

# The New York Times

## Sony Caved to Terror. No One Else Should.

Flemming Rose

Sony's decision to pull "The Interview" — an enormous act of self-censorship under threat of violence — somehow comes as no great surprise to me. It is the culmination of an insidious trend of self-censorship in the face of intimidation that has plagued Western culture for more than a decade.

Nine years ago, as culture editor of the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, I commissioned cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to start a debate about how we talk about Islam. In commissioning the cartoons, my newspaper was reacting to a pattern of self-censorship among publishers, writers, museums, theaters and performers. Institutions like the Tate museum in London and the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden, had called off shows or removed artwork from exhibits. Illustrators in Denmark were even afraid to make drawings for a children's book on Muhammad.

We received 12 cartoons and published all of them, including one by the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard showing the prophet with a bomb in his turban. We found out soon enough that fears of violence for ridiculing a religious symbol were not mere fantasy. The ensuing violence was manufactured months after the cartoons were published by activist imams with an agenda (and some falsified cartoons). It is true that embassies were stormed, boycotts proclaimed and some 200 people died around the world — though all the violence took place in countries without protection of speech. Numerous death threats came our way. The irony was that the perpetrators of these crimes were basically saying: You depicted us as violent, so we are going to kill you.

The cartoons were not intended to target a group, as critics claim, but to start a debate about how we talk about Islam. Mr. Westergaard's cartoon depicted Muhammad as one representation of Islam, in the same way that images of Jesus refer to Christianity, Karl Marx to Marxism, and Uncle Sam to the United States.

In the West, we increasingly live side by side with people who are different from us. A statement made in one part of the world is often heard — and misheard and misinterpreted — in many other parts. The Danish cartoons were created in the context of European humor but were soon seen in the cultural crucible of the Islamic Middle East. "The Interview" was an American comedy that was heard loudest on the other side of the Pacific Ocean — before it was ever shown. The North Korean government took great umbrage at a film American audiences might have found hilarious. As with the cartoons, the humor did not travel well.

But the decision by several large movie theater chains — and now Sony — to bow to bullies hiding behind Internet anonymity is wrongheaded. It is an open-ended invitation to more intimidation. History teaches that if you give in to intimidation once, you will not reduce it in the future; you will get more of it.

Unfortunately it is a growing trend. In Europe nobody publishes cartoons of Muhammad anymore even though there are cartoons of figures and symbols of other religions all over the place. Publishers have made this choice not out of concern for offending a minority, but out of fear.

After the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was killed in 2004 by a young Muslim who thought that Mr. van Gogh had offended God by making a documentary about violence against Muslim women, the Dutch minister of justice suggested that Mr. van Gogh would have still been alive if the Netherlands had had more stringent laws limiting work like Mr. van Gogh's.

Is it outrageous, even despicable, to depict the death of a national leader, as "The Interview" did with North Korea's Kim Jong-un? Maybe. But "Death of a President," a 2006 "mockumentary," depicted the assassination of President George W. Bush on the streets of Chicago. CNN and NPR declined to run ads for the film, Hillary Rodham Clinton (then a senator) criticized it and the Bush White House declined to comment on it. No one in the American mainstream called for censorship (or self-censorship).

We must preserve what the writer Salman Rushdie has called people's "right to tell their own story in any way they wish." The right to live freely, to read anything, to express oneself, trumps the right not to be offended.

How do we defend that right? We do it with solidarity in the face of intimidation. When Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a 1989 fatwa on Mr. Rushdie because of a few pages in "The Satanic Verses," one Danish writer made the ingenious suggestion that his colleagues include the offensive pages from Mr. Rushdie's novel as a supplement in their next books.

That seems to me a very effective way to fight intimidation and self-censorship. It may be easy for a state or a movement to go after one writer and his publishers and translators. But it's virtually impossible to go after thousands of them. As I learned during my 14 years as a correspondent in the Soviet Union, a dictatorship dissolves quickly when fear among its citizens dissipates. Dictatorships exist on the premise that people internalize the limits that the authorities impose on society.

The best way to counter the damage created by Sony's surrender to the intimidators would be for all of Hollywood to unite and for every studio to make a movie with a plot similar to that of "The Interview." They could humorously kill off all manner of repugnant leaders — not merely Kim Jong-un. Such an act would be a defiant affirmation of cultural freedom and the right to produce even offensive humor. At the very least, Sony should put "The Interview" online free.

Sadly, Hollywood's only significant reaction, so far, is Paramount's decision to prohibit three movie theaters from screening, as a political statement, "Team America: World Police" (a 2004 film that features Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, as a singing marionette). This is another step in the self-imposed tyranny of silence, a society where a new fundamentalism of grievance will determine what can and cannot be said.

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