



# WHAT CAN WE POST?

**FREE SPEECH IN A  
DIGITAL WORLD**



If there is a “public square” for speech in our world, it will not be found on the corner of Main Street; it will be found online. Social media platforms, video hosting sites, collaborative encyclopedias—these have become the principal sites for the open and public exchange of information, opinions, and ideologies. And yet, these sites are far from truly and entirely free. As private companies, social media giants like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube decide for themselves what speech is or is not permissible on their platforms. And so, these online platforms have become a strange hybrid—legally private companies functioning as our de facto public square. How, then, should we think about free speech in these digital spaces?

What kind of speech, if any, should be limited? Are there certain circumstances where speech can be harmful or dangerous? How do we think about advertising, libel and slander, pornography, images or videos of death and violence, biased news reporting, false scientific claims during a pandemic, bigotry, and hate-speech? Who decides what is dangerous content, and using what criteria? Do these private platforms have a responsibility to monitor or take down harmful content? Conversely, as the de facto public square, do they have an ethical responsibility to broadly uphold free speech? More complicated still, these platforms have a global reach; what is understood as acceptable satire in one part of the world, might be unacceptable slander or an instigation of violence in another.

In light of these manifold complexities, in this essay students should address the following question: What ethical principles should guide our legal and moral decisions about who limits free speech, how they limit it, and what speech is limited?

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## **SUBMIT YOUR ESSAY!**

Open to all students enrolled in  
11th or 12th grade classes

## **PRIZES**

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January 15, 2022

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