

di Samuel Wittenstein

*Is it finally time to regulate social media platforms?
(italian version)*

We live in an era dominated by social media. On one end of the spectrum exists the social media celebrity, “influencers” who command the attention of millions of followers every day. On the other side of the screen often lives the loner, trying to escape the realities of life through his phone. The stranglehold social media platforms have on our lives is beginning to feel like a dictatorship, either commanding our full attention or always hovering in the background, influencing the way we live whether we even realize it.

To be sure, there are many positive things that social media has engendered: apps like twitter have democratized national conversations, giving a voice to those who previously may have been locked out of traditional media organizations; it has allowed for the instant travel of information, providing access to events taking place across the world in just moments; communitarian practices such as those found on GoFundMe have helped improve the lives of many who otherwise may have been unable to pay for the things they need; perhaps most important, it has made it incredibly easy to communicate with friends and family no matter where you are in the world.

Yet each of these positives is counterweighted by negatives. Democratization of information has led to a decline in trust of traditional news sources and has created ripe conditions for misinformation to spread like wildfire. The immediate access to information coming from all corners of the world has led to a bombardment of information streaming into everyone’s lives, a massive shift in just a few decades. The human brain did not evolve to take in so much information on a daily basis, or to concern itself with things happening thousands of miles away that have no immediate impact on day-to-day life. While some members of the online community come together in humanitarian ways, others use their online personas to bully, insult and harass those they disagree with. And while staying in close contact with friends and forming online communities is great, it also means that more nefarious online communities are forming. Whereas 25 years ago it may have been difficult for extremists to find validation and community with others, it is now easy for radical and fringe members of society, those who hold extremist views, to find like-minded people online and continuously prime each other and feed each other’s worst instincts.

One need not look any further than what transpired on January 6 in Washington D.C. to see what can happen when extremists form online communities and live in their own invented reality, one in which Democrats rigged the presidential election and stole the presidency from Donald Trump. The consequences for the American political system and democracy writ-large are sure to be felt for many years to come.

The paradox here is real, even for individuals who use multiple platforms. Take a user on LinkedIn and Facebook, for instance. On LinkedIn everyone puts forth their professional self, highlighting how and why they are an outstanding employee and appearing dressed for a gala. Go to that same person’s Facebook profile and you may find old pictures that you likely would not want your employer to see, whether it be underage drinking, smoking or partying.

These days, even political elections need to be won and run mainly on social media. A few days ago, we all followed the news as, beginning with Twitter, platform after platform began permanently banning the account of the U.S. President Donald J. Trump. Our perplexity about this action is as big as the disagreement we have with Trump's policies and way of communicating. While we strongly disagree with nearly everything Trump stands for, it is worth considering the process through which these companies decided to ban the sitting U.S. president. If Trump had won re-election would they still have banned him?

While Twitter claimed he had violated their rules by encouraging violence and inciting rebellion, surely there were many other things the president said and did over the last few years that also violated their rules. This is a man who just a few months ago called neo-Nazis very fine people, lied about the results of his lost election for months, and just last summer tweeted, "when the looting starts the shooting starts." The list goes on and on. It is fair to ask why Twitter only reacted once the seat of the American government had been desecrated and five people lost their lives.

On the one hand, this seemingly arbitrary way of deciding who can and cannot use the platforms is no longer acceptable. It could be time for the global community to come together and regulate these digital giants that have accumulated vast amounts of power. It would be dangerous to allow them to become deciders of what is acceptable online discourse. This time they banned Trump, next time who knows who they may ban.

On the other hand, should it really be the role of the state to dictate to private companies how they need to run their platforms? In this respect, private companies like Twitter and Facebook *should* have the unilateral right to ban whomever they want. Freedom of speech does not guarantee individuals the right to use and abuse any social media platform they wish. Furthermore, it should perhaps be a source of pride for liberal democracies that companies operating within their borders can decide to ban powerful actors, including the president of the United States. Can you imagine a scenario where Chinese President Xi Jinping is banned by a private company in China? Such a thing would clearly never happen. On the contrary, a much more likely scenario involves one in which ostensibly private companies in China are forced by the state to broadcast the CCP's message. There are no easy answers here. It is true that social media companies have an outsized influence on the world in the 21st century; it also true that it would be a dangerous precedent to set if the state were to step in and direct these companies on what they can and cannot do. There is room for nuance here, perhaps involving increased government regulation, greater transparency, and more stringent enforcement of existing rules. These problems are not going away any time soon. The international community needs to treat them with the seriousness they deserve.

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