Social Media, Censorship, and Polarization

By

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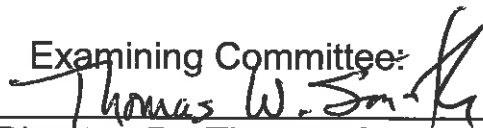Director, Honors College

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Abstract

Social media has exploded in importance and power over a very short period of time, faster than people and policy can keep up. As a result, social media has been a battleground of business and political interests that have changed and adapted so quickly that policy makers are unable to maintain the pace. This veritable wild west of communication has led to a variety of issues with no clear solutions, and even as ideas are put forward these are quickly made irrelevant by the next innovation or strategy that inevitably pops up. These issues range from social media companies generating ideological bubbles in their pursuit of building a superior product, fringe political forces adapting and making use of the internet in their struggles to both be heard and to stop their ideological rivals from being heard, to the government trying to adapt law and policy to new Constitutional issues that are arising. This paper will examine these issues and consider their complexities, while suggesting and identifying flexible solutions that recognize the ever-changing nature of the question at hand.

On Social Media Censorship

The world of communication has changed significantly in the past 20 years, the driving force of this change stemming from the Internet and its billions of interconnected computers and mobile devices. As internet based communications have progressed, become more ubiquitous, and become more powerful, so have the issues surrounding this technology. One of the most important controlling factors of this new age of internet communication has been the rise of social media. This behemoth of media has overtaken all other forms of communication as the premier manner through which the average person expresses their views to the world at large. From the Facebook profile, to the simple comment section, the internet has become the new method through which modern society expresses its varied points of view, in stark contrast to people who had only runners, horseback, pamphlets, postal mail, newspapers and other types of much slower communication, and even the traditional major network television news.

There are great benefits to this explosion of social media. The average person now has the capability to speak their mind to potentially millions of people, extending theoretically to the billions that have access to an internet connection. However, the very fact that this voice is now transmitted over the internet now raises questions about what it means to have freedom of speech in an era where so much communication takes place through platforms not only not controlled by the individual, but also not controlled by the government. Previously, people would communicate in the public square, a physical location where individuals would congregate to hear one another speak. Any censorship of this public location would be obvious and simple, and so the methods of fighting this type of censorship were obvious as well. The same can be said of paper publications from previous times, if a publication was being censored, some of the

information it would otherwise contain simply wouldn't be available. With the advent of the internet, censorship has changed forms dramatically, and the people responsible for carrying out the censorship have changed as well.

Prior to widespread access to the internet, knowing the views of the average person and then censoring those views was more difficult and the censorship more visible, as those people would spread their views on a person to person basis, but with the rise of social media, physical forms of media are no longer the most important form of communication. When the physical public square reigned supreme, censorship could be combatted by the opposing point of view simply physically showing up and either spreading or suppressing physical media and speech, but in the digital era, social media companies can simply bar opposing views from ever being showcased. This occurs for a variety of reasons, one of which being that it improves the user experience. Exposing users to views that they disagree with may annoy them into looking for websites that support their views more, or at least appear to. Facebook is the prime example of this, showing users stories that would be most relevant to them, and thus within their views. While there is not necessarily a malicious motive to only showing users things they enjoy, it can lead to bubbles that essentially censor views and information with which the individual user disagrees.

Many people simply remain within their own social media bubbles today, and this leads to many people rarely getting exposed to either a different point of view, or to a wide variety of views. The sheer volume of information available has led to a moment when people cannot possibly consume all of it, gaining both the privilege and the curse of having to choose a few different media sources they care about. People choose websites and sources that they enjoy, and that will generally be those with which they agree. This might not be a totally terrible thing,

people enjoy their media usage more with this method, and might still get exposed to other views by chance. The issue is that privately owned social media providers like Facebook have incorporated algorithms into their websites that show users articles and advertisements that are relevant to their interests. For the company this is a positive thing, it keeps the user on the website longer viewing material they enjoy, gets them more advertisement revenue, and generally improves the experience for the user, but it also leads to the creation of bubbles of information from which the user may rarely leave.

To some degree it can be argued that the age of the internet has allowed for controversial views to spread more than ever before, because with the dawn of the internet age anyone can go put up a website or social media page in minutes, rather than try to get their information disseminated through a newspaper or major television network. The difference between those days and now is the sheer necessity to have access to social media. In the realm of modern public political debate social media is where it happens, and if an individual is barred from accessing that arena, their voice simply does not exist. A banned individual may be able to go out and create their own website, but the great majority of users will never go to that website, especially if that website's views do not agree with their own.

As mentioned before, the attempts by social media companies to improve both their profits and the user experience is not inherently a malicious act. These things were done with good intentions in mind, and they have worked in the ways they were supposed to, with side effects that are undeniably negative. People need to be exposed to views that are outside of their frame of reference, otherwise their assumptions and opinions are backed up by ever more vicious cycles of ignoring sources they dislike until they either decide block it, or an algorithm of some sort does it for them. This is the unintentional side of censorship, or at least that is what the

social media companies say. There is another angle to this issue however, that of intentional censorship of views by the companies themselves.

The Charlottesville Incident

Intentional censorship by social media companies is the more easily understood and the more obvious type of censorship that social media companies undertake. The most recent and blatant example of this came after the car attack at a rally in Charlottesville, wherein a right-wing extremist rammed his vehicle into protesters. The response to the attack by social media companies was swift, to remove supporters of extremist right wing ideology from their websites. Various websites responded in different ways, Reddit responded by removing a tiny subreddit called PhysicalRemoval, Facebook responded by banning a number of Facebook pages that posted far right content, and removed all links to an article from the DailyStormer that attacked the victim of the Charlottesville attack. They also deleted the Facebook page of a prominent speaker who attended the rally, and Instagram also banned the individual's page. The website service provider GoDaddy also ceased providing service to TheDailyStormer, as did Google. (Umoh)

While the decision of these websites to crack down on right-wing rhetoric in response to this attack is commendable to a degree, there are some potential issues that arise from their actions. The pages removed by Reddit and Facebook were all very small in terms of user base, but the decision to do so is what matters. This sort of removal goes beyond just improving the experience for users, but down to removing specific ideas that the social media owners view as damaging to their brand. Rather than simply quarantining these pages, or perhaps even going as far as providing refutations against them, the websites banned them completely. This raises the question of responsibility on the part of social media platforms with regards to freedom of

speech. While these companies are private organizations, they control the most powerful pieces of mass communications technology to ever be created. Banning pages means that large numbers of people may never be exposed to the ideas of the other side, no matter how uncomfortable they may be. Seeing both sides of a debate, even the extremes, reminds people of what they are fighting against, and prevents one side from becoming too dominant as they play a sort of ideological tug of war. This moderates all but the handful of fanatics that inhabit pages such as PhysicalRemoval or the pages removed by Facebook.

Another much overlooked and vitally important part of the Charlottesville fallout was Google's decision to stop providing service to TheDailyStormer. With Google being the overwhelmingly dominant search engine, removing TheDailyStormer from its search engine means that anyone who wants to view the site would have to know the url, because they would not be able to find it through a search on Google. While this is not the death of the site on its own, it is a severe restriction. Again, while the intention behind this action was good, there is the downside that now the average person cannot go and explore the ideas of extremists in order to refute their ideas for themselves, or even to attempt to refute them on their own website. Instead, the link to the website will just be passed around among fanatics and those vulnerable to radicalization without ever coming into contact with the opposition. Whether it is better to remove the website or not is up for debate, but the willingness of Google and other large web providers to make that decision for the rest of us should be of concern, because whenever an organization decides to use power against one group, no matter how justified, there is always the chance that they will use that same power against other groups. Within China there is large scale censorship by that government, with the intention of keeping information that the government

does not want popularized out of the hands and minds of the Chinese people. In contrast,

American free speech is protected, even, and especially, highly offensive speech.

Perspective from China

Recently in China, there was a law passed increasing censorship of television media by a

significant degree. The law covers a gigantic range of material, with points that ban umbrella

concepts like material which, 'Damages the image of the country, state systems and policies' or,

'Plots, line, titles, characters, shots, or music, that hurt the feelings of ethnic groups' and perhaps

the most obscure censorship point of them all, 'Blurs the value judgement between truth and

falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, or confuses the basic boundaries between justice

and injustice' (Qz). This Chinese censorship could be viewed as a sort of Chinese solution to the

problem of immoral content. Comparing the censorship of radical political opinions in the United

States to total and extreme regulation of all television media in China may appear to be an over

exaggeration, but there is the potential for the precedent set by decisions like Google's choice to

stop carrying links to spill into large-scale policy decisions. There is the possibility for Google to

write policy in which they decide to not carry any more content they deem overly offensive,

based on whatever qualification, such as sexism, racism, bigotry or the like. The issue with these

value judgements is precisely that they are value judgements, and they can rapidly extend out of

control based on the opinions of the people who have the authority to ban content.

There is a very real potential that serious censorship could begin of the concepts that are

viewed as outside the acceptability of polite public discussion online. It only takes a few,

seemingly reasonable and small steps to go from only banning the most extreme political

dissidents off of Google's search results to opening up the ban policy to all websites that Google

views as potentially problematic. That dragnet may wind up including a number of sites that are

relatively harmless, and merely discuss the issues. It could also end up attacking accidentally targeting websites that are also raising valid concerns outside of their more offensive rhetoric targeted by this theoretical policy, or even just websites that feature ideas and links to a site deemed problematic. This judgement of radical or even merely highly controversial sites may not be particularly dangerous in its appearance right now, however, over a period of just a few years it could lead Google and other major sites down the road to censorship that is damaging to basic online discourse.

One potential solution to the overreach of censorship is to make censorship policies as specific as possible, trying to prevent a sort of dragnet effect wherein there is collateral damage. The new Chinese censorship laws are extremely broad, allowing the government to basically shut down any television show they desire since they can interpret the laws in the necessary way to target nearly any material. There is an argument to be made that various internet platforms have intentionally kept their guidelines vague to allow for them to adapt to changing situations and ban controversial material as is necessary. In this way they can avoid having to overthink the banning of controversial material, because they only enforce the policies when it is most important and most convenient. If policies were specific, it would make enforcement more difficult, and also more difficult to ignore. In the case of broad policies, failure to enforce can simply be brushed aside as being too difficult for so much material. This makes only targeting the more well-known material seem reasonable. Specific policies remove the regulators ability to make excuses for failing to control illicit content, because there is no longer a judgement call to make when regulating content, the rules are cut and dry.

Perspective from Russia

Another example of heavy government censorship comes out of the Russian Federation. As recently as 2015, the government of Russia passed a law on 'undesirables', referring to foreign and international organizations who, in the eyes of the Russian government may, 'undermine Russia's security, defense, or constitutional order' (HRW). Under this law if an organization is seen as taking part in contributing to the aforementioned activities then the government can cut off their activities in Russia, and can also, 'force Russian groups to cut off all contact with the targeted foreign organization' (HRW). The obvious danger with this law is that the government may be using this power to prevent freedom of speech rather than to defend the people of Russia. With such a broad set of criteria used to qualify an organization as undesirable, this law has the potential to be easily abused by corrupt government officials. As previously mentioned with China, censorship laws with a broad set of criteria lend themselves to abuse, because avoiding violation becomes difficult when the law can be interpreted many different ways.

In comparison to the Russian 'undesirables' legislation stands the powers of Facebook and similar social media giants to reduce or remove undesirable content from of their platforms, using a similar set of qualifications. Recently Facebook generated controversy when they blocked the notifications of recently uploaded content from a pair of popular conservative vloggers who made their content under the names Diamond and Silk. This action easily falls under the definition of a shadow ban, in which a content creator is not fully removed from a website, but instead walled off to prevent their content from being accessed. When asked for comment after this discovery, Facebook responded that the content was, 'unsafe to the community' (Concha). The humorous political commentary provided by these vloggers has

never been anything that could be reasonably called 'unsafe', which is doubtless why Facebook rolled back the message, saying, 'The message they received last week was inaccurate and not reflective of the way we communicate with our community and the people who run Pages on our platform' (Lieberman). This situation appears to be another example of the dangers of flagging, with the vlogging (video blogging) duo likely receiving automated messages and bans as a result of political rivals reporting their content out of spite. This would explain why Facebook called the 'unsafe to the community' comment inaccurate, if this was an automated message then it very well may have been genuinely inaccurate, being the same message sent to all accounts that get flagged enough by other users and not specific to the account of Diamond and Silk.

While Facebook may not be as oppressive as the Russian government, the comparison stands. The members of the Russian government acting to prevent outside voices from acting within the country, and their own people from doing the same, can easily be compared with the rogue flaggers of Facebook, who make efforts to drive content they disagree with from the website. There is a certain level of credit due to Facebook for responding to the complaints from the 1.2 million followers of Diamond and Silk's page and ensuring that they are still allowed to speak. However, the question is then raised as to what happens to other, smaller, pages that undergo the same treatment. With so many followers, and regular television appearances, Diamond and Silk have the necessary social media power to bring their issues to light, but for every famous Facebook page with millions of followers there are many others for whom there is little chance of this occurring.

On Hate Speech Censorship in the European Union (EU)

An interesting example of the sort of idea that Facebook puts forward of banning material that is, 'unsafe to the community' comes from Europe. Several cases have come out of Europe

recently concerning hate speech, the first of which occurred in 2008 in France where a leftist activist and French citizen, 'was convicted and fined for insulting former French President Nicolas Sarkozy by holding a sign that said "get lost, jerk"' (Greenwald). While the activists punishment was only 30 euro fine, an obvious irony arises once one learns that Sarkozy himself had previously, 'uttered (the very same words) when a citizen refused to shake his hand at a public fair' (Greenwald). Thankfully this case was ultimately taken on at the European Court of Human Rights, who sided with the citizen activist.

There is another case, even more recent and somehow even more bizarre, which occurred in Britain just this year. A Scottish comedy Youtuber by the name of Mark Meechan, who goes by the name Count Dankula online, narrowly avoided jail time over teaching his girlfriend's pet pug to raise its paw in response to hearing 'Sieg Heil' (Palmer) and posting a video of it to his channel. Mark Meechan said he made the video for the purposes of annoying his girlfriend, who would constantly talk about how cute the dog is, so he, 'would turn him into the least cute thing he could think of, a Nazi'. The video can still be found on YouTube, but the original video was taken down after receiving over three million views. The content creator was given a fine of £800, barely avoiding time in jail after a significant amount of public outcry. Under the U.K. Communication Act of 2003, 'Judge Sheriff Derek O'Carroll ruled (Mark Meechan) Count Dankula…guilty of being "grossly offensive," (Palmer). The judge stated, '"As a matter of law, the test is not whether the video was offensive but whether it was grossly offensive. I concluded….that your video was not just offensive but grossly so, as well as menacing, and that you knew that or at least recognized that risk."'. (Palmer)

These cases show a dangerous belief within the European system of free speech, that some speech is simply too offensive to be allowed within the public space. It is not that the

speech is inherently dangerous or especially obscene, but merely that it offends the listener, which gets the speaker in trouble with the law, at least in the French case. The British case raises the obvious question of who is able to judge content to be grossly offensive? In the case of Mark Meechan's pug video, the judge ruled the video to be 'grossly offensive', and while that may be accurate to some people, if the video is not universally offensive than is it not reasonable to conclude that Mr. Meechan was sentenced to pay £800 for making something that offended one judge in particular, rather than violating a specific law? What if this case had been judged by a different official, would the outcome have been different due to a sense of humor?

It is also disturbing that in Mr. Meechan's case context clearly wasn't taken into consideration. The video was very clearly not made with the intent to be grossly offensive, and even if it was, how could one begin to prove that Mr. Meechan made it with the intent to do so? Particularly in the realm of comedy where things are not expected to be taken seriously it is difficult to make the case that a comedian makes jokes with the intent to grossly offend someone, and even if they were to do so, is that not part of humor? If the judge is the one that makes the determination as to what constitutes grossly offensive content, couldn't any humor be charged as grossly offensive so long as that particular judge presiding over the case deemed it to be so? What is the next step after this, to appeal cases up from one judge to the next, implying that the sense of humor of one court is superior to the other? Is the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom to eventually determine for the people what acceptably funny offensive humor is and what crosses the line into the unfunny? As mentioned in the section on China there is a great issue with laws that are too broad in their potential application, as they can be abused. Not only can they be abused however, they can also be applied improperly, and that is what I believe

happened in the case of Mr. Meechan. Without stringent enough guidelines to define what 'grossly offensive' means, the judge simply made use of him own opinion.

If it were to be agreed by all that some item of speech was absolutely grossly offensive even then that grossly offensive speech should still be protected, otherwise there is the risk in a free society that there will be a constant 'tightening of the screws' of what constitutes grossly offensive speech until there is really only speech that agrees with whatever cultural, political, or religious regime is currently holding power. I would add that especially something that is created by a comedian has an even looser standard due to its very nature, and should simply be considered extreme humor, a spoof, or other intentionally extreme form of expression for humorous and/or comedic effect. This sort of expression would be, in earlier times, described as 'crude humor' and since there is no forcing of people to partake in these displays, it would end with the observer judging it was crude humor. Under hate speech laws of those indulging in these types of expression will instead wind up in court being fined, or worse yet jailed, based on the personal opinions of a judge for their expressions just existing. At least under US fighting word and obscenity legislations there are still times and places that these expressions can be made, they are merely restricted in the public square where those like children absolutely cannot simply avoid them, and these expressions can still be seen elsewhere.

On Hate Speech Legislation

The very concept of hate speech legislation lends itself to abuse due to the issues of definition and context. Attempting to ban and/or silence hateful rhetoric through the law is an extremely difficult thing to achieve without becoming almost medieval when it comes time to try to enforce these laws. These cases always loop back around to the question of who is defining what is hateful and what isn't, and trying to defining what could be considered intentional. The

US has had similar laws in the past that have been largely relaxed, in the form of obscenity laws. They still exist today in some forms, preventing various television advertisements until late at night and preventing some content from TV entirely. Obscene material is defined using the standards of, '(1) whether 'the average person, applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, 'taken as a whole,' appeals to 'prurient interest' (2) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (3) whether the work, 'taken as a whole,' lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.' (Staff). Another sort of speech censorship that we have here to contrast against European-style hate speech law is fighting words legislation, which defines some speech as an immediate breach of the peace when they are used. More specifically defined as words, 'by their very utterance, inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace. It has been well observed that such utterances are no essential part of any exposition of ideas, and are of such slight social value as a step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality' (Hashmall).

What separates obscenity law and fighting words from the hate speech laws that nearly landed Mr. Meechan in jail is that their definitions are much more nuanced than the legislation surrounding hate speech. Defining something as grossly offensive is a very personal thing, made even more difficult by the potential addition of humor. In the case of US law, specific criteria would need to be met to prove that the speech had either been obscene, to apply to obscenity laws, or had been both useless and disruptive enough to be considered clear breach of the peace and fall under fighting words law. In the case of English hate speech law no such specificity is required, just that the speech be 'grossly offensive'. Free speech is a very powerful thing to wield, and with such power comes great ease with which it could be misused or abused to insult

people. Which raises the question of which is more important, the right of people to have freedom of speech, or the rights of people to not be insulted by things they consider to be grossly offensive?

To illustrate my point of view on this subject, I would like to bring in an example from Thailand. Thailand is notorious for their laws against insulting the king, handing out long jail sentences to people that have made merely made unfavorable posts about their king to social media through 'lese majeste' (Jenkins) laws. In one case, the Thai government, 'arrested (a) factory worker (named) Thanakorn Siripaiboon at his home in suburban Bangkok…and charged him with writing a "sarcastic" Internet post about Tongdaeng.' (Jenkins) with charges that could net him up to 37 years in jail. You may have inferred that Tongdaeng is the name of the king of Thailand, but you'd be wrong, it is the name of the king's dog. To compare this to the British case, those bringing a man to court over a satirical video with a pug have themselves been granted a sort of lese majeste of their own over the free speech domain of other people. It is only a step further to criminalize even daring to hold certain views, seeing as expressing them is already clearly criminal. One of the reasons freedom of speech is so valuable is that it allows for people to speak out against their governments, and to bring up issues of controversy, but under hate speech law every individual who experiences gross offense by the speech of another is granted the power to command the government to shut down the speech of their fellow citizen. In the case of Thailand there is only one king to avoid offending, in the UK there are millions. By their very nature hate speech laws are oppressive, because they can only grant power to the offended.

Third Party Pressure

Decisions to hand out bans and removals are not always the independent decision of the policies of social media companies, many of these removals are due to pressure from various groups. For example, in the case of Reddit's removal of PhysicalRemoval after the Charlottesville rally was in large part due to pressure from another subreddit, AgainstHateSubreddits. (Little) Another great example of this sort of external pressure is YouTube, which has a moderating system that relies on users flagging videos that they believe are violating policy. This allows for a handful of individuals working together to flag down entire YouTube channels and have their videos at minimum shut down until they can be reviewed by the staff, a process which can take weeks. If one person is determined enough to make several YouTube accounts they can even accomplish these flagging strikes on their own. The videos can be demonetized, and the channels can also receive a form of shadow banning, a process where a channel is not deleted, but made much more difficult to find, such as being impossible to search for or not being attributed to the video's creator. What these systems allow for is a sort of outsider censorship through a word that I have only seen created and used within the last two years, 'deplatforming'.

Deplatforming is a word that has been created by and primarily used by the American far-left to describe the act of removing the potential for dangerous or outrageous speech from occurring. This can take place in a whole variety of contexts, the most open and obvious being self-proclaimed 'Antifascist' groups that act through physical intervention to attempt to stop people and speakers from gathering in public, or even private, places. The activity does not stop there, however, it can go as far as attempting to shut down political rallies, websites, book sales, social media profiles, the list is endless. Basically if one of these groups, or even a single

individual, decides that a piece of media or speech is too dangerous, they will make efforts to prevent it from reaching the greater mass of people. These efforts can vary wildly, from simply petitions and protests, to violent interventions against physical speakers at their locations. This is an important part of the discussion of social media censorship, since so much of it does stem from user outrage over specific content. Whenever a political group decides that content is too distasteful for their particular views, a sort of political laser beam can be focused on that content to report and protest it until the website does something to remove it. These groups are generally incredibly small, no more than a few hundred or a few thousand people, but when the energies of that group can be focused on a single page, their power is amplified through the power of anonymity and ability to appear like a larger force than is actually there. After the Charlottesville attack, where far left and far right attendees and protesters were both in attendance, this was especially prevalent as the left retaliated through online activism, pressuring major websites and apps to act.

As stated before, some of these activities have their commendable moments, but what is dangerous is the precedent that these companies will actively censor views based on pressure from tiny groups that ride waves of public outrage to accomplish their goals, and that those activities do not actually rebuke the ideas of the target anyway. Both sides of the spectrum are guilty of forms of deplatforming, but the tactic appears to be used much more openly by the far left and much more often, to the point where I have seen the far left describe themselves as deplatformers, and the far right accuse them of that, but I have never seen the left use this label against the right, it is a sort of badge of pride among the far left, in particular Antifa, to be successful at deplatforming some event or piece of media that they have decided is in some manner or another fascistic.

The deplatforming of either set of extreme ideas only pushes them into smaller and more confined spaces where they do not receive debate, bubbles where the ideologies bounce around and become more extreme. Both sides have participated in this activity of creating echo chambers where ideas can be protected from critique and made progressively more extreme. Each time this is done, however, the ideas are not actually dealt with, just pushed temporarily back into the margins, where they regroup, rethink, and reenter with new strategies that are more difficult to deal with than the previous iterations. User based reporting techniques utilized by social media websites for the purpose of censorship have the upside that under that system the website has largely given up censoring by themselves, and as a result a larger amount of material is able to get through uncensored. The downside is when deplatforming activists of one stripe or another decide to use that same system to their own political ends, shutting down their opposition using censorship rather than rebuttal.

Potential Self-Regulation

The response required for these current issues with social media censorship and exploitation are anything but simple and require a level of nuance, which is never the easy method. If the social media companies were to entirely take over censorship duties and leave no flagging abilities to the individual users themselves, then there is an increased chance that explicit materials could slip through and not get caught by the companies themselves, but when censorship is not adequately controlled by the companies then they are open to exploitation by groups that ride waves of public opinion to crush their opposition through otherwise reasonable methods of censorship. The correct method, in my opinion, to correct these issues is to decrease the power of flagging on these websites, to reduce flagging to only a warning for administrators to look at the content themselves. As it stands right now, flaggers can currently take content

offline just by flagging, before administrators have checked whether or not the content is actually in violation of the terms of service policy of the website.

The more important part of this censorship issue goes beyond just the content itself, but to the ideas. The great danger behind censoring speech is that people will never be exposed to the other side of an argument. The current system imposed by social media sites like Facebook is creating bubbles that lead to polarization between groups of people that receive different information, and never even see the information provided to their rivals. This leads to the end of the moderate and the creation of ever more polarized sides. The social media sites shoulder some of the responsibility for this problem, as they are the ones that design these algorithms, generating information bubbles for the sake of profits and makes their customers feel more comfortable. At the end of the day, these websites are businesses, and their desire to make profits are entirely reasonable, but they should also recognize the immense responsibility they have as some of the largest and most influential distributors of information in the history of the world.

Perhaps the most significant challenge social media companies' face concerning their responsibility in generation of ideological bubbles is the issue that censorship doesn't really solve the problem. Bubbles of extremist thought cannot be dealt with by pushing them off of major platforms, they are already fringe ideas and will simply take root in other, more fringe forms of media. Somewhere the ideas will find refuge and continue on, the major platforms will not have solved the problems, just moved them to a place where they are even less likely to receive opposition. The ideal method for dealing with these problems is properly debated opposition of the ideas, but since the companies themselves cannot be reasonably expected to do this themselves, this is a problem. One potential solution is to create a section of the website that exists for controversial material and ideologies. This would generate a space within which the

ideas could be fought over, and would prevent the bubbles from simply moving to an even worse echo chamber, while simultaneously allowing the social media company to scrub the vast majority of their user base of content that makes the website a worse experience for them. By doing this moderate people interested in political debate could debate amongst radicals from all parts of the political spectrum, bursting the bubbles and allowing the potentially real grievances of the radical groups to come into contact with the general public.

Beyond just holding the social media companies responsible, there is also the individual to consider. If each person who utilizes the fantastic tools that comprise social media would recognize their own bias towards their personal point of view, and made efforts to consider points of view beyond their own, our country would be much better off. This would effectively burst the bubbles of information that people reside within and end the problem of ideological polarization brought about by censorship. The issue is that for this solution to be implemented requires that people take the responsibility for themselves on an individual basis, and that this solution is accepted and implemented by the enormous majority of individuals. Since sadly this solution is unrealistic, we must look to the companies to maintain a healthy level of openness, but that does not mean we should forgo encouraging every person to look for other sources of information that are opposed to their own. This is why I believe that adding a section dedicated to controversial topics to major social media websites would have a positive impact, not just because it would pit radicals against one another and allow moderates in on the debate as well, but because it would prevent the average person from shirking their responsibility of knowing what the current civil debate is all about. Simply avoiding the issue is never an effective solution.

One of Facebook's current solutions to the problem of fake news was to hire, '3,000 human editors to help its algorithms figure out when noxious content is flowing across its

network' (Mcmanus). My first question would be what contents are considered to be 'noxious', that critique aside, I do not see this mass hiring of moderators to be inherently against my proposed solution of a quarantine zone for controversial content. The primary issue presented by human moderation is the issue of individual political bias, as there will always be some level of implicit, if not downright explicit political bias in human moderation. The only way around this is a location for the controversial material to settle, because if it is kicked off the site entirely the problem will not be solved, and there is a high chance of the radical groups returning under different strategies anyway. Another potential idea is the empowerment of individual users to censor content for themselves, Twitter has a feature similar to this. This 'muted words' (Loyola) feature works by allowing individual users to screen out content that contains certain words that they have decided they do not wish to see. This feature is great in the sense that it doesn't prevent other users from creating controversial content, but it also fails to address the issue of ideological bubbles. The individual is still generating a bubble in which they avoid content they do not like or disagree with. As a solution this is still superior to the outright banning of controversial content. The clearest way forward for social media is transparency, silencing determined radical groups through censorship tends to only bolster their arguments, and further polarize the groups, the solution is to take them head on through recognition of their existence and reasoned debate.

Potential Government Regulation

Social media companies must take the responsibility of preventing the formation of ideological bubbles through their censorship policies. For now this is only a voluntary responsibility, but that may soon change as the Supreme Court sets new precedents in this age of digital communication. Of great interest to this subject of censorship is the public square

question, if social media is now a necessity to communicate in the modern world, can social media companies prevent people from accessing it and using it? Recently the Supreme Court made a ruling on a case concerning social media use by sex offenders in North Carolina. The state had passed a law which made it a felony for a sex offender to use social media like Facebook, but the Supreme Court ruled that law unconstitutional, with Justice Anthony Kennedy writing,

'"To foreclose access to social media altogether is to prevent the user from engaging in the legitimate exercise of First Amendment rights…Even convicted criminals — and in some instances, especially convicted criminals — might receive legitimate benefits from these means for access to the world of ideas, in particular if they seek to reform and to pursue lawful and rewarding lives." (Lapowsky)

This ruling basically bars the state from preventing social media access on the grounds that it is an utterly essential modern tool for communication, and to infringe upon its access is to effectively silence people. The obvious follow up question is whether or not the social media companies themselves have the right to bar people from using their programs. They are private companies, yes, but this is a new era of communications that has been sprung upon us within only the last 20 years. The implications of this new media may mean that social media companies need to be regulated by the government to some degree similar to public utilities like electricity, in order to prevent misuse of censorship policies by the companies for the sake of user comfort. With the monthly user base of Facebook now above two billion (Statista), the question of natural monopoly seriously comes into play. When Facebook provides news to 45 percent of the population (Fortune), their level of control over the first amendment becomes a serious question. As an example, when a utility company provides water to an entire city, there is

a requirement that they provide water to anyone who pays. The same argument can be applied here, in which it can be argued that social media companies basically meter out first amendment rights to people so long as the Facebook moderation team approves of your speech content. What separates this situation from famous cases of natural monopoly like Standard Oil is the fact that there is open competition, Facebook may not be intentionally driving competition out of the market or competing unfairly. With that being said, Facebook's first to market advantage, coupled with the fact that it is unequivocally the largest and most used platform puts them in a position of significant control over the entire sphere of social media. This is especially true when considering the style of posting that Facebook provides. It is a much more serious platform than other large entertainment-oriented social media counterparts such as Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat. With all this considered, the question then becomes whether Facebook's right to freedom of speech can be considered on par with the importance of their individual users being able to have access to it.

Moving from the 1st Amendment to the 2nd Amendment, I would put forward the argument that if a single large gun company controlled all aspects of the firearms market in the USA, and then decided not to sell to someone for political reasons rather than legal requirement, they would essentially be denying that individual's second amendment rights extra-judicially due to their political views. In this hypothetical it may not be the intent of either the company or the government to deny anyone their rights, it is just the reality of the way the situation plays out. The censorship and denial of access to major social networks may not be done with the intention to deny people their first amendment rights, but if this is the outcome then there should be legal requirements to prevent this from happening. Social media is a very new phenomena, and the

way the legal system responds to it will also likely need to be new as well, just as the anti-trust laws of the early twentieth century responded to the new phenomenon of oil monopoly.

The issue with government stepping in to help prevent social media companies from infringing on free speech rights by forcing them to allow every voice to be heard are many, and the first is that it could be argued that if social media companies were forced to allow anyone to participate then their freedom of speech would be being infringed upon. The social media companies are allowed to have opinions and political stances of their own, and if they are not allowed to control their own website then it can create the appearance that they support vile views that they do not, preventing the company from exercising its freedom of speech rights to control its own content. However, if social media companies are not forced to allow all users to voice their opinions, then people can effectively be silenced by private interests outside of the powers of the state. The balancing act of state intervention and social media power in regards to our new era of social media is still being determined, but I do believe that there is a possibility that one day social media companies will soon not be allowed under law to ban users based solely on their statements being consider unsavory by the majority of the user base or the website administration.

Ideally, the social media companies will come to these conclusions themselves and government intervention to protect the first amendment rights of all Americans will not be needed. Adding yet more complexity to the already difficult issue of how to deal with censorship and polarization in social media by bringing in government regulation on top of already existing social media regulation will likely not make things more clear or easier to understand, but slower to react and more difficult to implement. The current state of the internet as a place that is able to adapt extremely quickly may be yet another route to tackling to these issues, as there is always

room for more websites to fill niches that are not already there. If far right or far left ideas are not

allowed on one website, there is a niche for that in the creation of yet another website to host

those ideas with the risk of further radicalization via echo chamber.

The solution to these complex issues will likely fall on a combination of all these

different ideas, a combination of personal responsibility on the part of the users, responsibility on

the part of the social media companies, a keen eye and deep consideration from lawmakers, and a

gentle touch by regulators when required to intervene. With all that in mind, this issue is likely to

continue growing in complexity before solutions are found.

Television in the era of Social Media

Outside of the social media sphere, television media has been another sort of soft

censorship. This is due to the level of control over media that a handful of major networks have,

and the relative self-regulation of the views they allow to be portrayed. Rarely on these

programs, left or right, are voices of significant dissidence allowed to have a say. The internet

has been a large corrective force to this problem, which is why it is so important that social

media conglomerates are not allowed to censor anyone off of their website for political reasons.

While television is still a major source of news media and debate, its importance has diminished.

Television has diminished as a source adults often get news from 57% to 50% just between the

years of 2016-17, while within the same period internet as an often-used news source for adults

has increased from 38% to 43% (Gottfried). In view of this decrease in importance, television

news channels are being forced to compete not just with each other for viewership, but with the

internet as well.

This causes an interesting quandary, if large cable news channels attempt to report in an

unbiased manner, they can wind up annoying their viewer base, as the average person has some

form of political leaning and they want their news delivered through a window that conforms to their views. An unbiased channel will have difficulty retaining these viewers while competing against a more left or right leaning channel, simply because their efforts to remain unbiased will wind up invariably attacking the biases of the viewer. The internet exacerbates this problem, because it offers such a massive variety of alternative political news sources from which to form a bubble of information. As such, major news channels can no longer assume they are the only source of news and not care if their efforts to remain unbiased for journalistic purposes annoy people. Now not only are major television news networks competing amongst each other, but against the internet as well. The easiest way to secure a significant viewer base is to cater to them directly, and as such television news channels will likely polarize further, trying to hold onto and grow their viewership by creating whatever sort of 'news product' that the market demands. This polarization is becoming increasing obvious as both left and right leaning news sources take to referring to one another as 'fake news' but there appears to be no easy solution, as the government can't step in and force news stations to remain unbiased, nor is it easy from a financial standpoint as attempts to be unbiased are largely squashed out by those larger stations happy to pander if that's what it is required to keep views rolling in.

Conclusion

In the coming years the debate will continue to rage and become more prominent concerning what is to be done to combat the dangers of polarization and its role in radicalization in social media and across the internet. The role of censorship will be considered, and I hope that the final conclusions of these arguments is the understanding by social media companies that banning material is both ineffective and dangerous, as it only leads to the generation of echo chambers for radical politics. Ideally, these radical politics are allowed to see the light of day in

specified areas of social media sites, both for the protection of our First Amendment rights, and so that the ideas can be debated freely by the moderate public so that the truth may come to light. The comfort of the average user of social media and their right to choose what forms of media they consume are legitimate concerns, but attempting to force ideas off the internet is not only untenable, but ineffective. In this era of diametrically opposed sides each accusing the other of 'fake news', censorship is the furthest thing from an effective solution. There is no policy that will prevent lies, only through the intentional spreading and discovery of the truth through free and unrestricted debate can dishonest media and censorship finally be defeated.

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