

To Be or Not to Be Charlie

PUSHING THE BORDERLINES OF FREE EXPRESSION

For every day since Jan. 7 — the day 12 people were murdered at the offices of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* — I could write a book trying to explain the emotional rollercoaster I have been experiencing as a young French journalist. Let me start by paying a tribute to all the victims of the killings that took place in Paris last week. My thoughts go to all who were close to these journalists, cartoonists, employees, police officers, Jews, Muslims, atheists ...

Different emotions still race through my body: surprise, deep sadness, fear and anger. Days later, I am still utterly confused. How could this happen?

As *Je suis Charlie* (“I am Charlie”) signs spread around the world, a dilemma has been raised among many in France and in my own heart. Am I really Charlie?

Charlie Hebdo is a provocative paper to say the least; it rallies against all forms of religious extremism, Islamic extremism being just one. Most importantly, the paper was produced by very smart and tolerant people who liked to make fun of *everyone*.

After the killings, a certain quote by the French Enlightenment writer Voltaire resonated with me: “I do not agree with what you have to say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it.”

This brings me to freedom of the press, one of the main reasons why on the Wednesday evening after the attack, people across France gathered in city squares. In Lille, a city in northern France where I study journalism, neither the freezing temperatures nor the rain defeated us. In silence we stood, looking at each other, raising a pen as a symbol of liberty. We hugged. We cried.

You might agree or disagree with the contents of *Charlie Hebdo*, but “the free communication of thoughts and of opinions is one of the most precious

rights of man. Every citizen therefore may speak, write, print freely.” Or so reads the 11th article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 — an essential human rights document from the French Revolution that is now part of the French Constitution.

The article continues. “Save [if it is necessary] to respond to the abuse of this liberty, in the cases determined by the law.”

Yes, you read correctly. The freedom of the press is limited in France. Speech that “insults, defames or incites hatred, discrimination or violence on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, sex or sexual orientation” is forbidden. A line is drawn. I like this line. The cartoonists from *Charlie Hebdo* played around it. It was their job. And I loved them for that.

Personally, “I was Charlie” the first day of the attack, but I quickly abandoned the sign. Here is why: If it started out as an attack against the weekly, five more victims in other parts of Paris died in the next two days. And then, Sunday, Jan. 11, dozens of world leaders came to Paris to march, among them some who don’t believe in freedom of press. The poignant silent gatherings I had experienced earlier were gone. By Sunday, they were replaced by people singing the national anthem, which left me perplexed.

This isn’t about national pride; it is about the victims. If wearing a *Je suis Charlie* sign makes you feel better, I am all for it. I, for one, walked silently without one, holding hands with my journalist friends.



My heart warmed from the pictures of people holding this sign all over the world, but seeing the one from a child in Syria broke my heart. His life is far from mine. Since Wednesday, Jan. 7, France has suspended the news. There was no more mention of the militant group Boko Haram (who killed up to 2,000 people in Nigeria in a raid starting Jan. 3), no more mention of bombing in the Middle East. It is all about “Charlie.”

There is a feeling that the worst has happened but that the worst is also to come, like the targeted attacks against Muslim mosques and facilities around France or the discourse that “all Muslims are

terrorists.” How France reacts in the aftermath of these attacks will be telling about the state of French society.

One thing is certain: The fallen members of *Charlie Hebdo* must be laughing up there. Laughing that 1.5 million people rallied in the streets of Paris when they used to only print 60,000 copies.

The other day I heard one Muslim woman on television say: “I am Muslim and screw you ... And that’s my tribute.” It made me smile. Short, provocative, irreverent, borderline humor — it was the best tribute to *Charlie Hebdo* I’ve heard.

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A RALLY FOR CHARLIE HEBDO IN PARIS JAN. 11 PHOTO BY LAETITIA BÉRAUD