

Statement in Support of the Right to Publish

Threats to boycott publishers undermine intellectual freedom and harm readers and writers.

As organizations dedicated to protecting freedom of expression, we write to comment on the calls for a boycott against Simon & Schuster because Threshold Editions, one of its imprints, has contracted to publish a book by Milo Yiannopoulos, a provocateur and self-described “supervillain,” whose views and statements are highly controversial and deeply offensive to many.

Calls for boycotts have become a familiar response to the publication of controversial books. Typically, such online campaigns go viral at lightning speed, instantly igniting a firestorm of criticism. We are aware of at least seven other similar situations involving threats or fears of boycotts, four of which were successful in having books withdrawn, delayed, revised, or not reprinted.

In the present case, the calls for a boycott stem not from the content of a book, which has not been published, but because of previous statements by the author which critics characterize as hate speech. The Chicago Review of Books has announced its intent to protest the publisher’s decision by refusing to review *any* books published by Simon & Schuster, even though that would deprive its readers of information about books from more than two dozen Simon & Schuster imprints, including Salaam Reads, which focuses on books with Muslim characters.

This kind of response will have a chilling effect on authors and publishers, which is undoubtedly the goal of those who support such boycotts. However, the suppression of noxious ideas does not defeat them; only vigorous disagreement can counter toxic speech effectively. Shutting down the conversation may temporarily silence disfavored views, but does nothing to prevent them from spreading and resurfacing in other ways.

Readers are of course free to criticize any book for any reason. They are likewise free to choose not to read any book that they think contains objectionable material, or to urge a boycott. Because other readers may disagree, however, publishers and writers need the freedom to express and disseminate ideas, even if they are controversial and offensive to some. We need not endorse the ideas contained in a book to endorse the right to express them.

That is the essence of freedom and democracy. As the Supreme Court observed 90 years ago:

[F]reedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth; ... without free speech and assembly, discussion would be futile; ... with them, discussion affords ordinarily adequate protection against the dissemination of noxious doctrine.

Endorsed by:

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January 5, 2017