

MAY 2016

**FREE SPEECH ON
SOCIAL MEDIA**

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“THERE SHOULD BE
LIMITS TO FREE
SPEECH ON SOCIAL
MEDIA”**

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 Social Media debate in context

Essential reading

Organisations

Backgrounders

Audio/Visual

In the news

KEY TERMS

[Gamergate](#)

[Internet Troll](#)

INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

NOTES

1
1
2
4
4
5
6
6

Free speech, and the debate about the extent to which it should be moderated, if at all, is one which continues to polarise opinion. Online, the argument surrounding the limits of free speech focusses primarily on social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter, who are coming under increasing pressure from critics to prevent so called ‘trolls’ from having a platform to abuse and offend people on their sites [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. With recent controversies such as rapper Azealia Banks having her Twitter account suspended for racially offensive comments [Ref: [Guardian](#)], many now question whether the online world should be, “the flag bearer of free for all freedom of speech” [Ref: [Forbes](#)] any longer, or if online free speech has gone too far and needs to be reined in. Instead of the internet being a forum for open dialogue and discourse, opponents argue that too often free speech online actually takes the form of: “Threatening, homophobic, racist, sexist abuse (which) can actually stifle debate and lead to censorship – with some individuals not willing to say things that might provoke abuse.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]

However, others such as journalist Brendan O’Neill are concerned by these developments, and suggest that the debate about free speech online epitomises our times. He argues that we are now told that we need protecting from distasteful and challenging views, ideas and opinions, that we should all feel ‘safe’ online, and from this perspective, “the internet is depicted as a terrifying sphere, people are re-imagined as vulnerable, and a select group of the switched on fashion themselves as the moral cleansers of web life.” [Ref: [spiked](#)]

In light of this, how should we view free speech online? Are critics right that freedom of expression online has become a smokescreen for hateful and abusive views, and should be curtailed for the good of all users? Or should people be allowed to express themselves in whatever way they see fit online, even if it is offensive and rude, without fear of censure? Should free speech be limited online?



Free speech and the internet

From its inception, the internet was envisaged as a domain that facilitated the free dissemination of ideas and information across borders – with the aim of giving everyone the opportunity to express themselves freely. Some fear that these principles are being lost in the current discussion about free speech online, especially when considering internet independence pioneer John Perry Barlow’s statement in 1996, that: “We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.” [Ref: [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#)] But is, and indeed should the internet, be a distinct sphere, free from the moral guidelines of acceptable speech in the outside world? Some argue that the anonymity of the web, allows people to disseminate offensive opinions to complete strangers, and that, “the freedom to invent a new identity is, like Plato’s ring of Gyges, taken as a freedom to slip free of all morality.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Similarly, in 2011, then President of France Nicholas Sarkozy declared that the internet needed to be civilised and brought into line because it, “is not a parallel universe which is free from the rules of law or ethics or any of the fundamental principles that must govern, and do govern the social lives of our democratic states” [Ref: [Arstechnica](#)]. And with incidents such as Gamergate [Ref: [Time Magazine](#)], and accusations of free speech allowing for the abuse and bullying of women and minorities in particular on social media platforms [Ref: [Guardian](#)], is it right in principle that we should look to moderate language and speech to combat this?

The right to troll?

Amid high profile cases of Twitter trolling [Ref: [Daily Mirror](#)] [Ref: [Guardian](#)], writer and journalist Laurie Penny is critical of the contemporary debate surrounding free speech on the internet. She questions the notion that: “People should be free to write and publish whatever they want online”, and instead argues that the discussion should focus on, “at what point one person’s freedom of expression impinges of the freedom of another” [Ref: [Al Jazeera](#)]. From this perspective, some would argue that free speech as an abstract concept is, “relatively noncontroversial” [Ref: [Al Jazeera](#)], but that when a commitment to free speech means that people are free to abuse, bully and offend others online, without consequence, we have to think very carefully about what that means practically. Journalist Suzanne Moore is sympathetic to this view, and she suggests that the online world is yet to catch up with the outside world on how to mediate between free speech and offence. She concedes that unfortunately: “Trolling seems to be viewed as an acceptable price to pay for having a voice, for the illusion of freedom.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Similarly, for those critical of the contemporary online discourse, the cost of allowing people to say whatever they want to whomever they want, anonymously, impacts on the nature of political debate more broadly. Addressing this point, columnist Owen Jones says that: “There’s scrutiny of ideas, and then there’s something else” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], going on to conclude that the effect of free speech online is to “coarsen, even poison, political debate” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Others though are not so sure about this assessment, with one commentator warning that: “Online abuse is a real problem; but so is the danger that it may become an excuse for silencing unpopular opinions and ‘offensive’

THE FREE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 6

NOTES

expression.” [Ref: [Observer](#)]

Free speech: no if’s, no but’s?

For supporters of free speech, the concept is inalienable, and should apply online and off. For instance, Willard Foxton argues that it is fine to judge certain things as being offensive, and uses the example of his disdain for racist posts on Facebook to highlight this – but notes that fundamentally, “we respect their right to protest, to freedom of thought and speech for good reasons in real life – I don’t see how we can remain true to those values if we start pushing racists off the internet, for the crime of having ‘bad’ views.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] This censorious climate, according to critics, has culminated in the banning of certain individuals from online platforms such as Twitter for being rude and abusive [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)], as well as accusations that social media companies censor controversial opinions [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] to avoid offending some of their users. For supporters of free speech online, these developments are deeply problematic, because once we start deciding that certain views are too offensive, and must be limited or moderated, free speech ceases to mean anything at all. However, in an opinion piece written in the Washington Post, a senior Twitter official acknowledged that some use the cloak of free speech to be hateful and offensive to others online, cautioning that: “Freedom of expression means little as our underlying philosophy if we continue to allow voices to be silenced because they are afraid to speak up.” [Ref: [Washington Post](#)] Others though dismiss these concerns completely, with one commentator stating that: “In their twisted world, free speech is censorship, and censorship is free speech”, declaring that: “The bottom line is this: too

much liberty is always, but always better than too little.” [Ref: [spiked](#)] So should we embrace the messiness of free speech on social media, because: “If the biggest inconvenience of internet freedom is that losers tell you you’re stupid or ugly, and should be punched, then we should consider ourselves very lucky indeed” [Ref: [spiked](#)]? Or is it right and responsible that tech companies and government begin looking to moderate speech online to protect users from offence and bullying?



ESSENTIAL READING

4 of 6

NOTES

[Online abuse: how different countries deal with it](#)

Guardian 12 April 2016

FOR

[Is it too late to stop trolls trampling over our entire political discourse?](#)

Owen Jones *Guardian* 13 April 2016

[The Guardian view on online abuse: building the web we want](#)

Guardian 11 April 2016

[It's time for the FBI to prosecute Gamergate trolls](#)

Brianna Wu *Daily Dot* 12 March 2015

[Online bullying isn't freedom of speech](#)

Laurie Penny *Al Jazeera* 22 February 2014

AGAINST

[Why has the Guardian declared war on internet freedom?](#)

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 14 April 2016

[Social justice warriors confuse cybercrime with unpleasant speech](#)

Cathy Young *Observer* 10 March 2016

[Is the internet evolving away from freedom of speech?](#)

Kalev Leetaru *Forbes* 15 January 2016

[Criminalising online trolls is absurd, even if what they say is vile](#)

Willard Foxton *Telegraph* 9 February 2015

ORGANISATIONS

[Electronic Frontiers Foundation](#)



BACKGROUNDEERS

5 of 6

NOTES

[I don't fear the trolls - I enjoy their absurdities](#)

Lucy Worsley *Telegraph* 13 April 2016

[What is the best way to stop internet trolls?](#)

Chris Baraniuk *BBC News* 21 March 2016

[Receiving online abuse has now become a badge of honour](#)

Douglas Murray *Spectator* 2 March 2016

[The death of internet freedom: mourning the demise of a 20yr old dream](#)

Kalev Leetaru *Forbes* 16 February 2016

[In the age of ISIS, will you lose freedoms of Arab Spring?](#)

Rebecca MacKinnon *CNN* 25 January 2016

[Twitter, in punishing a controversial user, stokes freedom of speech debate](#)

Yoree Koh *Wall Street Journal* 11 January 2016

[Twitter tackles the free speech conundrum](#)

Emily Bell *Guardian* 10 January 2016

[MP's should stop whining about abuse from online trolls and celebrate free speech](#)

Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 7 December 2015

[Who, what, why: What laws currently cover trolling?](#)

BBC News 20 October 2015

[Why Facebook needs to do more to protect you from online abuse](#)

Fiona R. Martin & Jonathon Hutchinson *The Conversation*
17 September 2015

[Controversial cyberbullying law passes](#)

Nicholas Jones *New Zealand Herald* 30 June 2015

[When do Twitter block lists start infringing on free speech?](#)

Matthew Ingram *Fortune* 12 June 2015

[Twitter executive: here's how we're trying to stop abuse while preserving free speech](#)

Vijaya Gadde *Washington Post* 16 April 2015

[What is #Gamergate and why are women being threatened about video games?](#)

Eliana Dockterman *Time Magazine* 16 October 2014

[Does free speech give us the right to anonymously troll strangers?](#)

Suzanne Moore *Guardian* 6 October 2014

[Twitter's failure to tackle trolls is an insult to the likes of Stan Collymore](#)

Anne Perkins *Guardian* 22 January 2014

[Involving the police is not the way to teach trolls a lesson](#)

Robert Sharp *New Statesman* 31 July 2012

[France attempts to civilise the internet; internet fights back](#)

Nate Anderson *Arstechnica* 24 May 2011

IN THE NEWS

[Azealia Banks suspended from Twitter following racist attack on Zayn Malik](#)

Guardian 12 May 2016

[Azealia Banks targets Zayn Malik with 'racist' and 'homophobic' abuse](#)

Independent 11 May 2016

[Facebook hides conservative news from its homepage, former worker allege](#)

Telegraph 10 May 2016

[Senior Tory calls on government to overhaul internet abuse laws](#)

Guardian 13 April 2016

[UK plans to prosecute fake online profile abusers](#)

Cybersmile 4 March 2016

[Stan Collymore takes to Twitter to mock internet troll](#)

Daily Mirror 19 February 2016

[Twitter planning 'regular and consistent action' to curb harassment and abuse](#)

Guardian 9 February 2016

[Internet trolling sees 150 people jailed](#)

Sky News 24 May 2015

[Five internet trolls a day convicted in UK as figures show ten-fold increase](#)

Telegraph 24 May 2015

[Twitter boss admits company 'sucks' at tackling trolls](#)

Telegraph 5 February 2015

[Internet trolls face up to two years in jail under new laws](#)

BBC News 19 October 2014

[Teenager issued with harassment warning over tweets sent to Tom Daley](#)

Guardian 31 July 2012

6 of 6

NOTES

AUDIO/VISUAL

[The morality of the imagination](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 7 March 2015

[The moral code of social media](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 17 November 2012

[Morality and social networks](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 31 March 2012



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS
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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

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.



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

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