

Freedom of Expression: A Test of Democracy (Guest blog)

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Summer @ LSE

One of the joys of the LSE and the [Polis Summer School](#) in particular, is seeing different political philosophies collide. Katy Kinney from Iowa is active in one of the heartlands of American democracy, a state famous for its special role in the US elections. So perhaps it's not surprising that she found it thought-provoking and even challenging when we discussed freedom of speech and the role of Islamism online from different perspectives.

A Test of Democracy by Katy Kinney

A great man, George Washington, once said, "If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter." Another, David Ben-Gurion, said, "The test of democracy is freedom of criticism."

I was raised on words such as these, and as an American, I have always accepted freedom of speech as a given—both an absolute and a necessity. But in Friday's class, I began to question what I believed to be a fundamental right. What does freedom of speech really mean? And—dare I think it—does it have downsides?

To attempt to answer those questions, allow me to ask another: What do white supremacists, anarchists, Islamic extremists, and fascists all have in common? While your answer may very well be insanity, the one I am looking for is that all have a website. All of those groups can spew their hate-filled, bordering-on-violent, and radical tenets online in the land of the free, home of the overly tolerant.

In some countries—most notably those in Europe—hate-speech, racist speech, and Holocaust denials are not allowed in newspapers, television, and—most impractically—the internet. The logic is that this kind of speech can negatively impact the minority groups to which it refers or even incite violence. One theorist even stated the demise of democracy could be brought about by the mere acceptance of intolerant and anti-democratic speech into public forum.

Mina Al-Lami, who monitors Al-Qaeda content on the web as part of her research at the LSE, then lectured our class on the group's online activities.

What I noticed about what Ms. Al-Lami said—the potential radicalization of those who viewed the extremist sites, the removal of Al-Qaeda websites maybe leading to more recruits, the possibility that some who posted on the removed sites might now be posting on moderate sites where they can be negated—was that none of these ideas was for certain. Ultimately, she did not know if the removal of the sites were for the best for preventing Al-Qaeda's brand of Islamic extremism or not.

What I came to realize, in the course of class that Friday, is simply the fear that the public would misuse a freedom did not necessarily justify limiting it. In the words of one my favorite movies, "fairness, justice and freedom are more than just words, they are perspectives." And I believe they could, and should, be questioned. So—the haters of democracy, of equal rights, and of secular society out there—I dare you. Go ahead and cry freedom of speech in order to bash them, because—regardless of what you say— I will always be able to voice my opposition. Or will I?

By by Katy Kinney, Polis [Summer School](#) Student

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