Freedom of Speech: What do we understand by the term freedom of speech?

When I suggested this topic at our previous meeting I said that I didn't want it to promote a deeply intellectual or political discussion, I just want a simple answer to what I hoped would be a simple question. When I was growing up I found this very clear.

Freedom of speech was a fundamental human right, essential to democracy, that allowed us to express our opinions freely; it also allowed an exchange of diverse ideas. This was summed up in the well known quote,(wrongly) attributed to Voltaire, 'I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.'

But this right was not absolute. All rights carry with them responsibilities and the freedom had its limitations: we mustn't cause harm or harassment to others, nor encourage riots, nor threaten or defame character, nor spread lies. There was a delicate balance between free expression and responsibility to others, and the laws of slander and libel supported this. In the simplest of terms we should all 'be kind'.

It all seemed very straightforward and clear, but now that clarity has gone and I feel more confused. There seem now to be two extremes, on the one hand it feels that you're not allowed to say anything, on the other it feels that you can say whatever you like! How has that arisen?

Part of the answer for me lies in two words, words that are not new but have taken on a new focus, and words that seem to represent polar opposites, the first is WOKE, the second is TROLLS.

In its original concept Woke is good. Woke and freedom of speech can co-exist. Woke doesn't affect any of the limitations of freedom of speech that I have mentioned before, it means 'be kind'. The word originated in the African American language to mean an alertness to racial prejudice, systemic injustice, and social inequality. It has now evolved to include an awareness of gender, sexual identity and other marginalised groups, and still at its heart it cares about the well being of all people. Surely that is good. So why has it become so unpopular?

I think the answer to this focusses on getting the balance right, because it suddenly feels like wokeness, rather than promoting free speech, has become more about attempting to ban or penalise specific viewpoints. Its often intense focus on policing speech to prevent offence seems to clash with the ideals of free speech. Woke and freedom of speech cannot co-exist if woke is seen as a desire to silence opposing views, if it demands rigid uniformity and penalizes for minor infractions. And that is the situation that many think has arisen today.

But TROLLS can say what they like!! This is another old word that has taken on new meaning. When I was a little girl trolls were ugly creatures that lived under bridges, and you couldn't cross without their permission. I hated them, and I hate the modern day trolls too. An internet troll is a person who posts offensive comments on line to provoke emotional responses. Their sole intention is to ridicule and upset others with hate speech and misinformation, and I have no idea why this is allowed. It sickens me. And this is why the present day concept of freedom of speech confuses me. Social media is riddled with disgusting comments, lies, false news and doctored photographs; we don't know what to believe any more and it's a total, total abuse of freedom of speech. So where are the laws of slander and libel that the younger me felt so protected by? And does accountability apply to AI?

This is why I'm confused, and this is why I would like someone to give me a simple answer as to what we understand by the term freedom of speech. If we can't make sense of the guidelines how can we live by them? Is there still such a thing as moral integrity? And what message are we giving to the young people who are growing up in what has become a very confusing world?

Mary Noble – March 2026