

**Rich and Varied Ethical Standards:
Freedom of Expression as a universal
value in a world of many cultures.**

Paul Sturges
Professor Extraordinary
Department of Information
Science
University of Pretoria



UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), Article 19



Intellectual Freedom as a human right

- It is easy (maybe too easy) to rely on an ‘authoritative’ statement such as:
- The United Nations’ Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), whose Article 19, says:
 - Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and any to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.
- This actually describes more than just Freedom of Expression
- It covers the complete range of basic Intellectual Freedom to be enjoyed by individual humans.

Challenges to Intellectual Freedom

- The validity and universality of the principle is often challenged, but not always directly.
- Threats to Intellectual Freedom can take the form of
 - Direct assaults (as in the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre of January 2015, or indeed the Paris killings of December 2015).
 - Questioning which undermines the social and psychological basis of the principle.
- Faced with such questions, we may feel obliged to admit that:
 - Intellectual Freedom is not equally respected by all cultures and belief systems;
 - In some parts of the world, the climate for Intellectual Freedom is actively hostile.

Ethics and Culture



The case of Raif Baddawi



Sentenced to 1000 lashes,
10 years jail, and 10 years travel ban

HIS CRIME?

Blogging about secularism and criticizing the
corrupt Saudian authorities in his website.

Fun fact? His lawyer also got sentenced
to 15 years prison for defending him.

‘Rich and Varied Ethical Standards’

- The case of Raif Baddawi, a Saudi Arabian blogger, allows us to explore a mindset that is hostile to Intellectual Freedom.
- His sentence, for blasphemy, included imprisonment, a fine, restrictions on travel and Internet access, and 1000 lashes.
- The Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallstrom protested, but
- The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) claimed she:
 - ‘Degraded Saudi Arabia and its social norms, judicial system and political institutions’, and
 - It further cited the world’s ‘rich and varied ethical standards’.
- Ethical standards can certainly be ‘varied’, but ‘rich’?

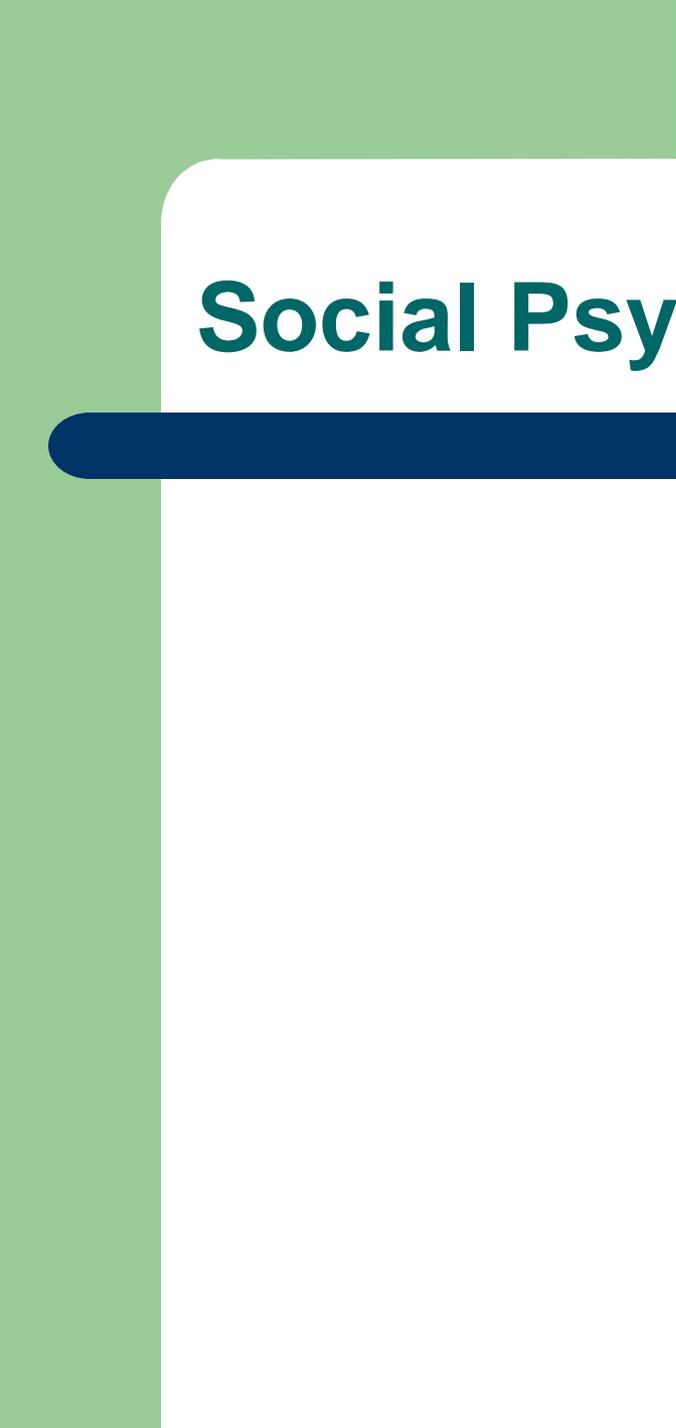
Ethical variation

- Ethical systems can rely on some fixed body of principles, teaching, commandments.
- Principles are also worked out by individuals from a range of sources (philosophy, biology, economics, and religion too).
- Social practices and laws emerge from the continuing debate on these ideas.
- But perhaps most influential are communal and traditional values.

Communal values

- The majority of societies embrace communal values as represented by:
 - Family and the wisdom of parents;
 - Local leaders and holders of traditional knowledge;
 - Priests and religious leaders;
 - Politicians, non-elected leaders and monarchs.
- This can be comforting and unchallenging,
- Or, unbearable and unacceptable.
- Universal principles based on individualistic values do not thrive in this atmosphere.

Social Psychology

The slide features a decorative layout on the left side. A light green vertical bar is partially visible on the far left. To its right, a white rounded rectangular shape contains the title. Below the title, a thick dark blue horizontal bar spans across the slide.

Social psychology and the individual

- The concept of Intellectual Freedom is protected on behalf of individuals, who:
 - Make discoveries and acquire information,
 - Form opinions and ideas,
 - Express those opinions and ideas to others.
- Social psychology suggests human propensities that are much more complex, with a great deal of variation in responses to intellectual freedom.
- Indifference to intellectual freedom seems to be more usual than any kind of innate propensity towards it.

Responses to 'universal' principles

- The idea that some principles might be innate to human psychology is worth examining further.
- An example:
 - Rejection of Homicide
- It is sometimes alleged that humanity generally rejects the killing of others.
- If we examine this more closely, it may suggest something about 'universal' principles.

Rejection of homicide

- In reality, the response to the killing of others is complex:
 - Homicide is accepted and even celebrated in some societies;
 - Most states reserve the right to wage war, and some practise capital punishment;
 - Public opinion tends to support war and capital punishment.
- Research suggests that there is a human capacity to kill which varies across a spectrum of responses (SLA Marshall's work on soldiers and killing).
- The idea of a spectrum is worth further attention.

A possible spectrum of response to Intellectual Freedom

- The idea of a spectrum of response could be applied to intellectual freedom, dividing humanity, for example, as follows.

20%

Intellectual Passivity

Accept Authority
Don't Ask Questions
Suppress Others

60%

Limited Desire for Knowledge

Gossip and Trivia
Leisure Information
Daily Life Information

20%

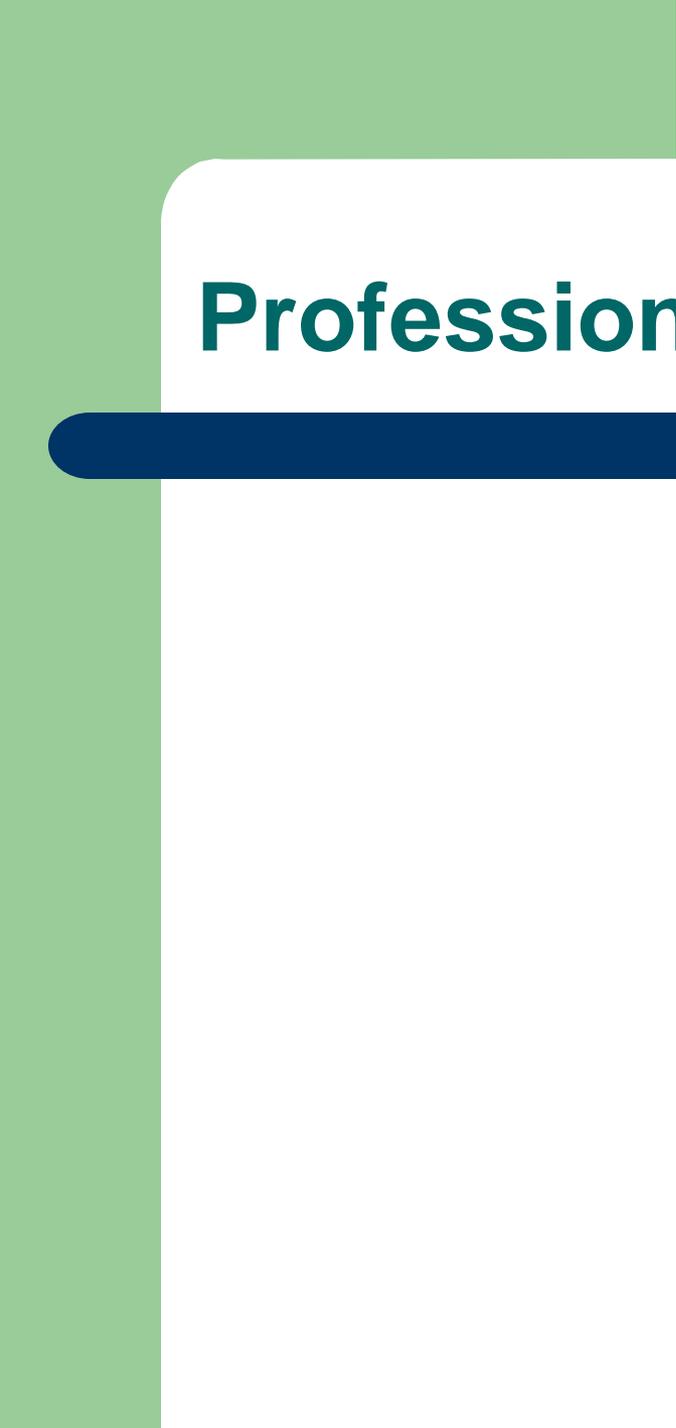
Free Minds

Question Everything
Dangerous Ideas
No Limits

The message of social psychology

- The idea of a spectrum (or possibly a Bell Curve) suggests that any principle might
 - Be fully accepted by a small minority
 - Have a certain acceptability amongst a majority, and
 - Be completely rejected by another minority.
- This reinforces the message from cultures and their ethical systems, that
- Respect for intellectual freedom might be much further from a universal principle than Article 19 would seem to suggest.

Professional Ethics

The slide features a decorative layout on the left side. A light green vertical bar is partially visible on the far left. A white rounded rectangle is positioned in the upper left, containing the title. A thick, dark blue horizontal bar spans across the middle of the slide, starting from the left edge and extending towards the right.

The 'richness' of ethical variation

- Although Cultural comparisons and Social Psychology might suggest that all cultures are equally important as phenomena;
- Respect for other cultures and dominant psychological propensities in society can lead into ethically difficult areas for library and information workers.
- Religion produces particular difficulties in the light of the dominant professional 'neutrality' in LIS
- A case study suggests how.

Case Study: respect for The Book.

- In 2010, in response to complaints, the Milner Library, Illinois State University, was advised by an Islamic scholar that the Qur'an should generally
 1. Not be handled by non-Muslims;
 2. Be handled with a cloth or glove;
 3. Not be placed on the floor or near the feet;
 4. Have nothing placed on top of it;
 5. Be kept closed when not being read.
- Some libraries also deal with the problem by placing all religious texts on a top shelf together, so one is not 'over' another.

LIS problems with this advice

- Although a significant aspect of librarianship deals with the care, preservation and scholarly study of books and other materials:
- Librarians accept the need to discard and recycle most books on the grounds that they no longer have any effective use.
- The underpinning rationale for this is that the value of a book (or any other format) is in the text.
- Content is fundamental: format is, for the most part, secondary.

Forms a text might take

- A single text might over time appear in all or some of the following:
 - Oral composition, preservation and transmission
 - Writing in manuscript
 - Publishing in print
 - Audio and video recording
 - Digital storage and networking
 - Reworking as drama and performance, graphic book, film, broadcast.
- How is a text in any of these actually sacred?
- (And is 'sacred' a useful concept?)

Rushdie's thoughts on 'The sacred'



“The idea of the sacred is quite simply one of the most conservative notions in any culture, because it seeks to turn other ideas—uncertainty, progress, change—into crimes.”

-Salman Rushdie

Respect for The book: Farkhunda



The case tested by an event

- March 2015. An Afghan woman called Farkhunda was accused by a mullah of burning a Qur'an.
- A mob beat her, burned her and threw her body in the river:
 - Police officers allegedly stood by,
 - Some imams and mullahs publicly endorsed the killing,
 - The available evidence showed the alleged Qu'ran incident had never taken place.
- The story is given a horrible irony by the suggestion in some accounts that Farkhunda, who was a student of religious law, had also memorised the complete Qur'an.
- Which was more sacred, the copy of a book allegedly burned or Farkhunda, the living repository of the text?

An opinion on the case from an LIS perspective

- In librarianship a book or other document might be afforded special care for reasons, such as
 - Particularly important book history qualities
 - Beauty and originality
 - Rarity
 - Frailty
 - Special association with the writer or an owner.
- But this is arguably the role of the archivist or museum curator more than that of the librarian.
- Reasons for special treatment of a book, such as specific religious content, are effectively a distortion of librarianship's Article 19 mission 'to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media'.
- The text that a book carries might or might not be sacred, but the book itself is not.

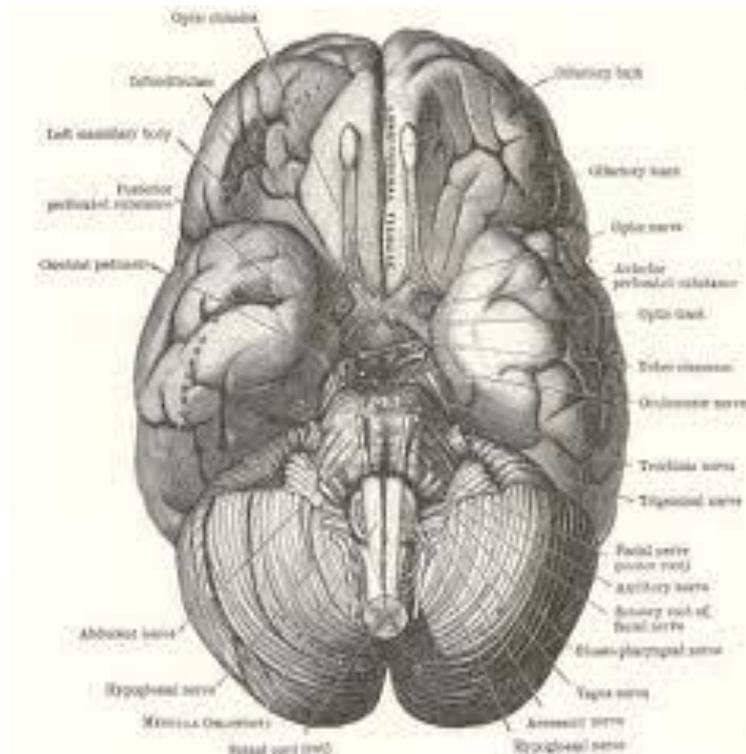
Neuroscience and Intellectual Freedom



An alternative approach

- If we accept that:
 - Cultures vary and most are not especially favourable to Intellectual Freedom, and
 - The majority of human adults do not value Intellectual Freedom highly, and
 - This presents real difficulties for library and information workers,
- Is there any kind of remaining universal rationale for Intellectual Freedom?
- There are helpful indications from modern scientific study of the brain.

The Brain



Twenty First Century Neuroscience

- Neuroscience has progressed through:
 - Case studies;
 - Non-intrusive experimentation;
 - Technology that tracks and measures brain activity, including
 - Positron emission tomography (PET)
 - Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)
 - Magnetoencephalography (MEG).
- Current knowledge represents only the early stages of a growing understanding of how the brain works.

Measurement technology



Popular Neuroscience

- An understanding of neuroscience is now available to the non-specialist in the form of:
 - Books explaining the science and exploring its implications;
 - Articles in newspapers, magazines and websites;
 - TV and radio broadcasts;
 - Exhibitions.
- There is a danger that popularisation distorts the significance of the research, but
- Approached cautiously there are valuable lessons regarding, for instance,
- The brain and childhood learning.

The brain and childhood learning



Brain development findings

- Findings relating to brain development in the child tell us about childhood learning and
- Recent findings suggest that as little as 40% of an individual's intelligence is due to inherited characteristics.
- The remaining 60% may therefore owe a great deal to the role of information, defined both as
 - Sensory perceptions, and
 - Ideas, encoded in language.

Neuroplasticity

- The ability of the brain to change and adapt
 - In childhood development, and
 - In response to damage, is called
- Neuroplasticity.
- This is an automatic process which will not occur normally unless there is the necessary external stimulus (information of all kinds).
- In the child, information flows stimulate the development of neural connectivity in the brain, whilst
- Deprivation of a free flow of information hinders development.

Consequences for the adult brain

- Brain processing speeds slow down in the adult, but
- The neural connections laid down in childhood provide for continuing powerful activity.
- The conclusion is that the freedom to acquire information and knowledge is essential for the developing child and the adult that the child will become.
- This identifies intellectual freedom as more than just an ethical principle.
- It is an essential influence on the development of human beings.
- Any potential that humans have to be imaginative, inventive, creative people relies on the influence of intellectual freedom in childhood.

Concluding thoughts

- Intellectual Freedom, as defined in Article 19, is not merely a philosophical concept.
- As a concept it is rejected or neglected
 - By many of the world's cultures,
 - By individuals across most of the spectrum of humanity, but
- A reading of current neuroscience suggests it is a biological imperative, which humanity ignores at its peril.
- Quite simply, without intellectual freedom, human potential is choked off.