

What academic freedom means for society

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The Financial Times has as its motto: “without fear or favour.” That is in the context of press freedom. But it applies equally to the context of academic freedom. This is because both the press and academics should be after the truth, and the truth needs to be challenged and tested, before it shows up for everyone to see, for there are pseudo-truths and lies dressed up as truth.

The truth is true not because we believe it. But there are those among us who so much believe in something that they cannot tolerate a dissenting view. Academic as well as press freedom requires a spirit of tolerance.

Academic and press freedom is not the freedom to use language of intolerance or abusive language. As long as we avoid language of intolerance or abusive language, anyone can write anything or say anything one likes. An article will be accepted or rejected based on its merit as judged by referees and the editor(s).

Academic and press freedom are often at risk and are therefore in need of protection, because certain messages that comes out of academic or press writings are considered harmful by those in positions of power and influence, and because people in positions of power and influence may like academics or journalists say things that they like, and not things that they do not like.

Academics are often considered to be the conscience of society because while newspapers and the media have to compete for the sponsorship of their clients for survival, academics are mostly aloof to such pressures. Society wants to give academics the unique opportunity to be in no fear of losing sponsorship. Academics are presumed to cherish the dream of a better society. They need to appreciate this unique freedom. At the same time we need to provide mechanisms such that they can write what they believe. Academics can be criticized for doing a lousy job. Criticisms based on well-reasoned arguments and evidence do not undermine academic freedom.

Universities must value the unique positions that they enjoy, and must exert that aloofness to the influence of money and power, and must value their staff who devote themselves in pursuit of the truth and a better society.