Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on freedom of the press and responsibility of the press

"Frankly, this so-called freedom of the press has reached a state of such license that virtually anything can be printed."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1989 India Today Interview (India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4315/

"A free press is not simply a press free to criticise as an end in itself. In many developed countries, freedom of the press has often come to mean license to behave irresponsibly. It is a contradiction, but nevertheless, a practical requirement, that in developing countries, with the youngest media and press traditions, newspapers and their journalists must, in the national and universal interest, behave substantially more responsibly than their counterpart in the West."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1977 National Press Club Reception address (Dacca, Bangladesh)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1825/

"Perhaps, too, it is ignorance which has allowed so many participants in this discussion [over the offensive, Danish caricatures (cartoons) of the Holy Prophet] to confuse liberty with license -- implying that the sheer absence of restraint on human impulse can constitute a sufficient moral framework. This is not to say that governments should censor offensive
speech. Nor does the answer lie in violent words or violent actions. But I am suggesting that freedom of expression is an incomplete value unless it is used honourably, and that the obligations of citizenship in any society should include a commitment to informed and responsible expression."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 Address to the Evora University Symposium (Evora, Portugal)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7653/

"The third of the media challenges I would discuss today is the need to balance concerns about press freedom with a greater emphasis on press responsibility. In my view, we are sometimes too preoccupied with the rights of the press as an independent social critic -- and we pay too little attention to the obligations of the press as an influential social leader.

"Too often, the press seems to be caught up with that obsessive individualism which seems so rampant in our world, an expectation that we must make our way in life through a sort of meritocratic free-for-all, ignoring those who are hurt in the process and those who are left behind. Too often, we join in the celebration of success for its own sake, regardless of the means by which it was achieved or its impact on society. Too often the media spotlight overlooks the corrupt or manipulative methodology and dramatises the triumphant result. Too often, the right of an individual or the right of a publication to unfettered self-expression is enshrined as the most sacred of all values -- independent of its impact on social or moral standards.

"One of the most familiar of Western political values is expressed in the phrase: 'Freedom of the Press'. I believe that Press Freedom, properly understood, is a universal human right. But we must be careful about how we define it and that it does not isolate the press from the rest of the social order. What is originally meant -- and properly still means for me -- is that the press should be free from the control or constraint of governments, and strong enough to resist all forms of intimidation. Why is this precept so important? Because the health of any government should depend on public evaluation of its work. Not even the most enlightened government can do this for itself. And only if a pluralistic press is allowed
to report freely about any government, will the public be able to hold their governments accountable.

"The problem comes, of course, when Freedom of the Press is stretched beyond this meaning and used to shield the press -- not just from government interference, but from any sense of social accountability. And that is when press liberty turns into press license. Just as press freedom is a means for holding governments accountable, so must the press itself be held accountable for the way it does its work. Accountable to whom? To the political leaders of the moment? Never. To the larger community and the cultures that comprise it? Always -- provided we see the community not as a mere majority of the moment, but as an organic, pluralistic entity. A most remarkable thing in our experience is that the larger community has invariably demanded better forms of journalism. Despite their relative lack of formal education, the first readers of the Nation [newspaper in Kenya] sought something well beyond what the colonial press had given them....

"Our journalistic code -- a set of explicit written standards about editorial goals and practices -- was submitted to our shareholders for their deliberation and approval because we want our shareholders to feel involved and responsible, not just for the Nation's financial success but also for its moral success. They are, after all, the ultimate stewards, not only of the Nation's corporate body, but also of its journalistic soul.

"In short, we have pursued a concept of Press Freedom which not only means Freedom 'from' but also Freedom 'to' -- not just Freedom from improper governmental constraints but also Freedom to advance the common purposes which give meaning to our lives. Such a sense of social accountability is not an easy thing to achieve. It must begin with those into whose care the institutions of the press have been entrusted, our editors and proprietors. Those who are in charge must really be in charge. Freedom of the Press does not mean the right of any journalist to write and to publish anything he or she wants to say. It is not acceptable for a reporter to cry 'censorship' when an editor or a publisher questions his accuracy or his judgement. Nor is it acceptable for editors, managers and proprietors to slip their solemn responsibilities by invoking the same line of defence. They may sometimes say they don't want to 'meddle' with the contents of their publications. This is a weak and dangerous excuse."
And too often that comment really disguises an abdication of moral responsibility. This abdication is particularly troubling when it is used by proprietors or editors to mask their personal quest for financial gain or political influence -- or to sustain divisive sectarian agendas. For in the final analysis, the press and those who manage it must also be held accountable to the collective judgements of the community.

"Responsible journalists and managers will not want to shield themselves from such judgements. To the contrary, they will eagerly seek them out. They will want to know what thoughtful readers are saying and how responsible advertisers are thinking. They will talk constantly with scholars and religious leaders, with artists and business leaders, with scientists and labour leaders, with educators and community leaders -- and yes, with politicians and diplomats and governmental leaders as well. And through such continuing interaction they will develop and refine their sense of how the larger community can best be served."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1986 Commonwealth Press Union Conference Keynote Address (Cape Town, South Africa)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5137/

"Let me insist again, however, on one important point. When newspaper people acknowledge the shortcomings of the press, this does not mean that they care any less about the freedom of the press. In fact the reason press leaders talk so much about press responsibility is that they care so deeply about press freedom. Or to put it another way, they strive to preserve press liberty by ensuring that it does not turn into press license.

"This central concern is one that Conrad Black, among others, sees as the particular responsibility of the newspaper proprietor or publisher. Black elaborates on the publisher’s role as follows:

"To maintain standards of fair reporting and consistency of opinion, to support the journalists when they are unfairly attacked, to prevent any faction from hijacking the newspaper, to order retractions when they are required and deserved, and to help give the newspaper a personality. (And he concludes,) non-interventionist newspaper proprietors encourage
irresponsible journalism by their abdication.’

"I have never been a 'non-interventionist publisher.' And I do not propose
to become one. A principal shareholder's role, it seems to me, is to be sure
that the company's key positions are in the best possible hands, that the
ideals and standards of the newspaper are clearly and thoughtfully
articulated, and that sufficient resources are available so that a truly
professional staff can be properly hired, properly trained, properly
equipped, and properly supported. If publishers can achieve those goals,
then they will surely have good reason to be proud of their publications."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1997 Nation Press and Building Opening Ceremony
address (Nairobi, Kenya)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5246/

"'Freedom of the Press' are four of the most commonly used and misused
words in the English language, but here in Kenya their meaning was
given true substance by the late President's personal commitment to the
independence of the media. I state this today, as I was privileged to
experience the depth of his conviction on this matter, and because I feel I
have a personal, unequivocal commitment to uphold what the father of
Kenya upheld so ardently himself. History is unjust, or at least very often
incomplete in recording the work and thoughts of great men; this must
not be the case with regard to Mzee's exceptional strength and courage in
defending this important foundation of democracy.

"Today, Kenya is one of the countries of the developing world that has the
strongest tradition of a free press. It has an unusually large number of
qualified and competent editors and journalists. As the owner of a
substantial newspaper organisation here for many years, it is right that I
should also recall the admiration and respect I feel for the way in which
His Excellency President Moi, his ministers and the people of Kenya have
continued to uphold this tradition of a free, responsible press."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1981 address to the International Press Institute,
30th General Assembly (Nairobi, Kenya)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2197/
Stefan Aust / Erich Follath: Again, this whole affair was misused by radical Islamists. They added caricatures much more offensive than the original ones to incite the masses.

Aga Khan: But I am told that there was an internal debate between the editors of that [Danish] publication and they actually knew what they were doing. They took a risk and somebody should have said to them, why get into that situation? Now we are talking about civility, which is a completely different concept. If we are talking about civility in a pluralist society, then how do you develop that notion of civility, particularly where there is ignorance? And that's the thing that's worrying. And that's why I get frustrated when I see these situations that go on and on and on. Because I'm not willing to believe that they are all inspired by evil intent.

Stefan Aust / Erich Follath: Provocative, sad and distasteful. But the freedom of the press is one of the highest values in our democracy. We have to balance one thing against the other and we will allow non-believers to express even outrageous opinions.

Aga Khan: I think that you are now referring to one of the most difficult problems that we have and I don't know the answer. The industrialised West is highly secularised; the Muslim world is much less secularised and that stems largely from the nature of the faith of Islam, which you know and I know has an intrinsic meshing with everyday life. And that is a scenario where people of goodwill need to think very, very carefully.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 Spiegel Online Interview (2nd), Stefan Aust and Erich Follath, 'Islam Is a Faith of Reason' (Berlin, Germany)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7900/

"Recent studies from the Freedom House organisation report that media freedom is increasingly threatened globally. For every nation that moves forward in terms of press freedom, two nations are said to be slipping backward. Media freedom requires continuing vigilance. But here let me sound a word of caution. Freedom, in any area of human activity, does
not mean the moral license to abuse that freedom. It would be a sad thing if the people of Africa in the name of freedom, were expected to welcome the worst of media practices, whether they are home-grown or imported."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 Address to the Conference Marking Nation Media Group’s 50th Anniversary, ’Media and the African Promise’ (Nairobi, Kenya) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9372/

Don Cyao: When I look at the Western perceptions of freedom, which we value highly, I sometimes think we interpret it as the whole world should be free to be like us. Is that how we are seen from the other perspectives?

Aga Khan: I think that’s certainly one aspect -- the feeling that the societies of the industrialised world are always right, and therefore what they get right should be the norm for everybody else. I think there are areas where we don’t agree with that.

We think freedom is important, of course. But we think that freedom really is not something that one has to take in the absolute. There is abuse of freedom. And when freedom is abused, what does it become?

Don Cyao: License, I guess.

Aga Khan: Exactly. And that’s where parts of our world say ‘Stop!’

That boundary between freedom and the abuse of freedom is something which is driven by so many different notions of thought, faith, society, the whole thing....

Don Cyao: In Canada I think some of our success is the comfortable tolerance of letting people set different standards for themselves. So, yes, some people may choose license and other people choose some realistic guidelines, if you like, to exercise their freedom. Is that what you see as the goal for the broader society, or is it a little different from that?

Aga Khan: Well I think it’s difficult to impose a firm line. But I think that when you look at history, the history of humankind, you will find that when freedoms have become license, society tends to disaggregate. And I
think that what we’re seeing in the Western world is that very issue on
the table, and a reversal. I think there is a reversal under way.

*Freedom doesn’t mean that if you want to abuse that freedom, whatever
it is, you legitimise or impose that on others.*

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"A pluralist commitment is rooted in the essential unity of the human
race. Does the Holy Qur’an not say that mankind is descended from ‘a
single soul?’ In an increasingly cosmopolitan world, it is essential that we
live by a ‘cosmopolitan ethic,’ one that addresses the age-old need to
balance the particular and the universal, to honour both human rights
and social duties, to advance personal freedom and to accept human
responsibility."

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See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the offensive caricatures (cartoons) of
the Holy Prophet (pbuh)

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See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on Freedom and License

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