Understanding Politics — Chapter 8 Student Practice Pack

Free Speech, Harm and Political Equality

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About this pack

Work through Chapter 8 with *On Liberty*, chapters 2 and 3, open. Read Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (2012), ch. 1, and Langton (1993). Answers are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com. Student Pack, Chapter 8, version 1.0 (October 2026). © Oxter Press. CC BY-NC 4.0.

Chapter at a glance

Justification	Why protect expression?	Strongest for	Weakest for
Truth	Discussion corrects error and keeps truth alive (Mill)	Political and scientific claims	Threats, abuse, commercial speech
Autonomy	Independent judgment needs access to ideas	Personal and artistic expression	Speech that manipulates
Democracy	Citizens must criticise and organise	Political speech	Private matters
Equal standing	Being heard is part of membership	Marginalised voices	Speech that undermines others' standing

The chapter distinguishes harm from offence, examines hate speech and silencing, and separates three claims: to speak, to a particular platform, and to amplification.

Close-reading worksheet

Passage A: the minority of one

> *If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. (ch. 2)*

1. Does the passage say anything about the quality of the dissenting opinion?
2. Mill adds that 'all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility'. Why?

3. Does fallibility mean every claim deserves equal credibility? Use section 8.13.

Passage B: dead dogma

> *However true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth. (ch. 2)*

> *He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. (ch. 2)*

1. What does a true belief lose when it goes unchallenged?
2. Does this argument protect false opinions? Why?
3. Mill also calls the claim that truth always triumphs over persecution a ‘pleasant falsehood’. What follows for unequal audiences online?

Passage C: the corn-dealer

> *An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer. (ch. 3)*

1. What changes between the two cases, and what stays the same?
2. Is Mill’s test about content, context or consequences?
3. Apply it to a post shared to a crowd organising outside someone’s home.

Policy case: draft a speaker policy

Using the chapter’s invitation dispute, draft a one-page policy for invited speakers at a university. It must state:

1. **Purposes:** what the policy protects (inquiry, equal participation, safety).
2. **Criteria:** when an event may be refused, moved or reformatted, and when it may not.
3. **Process:** who decides, on what evidence, by when.
4. **Appeal:** how a society or student challenges a decision.

Test it with the consistency question from section 8.16: would your rule still be defensible if applied by a government you distrust?

Self-test

1. In ‘mankind minus one’, Mill argues that silencing one dissenter is:

- A. Justified if the majority is large
- B. No more justified than that one silencing everyone else
- C. Justified if the view is false
- D. A matter for the courts

2. Mill says all silencing of discussion is:
    - A. An assumption of infallibility
    - B. Necessary in emergencies
    - C. A form of harm
    - D. Democratic
3. A true opinion not fully and fearlessly discussed becomes:
    - A. More certain
    - B. False
    - C. A dead dogma, not a living truth
    - D. Harmful
4. ‘He who knows only his own side of the case’:
    - A. Is the best judge
    - B. Should be silenced
    - C. Has a right to a platform
    - D. Knows little of that
5. In the corn-dealer example, the same opinion may be punished when:
    - A. Printed in a newspaper
    - B. Delivered to an excited mob outside the dealer’s house
    - C. It is false
    - D. It offends anyone
6. Mill calls the claim that truth always triumphs over persecution:
    - A. A law of history
    - B. Self-evident
    - C. A pleasant falsehood
    - D. A useful myth
7. Harm differs from offence because harm:
    - A. Injures interests that warrant protection
    - B. Is always physical
    - C. Is felt by more people
    - D. Is caused only by states
8. Waldron’s concern with hate speech centres on:
    - A. Emotional distress alone
    - B. Criminal violence
    - C. Offence to religion
    - D. The public assurance of equal standing
9. Matsuda asks analysts to attend to:
    - A. Speakers’ intentions only
    - B. Market effects
    - C. The experience of those targeted

- D. Legal precedent

10. Langton's silencing occurs when:
    - A. Speech is legally banned
    - B. Words fail to receive the uptake needed to function
    - C. Speakers choose silence
    - D. Platforms remove posts
11. Academic freedom differs from general free expression because:
    - A. It protects only professors
    - B. It is absolute
    - C. It forbids all selection
    - D. A university can judge scholarly relevance without banning a speaker from society
12. The chapter distinguishes three claims:
    - A. Expression, access and amplification
    - B. Truth, autonomy and democracy
    - C. Harm, offence and dislike
    - D. Law, culture and markets
13. The marketplace analogy is weakest when:
    - A. Ideas compete
    - B. Speech is political
    - C. Access, attention and responsiveness to evidence are unequal
    - D. Truth is clear
14. Wollstonecraft's contribution to this chapter is that:
    - A. Speech should be restricted to the educated
    - B. Formal permission is not enough when capacities are unequally developed
    - C. Women should not speak in public
    - D. Education should be private
15. For Arendt, public speech matters because:
    - A. It produces correct policy
    - B. It is economically useful
    - C. It is protected by law
    - D. It is how people appear as distinct participants in a shared world

Short answers and essays

Short answers: (1) Mill's three reasons for protecting discussion. (2) Harm versus offence. (3) Waldron's argument. (4) Langton's silencing. (5) Expression, access and amplification. (6) Academic freedom and no-platforming. (7) Why the marketplace analogy can fail. (8) The corn-dealer test. (9) Selective enforcement risks. (10) Wollstonecraft and Arendt on public voice.

Essays: (1) Does Mill's defence of discussion apply to all forms of expression? (2) Can hate speech restrictions support political freedom? (3) Does refusing a university platform violate freedom of expression? (4) Does equal freedom of speech require institutions that develop public voice? (5)

Should platforms be treated like publishers or like public squares? (6) Is offence ever a reason to restrict speech?

Glossary

Term	Definition
Infallibility	Mill: silencing assumes certainty no one has
Dead dogma	A truth held without understanding its grounds
Harm / offence	Injury to protected interests / distress or affront
Hate speech	Expression attacking people through group characteristics
Silencing	Denial of the uptake that makes speech work (Langton)
No-platforming	Refusing an institutional platform to a speaker
Amplification	Promotion that increases reach beyond availability