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Article:

“Democrats Want to Hold Social Media Companies Responsible for Health Misinformation” (NPR, 2021)
<https://www.npr.org/2021/07/22/1019346177/democrats-want-to-hold-social-media-companies-responsible-for-health-misinformation>

Analysis:

As a “zennial” (an in-between of a millennial and a Gen Z-er), I grew up with the Internet and have seen it transform drastically in just two decades. I remember TV commercials that reminded younger me to ask my parents for permission to use the Internet. In fact, I was only allowed online after I finished homework and if my mom wasn’t on the landline. The Internet was a privilege and a form of entertainment, secondary to hanging out with friends without screens present.

Fast forward to 2021; we are now at the point where the Internet is considered a necessity, and the World Wide Web, or more accurately – social media, is the main source of information and we put screens in the hands of three-year-olds. The age-old question of “is technology a blessing or a curse” seems harder to answer today.

The article highlights a hot topic – should tech companies be held accountable for moderating their platforms and regulating their content? Some argue that social media is merely a space for people to exercise their rights to free speech. The onus is on the individual to give and take what they want – if something bad happens, they should’ve been able to discern right from wrong. It is, after all, a personal choice to believe what you want.

On the other hand, we have seen disastrous outcomes of unregulated content on social media. Social media has become an echo chamber by design of their algorithms. We live in filter bubbles that make it easy to spread sometimes dangerous misinformation to like-minded individuals. Social media played a big role in the organization of the Jan. 6th insurrection that led to fatalities; there are claims of election fraud and downplaying the risks of the pandemic, which to date has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in the U.S. alone. Some argue that these rich tech companies created these platforms and therefore have a responsibility to “do no evil.” If lives are being put at risk, shouldn’t tech companies do something about it? Facebook has started to remove false information about COVID, and it is not without controversy.

In my experience, this is a great topic for discussion (maybe not so at the family dinner table) as *everyone* has an opinion (adults and students alike). It is interesting to see whether people believe the collective good is worth protecting at the cost of free speech, or if personal rights should be valued over the well-being of the public.

We cannot stand to table this issue any longer because inaction is equivalent to taking a stance on this issue. Tech companies obviously want to protect their financial interests and brand image, and will push back on any legislature requiring them to take action. I look forward to conducting class debates about this and implore students to really consider both sides of this complex issue.