

(The following is taken from The George Washington University's Debate & Literary Society, and can be found at the following link: <https://www.gwdebate.org/lafayette-debates>)

Topic

“Social media companies providing platforms for violent extremism should be held criminally and/or civilly liable.”

Topic Statement

On October 16, 2020, Samuel Paty, a French school teacher, was beheaded for having shown cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his students. In the aftermath, observers pointed to social media as a cause of the attack because the teacher had been targeted online for violence in the days before the killing. This is one of numerous instances that has prompted governments around the world to question their role in mitigating violent extremism on social media platforms.

The European Union has made stringent efforts to safeguard society from violent extremism on social media through actions like the General Data Protection Regulation, which imposes harsh fines on social media companies that fail to meet privacy and security standards. This approach differs from the United States, where the approach relies on social media companies to regulate their own content.

The 2021 Lafayette Debates topic challenges students to investigate the best method for the prevention of violent extremism on social media platforms. Affirmatives are asked to defend the proposition that, in the United States and Europe, civil and/or criminal penalties should be imposed on social media companies allowing their platforms to serve as breeding grounds for the spread of violent extremism. This includes defending the notion and value of laws like those in the EU, as opposed to the US approach. Negatives are asked to rebut this proposition by arguing against criminal and/or civil penalties for social media companies providing platforms for violent extremism.

Violent extremism is defined by the FBI as “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals.” Over the past 50 years, the U.S. Supreme Court has generally held that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects speech that advocates violence in the abstract. At the same time, however, the Court has held that U.S. governments may restrict or punish speech that threatens or facilitates violence in a more specific or immediate way. This includes incitement to imminent lawless action, true threats, and speech integral to criminal conduct. For the purposes of the 2021 Lafayette Debates, teams are asked to focus on penalties for speech that threatens or facilitates violence in a more specific or immediate way. Both sides should focus their examples and arguments on transatlantic examples and policies, with an emphasis on the United States and France.