

The Impartiality Project



Unsplash - Majlind Lufta

Introduction

Examining the effects of political and ideological polarisation on free speech.



Unsplash – Alex Knight

The Impartiality Project’s goal is to help free speech organisations in the UK and USA better understand the effects of ideological polarisation on censorship. Without taking any stances, we aim to provide a bird’s-eye view of how different organisations tackle some of the most challenging questions around free expression in these countries.

Ideological polarisation: *“When citizens, politicians, or parties move further apart on substantive policy issues or ideological positions.”**

Our hope is that this research will help those active in this space work better together, influence policy makers, and communicate effectively with an often divided public. This research draws on interviews with senior representatives from some of the leading free speech organisations, including **Index on Censorship, F.I.R.E., the Open Rights Group, Humanists UK, English PEN, the Free Speech Union, Academics for Academic Freedom, the Committee for Academic Freedom, LUCAF,** and more.

Each interviewee was asked the same six questions and their individual answers have been kept anonymous. All information in this report is sourced directly from these responses.

Disclaimer: This report deals with any censorship in the UK or USA. While acknowledging that there are differences between the two countries, there are still many cultural similarities that highlight political and ideological polarisation. The report was conducted independently by Alex Fernandes, with some support from Index on Censorship.

*Adapted from Dalton (2008), *Comparative Political Studies*, 41(7): 899–920.

Results

These are the six questions asked to a senior representative from each free speech organisation. Below are their amalgamated answers.

1. Why is freedom of expression important?

There was little disagreement here. All interviewees spoke passionately about how free speech is “fundamental to a functioning democracy”, how it is the “right that underpins all other rights”. One respondent even described freedom of expression as being necessary to human cognition. In the context of politics it is seen as a basic right to allow people to challenge authority, and in academia, to challenge prevailing orthodoxy.

Several interviewees spoke further about the need to expose our own ideas to scrutiny in order to move forward. Citing John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* in saying “any man who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.”

Poignantly in the current political climate, being able to freely discuss and debate political ideas is seen as essential to preventing social unrest and even violence, allowing the chance for reasoned debate and compromise on even the most divisive subjects.

All interviewees, including those with a global outlook, saw free speech as under threat within the UK and USA.

*“He who knows only his
own side of the case,
knows little of that.”
John Stuart Mill*



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2. Is free speech absolute?

“Unlimited tolerance will lead to the disappearance of tolerance.”

-Karl Popper

All but one respondent admitted there had to be limitations to free speech, with most drawing the line at incitement to violence, libel, defamation, doxing and several citing Justice Oliver Wendall Jones’ example of shouting “fire in a crowded theatre”. Though, as many recognised, there is clearly complexity here, with charges of libel and defamation often levied at those trying to legitimately criticise the powerful, leading to the phenomenon of SLAPPs (Strategic lawsuit against public participation). The one free speech absolutist of those interviewed argued that we should never limit speech, but instead police its effects.

The starkest divide was around “*hate speech*”. Advocates for limiting speech that was offensive to protected groups cited Karl Poppers ‘paradox of tolerance’, which essentially says that by granting absolute freedom you inadvertently grant some with the freedom to oppress others. In their view limiting hate speech is only a means towards protecting the liberties of marginalised groups.

There was strong opposition to this from some, who saw rules and laws around hate speech as a direct overstep, saying that even ‘deep offence’ isn’t a reason to shut down speech. Specifically cited was the threat to artistic expression (eg satire), public debate, and academic freedom, as well as the ambiguity around what constitutes “hate”.

What was particularly interesting is the sharp division around topics like gender-critical views and trans rights, disruptive protest (pro Palestine, climate activism), DEI, offensive humour, and disinformation.



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3. Which groups, causes or ideas are being suppressed?

About half of the respondents highlighted infringements on the speech of people of colour, the LGBT+ community, and migrants, who they believe have been locked out of power structures and now struggle to find an equal platform to express themselves. This includes asylum seekers, who they argue have been scapegoated by political parties and denied a voice to defend themselves. Campaign groups perceived as liberal are also being censored in the USA; Environmental NGOs are losing funding, LGBT+ books are frequently removed from libraries, DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) policies are being scrapped.

Other respondents spoke about how efforts to combat discrimination were in turn silencing even moderately conservative views (and many classically liberal ones too), for example colour-blind views of race, gender-critical feminism, and academics expressing what were described as “basic enlightenment values”. Several respondents described the application of DEI policies as ‘elitist’, silencing ‘majority views of ordinary working people’ (particularly what they argued were ‘majority views on sex and gender’). Similarly dissenting groups - those that opposed Covid lockdowns, climate sceptics, the vaccine hesitant - were all systematically denied a platform, some argued.

There was direct contradiction between some responses here, with some feeling certain groups were being suppressed, and others seeing that same group as the oppressor (eg gender-critical feminists, anti-immigration campaigners, DEI initiatives and their proponents).



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4. By what mechanisms are these groups, causes and ideas being suppressed?

Forms of censorship range from moderate to extreme. Moderate examples included deplatforming and social ostracisation, extreme ones included threats of violence and arrest. These answers have been split into two groups (though there was some crossover between the groups):

Group 1

Some participants saw the fear of social ostracisation as the most prolific and insidious, particularly amongst young students. Their view was that HR and administrative policies were to blame for a culture of “safetyism”, premised on the “condescending” principle that people “can’t think critically for themselves”. They argued this was reinforced by the “imposition” of progressive ideologies, with many organisations enforcing DEI pledges within the application process, creating a lack of viewpoint diversity. This effect, they said, could be found in universities, public services, private companies, and many media organisations.

It should be added that, to these respondents, the premise of ‘DEI’ was not simply to improve representation, but to impose a partisan world view, and reflected a “paranoia” that ordinary people were “racist and bigoted” and needed to be told how to think.

Examples of this included the way campaign groups would engage in tactics to deplatform speakers with opposing opinions. This included pressuring organisations, buying up all available tickets, calling in bomb threats, and even threatening speakers. This was particularly pronounced in the debate around gender, with gender-critical feminists the victims of violent threats and campaigns to get them investigated or fired. One respondent added that though many investigations led to exoneration, the “process was the punishment”.

There were many examples of people losing their jobs in the private sector for “lawful beliefs” expressed outside of work, with one organisation saying this was leading to a world where “only the rich [with access to legal representation and no dependence on a salary] were free”.

In a minority of cases in the UK, this led to arrests and convictions, sometimes with lengthy prison sentences. Often, it was felt, these were applied unfairly, due to overzealous interpretations of laws like the Malicious Communications Act, Public Order Act, Equalities Act, and other legislation that impose restrictions on speech.

4. By what mechanisms are these groups, causes and ideas being suppressed? (Cont...)

Group 2

In contrast to group 1, other respondents argued that it was in fact DEI initiatives, trans rights, environmental campaigners and pro-Palestine protesters that were under threat of censorship by “the far right”.

In the USA, groups perceived as “liberal” or “progressive” are being defunded, books removed from public libraries, and advocates even being deported - further silencing groups that were already oppressed.

Examples included environmental activists facing prison sentences for planning non-violent protests, trans people facing threats of violence on social media, pro-Palestine protesters being arrested and even facing threats of deportation in the USA.

It should be noted that one respondent said that in the USA, Trump’s executive orders were likely a “direct backlash to cancel culture”, though a completely egregious and disproportionate one.

There was agreement between groups 1 and 2 that social media was a key ground for digital censorship. Certain groups were “algorithmically” suppressed or unfairly flagged as dis/misinformation. Online bullying also made platforms very difficult for many minorities, an example being an openly trans person on X being mobbed and threatened for their identity.

There was also a perceived lack of access to platforms as a consequence of socio-economic disadvantage.



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5. What risks (*if any*) does political polarisation pose to free speech?

The majority of interviewees could see a clear link between political polarisation and freedom of speech. One said the risks posed were “very significant, and made it challenging to have complex conversations”. Another said people hold “such strong views they won’t [engage in] debate”, with politicians in the UK allegedly refusing to attend certain parliamentary debates they disagreed with. This was characterised as a “race to the bottom”, with some partly blaming social media algorithms for creating “echo chambers” and “destroying nuanced debate”. A result has been “ideological blocks and value stacking” which breeds a tendency to see others as “evil rather than wrong”.

On a broader scale, one respondent added that ideological polarisation throws institutions into disrepute, as they are seen as “ideologically captured”, threatening the public’s trust in important sources of information like academia and media.

Some organisations even felt unfairly maligned themselves, often being labelled as being “right wing” despite being demonstrably non-partisan in the cases they would defend.



*“It’s free speech for me, but not for thee-”
-Nat Hentoff*

Unsplash - Florian Olivo

6. What institutions do you, personally, trust for information?

In this question, answers were personal, and not necessarily reflective of the respondent's organisation.

The resounding agreement amongst all interviewees was that you cannot trust any single news source. Instead, you need to maintain a sceptical eye (or “active bullsh*t detector” as one participant called it) and “triangulate” across a range of sources.

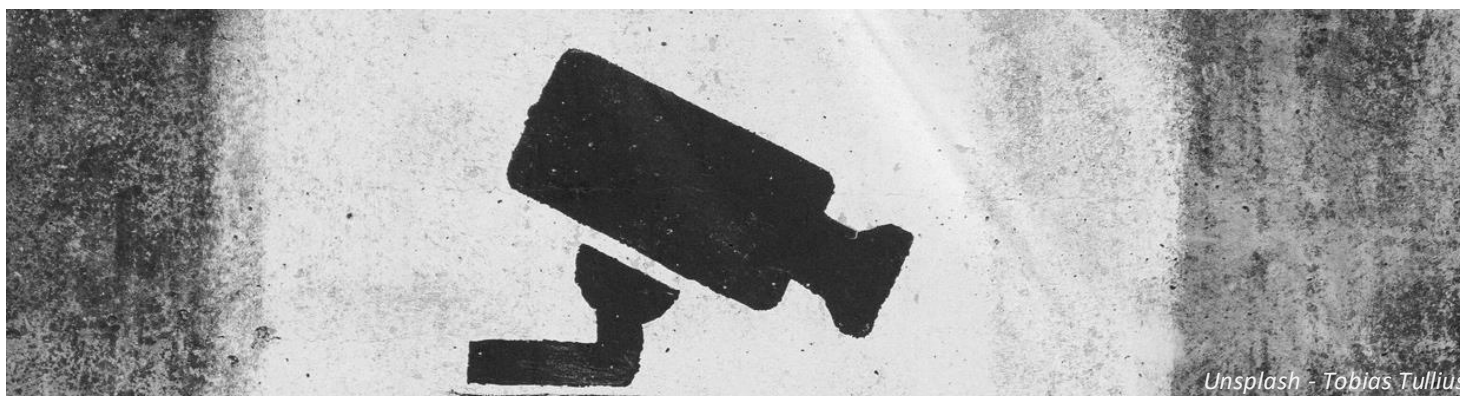
The degree to which different sources were trusted varied. Several respondents cited mainstream outlets like the Guardian, the New York Times, BBC, Telegraph, The Times and FT as the best sources of information, not including the opinion pages. They argued that they are well regulated, with experienced journalists looking for multiple sources. Others however felt these same organisations could no longer be trusted, with one saying there were topics that certain publications wouldn't discuss because of the papers political leaning or funding. Some accused the BBC of exercising “both sides-ism”, even at the expense of truthfulness, whereas others criticised it as a mouthpiece for the incumbent government.

Some respondents also cited other NGOs as a good source for information on free speech, with PEN and Index on Censorship being the most commonly cited. Others preferred getting information from social media due to its speed compared to traditional media. They acknowledged this sometimes came at the expense of accuracy, but said they selectively chose to follow only accounts they trusted.

The most widely accepted source for information was peer reviewed, academic research. Though even this was seen by some as actively tainted by the “ideological capture” of university departments.



Conclusion



Against a backdrop of polarised two-party systems, encroaching geopolitical and environmental dangers, distrust in media, and apathy towards the democratic process, free and open discourse is perhaps the only way to move forward as a society and face up to these challenges. This was a view reflected by all organisations featured in this report.

It was clear that all those interviewed had given a great deal of thought to the profound questions surrounding free speech, but in the day-to-day battle to defend our rights, those working in this space have limited time to take a step back and look at the overall free speech landscape, particularly with regards to how organisations with differing ideological viewpoints might approach these same questions.

Perhaps the most concerning finding from this small study is that many interviewees agreed on first principles, but then strongly disagreed on who was being censored, who is doing the censoring, and where the limitations of free speech should lie, often directly contradicting each other.

There is clearly a complex debate to be had around a number of domains. Including:

- The paradox of tolerance: To what extent does free speech infringe on the liberty of marginalised groups?
- Academic research: How should research on taboo topics be treated/protected?
- Protest: When does disruptive protest cross the line?
- Misinformation/disinformation: Who gets to decide what is true?
- Power dynamics: When do protections against libel and defamation become a tool to suppress?

Many of the examples of arrests, violent threats, social ostracisation, cyber bullying, social media suppression, book bans and other silencing tactics stem from questions like these. Ignoring opposing opinions on how to answer these questions creates a vicious cycle, where a lack of understanding leads to a will for further censorship, which creates even less understanding between polarised groups.

The ultimate question is: ***Is it incumbent on free speech organisations to break this cycle?***

Whilst organisations cannot be expected to fully agree on any/all of the above, the need for closer alignment and the establishment of common ground would be helpful at this challenging time. Then, when groups are advising policy makers and defending civil liberties, they are fighting with, and not against, each other.

Recommendations

Examining the effects of political polarization on the free speech space.

<p>Further research</p>	<p>This report is by no means exhaustive. It is our hope that this may inspire organisations to look more deeply into the effects of ideological polarisation on free expression in both the UK and USA. Suggested improvements would be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i.) A larger scale survey. ii.) Country or region-specific research. iii.) More organisations involved.
<p>Do not assume prior knowledge</p>	<p>Many respondents would informally describe contentious issues as "obvious". E.g. "Obviously the far right are misinformed about immigration" or "obviously wokeism is destroying our capacity for reason". Whilst these statements may appear "obvious" to some they are far from obvious to others.</p> <p>Where possible we would recommend explaining why, for example, DEI schemes should be protected or what wokeism means. An FAQ section on websites could help this.</p>
<p>Be honest about incomplete information</p>	<p>In many controversial cases, there is often a lack of information available, whether that's knowing an individual's true intentions when they sent a tweet, or undisclosed information like the full circumstances behind every arrest statistic.</p> <p>Many will give those they agree with ideologically the benefit of the doubt, whilst giving the least charitable assessment for those they disagree with. It is important to remain wary of this natural confirmation bias, and to be honest in addressing likely scrutiny.</p>
<p>Demonstrate Impartiality</p>	<p>If your organisation is bi-partisan in its approach, it could be worth highlighting this in your case studies. Showing examples of both sides of a debate being defended on the grounds of free speech – even those that hold opinions that you may disagree with. This will help lead the way in promoting free expression, agnostic to politics or ideology, much like the ACLU did in Skokie, 1977.</p>
<p>Case studies to consider</p>	<p>A great deal of disagreement seems to come from the way media (social and traditional) will focus our attention on specific free speech cases and ignore others, often along partisan lines, creating the now infamous echo chamber effect. Many of the important case studies cited by some organisations were not mentioned by others, and vice versa. To support with this, we have included a list of case studies and news articles referenced by interviewees on the following page. Some are clear cut, others will no doubt lead to important debate.</p>
<p>Mis/disinformation</p>	<p>It is already the case that political pundits will accuse their opponents of misinformation or "fake news" and this will only increase as generative AI continues to make deepfake video technology available to the masses. Dialogue around which are the trusted institutions and how they can maintain that level of trust is needed more than ever.</p>
<p>Collaboration</p>	<p>We have included links on the following pages of important work other organisations are engaged in, where collaboration may be possible.</p> <p>Many organisations here are happy to connect and to partner with organisations working towards similar goals.</p>

Case Studies To Consider



Below are specific cases/news stories alluded to in the interviews. The impartiality project does not take a view on any of the below cases, but our hope is they may inspire productive debate and potentially even collaboration:

- <https://www.thefire.org/news/fire-and-coalition-partners-file-brief-rebuking-us-government-attempting-deport-mahmoud-khalil> - Mahmoud Khalil
- <https://www.thefire.org/news/trumps-calls-investigate-pollster-put-first-amendment-risk> - Ann Selzer
- <https://afcomm.org.uk/2024/04/17/cambridge-race-realist-fired-for-rejection-of-edl/> - Nathan Cofna
- <https://humanists.uk/2025/01/30/most-people-worldwide-live-under-blasphemy-laws-freedom-of-thought-report/> - Blasphemy Laws
- https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdbfd265ca2ffef17da79c/The_Khan_review.pdf - Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience
- <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-plight-of-hatun-tash-shames-britain/> - Hatun Tash
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpx2wqpg7zo> - Salwan Momika
- <https://freespeechunion.org/defence-secretary-in-free-speech-row-over-fsu-member-colonel-wright/> - Kelvin Wright
- <https://freespeechunion.org/labour-reported-me-for-racial-hatred-a-jury-cleared-me-in-less-than-20-minutes/> - Jamie Michael
- <https://www.openrightsgroup.org/blog/putting-pride-in-privacy/> - Data Privacy for LGBT+ Community
- <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/banned-school-librarians-shushed-over-lgbt-books/> - Books Removed from Libraries
- <https://freespeechunion.org/fsu-member-suspended-by-waitrose-for-tweeting-conservative-views/> - Ben Woods
- <https://humanists.uk/2025/07/31/funding-to-promote-anti-lgbt-conversion-practices-surges/> - Funding For Anti-LGBT+ Conversion Practices
- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/02/bid-by-kazakh-mining-company-to-sue-journalist-is-dismissed-by-judge> - Tom Burgis FT journalist

Opportunities for collaboration

- Model UK Anti-SLAPP Legislation - <https://www.indexonensorship.org/slapps-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation/>
- Online Safety Act reform - <https://www.openrightsgroup.org/campaign/stop-state-censorship-of-online-speech/-online-safety-act>
- Free speech checklist for universities - <https://www.afaf.org.uk/a-check-list-of-ways-in-which-universities-can-promote-free-speech/>
- Open to Argument - a seminar series committed to rigorous discussion on the most contested issues of our time. <https://afcomm.org.uk/>

A Personal Note

This research was conducted by [Alex Fernandes](#) on a voluntary basis. My background for the past 15 years has been in advertising and communications, and I have led multiple research projects to support some of the biggest brands and advertisers in the world.

I have been concerned about the state of free speech and bipartisan communication for a long time. At the time of writing this conclusion (though after the interviews) over 1,000 peaceful pro-Palestine protesters have been arrested in London, and the conservative campaigner Charlie Kirk was shot dead as he hosted a live political debate.

Too often, productive discussions on important issues are scuppered by a lack of understanding and a “straw manning” of the opposing view, which is increasingly spilling over into arrests and violence in the UK and USA.

Having friends on both sides of the political spectrum, it so often seems the case that some of the greatest wedge issues of our time could be sorted out in an evening of nuanced debate, where the aim is not to win the argument but to understand the other side’s position and to learn from them.

In conducting this research I have been humbled by the tireless work the organisations involved have put in to defending our right to free expression, and the vast knowledge of all the experts I have been able to interview.

I hope that this report goes some small way towards supporting an open dialogue between these venerable experts, allowing them to work together in creating an open society that can face up to any challenge thrown its way.