

**‘Rich and varied ethical standards’:  
The idea of Freedom of Expression as a universal value  
in a world of many cultures.**

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Article 19 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) enshrines Freedom of Expression (FE) as a universal value. Librarians, IT specialists, professionals in other related fields, educators and students largely seem to buy into the basic assumption that human beings share a respect for intellectual freedom. Yet an assertion by the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation that the savage penalties inflicted on the blogger Rauf Badawi in a Saudi Arabian court should be understood in the light of the world’s ‘rich and varied ethical standards’ is a direct challenge to this view. Only a little thought is needed to confirm that there is indeed a global variation in the respect for FE. Cultures that derive their ethical system from a religious faith, or where communal values outrank the individualism that is at the heart of FE, abound. This raises the question as to whether there is a case for FE as universal despite this assertion. Arguments derived from the function of FE as precondition for effective democracy, scientific and technical innovation, and cultural creativity will be offered. But more fundamentally, the suggestion that human brain development, particularly in the child, is dependent on free flows of information (however defined) will be developed. Finally the presentation will return to the question as to what it means in practice for librarians and other information workers to respect both FE and quite different sets of values in a multicultural society.