

Connecticut Debate Association

December 8, 2018

Pomperaug High School and St. Luke's School

Resolved: Internet companies should not moderate users and content unless such content is illegal.

“moderate”

Wiktionary, the free dictionary, https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Main_Page

Verb

moderate (third-person singular simple present moderates, present participle moderating, simple past and past participle moderated)

1. (transitive) To reduce the excessiveness of (something), to moderate rage, action, desires, etc.
 2. (intransitive) To become less excessive
 3. (transitive) To preside over (something) as a moderator, to moderate a synod
 4. (intransitive) To act as a moderator; to assist in bringing to compromise
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Did Alex Jones Expose Social Media's Neutrality Delusion?

Bloomberg News, By Editorial Board, August 9, 2018

The shunning of a conspiratorial radio host shows a broader incoherence in the tech business.

What, exactly, did Alex Jones do wrong?

Jones, a radio host and proprietor of a conspiracy site called Infowars, is a ghoulish provocateur best known for harassing the parents of murdered children. His show is a stage for paranoia, delusion and expansive bigotries. This week, Apple Inc., Facebook Inc., Alphabet Inc.'s YouTube and others started removing Jones's content from their platforms or making it harder to find. (Twitter Inc. declined to join them.)

Oddly, though, these companies can't quite articulate why they're doing so. They've offered some tortured and legalistic rationales — Jones has violated their “guidelines,” their “terms of service,” their “community standards” — but they can't specify what behavior or speech they will no longer tolerate. They can't call a ghoul a ghoul.

This timidity reflects a broader incoherence. Social-media platforms now shape public discourse in the U.S. as powerfully as newspapers and magazines did a generation ago, perhaps more so. But they aren't publishers in the conventional sense. They weren't created to inform the public, advance an ideology or explore the marketplace of ideas. Their main aim, like that of carnival operators, is to draw a crowd. They're good at it — and good at finding ways to make money off attendance, via ads. So good, in fact, that they're killing off traditional media.

And therein lies the problem. Even as they've displaced the venerable gatekeepers, these companies have no attachment to virtues that traditional media at least purport to value, such as objectivity, accountability and faithfulness to the truth. They'd prefer to act as neutral forums for cranks and crackpots across the political spectrum to express themselves, accuracy very much optional. And they'd like to monetize the whole show.

Banning Jones, then, is an odd half-measure, offering neither a principled laissez-faire restraint nor a clear assertion of alternative values. This ambiguity is almost certainly untenable. In all likelihood, Facebook and its fellow travelers will soon be careening from crisis to crisis, forced to respond to every social-media mob that wants someone banished for an act or thought or opinion that they find objectionable.

So, in his awful way, Jones has forced a clarifying choice. The platforms can try to remain profitably agnostic, offer themselves as a forum for all legal content, and take their lumps for hosting reprobates — and worse — in the name of free speech and open debate. Or they can start to exercise judgment, articulate values and assume more explicit responsibilities for shaping the public discourse in a sober-minded way.

It's easy to see why they'd prefer the former. At a glance, it's the more profitable course. Awful people tend to be popular, after all: Despite Jones's banishment from some parts of Apple and Google, the Infowars app has shot to the top of the charts in their stores. However, these tech companies probably don't have the wherewithal for the latter choice. Arbitrating political speech requires weighing competing values and showing good judgment. There's nothing in Facebook's corporate DNA that suggests it's prepared to do this successfully, without hefty new investment.

Yet the public good is very much at stake. The last U.S. presidential election was a fraught exercise in democracy-by-social-media. The American political system, resilient as it is, requires a reasonably informed citizenry to function. American businesses rely on that system to prosper. Other media companies have found it possible to safeguard public virtues. Surely Silicon Valley, with its vaunted farsightedness, can see the trouble ahead — and can accept that it has a role to play in fixing what it has broken.

When Digital Platforms Become Censors

The Wall Street Journal, Glenn Harlan Reynolds, Aug. 18, 2018

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other tech giants say that they're open forums. What happens when they start to shut down voices they consider beyond the pale?

Call 2018 the "Year of Deplatforming." The internet was once celebrated for allowing fresh new voices to escape the control of gatekeepers. But this year, the internet giants decided to slam the gates on a number of people and ideas they don't like. If you rely on someone else's platform to express unpopular ideas, especially ideas on the right, you're now at risk. This raises troubling questions, not only for free speech but for the future of American politics and media.

The most famous victim of deplatforming is, not coincidentally, the least popular: Alex Jones, the radio host known for promoting outrageous conspiracy theories about everything from vaccinations to the Sandy Hook massacre. In a concerted action earlier this month aimed at loosely defined "hate speech," Facebook, Apple, Spotify and YouTube removed from their services most of the material by Mr. Jones and his InfoWars network. Twitter recently followed suit with a seven-day suspension.

Apple cited its "terms of use" in removing InfoWars from its iTunes podcast listings but couldn't explain why it didn't remove the InfoWars app, which shares the same content, from its App Store. YouTube made general reference to its "terms of service and community guidelines," but didn't say what Mr. Jones had done wrong. Facebook's reasons were similarly vague.

Their evasiveness isn't hard to explain. After all, Mr. Jones isn't doing anything different from what he has been doing for years. The real reason for his removal is that technology companies don't like his views and have come under increasing pressure to deny him the use of their platforms.

Nor is it just Alex Jones who's been subjected to digital unpersoning lately. The Austin-based "crypto-anarchist" Cody Wilson creates and distributes designs for guns that can be produced using 3-D printers. Shopify recently shut down the online storefront of Mr. Wilson's company, Defense Distributed.

But there is nothing illegal about what Mr. Wilson is doing—he recently won two First Amendment victories in federal court—and he did not violate Shopify's rules. In fact, since 2017, Shopify has operated according to a self-declared "free speech" policy regarding what people can sell on its site. Unable to explain its grounds for excluding Mr. Wilson, the company has now overturned that policy. It is also worth noting that a site set up to support Mr. Wilson, CodeIsFreeSpeech.com, has been blocked by Facebook.

This week, Vice co-founder Gavin McInnes was suspended from Twitter along with his far-right Proud Boys organization, who call themselves "Western chauvinists," though they say they oppose white supremacy. Twitter doesn't like them, and it doesn't like their politics. But even a mainstream conservative figure like radio host and author Dennis Prager has complained that YouTube placed age restrictions on some of the videos he produced. Facebook blocked an advertisement for Republican Congressional candidate Elizabeth Heng, ostensibly because her video mentioned the Cambodian genocide, which her family survived. Microsoft even threatened to shut down the web services used by conservative Twitter-competitor Gab because a single user on the network had posted anti-Semitic content.

If internet megaplatforms like YouTube and Facebook were publishers, none of this would be especially problematic. One of the essential duties of a publisher is deciding what to publish and what not to publish. The Supreme Court has even held, in *Miami Herald v. Tornillo* (1974), that the law can't compel newspapers to print replies to their articles, because it would interfere with their choice of what to publish.

But internet platforms don't want to be treated as publishers, because publishers are also responsible for their decisions. If a newspaper publishes a libelous story, it can be sued. If it infringes someone's copyright, it can be held liable for damages. And everything it chooses to publish or not to publish is a reflection on its reputation.

Today, the big internet companies are treated not as publishers but as conduits—tools that other people use to spread their own ideas. That's why the "safe harbor provision" of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, a landmark in internet regulation, states that platforms aren't legally responsible for what other people publish on their sites. The law was originally intended to protect things like newspaper comment sections, but its application has become very broad, encompassing virtually all of the content on social media and sharing sites.

Now these companies are trying to have it both ways. They take advantage of the fact that they are not publishers to escape responsibility for the endless amounts of problematic material on their sites, from libel to revenge porn. But at the same time, they are increasingly acting like publishers in deciding which views and people are permitted on their platforms and which are not. As a narrow matter of First Amendment law, what these companies are doing will probably pass muster, unless some federal court decides, as in *Marsh v. Alabama* (1946), that their platforms are functionally equivalent to “company towns,” where the public square is privately owned.

As a more general issue of free speech, however, the fact that a few corporations can play such a disproportionate role in deciding what subjects are open for debate is a problem. It is made more so by the pronounced leftward leanings of the big tech companies, which lately appear determined to live up to the right’s worst fears about them. Extremists and controversialists on the left have been relatively safe from deplatforming.

Some politicians are fine with corporations putting their thumbs on the scale. Senator Chris Murphy (D., Conn.) wants more online censorship, not less. He tweeted that Mr. Jones’s InfoWars site is just the “tip of a giant iceberg of hate and lies,” and that “These companies must do more than take down one website. The survival of our democracy depends on it.” But the tech giants rightly fear legislation that will force them to be open to everyone, or perhaps worse, that will make them financially responsible for everything published on their platforms.

The notion that Silicon Valley megabillionaires are actively limiting what ordinary Americans can talk and write about is likely to produce a backlash. The tech industry’s image has already suffered over revelations about Facebook’s experiments aimed at manipulating users’ newsfeeds to test their emotional states, as well as various cases of invasion of privacy and data mishandling. Twenty years ago, most Americans saw Silicon Valley as liberating; now it seems to have gone from the hammer-wielding woman in that famous “1984” Apple commercial to the Big Brother figure up on the screen.

And then there is the competition angle. Mr. Jones’s InfoWars is itself a media operation, in competition not only with Facebook and YouTube but with cable channels like CNN and MSNBC, which have made him a target. What happened to Mr. Jones could be described as “a conspiracy in restraint of trade,” in which one group of media companies gets another group of media companies to knock off a competitor.

One of the arguments for leaving tech industries unregulated has been that the industry is in constant ferment. But with a few companies now dominating the field, that ferment is less likely to continue. When giant companies combine to kick out their competitors and start interfering in politics, you can be sure that, even if they claim they are acting in the interests of decency, that’s not where it will end.

—Mr. Reynolds is a professor of law at the University of Tennessee and writes the InstaPundit blog.

A Response To Online Shadow Banning

The Wall Street Journal, By Adam Candeub, Aug. 5, 2018

‘Common carriage’ law points to a solution for the problem of censorship on social media.

Have you been shadow banned? That’s the term for Twitter’s limiting the reach of disfavored accounts. The company can, for instance, remove your name from its autopopulated drop-down search box, making it harder to find you.

Twitter is alleged to have shadow-banned Republican National Committee Chairman Ronna McDaniel, Donald Trump Jr. spokesman Andrew Surabian, and GOP Reps. Mark Meadows (N.C.), Jim Jordan (Ohio), Devin Nunes (Calif.) and Matt Gaetz (Fla.).

President Trump took to Twitter on July 26 to denounce shadow banning, vowing to “look into this discriminatory and illegal practice at once!” Mr. Trump is on solid ground, supported by centuries of common-law precedent. To this day, mail service, telephones and airlines operate under “common carriage” law and must serve all customers regardless of their political, religious or social views.

These protections have a long history. Precedents from the 17th century outlawed discrimination by docks, ferries and bailors. Common-law courts extended the idea, as technology developed, to railroads and telegraphs, and then eventually to telephones and air travel. Administrative agencies later codified the protections into regulation.

Should the old principle of non-discrimination apply to social-media platforms? The question pits free speech against private property and makes odd friends and adversaries. On one side, social media’s conservative victims have allied with old-school free-speech diehards to argue that open platforms are vital for democratic society. On the other side, conservative defenders of Twitter’s freedom to make its own rules stand alongside liberals and leftists who support censorship to block the spread of views they consider toxic.

Rep. Gaetz announced on July 27 that he filed a complaint against Twitter with the Federal Election Commission. He claims that, by shadow banning him, Twitter “gives his political rivals an unfair advantage” that constitutes an in-kind

campaign contribution.

In a recent lawsuit my co-counsels and I filed on behalf Jared Taylor—a self-described “race realist” and “white advocate” whom others consider a white separatist—Twitter claimed the power as a network owner to remove any user for any reason. But on June 14 California Superior Court Judge Harold Kahn rejected Twitter’s claim. The suit, which alleges Twitter failed in its promises to give users a free and open platform, will now proceed.

The entire gamut of 19th-century common-carriage protections cannot be applied unchanged to the internet’s complex offerings. Yet for centuries courts have adapted antidiscrimination protections for new technologies, and they could do so again for social media.

From classical Athens onward, democracies have required an agora, a central public forum open to everyone on equal terms. Today, the dominant social-media platforms have become America’s agora. As President Trump suggested, it may be time to treat them like it, updating longstanding legal principles for 21st-century democracy.

Mr. Candeub is a professor of law at Michigan State University and lead counsel in Jared Taylor’s suit against Twitter.

With Alex Jones, Facebook’s Worst Demons Abroad Begin to Come Home

The New York Times, By Max Fisher, Aug. 8, 2018

To Americans, Facebook’s Alex Jones problem might seem novel, even unprecedented.

When does speech become unsafe? When can it be limited? Should those decisions be up to a private company at all? And if a company shies away from acting, as Facebook did with Mr. Jones until Apple moved first, where does that leave the rest of us?

But to activists and officials in much of the developing world, both the problem and Facebook’s muddled solutions will be old news.

Before there was Alex Jones, the American conspiracy theorist, there was Amith Weerasinghe, the Sri Lankan extremist who used Facebook as his personal broadcast station.

Mr. Weerasinghe leveraged Facebook’s newsfeed to spread paranoia and hatred of the country’s Muslim minority. He enjoyed near-total freedom on the platform, despite repeated pleas from activists and officials for the company to intervene, right up until his arrest on charges of inciting a riot that killed one Muslim and left many more homeless.

Before there was Mr. Weerasinghe, there was Ashin Wirathu, the Myanmar extremist, whose Facebook hoaxes incited riots in 2014. Three years later, Mr. Wirathu would contribute to a wave of Facebook-based rumors and hate speech that helped inspire widespread violence against Myanmar’s Rohingya minority.

And so on.

“Facebook doesn’t seem to get that they’re the largest news agency in the world,” Harindra Dissanayake, a Sri Lankan official, said a few days after Mr. Weerasinghe’s arrest.

The problem, he said, goes beyond a few underregulated extremists. It also involves the algorithm-driven newsfeed that is core to the company’s business model. “They are blind to seeing the real repercussions,” Mr. Dissanayake said of Facebook’s leaders.

Developing countries’ experiences with Facebook suggest that the company, however noble its intent, has set in motion a series of problems we are only beginning to understand and that the company has proved unable or unwilling to fully address:

— Reality-distorting misinformation that can run rampant on the newsfeed, which promotes content that will reliably engage users.

— Extremism and hate speech that tap into users’ darkest impulses, and polarize politics.

— Malicious actors granted near-limitless reach on one of the most sophisticated communications platforms in history, relatively unchecked by social norms or traditional gatekeepers.

— And a private company uneager to wade into contentious debates, much less pick winners and losers.

Facebook — and many Westerners — have long treated those issues as safely “over there,” meaning in countries with weaker institutions, lower literacy rates and more recent histories of racial violence. Last month, a company official, announcing new policies to restrict speech that leads to violence, referred to “a type of misinformation that is shared in certain countries.”

But chillingly similar Facebook-linked problems are becoming increasingly visible in wealthy, developed countries like the United States. So is the difficulty of solving those problems — and the consequences of Facebook’s preference for action that can be incremental, reactive and agonizingly slow.

‘Something Bad Could Happen’

Though Facebook officials often portray the violence associated with it as new or impossible to predict, the incidents date to at least 2012. So does the pressure to more actively regulate speech on the platform.

That year, fake reports of sectarian violence went viral in India, setting off riots that killed several people and displaced thousands. Indian officials put so much pressure on Facebook to remove the posts that American officials publicly intervened in the company’s defense.

Reports of Facebook-linked violence only grew in India, and as Facebook expanded to other developing countries, similar stories followed.

“I think in the back deep-deep recesses of our minds, we kind of knew something bad could happen,” Chamath Palihapitiya, a senior executive who left Facebook in 2011, said at a policy conference last year. “We have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works.”

There were other warnings, typically from activists or civil society leaders in the developing countries where Facebook’s expansion was fastest and most obviously disruptive. But they were little heeded.

“Facebook is the platform that we could not meet with for years,” Damar Juniarto, who leads an Indonesian organization that tracks online hate groups, told me in March.

As a Facebook-based group called the Muslim Cyber Army organized increasingly elaborate real-world attacks, Mr. Juniarto said, Facebook proved unresponsive. “How are we supposed to do this?” members of his group wondered. “Is it a form? Do we email them? We want them to tell us.”

Facebook representatives eventually met with Mr. Juniarto, and the company has shut most pages associated with the Muslim Cyber Army.

Still, the episode seems to fit a pattern of Facebook waiting to respond until after a major disruption: an organized lynching, a sectarian riot, state-sponsored election meddling or, as with the so-called Pizzagate rumor pushed by Mr. Jones, a violent close call set off by misinformation.

A Corporate Regulator of Public Life

In the developing countries where such incidents seem most common, or at least most explicitly violent, Facebook simply faces little pressure to act.

In Sri Lanka, government officials spoke of the company as if it were a superpower to be feared and appeased.

Tellingly, Facebook grew more proactive in Myanmar only after the United Nations and Western organizations accused it of having played a role in spreading the hate and misinformation that contributed to acts of ethnic cleansing.

Even officials in India, a major power, struggled to get the company to listen. Indian pressure on Facebook, however, has dropped since the arrival of new government leaders who rose, in part, on a Hindu nationalist wave still prevalent on social media.

American officials have far greater leverage over Facebook, as members of Congress proved when lawmakers summoned Mark Zuckerberg, its chief executive officer, to testify in April. But the Americans seem unsure what they want Facebook to do, or how to compel it to act. So they, too, are not very effective at changing the company’s behavior.

More broadly, Americans seem unsure precisely how far Facebook should go in regulating speech on the platform, or what it should do about the data suggesting that misinformation is more common on the political right.

All of which comes through in Facebook’s hesitation about shutting down Mr. Jones’ page, despite his long record of demonstrable falsehoods that have real-world consequences.

American commitment to free speech is unusually tied into the country’s sense of itself. Still, the dilemma here is not so different from those government officials and Facebook itself face in places like Indonesia or Sri Lanka.

So while few are comfortable — perhaps Facebook least of all — with a private company acting as a vastly powerful regulator of public speech, even fewer seem willing to step in and take on the task themselves.

Move Fast and Break Things

There are growing indications Facebook’s problems in rich countries may go beyond misinformation to do the kind of harm developing countries have experienced.

Karolin Schwarz, who runs a Berlin-based organization that tracks social media misinformation, said she believed Facebook-based rumors about refugees could be fueling the spate of hate crimes against them.

“I think it does something to their sense of security,” she said. “These things, if they reach thousands of people, you cannot get it back.”

The platform has grown so powerful, so quickly, that we are still struggling to understand its influence. Social scientists regularly discover new ways that Facebook alters the societies where it operates: a link to hate crimes, a rise in extremism, a distortion of social norms.

After all, Mr. Jones, for all his demagogic skills, was tapping into misinformation and paranoia already on the platform. In Germany, Gerhard Pauli, a state prosecutor based in Hagen, told me last month about a local firefighter trainee who had grown so fearful of refugees that he attempted to burn down a local refugee group house. “I’m quite sure that social media made it worse,” he said.

Mr. Pauli said that his office spent more and more time tracking rumors and hate speech on Facebook, and that it seemed to rise in advance of violence, as when the mayor of nearby Altena was stabbed last year.

Though Germany is a major economy with some of the world’s strictest social media regulations, Mr. Pauli had only somewhat more success with Facebook than his peers in the developing world.

“In the beginning, they did nothing,” he said. “They would say, ‘You have no jurisdiction over us.’ In the last few years, they are more helpful, especially in cases of child abuse.”

But, in other matters, the company remains skittish, Mr. Pauli said. “They do have a lot of information, but they don’t want to lose users,” he said.

The prosecutor has grown especially concerned, he said, about social media rumors — say, a stranger near a school — that could spin ordinarily self-contained Germans into violence. Not so unlike in Sri Lanka or India.

“We have lots of situations where somebody saw somebody outside the kindergarten,” he said. “Within five minutes it’s spreading, and from post to post, it gets worse. It takes two hours and then you have some lynch mob on the street.”

The Interpreter is a column by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub exploring the ideas and context behind major world events. Follow them on Twitter @Max_Fisher and @amandataub.

Twitter Proposes Banning Dehumanizing Content

BLOOMBERG NEWS, By Yoree Koh, Sept. 25, 2018 5:11 p.m. ET

Twitter’s new policy will prohibit speech that treats others as subhuman

Twitter Inc. is planning to expand its rules to no longer allow content that treats others as subhuman in its latest attempt to replace toxic speech on the platform with healthier discourse.

The new policy will home in on “dehumanizing” speech because “language that makes someone less than human can have repercussions off the service, including normalizing serious violence,” Twitter executives wrote in a blog post on Tuesday. The new rule would ban content that “dehumanizes others based on their membership in an identifiable group, even when the material does not include a direct target.”

Unlike previous rule changes, the company is asking the public for feedback on this proposed rule before making the change official, such as how it would play out in different communities and cultures.

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Yelp Can’t Be Ordered to Remove Negative Posts, California Court Rules

The New York Times, By Claire Ballentine, July 3, 2018

The California Supreme Court ruled on Monday that Yelp, the local search and reviews site, did not need to remove negative comments posted by a user, in a case closely watched by the industry for its implications for online free speech.

In a 4-to-3 opinion, the court said that federal law protected internet companies from liability for statements written by others. The decision to remove posts is at the company’s discretion, the court said.

Forcing a site to remove user-generated posts “can impose substantial burdens” on the online company, Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye wrote in the majority opinion. “Even if it would be mechanically simple to implement such an order, compliance still could interfere with and undermine the viability of an online platform.”

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Yelp was joined by civil liberties groups, like the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Frontier Foundation. The A.C.L.U. filed an amicus brief in the Yelp case in 2016, arguing that the removal order “requires Yelp to remove speech from its website without giving it any opportunity to argue that the speech in question is constitutionally protected.”

However, opponents argued that this free speech approach could prevent victims of online abuse from seeking a legal

remedy.

Ms. Hassell's lawyer, Monique Olivier, said in a statement to The Associated Press that the ruling "stands as an invitation to spread falsehoods on the internet without consequence" and that Ms. Hassell was considering an appeal to the United States Supreme Court.

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Spotify Pulls R. Kelly and XXXTentacion From Playlists, Stirring a Debate

The New York Times, By Joe Coscarelli, May 10, 2018

Spotify, the music industry's leading streaming service, said on Thursday that it would stop promoting or recommending music by artists whose content or conduct it deemed to be offensive, hoping to quell a furor over the singer R. Kelly but immediately starting another debate over who qualified for the ban.

The company, which was valued at \$26.5 billion after an initial public offering last month, introduced its new policy regarding "hate content and hateful conduct" by citing two artists — R. Kelly, the multiplatinum R&B singer, and XXXTentacion, the troubled young rapper and singer — who Spotify said had been removed from all official playlists and recommendation features on the service.

While their music will remain available for streaming by choice, it will no longer appear in Spotify's influential curated packages, which often appear on the service's front page. "We don't censor content because of an artist's or creator's behavior, but we want our editorial decisions — what we choose to program — to reflect our values," Spotify said in a statement. "When an artist or creator does something that is especially harmful or hateful, it may affect the ways we work with or support that artist or creator."

In the case of R. Kelly, Spotify added its voice to the growing chorus attempting to hold the singer responsible after decades of accusations of sexual misconduct. Last week, the Time's Up organization, which formed around the #MeToo movement to support victims of sexual abuse, joined a grass-roots #MuteRKelly campaign that has called on his record label and concert promoter, as well as local venues, radio stations and streaming services, to cease its support of the singer.

Oronike Odeleye, a founder of the #MuteRKelly campaign, said she was "just dumbfounded and awe-struck" that Spotify had "decided to take this moral stance against R. Kelly's amoral behavior." She added, "Hopefully it's a domino effect with the other streaming services."

But by wading into the discussion about what responsibility digital platforms have to police content, Spotify also risked being seen as hypocritical — or insufficiently thorough. Social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have faced increased scrutiny since the presidential election about how they monitor and censor hate speech, and how their imperfect policies break down along ideological lines.

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Can Facebook, or Anybody, Solve the Internet's Misinformation Problem?

The New York Times, By Farhad Manjoo, Aug. 22, 2018

In theory, Facebook's announcement on Tuesday that it had discovered and shut down a wide-ranging Iranian misinformation campaign should make you feel better.

The social network was slow to recognize such campaigns as threats before the 2016 presidential election, and it surely deserves some credit for what Mark Zuckerberg, its chief executive, described as the company's shift from "reactive to proactive detection" of coordinated propaganda operations.

But it was not just Iran, and not just Facebook.

YouTube also said that it had removed content linked to the Iranian campaign. So did Twitter. And Facebook said that it had also removed pages stemming from a Russian propaganda operation that was unrelated to the Iranian campaign.

And there's more: Microsoft announced this week that it had discovered a Russian hacking campaign aimed at conservative think tanks in the United States. And on Wednesday there was news that hackers had this week tried to penetrate the Democratic National Committee's voter database.

All that in three days. (And Facebook took down another influence campaign last month that was of uncertain origin, but might have been operated by Russians.)

Feeling better yet? Yeah, me neither.

These drip-by-drip revelations inspire something like the opposite of confidence. Find one cockroach in the kitchen and you might feel better for having caught the sucker. Find another, and then another, and pretty soon you start to wonder

if you should burn your house down.

And these revelations of mischief underscore the novelty of the threats we are dealing with — and how unprepared we might be to handle them.

Some of these disclosures are about actual criminal activity. But others, like the Iranian campaign, describe a more fuzzy kind of misbehavior, one that is not obviously illegal, and whose tactics amount to something that lots of people do everyday: Lying on the internet.

Given the gray area some of these activities occupy, figuring out what to make of each revelation — how to assess its potential impact and our collective capacity to respond to it — is going to be the next great task of digital society. And the task is far bigger than any of us realize now.

“The work you see now from Facebook, Microsoft and others to be more proactive is a trend that is positive — it’s part of the solution, and I would want to see that trend continue,” said Graham Brookie, director of the Digital Forensic Research Lab at the Atlantic Council, a think tank that has been working with Facebook on election-security issues.

But Mr. Brookie added: “Is this a solution? No, definitely not.”

A solution, he said, would involve a society-wide reckoning with the problem of the vulnerabilities that the internet has uncovered in democratic society. A solution would involve the federal government taking the lead in such an effort, which is not really happening at the moment. A solution would also involve citizens becoming far more vigilant about what they see online, how they respond to it, and the effect it has on their political lives.

And even with all that, we may not really get an actual solution. Instead, the best we might hope for is something like an ongoing cat-and-mouse game between good and bad actors online: a fight that never ends, but whose damage we can at least hope to reduce.

That’s the long game. The short game is rather more depressing.

Consider the most pressing question: How confident should you be that the coming midterm elections will be safe from hacking and propaganda operations online? The most likely answer: Nobody knows for sure, but probably not very confident.

Facebook and other tech companies are stepping up their efforts to police their sites before the midterms. But some of the threats they have spotted so far have little to do with the election. The Iranian operation, for example, has been going on for years, and to judge by some of the content posted by these Facebook pages, was not aimed squarely at American elections, but instead American policy.

In a call with reporters on Tuesday, Mr. Zuckerberg argued that Facebook has been making progress on keeping elections safe, having learned from several races around the world since 2016.

“There was the French election, the German election, the Alabama special election, the Mexican election — and in each of these elections, our systems have been able to find a lot of fake accounts that were attempting potentially to do bad things on the system,” he said.

Each time the company finds something, Mr. Zuckerberg added, “We get better at identifying this kind of activity up front and putting barriers in place to those who would try to abuse these systems.”

His words are somewhat reassuring, but only in that they feel like the bare minimum that a company like Facebook should do.

Alex Stamos, who until recently was Facebook’s chief security officer, has a dimmer view.

In an article published on Wednesday on Lawfare, a news site that covers national security, Mr. Stamos wrote that the string of attacks revealed by Facebook, Microsoft and others were evidence that “America’s adversaries believe that it is still both safe and effective to attack U.S. democracy using American technologies and the freedoms we cherish.”

The government’s failure to address these threats have left the United States “unprepared to protect the 2018 elections,” Mr. Stamos said. He outlined a set of legislative, regulatory and law enforcement steps Americans might take to secure their digital house.

If we move fast, he said, we might be able to salvage 2020.

If We Silence Hate Speech, Will We Silence Resistance?

The New York Times, By Erik Nielson, Aug. 9, 2018

“Hate” is a dangerously elastic label. And it has long been used to demonize unpopular expression, particularly among people of color.

Apple, Facebook, YouTube, Spotify and most other major internet distributors took a bold step this week when they all

but banned content from Infowars, a website run by the right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. The tech companies cited their policies against hate speech for their decision, rather than the trafficking in fake news by Infowars.

It's tempting to applaud this move, but we should be wary. While Mr. Jones's rhetoric is certainly repugnant, mounting pressure from the political left to censor hateful speech may have unintended consequences, especially for people of color.

That's because "hate" is a dangerously elastic label, one that has long been used in America to demonize unpopular expression. If we become overzealous in our efforts to limit so-called hate speech, we run the risk of setting a trap for the very people we're trying to defend.

History offers countless examples. Consider black nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s. Impatient with the lack of progress for African-Americans after the civil rights movement, leaders like Malcolm X routinely inveighed against white America using inflammatory rhetoric. He had no trouble expressing animosity toward the "white devil," and he contemplated violent resistance.

That put him in the cross hairs of law enforcement, most notably J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. Of course, the FBI spied on many other so-called black radicals. Under Hoover's Counterintelligence Program, groups like the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers were subject to routine surveillance, harassment and even violence. Hoover's justification? He labeled them hate groups. It was a cynical but effective way to turn the tables, framing them as antagonists in the centuries' long struggle for racial equality.

Hoover is gone, but the tendency to label black radical organizations as hate groups persists, even among groups with more admirable intentions. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks extremist and hate organizations across the country, makes the dubious claim that nearly 25 percent of the 954 "hate groups" they follow are "black nationalist" groups.

There's no question that black nationalists often argue for racial separation or that many have engaged in bigotry. But it's false equivalence to label black nationalists and white supremacists alike as hate groups. Doing so ignores the centuries of racial terror that gave rise to black nationalism, as well as the power imbalance that keeps it alive. And it gives a powerful tool to people who want to silence radical perspectives. They can call these viewpoints hate speech.

Take, as one example, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, a Palestinian-led initiative that endorses a series of nonviolent measures to end Israel's systematic oppression of the Palestinians. As it has gained traction in the United States, in large part because of support from prominent African-American intellectuals and organizations, state and federal lawmakers have increasingly tried to shut the movement down by accusing it of hate speech.

The New York State Senate, for example, recently passed a bill that would prohibit from receiving public funds "student organizations that participate in hate speech, including advocating for the boycott, divestment and sanctions of Israel and American allied nations." Meanwhile, Congress (with support from many Democrats) has been trying to criminalize the movement for years.

If people engaged in a boycott can be silenced, even criminalized, for discriminating against the group they accuse of discrimination, we begin to see how problematic it is to punish "hate" speech. It can devolve into the politics of choosing sides, and that is usually bad news for people who lack political clout to begin with.

Black Lives Matter would know. A movement formed in response to police violence against African-Americans, it has been accused by law enforcement officials, and even some state legislators, of being a hate group, despite the fact that it renounces violence and welcomes allies from all walks of life.

By accusing Black Lives Matter of peddling hate, politicians effectively turned the tables on the movement, allowing lawmakers, in some cases, to strengthen protections for the police. Since 2016, several "Blue Lives Matter" bills have been enacted across the country, many of which seek to add police as a protected class covered by hate crimes laws. Following this logic, Black Lives Matter's opposition to police brutality is a kind of hate itself, from which the police require additional protection. Yet killings by police officers are increasing while line-of-duty deaths of police officers are decreasing.

It is difficult to imagine a more ridiculous outcome. But it speaks to one of the most serious perils of limiting speech: a measure to protect minority perspectives can instead be used to further marginalize them.

Despite this, a significant number of young Americans, especially young Americans of color, believe that hate speech should be limited by the government or on college campuses. In addition, some scholars have recently argued for legal restrictions on hate speech.

But how would stronger limits on hate speech affect progressive protests against white supremacy? What would have been the fate, for example, of the historic Million Man March in 1995, an event organized by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan? The Nation of Islam is a Southern Poverty Law Center-designated hate group, and Mr. Farrakhan has

openly made anti-Semitic comments for years. At the same time, the March was a landmark effort focused on uniting black men in the face of widespread inequality and racism.

What about the equally historic Women's March in 2017, after it was revealed that some of the event's most prominent organizers had ties to Mr. Farrakhan? Or that they openly revered Assata Shakur, a black revolutionary who was convicted (albeit questionably) of killing a police officer and is now on the F.B.I.'s list of most-wanted terrorists? Predictably, they have been accused by some of embracing hate, yet they organized one of the most significant protests in United States history.

If we allowed these voices to be silenced on grounds that they promote hate, we'd find ourselves scrambling to defend the radical poets, musicians, filmmakers and other artists who have pushed the boundaries of expression into what could arguably amount to hate speech, but who have done so from the vanguard of social and political protest.

That almost certainly explains the response from the music industry when Spotify announced its decision to stop promoting artists who engage in hateful speech or conduct. A number of people, including representatives from Kendrick Lamar's record label, Top Dawg Entertainment, expressed concerns that such a policy would lead to censorship and threatened to pull their music from the service.

Within weeks, Spotify reversed course, noting that its policy was "vague." But by silencing Mr. Jones on its platform, it's not exactly clear where Spotify is drawing the line.

And that's the inherent danger in attempting to limit something like hate. It can be so broadly defined that our efforts to counteract it will be broad, too.

If that happens, we risk silencing the voices and perspectives we can least afford to lose. That's not a triumph over hate. That's falling victim to it.

Erik Nielson (@ErikNielson) is an associate professor of liberal arts at the University of Richmond. Dr. Nielson has become well-known as an expert in the use of rap music as evidence in criminal trials.

Alex Jones Gets to Declare a Real Info War Now

SLATE, By APRIL GLASER, AUG 06, 2018

And by waiting years to crack down on the conspiracy theorist, tech companies were asking for it.

Monday was a bad day to be the internet's most famous conspiracy theorist. After Alex Jones' Infowars got the boot from Apple's Podcasts app Sunday evening when the company removed five of the six Infowars podcasts from the platform, Spotify followed suit and removed the Alex Jones Show from its podcast channel, too. From there the purge broadened: Facebook moved to "unpublish" four Infowars pages—not just individual posts, as it had previously done—saying that they had violated its community standards. Then the Google-owned YouTube banned the Alex Jones Channel, which counted 2.4 million followers at the time. Now one of the few major social media platforms that hasn't kicked out Jones and his Infowars clan is Twitter. No surprise, Jones was all over the social network Monday, shouting about censorship and globalists, while the Infowars website attempted to rally his supporters, declaring that "The war on your mind is happening right now."

War or not, Alex Jones fans still have plenty of options to get their fix of right-fringe conspiracy-laden news: Beyond Infowars' website, there's the organization's mobile app, which is still currently available for download in Apple's App Store and Google's Play Store. Slate first reported Monday morning that the Infowars app was still up in the Apple App Store despite the Apple podcast removal. At that time, the app ranked No. 56 in the App Store among news apps. By Monday evening, following the removals from Facebook and YouTube, Jones' app had climbed to No. 7. Though Apple might merit credit for giving the other platforms some cover to take more serious action against Jones, who has been using the sites to disseminate frequently harmful false stories for years, the fact that Infowars continues to have an app on Apple's App Store is glaring. For what it's worth, Infowars still has a presence on LinkedIn and Instagram, too. But Monday's bannings—and Jones' response to them—raise a new question: Will the platforms' actions diminish the reach of Jones' conspiracy theories? (The more infamous of them include the false assertions that the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax and that the survivors of the Parkland, Florida, shooting are crisis actors.) Or will Jones be able to use the bans to paint himself as a free-speech martyr, further cementing his audience's devotion?

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