

# Young students discuss social media and free speech



*The competition winner, Daniel Lopez, with Centre Director Professor Joseph.*

For students in years 10-12, social media is often a part of everyday life, so their views on whether “social media is free speech gone mad” are particularly interesting. This was the topic of this year’s Writing for Human Rights Essay Competition, and the diversity of responses testified to the fact that young people are more than capable of engaging with the complexities of social media and human rights. Across the many submissions the standard was very high, as these young students argued their points with clarity and originality.

On one side of the debate students passionately defended social media as an exciting new form of expression used by social movements demanding change or raising awareness. On the other hand, students were also concerned that unchecked use of social media has led to incidents of cyber bullying and vilification.

With many outstanding contributions, the judging panel had a difficult choice. They eventually settled on Daniel Lopez from Emmanuel College as the winner of the 2011 competition and the iPad 2. Daniel argued that far from being “free speech gone mad”, social media is simply a new and powerful form of free speech. He drew on examples from the “Arab Spring” to show that social media can be a powerful tool for expression, organisation and communication in countries where free speech is severely limited. As such, he argued, social media is a sensible extension of people’s basic human rights and liberties. His essay is reproduced following this article.

Another great essay came from Cynthia Huang of MacRobertson Girl’s High School, which claimed the second prize of an iPad 2. Cynthia looked at the roots of free speech in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which describes freedom of expression as the right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas.” She argued that our modern understanding of free speech needs to return to this concept of the development of ideas in order to avoid offensive and hateful speech being protected by freedom of expression. Karan Dhamija from Melbourne High School was awarded the third prize, which was also an iPad 2. Karan argued that because social media is in its infancy, we do not have adequate means of censoring hateful expression without also removing its ability to facilitate positive social change.

The high quality of the submissions meant that four Certificates of Commendation were also awarded. The recipients were Mardy Bridges from Casterton Secondary College, Christine Li from MacRobertson Girls’ High School, Fergus Peace from Melbourne Grammar School and Thomas Posa from Melbourne High School.

The winners were presented with their awards at a ceremony following the 2011 Costello Lecture, hosted by the Monash Law Faculty. The students and their families had the opportunity to listen to Brian Walters SC speak about enlarging our vision of rights to include the rights of non-humans.

***The prizes for the 2011 Essay Competition were donated by the Office of Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education) at Monash University.***



*Cynthia Huang receiving second prize from Professor Joseph.*