Facebook, Fake News, and the Ethics of Censorship

Ethics, Data, and Technology

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**Mill on censorship**

*The harm principle.* Mill’s argues that the following principle should govern all proposed attempts to interfere with the activities of others:

“The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (*On Liberty*, ch. 1).

*Mill on censorship.* Mill takes a very strong stance on when censorship is morally permissible:

“If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (*On Liberty*, ch. 2).

*Classical liberalism.* Mill’s views about the appropriate scope of individual liberty are associated with a political philosophy called “classical liberalism.”

Classical liberals believe in very limited government and very limited interference with how individuals choose to live their lives. According to classical liberals, we should only use coercion to solve social problems if we can demonstrate that purely voluntary solutions cannot work.

**Is fake news harmful?**

An argument that fake news interferes with good governance:

1. The viral spread of fake news causes voters to base their policy and candidate preferences on misinformation.
2. If voters base their policy and candidate preferences on misinformation (false or highly misleading information), then they are less likely to favor good policies and candidates – policies that are beneficial, fair, and just, and candidates that are likely to implement such policies.
3. If voters favor worse policies and candidates, the government will be less likely to implement good policies.
4. The viral spread of fake news will make it less likely that the government will implement good policies. (1, 2, 3)

**Mill’s arguments against censorship**

Mill thinks that we should only interfere with others’ speech (written or otherwise) if it is likely to harm others. What should we do, then, if we think that a particular opinion is (a) false, (b) poorly supported, and (c) likely to cause harm? Should we intervene to prevent the opinion from being shared?

* You might expect Mill’s answer here to be a clear “yes.” But instead he argues that we should only censor an opinion if it is likely to lead to a specific kind of harm – immediate physical harm. So the answer to “should we censor this false, harmful opinion” is almost always “no.”

Argument 1: the argument for false orthodoxy

* Censorship entrenches orthodox opinions that are actually false.
* Censors can make mistakes even when they are justifiably confident that a view is false.
* History teaches us that much of what we firmly believe today is likely to be disproved in the future.
* If we censor views we think are almost certainly false, then we will make it less likely that false orthodox views will be corrected by silencing people who challenge them.

Argument 2: the argument from partially true falsehoods

* Censorship prevents us from benefiting from the truth in opinions that are only partially false.
* If we censor opinions we think are false, some of the views we will censor will be only partly false. Some of those views will include important elements of truth that could help us make our overall picture of the world more accurate.

Argument 3: the argument from the value of being challenged

* Censorship prevents us from the benefits of having our true beliefs challenged.
* Encountering beliefs that we disagree with is important even when we happen to be right. Why? Because examining why people disagree with us, and defending our true beliefs against the best arguments that can be marshalled, helps us to better understand *why* our true beliefs are true.
* When we understand why something is true, our belief in it is more secure, and less likely to give way in the face of misleading evidence that it is false.
* Better understanding why our beliefs are true will also make our true beliefs more useful to us, since our understanding of the relevant issues will be more nuanced and so more useful in guiding behavior.

Argument 4: the argument from the motives of censors

* Censors are not only fallible, they can also be driven by goals other than truth.
* Specifically, they might be politically motivated, or driven by greed, or under the influence of an oppressive or corrupt political regime.