

Opinion **US politics & policy**

We must not allow free speech to become a partisan issue

Repelled by the characters of those who decry censorship, we fail to value rights that are fundamental to liberal democracy

JEMIMA KELLY



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Jemima Kelly 8 HOURS AGO

If you wanted to assemble a crack team of crusaders to fight for the moral rectitude of your side of an argument, you might not put Elon Musk, Russell Brand or Tucker Carlson top of the list. And yet, somehow, we find ourselves in the rather bizarre — even distressing — situation where these are the men currently most vociferous in defending one of our most fundamental human rights: the right to exercise free speech.

“Free speech is the bedrock of democracy and the Democratic Party (Kamala is just a puppet) wants to destroy it,” came the [latest pronouncement](#) this week on X from the platform’s owner Musk — a man who unironically calls himself a “free speech absolutist” — as he reposted a video of Kamala Harris shared by fellow-new-friend-of-Donald-Trump Robert F Kennedy Jr.

In his post, RFK Jr falsely claimed Harris was saying Musk had “lost his privileges” and should have his account “taken down” (she was actually talking about Trump). He also forgot to mention that the video was five years old, and showed Harris as a senator rather than presidential nominee. But such details were clearly unimportant to Musk, who also this week posted an AI-generated image of Harris depicting her as a communist, and asking: “Kamala vows to be a communist dictator on day one. Can you believe she wears that outfit!?”

The latter might have been a joke. But by showing such a lack of interest in the truth — something he [has made a habit of](#) — Musk proves he has his priorities wrong. Free speech is indeed one of the bedrocks of democracy but we should not consider it an end in itself; rather, by allowing all opinions and points of view to be heard, it is a means of getting as close as we possibly can to the truth.

The idea that he is a “free speech absolutist,” as he claims, is also demonstrably false. [According to data](#) analysed by the non-profit publication Rest of World in April, Musk has complied with more than 80 per cent of demands from governments to remove content or reveal information about users. He continues to cave to the pro-censorship government in China, where X is banned but where he happens to have a Tesla factory.

In a particularly risible moment during a recent cosy two-hour chat with Trump, Musk [told](#) the former president — who has called the press “the enemy of the American people”, admires authoritarian dictators, and recently proposed [amending the US constitution](#) to make burning the US flag punishable by jail time — that it was “obvious” that he was “a believer and an advocate of free speech”. He also claimed Trump “didn’t try to inhibit [the press’s] freedom of speech” during his presidency. Some in the “fake news media” would beg to differ.

Musk might be a hypocrite, a sycophant, a charlatan and a fabulist. But that does not mean he is wrong to stress the importance of free speech. We must not allow such a fundamental principle — one that gives a voice to the voiceless, that allows us to hold the powerful to account and that underpins all sorts of other human rights and indeed the whole concept of a liberal democracy — to become a partisan issue; all sides of the political spectrum must be willing to speak out strongly in favour of it.

Too often, the conversation around free speech is reduced to “misinformation bad!” from the left, and “censorship worse!” from the right. Too often, there seems to be a reluctance among right-thinking types to condemn censorship simply because of the dubious credentials — not to mention self-interest — of some of the characters who do complain about what they call the “censorship industrial complex”.

And it’s not as if we don’t have proof that some quite concerning events are indeed taking place: Meta chief executive Mark Zuckerberg [wrote a letter](#) to Congress last week in which he said that senior White House officials had “repeatedly pressured” the platform to take down certain Covid-19 content, including humorous and

satirical posts. X has been banned in Brazil — with a draconian fine of about \$8,900 for anyone who tries to access the platform using a VPN — after it failed to meet a deadline to appoint a new legal representative or comply with a court order to suspend a number of accounts suspected of spreading hate and “disinformation”.

It is clear that there are important conversations to be had around how to regulate platforms such as X, to change the profit incentives away from promoting hateful and incendiary content. It is also the case that there must be limits to free speech, as laid out by the law in many countries — “free speech absolutism” is neither a reality nor something we should aspire to. But we must not allow our most important principles to become tainted by the people who defend them. Free speech is far too important to become a political football.

[*jemima.kelly@ft.com*](mailto:jemima.kelly@ft.com)

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