

## Argumentative Essay Practice 19

Question: 'People should be allowed to express themselves freely on social media.'  
What are your views?

### Step 1: Defining your key words

1. **"People"** – specific to this question, I suppose it will be fair for us to assume/define that people refers to netizens/users of social media platforms
  
2. **'express themselves freely'** – with emphasis on the word 'freely'
  - ➔ Free online expression for users means that there is **little to no censorship** on social media platforms in terms of the content/messages that users post out
  - ⇒ If we assume the extreme, this also means that **all forms of expression** – regardless of ***vulgarity, nudity, defamation, death threat, bullying posts***, etc. → would be permissible online
  - ⇒ When we think of 'freely' in terms of such great liberty **to commit indecent acts online**, it becomes easier for us to take a stand on this issue
  
3. **'social media'** – in order to define such a broad category, it could help to give your readers some context. Give some examples of social media platforms
  - **Traditional media platforms include TV, newspapers, radio, etc.** → although many of the broadcasting stations/press publishing house is also switching their media formats and engaging in online modes (ST app, radio as podcast, etc.)
  - ➔ Some ways that social media differs from traditional media:
    1. **Recent phenomenon vs. Age-old media format**
      - The rise of social media platforms is **relatively recent phenomenon** that emerged shortly after the rise of the Internet: it has **evolved for decades**, from the initial start-ups that had **very basic/rudimentary functions** to the sophisticated and complex platforms we have today, which also happen to be **multi-million dollar platforms**

## **2. Experience with boundaries of expression (due to its datedness)**

- As a relatively new phenomenon/media format, authorities and laypersons alike are still in the **process of figuring out** what are the **limits of expression/boundaries** that should be set and followed in the foreign medium

## **3. Degree and type of participation by audience and content-producers**

- For traditional media, the relationship between content producers and audiences/viewers/readers is very different
- Most of the time, engaging in traditional media platforms is to be involved in a **largely one-sided relationship**
- Audience of television shows are receiving information, and hardly can provide **instantaneous responses and feedback** to the producers, or to communicate in real-time with other viewers
- This is the same for the newspaper medium – readers' only channels of communication to writers/journalists and other readers is through weekly forums that editors selectively pick out to publish on papers
- However, with social media platforms, the fact that it operates on the Internet makes the **type of participation vastly different**
- The differences between the Internet and traditional media is its ability to **connect many people extensively from all around the world, and to transmit data at unprecedented high speed**
- This means that online users of these social media sites can able to input and **broadcast their private thoughts and share their personal opinions** on a social issue, a recent news event, a political matter – all on their own accounts/feed/page
- Social media platforms provide the average citizen with what they would not have been privileged to enjoy with traditional media: **a personal voice and a potential audience**

- ⇒ These comparisons between traditional media and social media platforms are important in guiding us to think about one thing: **how does this affect the need for censorship online?**
- ⇒ What are some **features** of the online sphere of communication, broadcasting, publicizing that might **potentially need much more/much less censorship/regulations and restrictions?**

**\*\*\*CENSORING TRADITIONAL MEDIA\*\*\***

*Do the same reasons apply to social media platforms as well?*

- ⇒ Do also bear in mind that traditional media have always been highly controlled, strictly regulated and consistently censored for insensitive/offensive and inappropriate content/articles/films/shows
1. This is because the relevant media and political authorities, especially in Singapore, have realised the **influence and impact of media on social beliefs** (for instance, entrenching stereotypes by representing certain groups of people consistently in an inaccurate and misleading manner)
  2. They have also understood how **wide-reaching traditional media is consumed** amongst the people, and that one careless or biased opinion on the paper, a racially insensitive scene from a TV show can potentially cause intense uproar
- ⇒ **Does the same reason for censoring traditional media apply to the social media platforms?** Are they **new reasons** why social media should be even more tightly regulated?

**Step 2: Dissecting the idea of 'should' and asking ourselves more questions**

- **'should'** – how can we come up with arguments taking into account the idea of 'should'?
- ➔ This is one crucial word in the statement which would be needed to facilitate our brainstorming process
- ⇒ There are some ways to phrase the word 'should' into questions (using our 5W1H)S that may allow us to unpack the density of its meaning/requirements:

## 1. WHEN should we allow complete freedom of expression for users of social media?

- ❖ This question leads us to think about what condition/qualities/characteristics that the society/the online community must possess in order for freedom of expression to be effective/beneficial
- ❖ This question can also be thought of in terms of 'who': who should we entitle the freedom of online speech to? What kind of persons do we deem as adequately
- ❖ For instance: the online community/internet users have to be mature and sensitive enough not to post offensive, harmful or detrimental content online

## 2. WHY should we allow the freedom of expression online?

➔ Is there a specific and compelling reason why we should not deny social media users to freely expressing themselves online?

### ❖ FREEDOM OF SPEECH/EXPRESSION?

- ⇒ One of the key principles in the US Constitution (a basic set of principles in which the other laws have to follow/be based on), citizens should be entitled to their rights to the freedom of speech/expression (as a basic human right)
- ⇒ 'Freedom of speech' or 'Freedom of expression' – means that the individual's right to say something is protected, however – he/she is not protected against the potential consequences of saying it
- ⇒ In other words, the adverse effects of offensive comments that a reckless, irresponsible individual made will have to be shouldered by him/her through appropriate punishment either by authorities or backlash by the public
- ⇒ However, the more important question remains – is society itself able to withstand the divisive, conflicting and destructive opinions that can greatly damage the social harmony present?

### 3. WHAT are some *advantages* (and to who) when there is free expression online?

- Try to think of these advantages beyond simply gratification and rights to freedom of speech for the individual social media user
- Are there any benefits that the society can yield from engaging in free online speech?
  1. For instance, you can consider advantages to society along the lines of more constructive, substantial public discussion on critical societal issues and problems
  2. Will greater freedom with respect to online expression also encourage society to progress towards greater artistic creativity, sparking new ideas that will serve as breakthroughs?

**3. Can freedom of expression online affect the economy?** Given that many governments would be concerned with the prosperity and survival of their nations' economies, can we link this topic to boosting economic growth?

- Think in terms of how social media platform providers are mainly multi-billion dollar tech companies, and also the fact that there are many social media users/influencers/celebrities who earn their income solely by creating digital content for the public's consumption
- How will curbing the freedom of expression for users of SMP → affect participation rates → affecting the business viability/profitability of these platforms?

### 4. What are some of the disadvantages or detrimental damages that might occur (to who) when there is complete freedom of expression online?

- What forms of negative/adverse content might you expect when allow/permit complete freedom of expression online?
- For instance: even today, when there *is* censorship rules and strict regulations in place to filter out these harmful content – there are still vulgarities, nudity, violence, cyberbullying, shaming, false rumours, radical content etc. being circulated (sometimes extensively) all over the net

- These adverse online content posted by users **who are protected not only by the anonymity of the net, but also a supposed 'right' to freedom of expression** → can affect both individuals and society as a whole
- For instance: cyberbullying brings about **intense mental and psychological stress** for victims, in many infamous cases leading even to suicide
- Another prominent concern (of public community and governments alike): the rise of radical content online – **the internet as a hot-bed for terrorist organizations to recruit new members who are convinced by their extremist ideals**

**To sum up this entire segment of dissecting, analysing and providing information on how should we approach 'should' in this question:**

1. These questions are meant to **facilitate your thought process** as you brainstorm for your arguments to/against providing freedom in online expression
2. Ultimately, whether or not there *should* be freedom of expression online depends on a few things:
  - ➔ Do we have **strong reasons** to provide freedom of expression online? In other words, is this a basic human right that we cannot deny users of? Are there immensely positive impacts on society when we grant such freedom?
  - ⇒ That said, however – do granting this right then **lead to even more dire consequences** when users stand a chance to abuse this freedom?
  - ⇒ In this case, **do the negative consequences outweigh that of the positive impacts**/the obligation to provide?
  - ⇒ **What do we expect of the users/society in general** before we can entrust them/ourselves with such unlimited freedom to speak our minds?

**Important note:**

1. The notion of 'freely' → implies **absolute freedom online**, without any form of limitations → and this will be the perspective you keep throughout your essay
2. You **could attempt to qualify the extent of freedom** in online expression in your conclusion (more on that later)

### Step 3: Brainstorming arguments...

<p>No, people should not be completely free to express themselves on social media platforms</p>	<p>Yes, people should be completely free to express themselves on social media platforms</p>
<p>1. People should not be completely free to express themselves on social media platforms because users might carelessly post offensive content which can have a destabilizing effect on society</p> <p>⇒ Freedom to online expression sounds very appealing to users because it takes away the restrictions imposed onto them in terms of broadcasting their opinions online</p> <p><i>Elaborate on the nature of social media platforms as sites that as <b><u>widely subscribed to</u></b> across the world, by <b><u>vastly different groups of people</u></b></i></p> <p>⇒ However, it is important to understand that one's opinion, especially when posted on such <b><u>a public platform</u></b> that is extensively shared by many individuals across the world → has the <b><u>potential to harm, hurt or offend someone else</u></b></p> <p>⇒ With such a large platform, the <b><u>diversity</u></b> of the users involved will definitely be <b><u>wide</u></b> since these social media tools are <b><u>available internationally</u></b> in many countries</p>	<p>1. People should be completely free to express themselves on social media platforms because <b><u>one of the basic human right is the freedom of expression</u></b></p> <p>⇒ Though not necessarily enshrined in all of the constitutions around the world, there are many democratic societies around the world that <b><u>recognizes the individual's freedom to expression as a basic human right</u></b></p> <p>⇒ Because the way people communicate today has been drastically transformed as a result of the internet and social media platforms, the <b><u>concept of freedom of speech should also rightfully extend to these online platforms</u></b></p> <p>⇒ Why is the freedom to express one's opinion so important? It is protected as one of the fundamental human rights because many believe that being free to express one's views on a social or political matter is <b><u>what can help the society progress and create positive changes</u></b></p>

⇒ As a result, a **careless tweet** that has not been given enough thought before posting could easily circulate to specific segments of the online community **that might find it offensive/insulting/inconsiderate**

⇒ There is **no guarantee that all social media users will be mature and sufficiently aware** of the consequences of their remarks on others'

*Make comparison to traditional media: the lack of suitable checks:*

⇒ Moreover, unlike traditional media, there are no editors/formal checks in place to ensure that the final media content that will be transmitted to the public is appropriate

⇒ There are **renowned individuals**, journalists/presidents/celebrities who have posted offensive messages online that is insulting to another group

⇒ Many of these borderline/majorly offensive tweets **might not be deliberate or intentional**, and genuinely a careless slip-up in a moment of folly/ignorance

⇒ Freedom of speech is particularly crucial for minority/marginalized/oppressed groups → because it **unites them, enables them to speak out about their oppression, fight for their own rights and rally for a lasting change to improve their lives**

⇒ If an individual's/a group's view is constantly being clamped down as a result of repressive censorship laws, and any form of dissent/dissatisfaction is being punished severely → then it **leaves absolutely no possible way for them to protect themselves from injustice and unfairness**

⇒ Social media platforms in particular, have played **critical roles in facilitating significant revolutions and completely changing societies** in the world, freeing millions from their tyrannical rulers

⇒ One notable example: **Starting in 2010, the Arab Spring revolution** – a series of protests, civil marches, debates and riots started in North Africa and many countries in the Middle East

⇒ Many people chose to label this event as **the 'Twitter Revolution'** because of the significant role that the social media platform played in the revolution, and the successes of overthrowing their dictators



⇒ However, regardless the intention of the original poster, the **interpretation of the content posted is unlikely to change** (that after all, people will still be offended)

⇒ One good example: In 2013, Justine Sacco, the communications director of a New York-based internet empire, ActiveCorps – tweeted this:

***“Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”***

⇒ This tweet marked the end of her career with the company as she drew severe criticisms and outrage at her insensitivity towards millions of people worldwide living with this virus

⇒ What was most telling about the **viral feature of the Internet is this**: Sacco became notorious on Twitter as her tweet was rapidly circulated and criticized – **all within hours of her long flight to South Africa, unbeknownst to her**

⇒ She was dismissed by her company shortly after

⇒ Sacco is a **prime example** of how an **adult professional female worker is able to slip up** and cause public outrage with an offensive remark that she calls a “needless and careless tweet”

⇒ Many of the participants in these revolution **utilized Twitter to communicate with each other, spread and inform each other about the details of the protests, create global awareness, rallying international support** and attention to their social movement and cause

⇒ More importantly, according to the Project on Information Technology and Political Islam – it was **open conversations about political revolutions that took place online first** before all these actual protests was carried out on the streets

⇒ To a significant extent, it was Twitter and other SMPs that had helped to **shape the citizens’ political ideologies, empowering them to fight for changes to make their societies better**

⇒ The fact social media platforms are a new form of media that differs from traditional media in terms of their ability to **connect millions of people worldwide instantaneously in real time** is also what helped to organize these **mass-scale protests**

⇒ The **ability of the Internet to disseminate information so quickly**, together with the freedom of expression → is **what guaranteed the high success rates** of organizing these uprisings for the betterment of their society

- ⇒ Sacco's tweet is only but one example of an **unintentionally racist and hateful statement** made under the general conditions of a freely-expressing online platform
- ⇒ She may be entitled to her opinions and received her punishment, but those who have seen her tweet and **felt emotionally attacked might not have been pacified by her apologies**
- ⇒ Sacco is but one of the many online users who post hateful and disrespectful opinions under this shield of 'freedom of expression'
- ⇒ Without **suitable restrictions and filters** put in place by relevant public and private media authorities, the circulation of these mean online posts will **continue to ignite uproars and result in social division** that will likely **cause chaos and turmoil** in the community

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- ⇒ Thus, people should not be completely free to express their opinions online users might carelessly post content that is offensive

2. People should not be completely free to express themselves online because **this may facilitate and worsen the on-going trend of cyberbullying**

- ⇒ Without such freedom of expression, the people would have found it impossible to post up such politically sensitive content and ignite such extreme changes, because **it would have been easily filtered out**
- ⇒ Even though the strictness and intensity of the censorship laws in these conflict-ridden places escalated, **the strong impacts of the earlier political debates before the protests could not be undone**

*Link:*

- ⇒ As a result, people should be allowed free expression on social media platforms because **it is a fundamental human right that is believed to lead to the betterment of society**

2. People should be allowed to express themselves freely on social media **because it can start helpful and constructive discussions on various topics, enriching individuals' knowledge and creating well-informed societies**

- ⇒ While being free to exchange opinions online can lead to a series of hateful and careless comments,
- ⇒ It can just as well **create fruitful discussions about various social matters that the public is concerned about**

- ⇒ Cyberbullying is a rising social issue that has received increasing attention from the public and government alike
- ⇒ Cyberbullying often involves falsely spreading rumours about victims, shaming them, causing emotional harm and psychological stress
- ⇒ When freedom of expression is being granted to users of social media platforms, cyberbullying trends might be expected to intensify
- ⇒ Cyberbullies **no longer have to hide behind the veil of anonymity** and can openly use their actual accounts to post rude messages to others, claiming that even such disrespect is part of their rights
- ⇒ It could be hard to stop them in their attempts at cyberbullying or punish them for their actions **without being accused of depriving them of their freedom to express themselves** in the online community
- ⇒ This is a clear flaw of providing *complete* freedom of expression online **without critically differentiating between harmful content and constructive ones**

*Make some comparison with traditional media platforms*

- ⇒ Different from traditional media platforms whereby the degree of participation from the public is limited, online conversations from these social media platforms **occur at a quick pace,** with ideas and thoughts being **shared from all across the globe rapidly**
- ⇒ Amidst unkind comments and opinions from less socially responsible individuals, we can also find **informed political blogs and enlightening social commentary** on important current day affairs
- ⇒ Many bloggers/vloggers today **are experienced journalists/businessmen/writers** who create online digital content after retirement/quitting from their professional career
- ⇒ Often times, they do provide **very refreshing insights and contribute to the overall online discussion** in positive ways
- ⇒ If these writings/posts are constantly being censored because it is deemed as inappropriate by the authorities, the society in general **will hardly benefit from the lack of rigorous discussion** and sharing of ideas

- ⇒ Unless boundaries can be clearly established between cyberbullying and constructive criticisms, complete freedom of expression online will always carry the risk of bullies abusing it to their own advantage to excuse themselves from blame
- ⇒ In other words, if free speech online is to be granted, then it must be **accompanied by the enactment and reinforcement of cyberbullying laws**

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- ⇒ Therefore, we should not grant users complete freedom of expression online for fear that **they misuse this right to harm others on social media sites**

3. People should not be allowed complete freedom of expression online because **it becomes possible to create and spread radical content online, which can lead to intensified global terrorism**

- ⇒ Radicalization is a process by which an individual, or group comes to **adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations** that reject or undermine the status quo or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of the nation

- ⇒ The removal of a diverse range of ideas and thoughts posted online can potentially **create a narrow-minded society that lacks exposure to various possibilities**
- ⇒ In addition, many individuals on social media also post up **honest personal reviews** of the products they are using/have purchased
- ⇒ These honest and informative product reviews are **popularly consumed by many of netizens online and serve as a shopping guide for many consumers** on the products they are intending to purchase
- ⇒ If companies are going to impose censorship regulations on negative reviews they deem as detrimental to the overall public image → **then this will deprive the general consumer group of honest opinions**

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- ⇒ Therefore, by allowing complete freedom of expression, **people would be able to gain from the discussions and insights that the online community can openly engage in**

- ⇒ This trend has been of increasing concern in recent years since the flurry of terrorist attacks across the world has stirred up a significant amount of panic and fear in the hearts of the people
- ⇒ Given the liberal and wide definition of online freedom of expression– its **protection also extends to such dangerous and radical content** that aims to convince individual to subscribe to their beliefs
- ⇒ Lawmakers and cybersecurity police officers **might no longer have a criminal reason to capture these terrorist organizations** on the basis on their malicious intent
- ⇒ Radical content is arguably a form of ‘expression’ for the group and if we believe that everyone should be entitled to the freedom to speak up online, then we cannot unfairly make the exception for terrorists
- ⇒ Their beliefs and ideologies are **one type of political opinion, even if it is a vicious and toxic one**
- ⇒ If others in the community not labelled as ‘terrorists’ are able to air their political views without restrictions, **terrorists by the same right should be granted the same amount of freedom**

3. People should be allowed to express themselves freely on social media platforms **because these sites are becoming critical feedback channels for citizens to connect with their community leaders and national representatives**

- ⇒ One of the many concerns that prevails globally is the idea of media censorship – and especially Internet censorship
- ⇒ The majority of the people, even those in democratic societies, have **largely accepted that the ultimate control over traditional media such as TV shows and news articles lies in the hands of the government** and entrepreneurs of the media franchise
- ⇒ It is understandable that these are the people with the financial and political power to decide what will be aired on TV, radio or published in the papers for that day for the entire nation to view
- ⇒ However, many of them **still regard the Internet as a relatively less controlled platform** whereby they have greater freedom to air their thoughts
- ⇒ The Internet still feels like **a virtual space whereby anyone is free to participate as an equal member**

⇒ This dilemma is therefore another reminder of how dangerous it can be **if we don't discern the freedom of expression for what type of online content**

⇒ Radical content freely published on social media platforms and circulated online can intensify the global terrorist threat that we all currently fear and end up undoing all the efforts to increase national security and defence measure

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⇒ Therefore, given that complete freedom of expression can result in radical content being posted online and undermining national security, **it is ideal that restrictions are in place to decide on what kind of content/opinion is appropriate for these social media sites**

4. People should not be allowed to freely express themselves on social media when **the negative consequences outweigh the positive impacts of such liberal online expression**

⇒ Freedom of expression online is ultimately a **double-edged sword**

⇒ Therefore, this also becomes the place where many citizens **choose to communicate their political opinions, provide feedbacks to leaders and expect that they do not get censured for it**

⇒ Politicians are also increasingly utilizing social media platforms as channels to reach out to their citizens and hear the voices from the grounds, **in order to make better policies for the sake of their people**

⇒ When online censorship is practiced strictly, and people are deprived of the freedom to speak up on certain political matters that may challenge the authority of the government → **this form of clamping down itself should be morally frowned upon because it is a denial of the people's right to expression**

⇒ Having honest feedbacks from citizens being removed from social media platforms because it is not tolerated by the government → **leads to a government unreceptive to constructive criticisms and resistant to changes**

⇒ Strict internet censorship when it comes to political affairs **is both a cause and result of corrupt and tyrannical governments**

- ⇒ Whether or not we yield positive outcomes from such freedom is **ultimately dependent upon our personal decisions** and **how we choose to utilize it**
- ⇒ In many countries, complete freedom of expression has not been granted → there are still preventive filters involved **aiming to remove and block out harmful content from social media sites**
- ⇒ However, in *relatively* liberal societies whereby the online social media platforms are sites with **freely-flowing exchange of opinions**, it is hard to observe whether **constructive criticisms has emerged**
- ⇒ Instead, what we tend to see more often are heated debates and uncontrolled arguments **about the rights and wrongs of certain issues**
- ⇒ These discussions **do not remain civilized and polite for long**, and a slew of vulgarities, insults, stereotypes, biased judgements, critical statements follow through
- ⇒ This is on top of all the **other adverse and detrimental content** that could be posted online when there is such freedom

- ⇒ For instance: **China's strict censorship policies (dubbed as The Great Firewall)** has drawn international backlash due to the extent that Chinese citizens are denied access to many sites including Youtube and Yahoo
- ⇒ China's government has very strict control over both the kind of media content that their people can access *and* create
- ⇒ Such intense censorship has caused great dissatisfaction both locally and abroad
- Link:*
- ⇒ Therefore, freedom of expression on social media sites is crucial in **bridging the communication gap** between national representatives and their citizens

- ⇒ The positive impacts of the freedom of expression such as ensuring that individuals have the right to speak up on cases of injustices and unfairness without quickly being silenced by censorship
- ⇒ It could also lead society to engage **in fruitful discussions on social issues and problems** in hopes of coming up with a solution
- ⇒ However, if social media users are unable to utilize this freedom responsibly in terms of what they put up online, then it is likely that the **adverse effects of such freedom will negate the positive impacts it can bring**
- ⇒ This is especially so if there is **little to no precautions or safety plans put in place** to prevent and mitigate the instances of such abuse and the detrimental harm it can bring about

#### Link

- ⇒ Therefore, people should not be allowed to completely express themselves online if that will lead to more detrimental harm than positive good it can bring to society and individuals

### \*\*\***TO SUM UP, CONCLUSION**\*\*\*

#### 1. **What to discuss/take note of within the essay thus far:**

- ⇒ Comparing between traditional media platforms and social media sites – what is the difference? How do these differences create greater need for censorship?
- ⇒ Remember: features of social media content will be closely related to features of Internet (connectivity, speed, anonymity, relative freedom to post content)

#### **Simple relationship between three related factors:**

