

Internet freedom in relation to political engagement

What is Internet freedom?

Formally proclaimed on 10th December 1948, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) is a landmark document, created with representation from all regions of the world outlining fundamental rights to be universally protected. Articles 18 and 19 describe the right to freedom of thought, conscience, opinion and expression, privately or publicly, and to “receive and impart information and ideas through any media”ⁱ.

As these human rights are deemed to be universal, democratic countries typically define civil liberties within statutory law, intended to enable any person to develop and function freely as an individual within society. These civil liberties typically include the right to vote, the process of law and individual rights such as freedom of thought and expression. In the UK, freedom of expression is incorporated into domestic law in [Article 10](#) of the [Human Rights Act 1998](#).

Interacting with the internet requires both thought and expression, but the interaction output – such as a written article or social media comment – may be more demonstrable of freedom of expression. For example, internet publishing has become the essential medium of mainstream journalism and with the rise of citizen journalism and user generated content, it is generally accepted that the level of press freedom within a country correlates to freedom of expression. We can therefore use the level of press freedom - as measured by organisations such as [Reporters Sans Frontieres](#) - as a tangible measure of the level of internet freedom within a countryⁱⁱ.

Furthermore, as digital media evolves, measuring internet freedom should consider broader digital interactions such as communicating via messaging services, access to mobile apps, levels of surveillance and access to information, including news and political content. Best and Wade (2007) note that such measurement of internet freedom may be constrained by:

- Law (criminalising certain activities, defamation and slander, etc).
- Architecture (infrastructure, firewalls, connectivity, encryption, surveillance, etc).
- Market forces (pricing, commercial relationships, bundling of services, etc).
- Social norms (social criticism, ostracism, community pressure, etc).ⁱⁱⁱ

Internet freedom during election campaigns

In 2008, just two years after the public availability of Facebook and Twitter, Barack Obama's successful U.S. presidential campaign is widely recognised as the first to effectively use social media as a major feature of campaign strategy. Subsequently, the role of social media in politics – especially during election campaigns - has been a powerful tool for campaign engagement and a highly visible forum for wider debate and discussion from the electorate. This heightened role of social media in significantly affecting political outcomes, illuminates the concept of internet freedom.

Utilising internet freedom through engagement with the electorate is most typically seen in democratic political environments. In the 2017 UK election, Labour's unexpectedly strong performance was largely credited to a [youth-focussed social media strategy](#). Actively encouraging people to share content on social media, proved more effective in generating positive Labour party commentary than the Conservative party's ad-centric (online and offline) campaign and also allowed for reactive real-time content such as memes to deride Labour's opposition.

However, internet freedom is not a binary measure, and even in democratic elections we observe manipulation and restriction of internet freedom. In the U.S., during his 2016 election campaign the prolific tweeter Donald Trump repeatedly undermined public trust in the press with a sustained "fake news" narrative, and subsequently, as President, banned specific major news organisations from White House press briefings.

Most notably we recognise practices, often in non-democratic regimes, where significantly restricting internet freedom is used to control political expression and opinion. In Turkey's elections in 2011 and 2015, residing President Erdogan's authoritarian regime threatened and imprisoned journalists and used state police to raid offices of critical press organisations. In 2017 during the run-up to the Catalan independence referendum in Spain, the Spanish government blocked access to websites with a .cat domain containing information about the referendum, [prompting comparisons to authoritarian approaches previously seen in Turkey, China and North Korea](#).

ⁱ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

ⁱⁱ Reporters Sans Frontieres, Detailed Methodology, <https://rsf.org/en/detailed-methodology>

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael L. Best & Keegan W. Wade (2007) Democratic and Anti-Democratic Regulators of the Internet: A Framework, *The Information Society*, 23:5, 405-411. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01972240701575684> (accessed 05/11/17)