40 far-right activists. Composed mainly of supporters of the English Defence League (EDL) and a group calling itself Combined Ex-Forces, they

displayed the flag of St. George and carried placards reading: “Jail all those who insult our troops,” and “Respect the British armed Forces.”

Ahmed was bailed to an undisclosed address. He will stand trial at Huddersfield magistrate’s court on July 3.

The Communications Act 2003 was passed ostensibly to regulate broadcasting and electronic media across the country. It also concerned changes to ownership rules, which facilitated greater control by media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch of News International.

The act is now being employed to police the Internet in a manner that is a fundamental threat to free speech and democratic rights generally.

In June, 2010, for example, Paul Chambers, a former trainee accountant, was found guilty under the Communications Act 2003 after posting a message to the social network site Twitter while waiting at Robin Hood airport, near Doncaster.

Chambers was found guilty of sending a message of a “menacing character” after he tweeted in frustration in January at the closure of the airport, due to snow. His crime was to have tweeted: “Crap! Robin Hood airport is closed. You’ve got a week and a bit to get your shit together, otherwise I’m blowing the airport sky high!”

Chambers admitted that his tweet was “silly”, but called the police reaction “absurd”, saying his tweet was “like having a bad day at work and stating that you could murder your boss. ... I didn’t even think about whether it would be taken seriously”.

The airport categorised the message as “not credible” in threat terms, but was obliged to tell South Yorkshire police. Chambers was fined £1,000 and had to leave his place of employment.

Ahmed’s arrest on the grounds that he had not made “his point very well” and being initially charged of a “racially aggravated public order offence” is a still

clearer example of a gross violation of democracy.

Free speech, if it means anything, means the right to say things that others may find offensive. Ahmed clearly found the official mourning for the six dead soldiers offensive, given the media silence on the much greater numbers of Afghan civilian casualties. And he responded angrily. There is no doubt, moreover, that many, many people would share his sentiments regarding the hypocrisy of the media, whether or not they considered his response to the soldiers involved in the occupation to be justified.

Yet Ahmed's case will reportedly involve the prosecution bringing forward just five witnesses who found his comment to be grossly offensive. On that criterion, anyone could be prosecuted for stating almost any opinion—from criticising a public figure to denying the existence of God. Above all, it would criminalise criticism of Britain's barbaric wars of conquest, such as that waged in Afghanistan, Iraq or more recently in Libya.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq resulted in the slaughter of a million men, women and children. Post-invasion violence continues in Iraq. Ongoing counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan, backed by British forces, have contributed to the deaths of thousands of Afghan civilians, including most recently the deliberate slaughter of 17 people, 11 of them children.

This has all been aided and abetted by a compliant media, which promotes pro-war sentiment by playing on public sympathy for the soldiers maimed and killed. There is now constant coverage of organisations and events such as the Help for Heroes charity, the Military Wives recording and soldiers' coffins passing through military towns.

If a charge of being grossly offensive is to be levelled, then it should target Murdoch and the rest of the warmongering media barons. They are the ones who conceal the fact that soldiers, recruited in an economic climate where jobs are scarce, are sent to kill and die to secure the interests of a fabulously wealthy elite.



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