**Free Expression Awards: How nine honorees used their First Amendment powers**

By Patty Rhule

The right to free expression is the pounding pulse of American democracy.

“Free expression” sums up the sentiment of the 45 words of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. We can worship a higher power or choose not to. We can speak our minds, publish our thoughts, march with others in protest and petition for change. Congress — that’s your government and mine — can make no law abridging those freedoms.

On April 15, the Freedom Forum will honor [nine people who exhibit free and fearless expression](https://freeexpressionawards.org/), 2021’s Free Expression Award (FEA) honorees. Please join the Freedom Forum for this free online event to celebrate those who practice the First Amendment freedoms too many of us take for granted.

Freedom, by definition, means a wide range of choices.

So, fellow Americans, what are you doing with your vast First Amendment freedoms?

Do you choose to exercise your freedom of expression on social media to “cancel” people whose ideas or actions offend you? Or do you use it to build coalitions, like FEA honoree **DeRay Mckesson**,an educator and activist, who used Twitter to assemble a worldwide social justice movement many hope will help end centuries of injustice against Black Americans?

You could go on the radio and amass a wide audience spewing jokes that mock the LGBTQ community, minority groups and women. Or you can challenge gender inequity, as FEA Lifetime Achievement honorees **Susan Stamberg, Nina Totenberg, Linda Wertheimer** and the late **Cokie Roberts** —the founding mothers of NPR — did when they brought the perspectives of women to the airwaves in the ’70s, when female voices weren’t deemed “authoritative” enough to deliver the news.

You could march on Washington to challenge the outcome of an election that [officials in all 50 states](https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/09/politics/2020-election-results-certified/index.html), and the former [attorney general of the United States](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/12/01/attorney-general-barr-no-evidence-widespread-election-fraud/3783305001/), certified as accurate. Or like Hong Kong publisher **Jimmy Lai,** an FEA honoree, you can risk your freedom and that of your family to march in support of democracy and challenge China’s crackdown on freedom in its territory of Hong Kong.

You could [hound young female entertainers like Britney Spears](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/arts/music/britney-spears-documentary-media.html) about their sexuality and private lives. Or you can shine a light on the serial sexual abuse of young girls, as investigative journalist **Julie K. Brown**, another FEA honoree, did through years of reporting. Her journalism revealed how the criminal justice system failed victims and her work helped bring charges against Jeffrey Epstein.

You could harrumph from your easy chair about “unpatriotic” athletes who use their platforms to draw attention to the nation’s injustices against people of color by kneeling on the sidelines. Or like FEA honoree **Gen. Colin L. Powell**, who has led men and women into wars where too many died defending American ideals, you can defend the rights of all Americans to burn the American flag in protest as one expression of those same shimmering ideals.

You could create false narratives in slick videos about debunked conspiracy theories that quickly go viral. Or like **Susan Wojcicki**, YouTube chief executive officer and an FEA honoree,you can help navigate social media’s evolving narrative on censorship, free expression and social responsibility.

Democracy relies on our responsibility as citizens to stay alert and informed. The First Amendment empowers us all to challenge the powerful. The First Amendment protects hate speech, online trolls and protesters who march to support divisive causes, just as it protects the people who challenge them. Our nation’s founders wrote it that way because out of a free marketplace of ideas — some repellant, some resplendent — sometimes emerges thinking that propels us as a country to do better.

Your First Amendment freedoms are there to be used. When you do, consider the choices made by the Free Expression honorees, and whether you will be proud or haunted by how you express yourself.