

Free Speech Debate's highlights of 2015

Neil Dullaghan sums up a year of conflict and controversy for free speech, catalogued on our website.



In 2015 there were many issues surrounding how we conceive of and protect free speech, from the tensions between religion and free speech to the censorship of offensive content, but a central debate across the year was about the balance between the right to free speech and the potential harm of the speech itself. This debate spanned the range of content-producers, from traditional print mass media to user-generated social media.

2015 began with Islamist terrorist assassinations of Charlie Hebdo employees in Paris and Free Speech Debate's own Timothy Garton Ash sparked a [discussion](#) about how the media can best respond so that the "assassin's veto" does not prevail. He argued "We do not resolve our differences by violence. We do it by speech." Furthermore, he placed the blame squarely on the terrorists "The assassins, not the cartoonists, have brought this upon the image of the Prophet." Ian McEwan, one of Britain's best known novelists, [told](#) Free Speech Debate why freedom of expression is not religion's enemy but its protector. In Europe "The freedom that allows the editors and journalists of Charlie Hebdo their satire is exactly the same freedom that allows Muslims in France to worship and express their views openly." This was just the beginning of the debate.

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Free speech is hard, it's noisy and bruising sometimes

It may be that much like Christianity pre-Enlightenment, Islam today is “experiencing its own version of a totalitarian moment”, which gives rise to the violence we see. Supporting free speech is “hard, it's noisy and bruising sometimes”, but it is the only alternative to violence when so many worldviews cohabit the same space.

Leslie Green's [talk](#) reminded us that the links between religion, free speech, and violence extended beyond Charlie Hebdo and Islam in 2015. He cited the Buddhist ideas of avoiding false, abusive, and divisive speech, echoed by Senior Research Fellow at Oxford, Matthew J Walton, in his [discussion](#) of the other side of the coin, “right speech”. Meanwhile Giles Fraser, commentator and Anglican priest, [spoke to us](#) about whether free speech can be considered a “Christian value”, and on his experiences of exercising his right to free speech as a priest of the Church of England.

This issue of censorship was a key theme of 2015, and centred around the fear of causing offence to the state or to others. In print media, we [asked](#) whether the Charlie Hebdo cartoons should be republished or not and what the dangers were of republishing books like [Mein Kampf](#), which became copyright-free at the end of 2015. In digital media, the Indian government banned the film “India's Daughter”, a BBC documentary about a notorious gang rape, on the grounds that it was “encouraging and inciting violence against women” and could lead to “a huge public outcry and serious law and order problem.” However, support for the ban in India came not only from a state with a [long history](#) of censoring films, but also from citizens [who justified](#) curbing the free speech of “anyone trying to abuse our nation's dignity and pride”. India also witnessed the striking down of a section of law that restricted free speech via electronic communication, but in the same year 16-year old Amos Yee of Singapore was arrested for [uploading a video](#) to YouTube that insulted the countries' late Lee Kuan Yew. His lawyers argued the law he was charged under was not appropriate as it was aimed at “peddlers and purveyors of pornography”.

2015 also saw a new conversation developing in the digital era about “rape pornography” and “revenge porn”. Offences criminalizing the [publication of private sexual images](#) (commonly called “revenge porn”) and the [possession of pornographic images of rape](#) came into force in Britain in spring 2015. However, the law contained a number of sources of uncertainty. Freedom of speech may be considered part of the public interest but it ["remains to be seen whether this is merely a hypothetical danger or will become a barrier for victims"](#).

This debate between an unconditional right to free speech and the need to protect potential victims of speech, common throughout the year, was captured in a Free Speech debate event held at the end of 2015 on “no-platforming”. While discussants debated whether there was a distinction between a right to speak and the provision of a platform, we also [moved the debate](#) from the choice of whether to emphasise an abusers' freedom of speech—to one where we immediately concede this freedom, but discuss the impact of such abuse on civil discussion. In the digital realm, the Federal Communications Commission of the United States clearly took one side of this debate

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when it [published rules](#) to protect the principle of net neutrality and ensure that the internet remains an open platform for free speech. However, we were also [reminded](#) that even in 2015 the progress towards universal free speech is not linear. Leftist politicians in Latin America used all manner of laws, rhetoric, and propaganda to censor media outlets, silence dissidents, and limit free speech in this part of the world.

2015 saw the opening of new areas of debate and pushing of the boundaries of what we consider free speech, but it also featured the resilience of some demarcating lines and made clear that free speech is not an uncontested concept.

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