

Ellie Applegate
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Sony's *The Interview*: Freedom of Expression vs. National Security

In Sony's 2014 film, *The Interview*, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has a breakdown over his tenuous relationship with his father, bro-bonds over basketball and margheritas, and eventually embodies his favorite Katy Perry song by becoming a human firework when his helicopter is struck with a missile. The world leader, with whom the United States had already shared long-standing tensions, was rather displeased by this Hollywood cameo. Chaos ensued.

It may first be beneficial to introduce context to this controversy, starting with the company itself. Sony Pictures Entertainment (SPE) is a film- and media-production company born in 1987 when Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. was acquired by Sony Corporation (Kim, 2024). Its 2014 CEO was Michael Lynton; its current CEO is Ravi Ahuja (Kim, 2024). The film in question was co-directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg. It features Rogen himself and James Franco as entertainment figures recruited by the CIA to interview and ultimately assassinate Kim Jong Un. Per its genre, it is aptly categorized as an action-comedy, but this categorization is where the levity stops.

Due to hit big theaters on Christmas Day, Sony's post-film schedule was unexpectedly interrupted by a cyberattack orchestrated by an anonymous organization called the "Guardians of Peace" – whose national origin may have appeared obvious, but the North Korean government, nevertheless, denied all ties to the event and its perpetrators (Rushe, 2014). A Columbia University case study aptly called the GOP's attack "devastatingly and highly publicized" (Columbia University, n.d.). Unreleased scripts and copies were wiped into oblivion. Private data was leaked online, including personal employee data and confidential communications (Social Security numbers, passports, medical information, et cetera). Employees themselves were locked out of company computers, like knights barricaded from their own castles (Columbia University, n.d.). For all the assets pillaged, the GOP made sure to leave something behind, too – a message, one which threatened violence against the United States itself if Sony's film were still released as planned (Rushe, 2014). This threat was elevated further by invocations of 9/11 attacks, preying on the nation's past traumas and fear of future terrorist activities. To some, Sony's choice seemed obvious: cancel the film release entirely, end of discussion. However, in a country whose very First Amendment augments the values of free speech, this query is not so simple. Freedom of speech, freedom of creativity and expression, struck up against national security: this is the sort of right-versus-right dilemma one might expect to see in Rushworth M. Kidder's 1995 novel, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. What did Sony do? In the end, the company made a contestable sort of compromise – aborting the film's premiere from large theaters such as AMC and Cinemark, while still allowing an edited (i.e. lightly sensitized) version to be released in independent theaters and online (Rushe, 2014). To some, this choice was a cowardly retreat – a surrender of chief American values, an embarrassing submission after vague attempts at intimidation. To others, this was a wiser call; after all, shouldn't safety – national safety, moreover – take precedence?

In this composition, I will analyze this problem in the context of Kidder's most applicable paradigms (individual vs. community, truth vs. loyalty), consider all three ethical

frameworks in approaching resolution, offer a third alternative, assert my own beliefs apropos Sony's best strategy, and include any broader implications of the issue itself. While my main endeavor is to merely create a roadmap of this controversy – and to address all aforementioned areas – I do loosely contest that Sony's partial release of the film was an ethically balanced route, one which appropriately honors the values of both free expression and national security.

First and foremost, one might endeavor to ask the easiest question of all: which dilemma exactly *is* this? I believe a case could be made for all except, perhaps, justice vs. mercy, but individual vs. community and truth vs. loyalty strike me as the most prevalent here. Individual vs. community is very plain. For one, it is right that Sony should protect its own interests as an isolated corporation (both in defending its creative property and in collecting hard-earned profit), but it is also right that the broader American public be protected, as cancelling the film's release entirely offers the nation to which Sony belongs the best chance at avoiding further damages – violent or nonviolent – inflicted by angry North Korean officials or organizations. What about truth vs. loyalty? This paradigm is applicable in a more abstract form, as Kim Jong Un's portrayal, along with North Korea's portrayal as a whole, was grossly caricaturized for comedic purposes. It can be most expediently described as follows: it is right that Sony should express its own creative truths, even in satirical form, but it is synchronously right that the company should demonstrate loyalty to the American people by preserving their security (i.e. by placating tensions with North Korea). If we were to continue with this practice, Kidder's short-term vs. long-term paradigm is also loosely relevant: it is right that Sony should prioritize its immediate profit-related interests by releasing the film, but it is also right that Sony should consider the long-term geopolitical ramifications of doing so and withhold release. Having considered these two (three-ish) paradigms, we might thus consider which resolution approaches are most suitable.

Utilitarianism, deontology, virtue-ethics; I have failed to discriminate between the three as appropriate treatments for this dilemma, so all three will hence be considered. Utilitarianism has always struck me as the most straightforward, as one must only algebraically deduce which populace outweighs the other in the see-saw of "greater good" and put them first. Obviously, the larger group in this case is the entire United States – all 318 million citizens (per the 2014 U.S. Census Bureau) – whereas Sony itself is a much smaller party (Macrotrends, 2025). Stock Analysis estimates that Sony had around 142,000 employees that same year, and while this number presumably excludes a large number of external, or even temporary, stakeholders (actors, investors, other industry titles, etc.) the math is irrelevant; America itself both includes this party and, even minus those 200,000-ish people, tips the scale (Stock Analysis, 2025). As the Guardians of Peace were designated as an elite group of hackers – and, further, were linked by the FBI to North Korea despite claims otherwise – there seemed to be a very real threat to national security. Should more evidence of risk be required, one need only consider North Korea's own letter to the UN. Written by ambassador Ja Song Nam, the letter condemns the film as both an "undisguised sponsoring of terrorism as well as an act of war" and illustrates a level of provocation that borders total irrationality, one which tells the US just how seriously – how *personally* – North Korea has taken the whole affair (Beaumont-Thomas, 2014). What about deontology? How should Sony have reacted, were they to consider Kant's categorical imperative (and what would that

be here)? In the cultural context of the United States, it seems to me that the most uniformly correct route would have been to protect freedom of expression. Speech itself being upheld throughout history, regardless of what that speech contained or what the implications of that speech were – history seems to indicate that Sony had a strict duty to release the film in its original form. With regards to the final approach – virtue ethics – I actually found this the most contentious approach to unpack. Aristotle’s core question circles the drain like a dropped coin: What would a righteous person do? Someone striving for integrity, honesty, courage, justice – how would they, playing the role of a Sony decision-maker, respond to North Korea’s anger and threats? To me, the nuance is derived from which virtue-trait is given priority. David Hume’s primary virtues (nobility, decency, courtesy) might warrant the film’s blanket cancellation (Russell, 2012). Prioritizing friendships might necessitate the same. To picture an adequate virtue-based approach, one must consider Sony’s *own* preferred traits by looking at its mission statement. Per the company site, dreams and curiosity, diversity, and integrity are listed, and the company’s purpose is to “fill the world with emotion, through the power of creativity and technology” (Sony, 2025). Suffice to say, to remain true to Sony’s self-subscribed character, it should have plowed forward with the film’s release in its raw form – let the world enjoy, or suffer, any emotion it evokes. This course of action breaks the tie between utilitarianism and deontology.

Initially, Sony seemed to have only two options: release the film as is, or cancel the release completely – evaporate it from existence, lest North Korea retaliate in rage. The corporation managed to eke out a third alternative for itself, but this roundabout route actually followed an initial submission to North Korean pressure and was prompted only by harsh media critiques. Jimmy Kimmel, for one, tweeted that Sony’s cancellation was an “un-American act of cowardice that validates terrorist actions and sets a terrifying precedent”) (BBC News, 2014). Actor Rob Lowe similarly renounced this decision: “Wow. Everyone caved. The hackers won. An utter and complete victory for them. Wow.” (BBC News, 2014). What was Sony’s eventual compromise? Feeling the pressure, the company pivoted, still opting to withhold large cinema chain premieres – as well as its scheduled premiere in New York – but the film ultimately enjoyed a delayed release in independent theaters and online. A blessing in disguise? Despite initial projections for a severe profit loss, the online release alone reaped around \$40 million by 2015 (Vary, 2015). From my own perspective, I actually commend Sony’s response. I think it balances out the dilemma quite neatly. If I were to offer my own third alternative (or fourth, rather), I might suggest the following: the film could have been further fictionalized – i.e. by swapping out Kim Jong Un’s name and that of North Korea itself for something entirely fabricated – to continue on with big-screen releases as originally planned. Of course, this would not have been a guaranteed method in suppressing North Korean ire, as even this fictitious leader and country would have already been an established parody of reality. Further, this option would still entail some degree of self-censorship, of First Amendment surrender, but swinging to either absolute simply does not feel feasible in this case. Yes, national, Constitutional values were at risk. However, with national security *also* at risk – American livelihoods potentially on the line – throwing all caution to the wind just seems foolhardy, a trite retaliation against foreign intimidation that doubles as a bald retaliation against practicality. Intangible versus tangible; the former should not be so quickly prioritized, not if North Korea posed a real (or even

possible) threat. This is where I reiterate my subtle thesis: Sony Pictures responded as appropriately as it was able, given the circumstances.

Having now considered Kidder's applicable paradigms, appropriate resolutions, and both feasible and non-feasible solutions, a final question emerges: What were the broader implications of this dilemma? Surely, a controversy so big – big enough to even invoke the opinion of President Barack Obama (another criticism of Sony, surprisingly) – was not isolated in its effects (Rushe, 2014). I would categorize these effects as twofold: firstly, it evoked caution over the real-world geopolitical ramifications of Hollywood fiction; secondly, the resultant cyberattacks exposed the then-fragility of data security. Concerning the former, one might look to the cancellation of *Pyongyang* (due to star Steve Carell) that occurred in the immediate wake of this drama (BBC News, 2014). While this film was set in the genre of thriller – and likely would not have been very satirical at all – it is nonetheless evidence of Hollywood's spiked sensitivity to geopolitical relations. It was articulate proof of the realization that silly movies can affect real-world international tensions. It is important to note, however, that satire as an entity is apparently as durable as a kitchen roach – evidenced by the one-year-later production of *Julius Caesar* at Trinity Repertory Company in Rhode Island, which was determined to be an allegorical representation of Donald Trump's murder and had several audience members stricken (Gilbert, 2015). In short, *The Interview* and its succeeding cyberattacks raised awareness and evoked strong hesitation, but satire is unkillable. As a second, more literal implication of the controversy, the massive leaking of confidential employee data at the GOP's hands exposed extreme vulnerabilities in data security, but these vulnerabilities have been padded considerably over the course of the following decade (Columbia University, n.d.).

In this paper, I assessed how Sony's *The Interview* fits in the context of Kidder's ethical paradigms, determined how each resolution framework would apply, offered my own alternatives and speculations, and explored broader implications of the film's handling itself. From my own standpoint, I had a rather difficult time separating my personal liking for the film from what I reasonably think should have been done in response to the GOP's cyberattacks and accompanying threats. Further, I had an even more difficult time parsing through my own patriotic support for the First Amendment (and freedom of creativity, including satire, as a whole) and drawing the line. This paper could have been written in either light, honestly, but hindsight is what drew me to support, at the very least, the notion of compromise. I am alike Obama and other criticsors' in my scorn for total surrender to foreign pressure, but hindsight draws me to believe that – had the film been released, raw, in big theaters, without a second's hesitation – and real violence followed, the dilemma would be far less infused with patriotism.

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