

The project



Timothy Garton Ash explains the thinking behind this project, how the website works and how we hope people around the world will participate.

Free expression in an interconnected world

In the beginning, human beings could only communicate as far as they could shout and wave. As we learned to draw, write and print, then through new technologies such as the telephone, radio and television, the circle widened from tens to millions. With the internet and mobile phones, we can now reach and be reached by up to four billion other human beings. Never was there such a chance for free expression as this.

Yet this interconnected world also gives unprecedented opportunities for paedophiles, threats of

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violence and gross intrusions into our private lives. So we need to talk about how we can best use this freedom. What limits should there be to what we say, write and show? What should be regulated by law, and what left to standards of behaviour that we set and try to keep ourselves? Who should decide?

The issue here is not just the possibilities opened up by the new technologies of information and communications. It is also what free speech norms can be agreed on by people in the geopolitical west (or “global north”), and those in the rising east and south. In an increasingly post-western world, there is a crying need for a global conversation engaging people, and not just governments, from east and west, north and south. Only by having this conversation, in a frank, open, well-informed way, can we discover what is – or could become – genuinely universal and what remains stubbornly local. Only by talking and listening, across all frontiers, can we work out what we ourselves really think. Many of us will be hearing the relevant arguments for the first time. We cannot make up our minds properly until we have.

To give a clear structure, we have organised this debate around ten principles for global free expression. These have been thrashed out in discussions with free speech experts, lawyers, political theorists, theologians, philosophers, activists and journalists from across the world. They have been revised in hours of detailed work with [our team](#) of current Oxford graduate students, including native speakers of all the 13 major languages in which the site’s editorial content appears. We have tried very hard to make the principles short, clear and comprehensible in all these languages. These draft principles both complement and qualify each other. They need to be understood as an interlocking set. We cannot emphasise too strongly that this is just a first attempt at drafting some rules-of-thumb for what we should or should not be free to express, and in what manner we may choose express it, in a world where everybody is becoming neighbours with everybody else.

Inevitably, some will decry this as a western “imperialist” project. We would strongly dispute that. The fact that freedom of expression first became effectively institutionalised, and protected by the rule of law, in the modern west, does not mean that it is a value alien to or incompatible with other cultures. “To block people’s mouths is worse than blocking a river,” says Duke Zhao to King Li in the fourth century BCE Chinese Discourse of States. In the 1570s, when Europeans were massacring each other in wars of religion, the Indian emperor Akbar was meeting with the learned men of many religions to debate the relative virtues of their faiths.

Precisely if we believe in the universalist promise of the Enlightenment, the time has come to work towards a more genuinely universal universalism. One way to do that is to advance principles that we believe both should and can apply for all women and men everywhere, whatever their nationality, religion or cultural heritage – and then be open to revisions, challenges and alternatives.

How this website is structured

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Each principle is accompanied by an explanatory essay in which I say a little more about the issues it addresses, give a few examples and links to other sources, and highlight points for discussion. I emphasise “a little”. Many of these issues have been the subject of learned political, legal and philosophical debate for centuries. In a world transformed by electronic communication and mass migration, old questions are posed anew. There is much more to be said on every subject. These are just my short personal introductions, to help start an informed debate. If you want to learn more, please [read my book](#), *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*. If you get it as an e-book, it has links to all sorts of fascinating material, both on the site and across the internet.

Crucially, we then have case studies – many of them written by our students – which connect these necessarily general principles to real life experiences from around the world. Without these examples, this could all seem abstract and wishy-washy. Only by working out what we think on these individual cases can we determine what the principles really mean. With your help, the list of case studies will grow as the debate progresses.

Each principle begins with the word “We”. Who are “We”? “We” in this context are the world’s citizens and netizens. So “We” means you. Traditionally, free speech debates have focused on what states should or should not allow by law. That is the target of many efforts by groups campaigning for free speech. Our project has learned a lot from their work, but this is not our main focus.

Rather, we are trying to get at the underlying core ideas, or norms, which should inform the way in which we individual men and women choose to express ourselves freely in such an interconnected world. Some of these do need to be translated into the detailed, technical and legal language of states, courts, international agreements and organisations. However, it is at least as important for these principles to be reflected in the community standards of social networks, the editorial practice of media, and our own myriad individual interactions – whether on-line or in person.

So these are intended to be guidelines that we choose to follow in our triple capacity as citizens (influencing our own governments and parliaments); as netizens (influencing the media and communications organisations which would not exist if we did not use their services); and simply as human beings, interacting every day with other unique women and men.

To enrich the debate, we shall constantly endeavour to bring in new voices from a wide range of places and viewpoints. Some of our commentators will be prominent, others less widely known. We will bring you video and audio of these comments, and of events which we organise, or in which we participate, around the world. We will also react to current developments and news stories that illuminate free speech choices.

How you can participate

At the heart of the project is you, the citizens and netizens of all countries. Free Speech Debate

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aims to combine expertise and openness. We are supported by a group of expert [advisers](#) and by the intellectual resources of [Oxford University](#) – but expertise and openness are not necessarily separate, let alone opposing poles. Crowdsourcing sometimes produces better, more authoritative answers than the lone researcher. Moreover, since we are seeking principles on which people from different countries, cultures, faiths and political tendencies can agree, every opinion counts.

We hope you will have a sense of being in conversation with contributors to the site, as well as with prominent intellectuals and specialists from diverse cultures and perspectives. In the [What's missing?](#) section, we invite you to highlight what important principles you think are missing from our list, and to suggest new areas and ways of thinking about them. Quite a few subjects didn't make it to the top ten: obscenity and pornography in general; child pornography in particular; advertising; intellectual property. Should they have? What else demands a principle of its own?

Please use the opportunity to select a default language from the bar at the very top of the site. The 13 languages in which the editorial content and navigation tools on the site are presented cover more than 80% of the world's current internet users. For more on this, and how the translation is done, see [Our languages](#). Note that new editorial content will be posted initially in English, and there may be some delay before it appears in your chosen language. Video and audio will mainly be in the original language, with some subtitling in English.

If you want to comment, which we hope you will, we ask you to go through a very simple registration process. Our preference is that people should identify themselves by giving their real names. We believe that should be a norm of civilised debate in a free country. It is better – more honest, more personal – if you and I both know who we are talking to. However, we recognise that there are many circumstances in which pseudonymity/anonymity is essential for people to speak freely, whether because they live in an unfree country or because they want to write frankly about their employer, community or family. Sadly, these circumstances prevail for many hundreds of millions of men and women around the world. The choice is therefore yours. Debate the issue of real names vs pseudonyms [here](#).

Needless to say, this is an experiment. We hope what will come out of it is, at the least, an interesting, informed, genuinely trans-cultural and multilingual debate. We hope for new, illuminating case studies and suggestions for revised or new principles. We hope to discover what contributors from across the world tend to agree on, and to explore some of the main lines of disagreement.

The discussion on this website is being [digitally archived](#) by Oxford University's Bodleian Library, so that future readers can see how it has evolved since its launch in 2011.

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