

A Time to Stand for Free Expression

By Donald Sutherland

Recent months have seen free expression under attack, both in the U.S. and beyond. The BDS movement attempted to impose de facto limits on academic collaboration between some within the CUNY community and their counterparts in Israel. North Korea hacked Sony Pictures, briefly leading Sony to cancel the release of its controversial film, “The Interview.” Most recently, a pair of Islamic terrorists carried out a massacre against the staff of France’s satirical publication, *Charlie Hebdo*, and at least one terrorist seized a Hypercacher supermarket, almost certainly targeting France’s Jewish population.

Academic freedom and free expression are inseparable. Therefore, one should reasonably expect a broad and robust defense of free expression from the academic community. This blog entry argues for just such a defense.

On this day on which some [700,000 people](#) joined together in France to remember the victims of the recent terrorist attacks, it is important to memorialize those innocent victims. I mourn those from *Charlie Hebdo* who lost their lives, the three police officers who were killed, and four persons in the Hypercacher supermarket who were slain. My thoughts and prayers go out to those people, their families, and to the French people.

At the same time, I join the growing chorus of sentiment in proclaiming, “Je suis *Charlie*.” That cause is not a statement about the merit of the publication’s works. It is about far more than the fate of that publication or any other. It is nothing less than a defense of free expression. One cannot overstate the importance and urgency of that defense.

John Stuart Mill made among the strongest arguments for free speech in his classic work, *On Liberty*. Those arguments resonate as loudly and clearly today as they did when he first put them to paper nearly 150 years ago. He pointed out that even when the “silenced opinion be an error,” it held value. Toward that end, he wrote:

[T]hough the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any object is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Free expression, not all of which is tasteful and some of which can shock the senses, is the lifeblood of creativity, innovation, research and inquiry, learning, and human progress. Therefore, neither France nor the West can afford to compromise when it comes to safeguarding this most basic freedom. The costs of doing so would vastly outweigh any perceived or actual benefits. Without free expression, France cannot be France and the West cannot be the West.

The same holds true for the academic community across the world. Without free expression, the ability to advance the frontiers of knowledge, cultivate tolerance for

diversity in all its forms, and prepare future generations for the evolving world's vast challenges and opportunities can only grind to a standstill. If such a situation is permitted to unfold, the world will become a far worse off place than would otherwise be the case, both socially and economically.

In the end, there can be no room for hesitation, ambiguity, indifference, or silence when free expression is assaulted regardless of the rationale deployed. If attacks on free expression are permitted to go unchecked and expression becomes increasingly limited, that outcome will surely pose a grave threat to academic freedom down the road. In such an environment, the university would cease to be able to perform its vital and timeless academic mission. The costs of that outcome would be incalculable.