

# A Multicultural Psychologist's Take on Free Speech



**Laith Al-Shawaf**

Sep 15, 2021 — 6 min read



What is important in life? I think freedom of thought and expression must be among the top contenders. I'd like to share with you how two things contributed to this view: my background as a psychologist and my upbringing in a mixed-culture, mixed-ethnicity household.

As background information, first consider the obvious fact that no person or group has privileged access to the truth.

With this backdrop in mind, when you encounter differing perspectives on an issue, how do you figure out which one is correct? Limiting or banning some views won't do the trick. The only way to have a reasonable chance of discerning the truth among alternatives is to let them battle it out and assess all of them. Our job becomes much harder, and in some cases even intractable, if we allow handicaps

that place some views at an advantage and others at a disadvantage from the very beginning.

Second, all humans come factory-equipped with cognitive biases. [Confirmation bias](#) (also known as myside bias) in particular is omnipresent: you selectively pay attention to information that conforms to your views, you selectively *remember* the material that most agrees with your views, and when you encounter ambiguous information, you *interpret* it in a way that accords with your views. All humans are like this—it's the norm, not the exception. It's how our mental software runs. (Incidentally, it may not be ideal for truth seeking, but we evolved this way for interesting [social reasons](#)).

Our human biases just get worse from there. We also have second-order biases like *the bias blindspot*: the tendency to think that we are less biased than others. *You* are irrational and biased, but *I* am objective and impartial.

And we also have powerful groupish and xenophobic biases: *my* group (my ethnicity, tribe, political party, country) is more deserving, more moral, and more accurate than the other side.

In an environment like this—populated by well-meaning but cognitively flawed humans who interpret everything they see through a self-serving lens—it is actively helpful for you to hear different, dissenting viewpoints. Without that dissent and debate, you are mentally shackled. It brings to mind that lovely Thomas Paine quotation:

I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it.

Third: imagine we decide that yes, we're going to allow Arbiters of Speech who will decide what can and can't be said. Well, who should the arbiters be? Who should make the decisions? Whoever is tasked with deciding will be saddled with the same cognitive biases and human foibles as everyone else. When the Hutus are in power, they'll crack down on speech that they deem too pro-Tutsi or anti-Hutu. When the Tutsis are in power, they'll crack down on speech they think is too pro-Hutu or anti-Tutsi. In such a system, *which ideas are deemed thinkable*, and *which*

*thoughts are considered speakable*, will be controlled by the vagaries of which particular flawed humans happen to be in power at any given time. That is a diminished and irrational way to live, and it gives too much power to the contingent historical accident of who happens to currently be in charge. These are arbitrary chains. No freethinking mind can accept them.

The solution? Nobody gets to decide what can and can't be said—because nobody is immune to self-serving cognitive biases, it is best not to give the decision-making power to any specific person or group, because they will abuse it and use it to further their own interests. There are some important limits on freedom of expression that are already enshrined in law (no inciting violence, for example, and no false advertising). These are important and they must be observed. But beyond these useful minimal restrictions, there should be no further encroachment on free expression, especially about matters of politics, philosophy, or the culture wars—because each time we indulge our side's biases and try to limit others' speech, we limit our *own* ability to learn new things and we proliferate opportunities for error. Tragically and irrationally, we institutionalize a system where our flawed thinking is placed on a pedestal while others' flawed thinking is silenced. That is a comically dystopian setup.

In place of this irrational system, we should take a lesson from our gut microbiome: when one particular type of bacterium dominates in our gut, [our health tends to suffer](#). But when many different types of bacteria are present and can vie with each other for power, they keep each other in check, and [we emerge healthier as a result](#). Look: frankly, we're all wrong and stupid and don't really know what we're doing. Step one in figuring it out is allowing us to whisper and yell our biased nonsense at each other. The marketplace of ideas won't always lead the best idea to win, but the dictatorship of a particular group's ideas almost never will.

Fourth and finally, different societies have different [Overton windows](#). This becomes clear when you live in different countries or when you grow up with different cultural influences, both of which were the case for me. My mom is mostly Lebanese, my dad is half German and half Iraqi, and I grew up mostly, but not exclusively, in Lebanon. I had Arab and European influences from my parents, Lebanese ones from my surroundings, and Anglo-American ones from my education and the books and movies I consumed. Growing up with so many different cultural influences gives you an outsider's perspective that makes it a bit

easier to see the oddities in a culture's discourse, especially when the sacred cows and unthinkable views differ from culture to culture—which they often do.

Growing up in this kind of environment made me deeply committed to free thought and free expression, as I'm sure it did for most multicultural kids. There were two reasons for this: first, I witnessed firsthand many irrational and immoral clampdowns on what I regarded as perfectly acceptable views—[pro-LGBT rights views](#), for example, or views critical of corrupt and despotic regimes. Watching people get punished for expressing perfectly reasonable views will make you cherish free thought and free expression forever.

Second, growing up with different cultural influences cast a spotlight on the differences in Overton windows from one culture to another. Observing those differences, and noting how they are partly driven by historical accident, drives home the fact that there is a certain arbitrariness to them (within the bounds set by a [shared human nature](#)). It suggests that there is no especially privileged connection between a culture's contemporary Overton window and the grand Truth. That same society's Overton window was different 20 years ago, and it'll be different again in 20 years' time. These things tend to shift from time to time and place to place, and sometimes the movement is driven by fads and trends that are not entirely rational. Because of this, any given society's window at a particular moment in time should not be treated as sacred or privileged; it should be treated as a workable framework set up by cognitively biased humans, acting according to self-interest and responding to the practical demands of their surroundings. That might work pretty well for enabling a group of people to stay alive and navigate their environment, but it doesn't necessarily offer a privileged road to the truth, and it shouldn't be regarded as sacred. And it certainly isn't sufficient reason to clamp down on other humans' fundamental liberties.

At the individual level, free thought and free speech are fundamental human rights. At the group level, they are the lifeblood of a healthy, functioning society. What little we have of these two precious commodities was *extremely* hard-won and didn't exist for the vast majority of history. In many parts of the world, these core human rights still don't exist—as those who grew up under repressive regimes know well. We should [defend](#) freedom of thought and expression vigorously, and we should in fact be working harder to expand them in the many parts of the world where they are routinely quashed. They are among the most important desiderata

in life. At any rate, that's one of the most important lessons I've learned from my experience as a multicultural psychologist.

If you disagree, consider yourself lucky—you have the freedom to do so, and the freedom to voice it.