Group philosophizes on free speech

By Zachary Jernigan
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Free speech is a contentious issue, especially when you’ve invited a dozen people to speak their minds about it.

Andrea Houchard, director of Northern Arizona University College of Arts & Letters’ Philosophy in the Public Interest program, stood before the twelve attendees in Sedona Public Library’s Si Birch Community Room on Friday, Feb. 6.

She outlined the rules for conduct as well as the oddity of having rules when participating in the evening’s Hot Topics Cafe, titled “What Shouldn’t We Say? The Limits of Free Speech.”

“This particular topic is interesting to us,” she said. Free speech, she added, is about expressing oneself without needing to restrict one’s tone or content. Yet, she added, “We ask people to be civil when discussing the topic.”

Houchard introduced the evening’s discussion leader, NAU Department of Philosophy Professor Jeff Downard.

“The reason we’re here is to try ideas out,” he said before setting out questions for discussion:

■ What limits, if any, should there be on free speech?
■ Why do we value free speech? And what competing values, if any, justify limiting it?
■ What place, if any, should hate speech have in a democratic society?
■ How should our local community respond to speech we deem harmful or offensive? What values support such responses?

As usual for Hot Topics Cafe discussions, answers were not sought by the discussion leader.

Instead, Downard offered examples — Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.’s 1919 Supreme court decision to restrict yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater; the recent deaths at Charlie Hebdo over satirical cartoons mocking religious figures — and asked participants whether they believed a right decision had been reached in allowing or restricting free speech.

“If it incites to damage, even emotional harm, then I’m against that,” Jawn McKinley said.

Ken Bork focused upon the Charlie Hebdo massacre, echoing several participants’ assertions of the value of free speech, but also noting that thoughtful people should “respect a major religious tradition.”

Downard asked if the Parisian magazine had made a wrong choice in allowing its artists to print images of Muhammad. “That seems like a high price to pay,” he said, referring to the 12 dead in response to the cartoons.

Bork shrugged and said that he believed the cartoonists should have been censored.

Downard narrowed the terms, asking his listeners if they support legislation restricting free speech or whether some other vehicle — public opinion, for instance — seemed like a possible solution.

“It seems like we might be inching toward a judicial reaction to hate,” McKinley responded. “Fifteen, 20 years ago, we didn’t have hate crimes .... Someone with no restrictions can reach millions of people. It’s disturbing to me that hate mongering can be delivered to millions of people with no restriction.”

After Downard’s closing summary of opinions, participant Tim Gandee said that the entire world was opening up to the idea of monitoring speech that harms others.

“Every country is at a different stage of this process,” he said.

For more information on Philosophy in the Public interest and to see a schedule of upcoming Hot Topic Cafes, visit nau.edu/ppi.

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