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**Opinion**

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The silencing of Trump has highlighted the authoritarian power of tech giants

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**I**t was eerily quiet on social media last week. That’s because Trump and his cultists had been “deplatformed”. By banning him, Twitter effectively took away the megaphone he’s been masterfully deploying since he ran for president. The shock of the 6 January assault on the Capitol was seismic enough to convince even Mark Zuckerberg that the plug finally had to be pulled. And so it was, even to the point of Amazon Web Services terminating the hosting of Parler, a Twitter alternative for alt-right extremists.

The deafening silence that followed these measures was, however, offset by an explosion of commentary about their implications for freedom, democracy and the future of civilisation as we know it. Wading knee-deep through such a torrent of opinion about the first amendment, free speech, censorship, tech power and “accountability” (whatever that might mean), it was sometimes hard to keep one’s bearings. But what came to mind continually was H L Mencken’s astute insight that “for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong”. The air was filled with people touting such answers.

In the midst of the discursive chaos, though, some general themes could be discerned. The first highlighted cultural differences, especially between the US with its sacred first amendment on the one hand and European and

other societies, which have more ambivalent histories of moderating speech. The obvious problem with this line of discussion is that the first amendment is about government regulation of speech and has nothing whatsoever to do with tech companies, which are free to do as they like on their platforms.

A second theme viewed the root cause of the problem as the [lax regulatory climate](#) in the US over the last three decades, which led to the emergence of a few giant tech companies that effectively became the hosts for much of the public sphere. If there were many Facebooks, YouTubes and Twitters, so the counter-argument runs, then censorship would be less effective and problematic because anyone denied a platform could always go elsewhere.

Then there were arguments about power and accountability. In a democracy, those who make decisions about which speech is acceptable and which isn't ought to be democratically accountable. "The fact that a CEO can pull the plug on Potus's loudspeaker without any checks and balances," [fumed EU commissioner Thierry Breton](#), "is not only confirmation of the power of these platforms, but it also displays deep weaknesses in the way our society is organised in the digital space." Or, to put it another way, who elected the bosses of Facebook, Google, YouTube and Twitter?

What was missing from the discourse was any consideration of whether the problem exposed by the sudden deplatforming of Trump and his associates and camp followers is actually *soluble* - at least in the way it has been framed until now. The paradox that the internet is a global system but law is territorial (and culture-specific) has traditionally been a way of stopping conversations about how to get the technology under democratic control. And it was running through the discussion all week like a length of barbed wire that snagged anyone trying to make progress through the morass.

All of which suggests that it'd be worth trying to reframe the problem in more productive ways. One interesting suggestion for how to do that came last week in a thoughtful [Twitter thread by Blayne Haggart](#), a Canadian political scientist. Forget about speech for a moment, he suggests, and think about an analogous problem in another sphere - banking. "Different societies have different tolerances for financial risk," he writes, "with

different regulatory regimes to match. Just like countries are free to set their own banking rules, they should be free to set strong conditions, including ownership rules, on how platforms operate in their territory. Decisions by a company in one country should not be binding on citizens in another country.”

In those terms, HSBC may be a “global” bank, but when it’s operating in the UK it has to obey British regulations. Similarly, when operating in the US, it follows that jurisdiction’s rules. Translating that to the tech sphere, it suggests that the time has come to stop accepting the tech giant’s claims to be hyper-global corporations, whereas in fact they are US companies operating in many jurisdictions across the globe, paying as little local tax as

possible and resisting local regulation with all the lobbying resources they can muster. [Facebook](#), YouTube, Google and Twitter can bleat as sanctimoniously as they like about freedom of speech and the first amendment in the US, but when they operate here, as Facebook UK, say, then they’re merely British subsidiaries of an American corporation incorporated in California. And these subsidiaries obey British laws on defamation, hate speech and other statutes that have nothing to do with the first amendment. Oh, and they pay taxes on their local revenues.

## **What I’ve been reading**

### **Capitol ideas**

What Happened? is a [blog post](#) by the Duke sociologist Kieran Healy, which is the most insightful attempt I’ve come across to explain the 6 January attack on Washington’s Capitol building.

### **Tweet and sour**

How @realDonaldTrump Changed Politics – and America. [Derek Robertson in Politico](#) on how Trump “governed” 140 characters at a time.

### **Stay safe**

The Plague Year is a [terrific New Yorker essay](#) by Lawrence Wright that includes some very good reasons not to be blase about Covid.