

**JANUARY 2015**

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**ART  
CENSORSHIP**

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**ANWAR  
ODURO-KWARTENG**



**DEBATING MATTERS  
TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“ARTISTIC  
EXPRESSION  
SHOULD NEVER BE  
CENSORED”**

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The art censorship debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Organisations**

**Backgrounders**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

Censorship

Self Censorship

Trigger Warning

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
4  
5  
6

The extent to which society should impose limits on the ability of artists to express themselves is a debate which polarises opinion. The recent decision by several UK universities to ban the pop song ‘Blurred Lines’ from their student unions [Ref: [BBC News](#)] has brought the issue into sharp relief, with supporters of the ban suggesting that the song is degrading to women, and has: “...deeply sinister undertones” of misogyny and sexual violence, which some may not wish to hear [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Others though are critical of the move, with one commentator suggesting that: “...if you look to pop music for moral guidance, you’re an idiot” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. The censorship of art also reflects political and religious concerns. Famously, ‘The Satanic Verses’, a novel by author Salman Rushdie, was deemed blasphemous to Islam, and throughout 1989 the book was banned by various countries around the world, and the author himself is still subject to ongoing death threats [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. To the present day, various artists such as Ai Wei Wei continue to have their work censored and banned by authorities for either being subversive or for upsetting cultural or religious sensitivities [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. But critics of censorship argue that a fundamental aspect of free expression is allowing art that is: “...abhorrent, that shocks, disgusts and appals and causes offence” [Ref: [Index on Censorship](#)]. But how should we view this? Should artists have the right to shock and appal, or are there instances where their artistic license should be curtailed? Can some art be so offensive that banning or censoring is the right thing to do? Or should artistic expression always be allowed free reign, without any restriction?



### Art for art's sake?

As a retort to critics who wanted to see his work censored, nineteenth century writer Oscar Wilde stated that: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. A book is either well written, or badly written, that is all" [Ref: [Lit. Genius.com](#)]. For Wilde, art should be judged according to its artistic merit, and nothing more. However, the controversy surrounding the publication of 'The Satanic Verses' in 1988 tested that sentiment as it was deemed offensive to Islam, resulting in protests around the world [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Many felt the author was entitled to write the book, even though it caused offence [Ref: [Vanity Fair](#)], whilst others were less forgiving, questioning whether an artist really does have the right to offend on such a large scale. Children's author Roald Dahl claimed at the time that: "Clearly he has profound knowledge of the Muslim religion and its people and he must have been totally aware of the deep and violent feelings his book would stir up among devout Muslims. In other words, he knew exactly what he was doing...to my mind he is a dangerous opportunist" [Ref: [Telegraph India](#)]. In response to this view, one commentator suggests that: "...original art is never created in the safe middle ground, but always at the edge. Originality is dangerous. It challenges, questions, overturns assumptions, unsettles moral codes, disrespects sacred cows or other such entities. It can be shocking, or ugly, or...controversial" [Ref: [New Yorker](#)]. But how far should art go to be original? The controversy in 2010 about a series of Danish cartoons reignited that debate [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. And the decision by a Swedish gallery to exhibit a painting made from the stolen ashes of Holocaust victims, again asks us to assess what type of art we

find palatable, as well as questioning the extent to which artists have the right to be offensive [Ref: [New Statesman](#)].

### Decency Vs taste: Blurred Lines?

Supporters of the ban on 'Blurred Lines' insist that the song is crass and sexist, and "...perpetuates rape culture, and therefore has no place on our university campuses" [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], but critics say that it is sad that we feel the need to protect young men and women from a simple pop song [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. However, this furore highlights the delicate balance that artists must tread in relation to taste and decency. In a similar vein, there are calls from campaigners for controversial books containing sex, violence, bad language and offensive terms to have 'trigger warnings' on the covers. For advocates of such measures, it is not about censorship but accepting that art does not have the right to offend everyone, as one commentator points out: "Trigger warnings are fundamentally about empathy" [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. But trigger warnings could potentially stifle the creative output of writers if they are afraid that their work will come with a warning on the cover opponents argue, with writer Jay Caspian Kang observing that: "Any amount of guidance will lead to dull conformity" in literature [Ref: [New Yorker](#)]. Such concerns are heightened by the news that racial epithets are to be censored from the new editions of Mark Twain's 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' because: "...abusive racial insults that bear distinct connotations of permanent inferiority...repulse modern-day readers" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But do we lose something from novels when we seek to censor them retrospectively in such a way? After all, argues one critic, art



and literature are meant to push boundaries and make us think: “One thing a novel never is, is simple. That’s why we read them, because they are challenging and thoughtful” [Ref: [spiked](#)].

### Art, Politics and Self Censorship

For some, the result of restricting artistic expression is that artists will begin to self censor, which will dilute the quality, and narrow the scope of the art produced [Ref: [Independent](#)]. This, it is argued, is unfortunate because: “Art can only mirror the culture which produced it. It shows us all of the positive aspects of humanity, but it is also the duty of art to examine the uncomfortable, dark stuff. Sometimes art will be troubling, but then so too will the society it is depicting” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Yet others suggest that self-censorship can be seen simply as the artist being responsible. Reflecting on the Danish Cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, Sukhvinder Stubbs notes that far from being merely art: “Cartoons...can be a powerful means of catalysing and disseminating ideas, be they pertinently satirical or hideously warped. Cartoons were, for example, used extensively by the Nazis in their anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. If we view art from this perspective, it is not a thing in and of itself, to be judged by its own standards as Oscar Wilde suggests; but instead, has the power to influence; the power to be political. Art with a political message, such as Picasso’s Guernica painted in 1937 [Ref: [Pablo Picasso.org](#)], continue to evoke strong feelings [Ref: [Slate](#)], and today, political concerns about the power of art are shown by the way Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei is seen as being subversive by the government in Beijing [Ref: [BBC News](#)]; challenges to the orthodoxy are

seen as problematic in Ireland [Ref: [The Times](#)]; and in the last few weeks, Russia has banned the use of profanity in all art, a political move many feel is an attempt to distance Russian culture from: “The decadent West” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. So how should we view censorship in the arts? Should artists, musicians, playwrights and novelists have the space to express themselves, even if their work is challenging and offensive to some? Should artists moderate their work in the name of: “...discretion, good sense, good taste and goodwill” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? Or should we resist any attempt to dilute the content of an artist’s work?



# ESSENTIAL READING

4 of 6

NOTES

## FOR

[In defense of old racist art](#)

David Marcus *The Federalist* 21 July 2014

[Blurred Lines shows how zealously intolerant we've become](#)

Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 13 September 2013

[Censorship and the arts](#)

Julia Farrington *Independent* 31 May 2013

[On Censorship](#)

Salman Rushdie *New Yorker* 12 May 2012

## AGAINST

[The Yellowface of Mikado](#)

Sharon Pian Chan *Seattle Times* 13 July 2014

[The Whole Canon needs a trigger warning](#)

Sarah Ditung *New Statesman* 21 May 2014

[Why other universities should ban Blurred Lines](#)

Daisy Lindlar *Huffington Post* 30 November 2013

[Is this the most offensive art ever made?](#)

Kamila Kocialkowska *New Statesman* 6 December 2012

## IN DEPTH

[A fundamental Fight](#)

Paul Elie *Vanity Fair* 1 May 2014

[Taking the offensive: defending artistic expression](#)

Index on *Censorship* 13 May 2013

## ORGANISATIONS

[Index on Censorship](#)



## BACKGROUNDEERS

Whats Really important about Trigger Warnings  
Soraya Chemaly *Huffington Post* 20 July 2014

WTF! Russia bans swearing in the arts  
Miryam Omili *Guardian* 1 July 2014

Trigger Warnings: A gun to the head of literature  
Dr Tiffany Jenkins *spiked* 22 May 2014

Trigger Warnings and the novelists mind  
Jay Caspian Kang *New Yorker* 21 May 2014

Trigger Warnings: what we're really talking about  
Laurie Penny *New Statesman* 21 May 2014

Putins four dirty words  
David Remnick *New Yorker* 5 May 2014

Is this art too risky or offensive to display?  
Martha Rosenberg *Huffington Post* 28 April 2014

After 25 years  
*Telegraph India* 20 April 2014

How Salman Rushdie survived The Satanic Verses Fatwa  
*Vanity Fair* 14 April 2014

Blurred Lines: The most controversial song of the decade  
Dorian Lynskey *Guardian* 13 November 2013

25 years later: why the Rushdie affair still matters  
Todd Green *Huffington Post* 26 September 2013

Censorship is stifling Australia's freedom of expression  
Steve Cox *Guardian* 14 June 2013

Nothing, however vile deserves censorship  
Nick Cohen *Guardian* 16 September 2012

Censoring Mark Twain's 'N' word is unacceptable  
David Messent *Guardian* 5 January 2011

National Portrait Gallery bows to censors  
Blake Gopnik *Washington Post* 30 November 2010

How one book ignited a culture war  
Andrew Anthony *Guardian* 11 January 2009

The freedom that hurts us  
Sarah Joseph *Guardian* 3 February 2006

Its about discretion and good taste  
Sukhvinder Stubbs *Guardian* 3 February 2006

Whats so controversial about Picasso's Guernica?  
David Cohen *Slate* 6 February 2003

Oscar Wilde famous quotes  
*Lit Genius.com*

Guernica  
*Pablo Picasso.Org*

Satanic Verses controversy  
Wikipedia

5 of 6

NOTES



## IN THE NEWS

Painting removed from exhibition because of female public hair

*Independent* 8 July 2014

Google censors album cover

*Independent* 8 July 2014

Putin Law bans words even Pushkin used

*Moscow Times* 1 July 2014

Japanese artist arrested for distributing 3D images of her genitals

*Huffington Post* 15 June 2014

Council bans gay art from exhibition

*The Times* 8 June 2014

Scared artists are self censoring says Sir Nicholas Serota

*Independent* 30 May 2014

Russia law bans all swearing in the arts

*BBC News* 5 May 2014

Censor cast stricter eye over suggestive dance videos

*The Times* 14 January 2014

Nude artwork censored in Berlin due to religious sensitivities

*Huffington Post* 15 November 2013

UCL becomes another university to ban Blurred Lines

*BBC News* 4 November 2013

Ai Wei Wei under house arrest

*BBC News* 6 November 2011

New editions of Huckleberry Finn to have offensive words replaced

*Guardian* 5 July 2011

What the Muhammad cartoons portray

*BBC News* 2 January 2010

Japanese publisher of Rushdie book found slain

*New York Times* 13 July 1991

12 die in Bombay in anti Rushdie riots

*New York Times* 25 February 1989

Ayatollah sentences author to death

*BBC News* 14 February 1989

6 of 6

NOTES



## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX  
WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**