

## The teaching profession: the light that illuminates

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Teachers and journalists are among the favourite targets of zealots and bigots of all stripes because they “foment” tolerance, understanding, freedom and truth. Teachers also encourage the “dangerous” practices of critical thinking, questioning, and free discussion.

There is nothing new about witch hunts, tracking down and attacking the best among us to weaken democracy and chill free thought.

What is new is the delivery system of hate and retribution.

### DANGERS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks have, in many cases, served human rights and democratic governance. They continue to be, for instance, a critical link among democracy activists in Belarus and Hong Kong. However, they can also pose a serious risk for democracy and our ability to live together.

Just as warfare has evolved from machetes and bows and arrows to automatic weapons and bombs, popular cyber warfare — with its disinformation and propaganda — is now conducted instantly and globally on the internet.



The internet has been developed and implemented for business purposes. It also harvests data, where the real money is made, to enable precision targeting of consumers. Its *raison d'être* was not free expression, but manipulation. Its marketing-oriented algorithms were used for social media. They had the effect of sorting us into groups in virtual bubbles that amplify our views and isolate us from other perspectives. They help homogenise opinions and polarise our societies.

Social networks need more than tweaking. It is past time for serious reflection and re-design of the information highway based on the public good, free discussion, and democratic institutions.

### FREEDOM TO TEACH

Samuel Paty was a victim of organised hate and disinformation. However, the ultimate target is our liberties and our democracy. There is no profession so intimately linked to the values and practice of citizenship as the teaching profession. That means that there is a compelling public interest and responsibility to protect those who practice it.

Countless other teachers have received threats and attempts at intimidation by students and parents without physical violence. However, creating a climate of fear chills the exercise of freedom and may even infringe

the freedom to teach. It can lead to self-censorship. The beheading of Samuel Paty reminded us one can die from teaching.

Teachers like him are on the front lines of the fight for decency and democracy. They should have the full support and encouragement of school authorities and leaders. They should never have to respond to brutality and hatred in isolation. Teachers should be respected by their governments, and by parents and students.

Teaching is a healing art. It brings understanding and tolerance. It spawns open minds, critical thinking, and active citizenship. It illuminates darkness.

Let us honour Samuel Paty.

His life's work was based on the understanding that knowledge and inquiry form the path to freedom and working and living together, just as light illuminates darkness.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared on the [Education International website](#)