

## **Debate Topic: There Should be no limitations to free speech online or otherwise**

**Introduction:** I believe, granting limitless authority for free speech can give rise to anarchy. Even though putting fewer restrictions on the speech can promote free exchange of ideas and unmasking of unlawful activities. The alarming question here is, if there are no restrictions on free speech, to what extent can a person exploit this power? I believe that the most detrimental outcomes of unrestricted free speech online are spread of radical hate speech, vulgarity, cyberbullying, infringement and misinformation.

**Hate Speech Argument:** It is evident that marginalized groups are often victims of hate speech. For instance, across the African continent, the marginalized groups such as nonnationals and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) are known to be targeted by extremists. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in 2014 passed a resolution acknowledging that discrimination, acts of violence and other violations of human rights continue to be committed on people in many regions of Africa due to their actual or inferred sexual orientation and gender identity. The resolution also instructs all states to completely end acts of abuse and violence committed by both state and non-state actors. Furthermore, in one high-profile case, the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) provided evidence suggesting that the homophobic hate speech incidents have caused psychological harm to the victims. (Melanie Judge, 2017) Therefore, the restrictions in freedom of speech are in fact protecting the marginalized communities from being targeted. A more serious repercussion of granting freedom of speech is radicalization. Consider the most recent case of Orlando shooting wherein a security guard of a gay nightclub was brainwashed by ISI to kill people of marginalized groups. (Time, 2016) If proliferation of such radical hate speech is not restricted, it might promote more such incidents. Such communication is a direct **threat to National Security**. I believe the National Security of a country is of utmost importance and a direct threat might provoke war.

**Obscenity Argument:** The First Amendment protects the freedom of speech and the Supreme Court necessitates the government extensive reasoning if it tries to regulate the content of speech. However, there are certain types of speech that are unprotected such as commercial speech, obscenity, fighting words, and illegal action. (Legal Information Institute, 2017) The United States of America has separate laws across all fifty states for governing the obscene material. This is because it is subjective as to what can be truly called as obscene. However, some categories of obscenity such as child porn are universally agreed to be offensive. (The United States Department of Justice, 1998) The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other activists fight for defending freedom for sexually oriented expression and supports women's rights, reproductive freedom, and lesbian and gay rights. Even though these activists fight for freedom of speech and challenge the cyber censorship laws, they unanimously agree that child pornography should be illegal. (ACLU, 2011) The other categories of obscenity that are unprotected include disgusting words or pictures, indecent material or artistic expression. (Skovron, 1990) Even though such obscenity is subjective, in certain instances we outright know that such obscenity should not be tolerated. For instance, recently an incident in Syracuse University came to light wherein someone had created graffiti using language that was derogatory to Asian individuals. (The Washington Post, 2019) A swastika drawn from the snow was also found in front of a student apartment in Syracuse on that same day. Syracuse University has become quite familiar with such disturbing reports in their privately owned properties. However, no strict actions are taken against the perpetrators. Incidents like these engender fear in the minds of marginal communities. (The Atlantic, 2015) The question raised here is, should such categories of free speech be protected or be condemned?

**Misinformation Argument:** With the rise in digital technology across the world, a grave concern is being raised about the spread of false information. (Hunt Allcott, 2019) If there are no laws to validate what said is correct, we are encouraging inaccurate information to be deliberately used for deceiving people. For instance, Cambridge Analytica exploited data collected from millions of people across the world using Facebook to target them with political messages and misinformation. (The Guardian, 2019) Cambridge Analytica was paid 6 million US dollars by the Trump campaign for this propaganda. (Wired, 2017) As a result of the psychographic targeting and personality profiling, the Trump campaign benefited from the fears of American people. Besides manipulation of elections, the main concern that was raised from this incident was about racism being used in disinformation and propaganda campaigns. (PBS, 2015) I, therefore, believe that speech needs to be validated before being presented to the public.

**Questions for the other side:** The first question that I would like to ask the other team would be, how do you envision a digital world without any government to be? To maintain the order within this world, at least some restrictions on information and speech would be required. If the other team truly believes that no such restrictions are required, I would give an example of the two consecutive Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand. In this incident, the gunman live streamed the first attack. (BBC, 2019) Should display of such extreme and violent acts be allowed in the name of free speech?

The second question that I would like to ask the opposition is, how would you tackle misinformation without limitations on freedom of speech? I believe that the most obvious answer would be to trust word of mouth. To argue, I would like to share an example of bad actors taking advantage of journalists to spread misinformation. Citizens rely on Media professionals for authenticity of the news. However, these professionals are often manipulated by bad actors for their profits. During the 2016 US elections, the internet was flooded with fake news, consisting of written pieces and recorded segments that promoted incorrect information or spread conspiracy theories. Some new channels published reports highlighting examples of fake news, hoaxes, and misinformation. (Journalist's Resource, 2017) Before publishing these reports, it was the duty of new reporters to validate these occurrences. I feel that in answering the above two questions, the other side would agree that restrictions should be made on freedom of speech at least to some extent.

**Possible arguments made by the Opposition:** The argument that the opposition most likely will make is that freedom should be given to citizens and corporate companies to expose unlawful activities in the active government. I partially agree with this point. I believe right amount of authority should be given to the civilians in order to express their grievances against the government. The Whistleblower Protection Act safeguards the whistleblowers who report probable existence of activities that violate law, rules, and regulations. However, the government is critical of not protecting the whistleblowers when they leak classified information that could endanger civilians. (Frontline, 2014) Another argument that the opposition might make is that should the ruling government be given the authority to suppress messages which are not in their favor? I agree with the point that there might be some grey areas wherein the ruling government might be violating the freedom of speech. This calls for more robust policies of freedom of speech. However, I believe there should be suppression of messages on social media networks if they relate to hate speech or cyberbullying (Dorothy L. Espelage, 2016).

**Conclusion:** Recent incidents demand more robust policies for free exchange of ideas and unmasking of unlawful activities. There is always going to be a tradeoff between unrestricted speech and security. But the alarming question here is, should we support categories of free speech that endanger national security and raise fear in the minds of marginal communities?

**Count:** 1253

## References

- ACLU. (2011, May 26). *We Must Combat Child Pornography Without Abandoning Online Privacy*. Retrieved from ACLU: <https://www.aclu.org/blog/national-security/we-must-combat-child-pornography-without-abandoning-online-privacy>
- BBC. (2019, March 16). *Christchurch shootings: Social media races to stop attack footage*. Retrieved from BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-47583393>
- Dorothy L. Espelage, J. S. (2016). Cyberbullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts: Current Knowledge and Future Directions. *SAGE Journal*, 374-380. doi:10.1177/0706743716684793.
- Frontline. (2014, May). *United States of secrets*. Retrieved from Frontline: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/united-states-of-secrets/>
- Hunt Allcott, M. G. (2019). Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media. *Research & Politics* (p. doi:10.1177/2053168019848554). SAGE Journal.
- Journalist's Resource. (2017, September 1). *Fake news and the spread of misinformation: A research roundup*. Retrieved from Journalist's Resource: <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/internet/fake-news-conspiracy-theories-journalism-research/>
- Legal Information Institute. (2017). *First Amendment*. Retrieved from Cornell Law: [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/first\\_amendment](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/first_amendment)
- Melanie Judge, J. A. (2017). Psychology and hate speech: a critical and restorative encounter. *South African Journal of Psychology* (p. doi: 10.1177/0081246317728165). SAGE Journals.
- PBS. (2015, October 1). *A decade after Prophet Muhammad cartoons, tension over free expression endures*. Retrieved from PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/10-years-later>
- Skovron, J. E. (1990). Obscenity and the law. *Springer*, 139–150.
- The Atlantic. (2015, November). *The New Intolerance of Student Activism*. Retrieved from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/the-new-intolerance-of-student-activism-at-yale/414810/>
- The Guardian. (2019, March 17). *Cambridge Analytica a year on: 'a lesson in institutional failure'*. Retrieved from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-year-on-lesson-in-institutional-failure-christopher-wylie>
- The United States Department of Justice. (1998). *CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO U.S. FEDERAL LAW ON OBSCENITY*. Retrieved from The United States Department of Justice: <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-obscenity>
- The Washington Post. (2019, November 15). *Syracuse University hit with racist graffiti, vandalism and a swastika — all in just eight days*. Retrieved from The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/11/15/syracuse-university-hit-with-racist-graffiti-vandalism-swastika-all-just-eight-days/>
- Time. (2016, June). *These 5 Facts Explain How the Orlando Shooting Has Polarized the U.S.* Retrieved from Time: <https://time.com/4370233/orlando-shooting-isis-gay-rights-political-polarization/>

Wired. (2017, October 26). *What Did Cambridge Analytica Really Do for Trump's Campaign?* Retrieved from Wired:  
<https://www.wired.com/story/what-did-cambridge-analytica-really-do-for-trumps-campaign/>