# Brief introduction

In this modern day and age, the advancement of technology has given birth to social media which has caused the world to become interconnected. Individuals from across the globe can now freely communicate with each other provided they have access to a working internet connection and an electronic device. Distance has become a nonissue as technology and social media has bridged the gap between us. Apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram have made communicating with each other as easy as the press of a button. We have come a long way from using pigeons and post to now just typing away on our laptops and mobile phones. To a person 100 years in the past, the very notion of this idea would be inconceivable and absurd and yet here we are.

However, as wonderful as social media is, its usage also comes with its own share of issues. Evil and sin has long existed since the birth of man. As long as free will exists, man has the choice to commit evil and thus sin will continue to exist until the extinction of man or the end of free will. Even if social media was created with good intentions in mind, some people will still misuse it. So, the topic we will be discussing is free speech on social media and the ethical issues surrounding it.

# Brief background review of what is currently understood about the topic

What is free speech? Free speech is the right of an individual to express any opinions without censorship or restraint. An individual is free to express their opinions no matter if they are right or wrong. However, free speech does not protect an individual from the consequences of expressing their opinion. A person may practise free speech yet be punished by their words.

However, free speech also comes with its own issues. We say that we must tolerant all opinions yet does that include hate speech, racial attacks and slander? The tolerance of free speech brings about the paradox of intolerance. If we were to tolerate intolerance, then eventually there would be no tolerance. So, to maintain tolerance, we must be intolerant of intolerance, and this is where the paradox of intolerance is born.

This notion of free speech also extends to the use of social media. A person is freely able to express their opinions on social media, yet they must face the consequences of their words. However, the concept of free speech on social media is flawed. This is because social media allows the user to become anonymous on the internet. So, the user can freely express heinous opinions without suffering any consequences as their identity is protected and hidden. So, free speech on social media also carries with it a freedom of consequences. This is the ethical issue we will be discussing.

# Recognize that there is a problem

We recognise that there is a problem of free speech on social media. Users of social media can freely express their opinions. However, as mentioned above, to truly allow tolerance to thrive, we must reject the intolerant. So, where do we draw the line? Countless users on social media everyday make racist remarks, propagate misinformation, and harass others. How do we decide if the opinion expressed is within the bounds of free speech or has crossed the line into intolerance. Users on social media can also choose to be anonymous. This protects their identity and allows them to be free of the consequences of their words. How do we address this issue?

# Determine the actor

Now, we determine who is responsible for addressing the problem. The main actor in this case would be the parent companies managing the various social media apps. For Facebook, the parent company would be Meta and for WhatsApp and Telegram, it would be Google. They should address this issue by punishing users who violate free speech by suspending or blocking their accounts. Censorship may also be used to address hate speech, misinformation, and harassment. The companies can do so by setting up automatic checks by bots or having a dedicated department work on this issue.

However, if the company does not comply, then we may need to rely on a higher authority such as the government. If the companies refuse to comply with free speech, the government can punish the company by issuing fines, taking the owners to court, sending the owners to prison, or even shutting down the company and services. In this case, the actor would be the government as they would force the company to adhere to the principle of free speech according to the law.

# Gather the relevant facts

Now, we must gather the facts the relevant facts on the opinion expressed. Is the opinion within the bounds of free speech or can it be considered intolerance. If the opinion is intolerant, what is the type of intolerance expressed? Is it hate speech, harassment, misinformation, or something else. How severe is the degree of intolerance expressed. Is this the first time the user has expressed this opinion or is the user a repeat offender. Is the user expressing this opinion unknowingly or knowingly? Who is the target of the opinion? Why has the user decided to express this opinion? Has the user broken any laws? Is the user anonymous or is the identity of the user known? With all these questions answered and the facts in hand, we can finally move on to analysing the issue.

# Test for right-versus-wrong issues

Before going any further, we can do some simple tests to decide if the opinion expressed is wrong from the start and does not need any other consideration as an ethical issue. The opinion expressed then becomes a moral issue as it has a clear right and wrong answer. This is different from an ethical issue where there are right answers from both sides of the divide.

The first test is the legal test. Is the opinion expressed illegal? Is it covered under the law such as defamation, misinformation or hate speech? If it is, the problem has become a legal issue and not a moral one.

Secondly, we can apply the stench test. We assess if the opinion expressed goes against our own moral principles. If it does, then it is a moral issue and not an ethical one and does not need further consideration.

Thirdly, we apply the front-page test. We try to imagine how we would feel if the opinion expressed showed up in tomorrow’s newspaper front page. If we feel horrified or incensed, then it is most likely a moral issue.

Finally, we apply the mom test. We ask ourselves the question: If we were our moral exemplar, would we express this opinion? If we would, then it becomes an ethical issue. If not, then it is just a moral issue.

If we apply all 4 test and get inconclusive results, then we can conclude that the opinion expressed is an ethical issue. Then, we must start comparing right values.

# Test for right-versus-right values

Now that we have established that the opinion expressed has become an ethical issue, we must start testing the right values from both sides and decide which values must ultimately win out.

For free speech on social media, after removing all the illegal opinions such as hate speech, slander, and misinformation, we are mostly left with ethical opinions such as user preferences. These preferences may include politics and dating. We pit the values of freedom of speech of the individual and the rights of an individual to feel safe while using social media. As an example, an individual may express the opinion that they prefer a particular political candidate or prefer to date a certain race of people. This opinion might incite feelings of rage in other users but the opinion itself is not illegal. Should we censor this opinion because it has affected the sensitivities of a subset of users, or should we allow it to maintain freedom of speech? How far can an opinion go without devolving into intolerance can we tolerate? Do we measure this by counting the number of users offended by the opinion and decide on an arbitrary percentage where it becomes unacceptable, or do we allow all legal opinions knowing some opinions might offend a majority of users?

# Apply the ethical standards and perspectives

# Look for a third way

Sometimes, irreconcilable situations may be resolved through compromise. This statement is also true for freedom of speech on social media. Instead of performing a blanket ban on certain types of opinions, the social media company can come up with creative solutions such as using tags and preferences choices.

Social media posts with divisive opinions may come included with a tag to warn users about it. This makes it easier for users to ignore or delete the posts before reading it and feeling offended as a result.

Social media may also come with a preference tab. Users can choose to include which types of posts they wish to see and which types they wish to exclude from viewing. This allows users to freely express their opinions while also not offending individuals who may disagree with their opinions as the offending post has been filtered out by their preferences.

# Brief Conclusion

Free speech is the right of an individual to express any opinions without censorship or restraint. Yet, to allow tolerance to thrive, we must reject the intolerant. So, how do we decide which types of opinions are allowed and which are not on social media?

Social media companies and the government are the main actors is enforcing free speech on social media. After filtering out illegal opinions, we are left with ethical opinions which can be freely expressed yet offend other users. Instead of censoring all content which offends others, we can come to a compromise with the use of tags and preferences to preserve free speech and protect the dignity of the individual. This is because users can still freely express their opinions while individuals who oppose the viewpoints can filter them out before seeing them and feeling offended.