



# Americans Support Free Speech Online but Want More Action to Curb Harmful Content

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As the COVID-19 crisis continues and the debate rages on between Twitter and President Trump over online content moderation, a new report from Gallup and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation found that Americans understand the threat of misinformation to public health and democracy, and want misleading information removed from social media.

However, the public's desire to address the "infodemic," or the excessive amounts of often false or unverified information around the coronavirus, clashes with Americans' overwhelming support for freedom of expression online.

The major findings in the report, "Free Expression, Harmful Speech, and Censorship in a Digital World," available at [kf.org/techpoll](https://kf.org/techpoll), include the following:

- **Most people want the internet to be a place for free expression.** Nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) favor allowing people to express their views on social media.
- **Most people support the removal of false or misleading health information from social media.** Amid the pandemic, 85% of Americans are in favor of this, and 81% support removing intentionally misleading information on elections or other political issues.
- **Most Americans don't trust social media companies to police the content on their platforms.** Eight in 10 said they don't trust big tech to make the right decisions about what content appears on their sites, and what should be removed. But people, especially conservatives, trust the government even less to make these decisions.
- **Most Americans support in principle Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the law President Donald Trump and many in Congress are pushing to reform.** Almost two-thirds (66%) of Americans say they support keeping the existing law that shields major internet companies from liability.
- **Americans favor the creation of independent content oversight boards to govern content policy on social media.** Eighty-one percent think independent bodies that set policies on the removal of disputed content are a good idea, as long as they are diverse

and transparent.

“We have a clash of values online,” said Sam Gill, senior vice president and chief program officer at Knight Foundation. “People like freedom online but they are genuinely worried about harm—and they don’t know whom they can trust to make content decisions.”

The report’s findings come at a critical moment, when Congress and federal agencies are assessing a more prominent role for government in regulating internet technology companies, and the companies themselves are collaborating with the public sector and one another to a greater extent than ever before to weed out dangerous and harmful content. The findings point to an American public that still treasures the ideals of free speech and expression, but sees these values as increasingly in tension with the new realities of the COVID-19 landscape.

The report contains viewpoints from the following academic and tech industry experts on the findings and their implications on technology policy:

- **Evelyn Aswad**, professor of law at the University of Oklahoma College of Law, where she is the director of the Center for International Business and Human Rights, and a member of Facebook’s Oversight Board.
- **Danielle Citron**, professor of law at Boston University School of Law and vice president of the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative.
- **Eric Goldman**, professor of law and co-director of the High Tech Law Institute at Santa Clara University School of Law.
- **Daphne Keller**, director of the Program on Platform Regulation at the Stanford University Cyber Policy Center and former associate general counsel at Google.
- **Olivier Sylvain**, professor of law and director of the McGannon Center for Communications Research at Fordham University.

**A virtual discussion of the report and its findings will take place at 12 p.m. ET/9 a.m. PT on Wednesday, June 17**, with leading experts including Aswad and Keller, as well as John Samples, vice president and founder of the Center for Representative Government at the Cato Institute; and Paul Barrett, adjunct professor of law at New York University and deputy director of the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.

The survey is part of Gallup and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s Trust, Media and Democracy research series, which aims to address the decline in trust for journalism and other democratic institutions by examining the causes and supporting solutions.

**For interviews with experts from Knight Foundation to discuss the new report and its findings, please contact Tony Franquiz at [TFranquiz@westendstrategy.com](mailto:TFranquiz@westendstrategy.com) or 202-374-5393.**