

CONTACT



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Please keep letters brief. We reserve the right to edit them for length. Include your full name, town or city and phone number.

'PERVERSE, NEGLIGENT' FRACKING

Great report! Biggest Cuadrilla fracking induced earthquake before the 2.9 Richter Scale at Preston New Road was the Preese Hall 2.3 Richter Scale event on April Fools Day, 2011 which reportedly caused property damage and distress. Continuing with fracking linked activities at Preston New Road is perverse, negligent and dangerous to local residents and our environment. Should be totally closed down now and site restoration commenced.

Peter R in a website comment on the news story *Anti Frackers Will Stay at PNR.*

CORRECTION

In our news article on fracking last week (issue 1307) we inaccurately referred to Sarah O'Brien as an activist. She's a social anthropologist doing fieldwork alongside the anti-fracking activists at Preston New Road, Lancashire.

Didn't think I could ever meet a dog as beautiful as my own. OMG what a gorgeous spirit is Bumper sooo beautiful and Jay just let me have a hug with him. Made my day @kellymattison7 on Twitter about vendor Jay's dog Bumper. Read about both in the vendor stories section on the website.



Today I came across a Brexit Party stall in town. I was tempted to go show them some screenshots of @ByDonkeys posters and asking for their thoughts but decided my time was better spent chatting to the woman selling @bigissuenorth and buying one. I feel like a grown up. @ElisabethHobbes

Why don't we just... recognise that our free speech is good for all?

JODIE GINSBERG

"Free speech" has become something of a dirty word in recent years. While most people like to say they are in favour of free speech, when you drill down into the areas where speech should be curtailed, it is apparent that views on where the lines should be and are drawn differ widely.

And it is in debates about those lines that a gap has opened up in the defence of free speech, into which the far right has gleefully stepped. "Free speech" is now the rallying cry for those who want to defend bigoted and hateful views, and who want to defend the right to use terms like "cockroach" and "vermin", while also denying the rights of those they denigrate to speak in their defence. And as free speech becomes increasingly linked with those who espouse intolerance and division, so free speech as a universal value becomes tarnished.

This has meant in turn that those who would have traditionally championed free speech have become increasingly willing to tolerate or even advocate censorship as a social good. But censorship is never a social good. Whether imposed by states, big business, or the mob, censorship always ends up targeting those who are already oppressed and marginalised.

Take the example of Facebook and Twitter. While we have seen many calls for these social media platforms to tighten up their treatment of racism, homophobia and misogyny, the attempt to implement hard and fast rules that would target only "bad" speech have failed. Anti-racism campaigners in the United States repeatedly find their accounts suspended for documenting the very abuse they call out.

Similarly in Myanmar, Facebook came under criticism after posts inciting violence against the Rohingya remained on the platform, while posts from activists documenting the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya were removed and their accounts suspended — a loss of vital evidence about this terrible conflict.

We need to be careful what we wish for in clamouring for governments or major corporations to take control of increasingly poisonous discourse. The UK already has a host of laws for dealing with threats and abuse, online and off. Calling for tighter controls risks scooping up vast swathes of legitimate political and social discourse. Faced with the threat of hefty fines, for example, social media companies are far more likely to take a risk-averse approach to online



Ginsberg: censorship hurts the marginalised

speech, meaning you could find your own critique on the government's Brexit policies or gender self-identification being removed for falling foul of ill-defined policies on hateful speech.

It's vital that we reclaim free speech as a universal value — that we demonstrate not simply the ills of freedom of expression but its benefits and its power for good. Free speech is what allows us to assert the rights of minorities to be treated with respect and dignity. Free speech is what allows those without power to hold the powerful to account. Reclaiming free speech as a universal value means doing everything we can to give as many people as possible access to avenues of speech — not shutting down those with whom we disagree.

To that end, Index on Censorship has just launched a new programme called Free Speech Is For Me, which will provide training and mentoring to individuals from communities that have become sceptical about the value of free speech. It aims to bring new and original voices to the fore. These new voices will be part of a movement that will take back free speech from those who use it solely as a defence for hateful views, and it will reassert freedom of expression as a freedom that benefits all of us. All of our voices are important. Let's help make sure they are heard. ■

Jodie Ginsberg is chief executive of Index on Censorship, a UK-based charity that campaigns against censorship worldwide (indexoncensorship.org)