# Should Social Media Be Allowed To Ban Users For Speech? A Look Into Free Speech Online.

## ABSTRACT

A deep dive into today's world of speech online and the censorship that comes with it. Online speech comes in many forms ranging from both positive and negative views. Social Media platforms are vital to the majority of speech online and provides many individuals with space to discuss and talk about many things and also showcase themselves, and their creativity. A big question arises from the historical and recent actions of social media platforms, and that is to question; should they be allowed to ban speech online in all its forms? Who gets to decide what is right or wrong online? Research on this subject will shed some light on who is behind the censorship and shadow-banning, what the current regulations are and identify gaps within this particular subject.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am going to take a critical look at free speech, hate speech and misinformation online across the globe; and whether or not Social Media giants should have the power and ability to ban users, groups and businesses who discuss or say things that may be harmful, go against the grain and that could be deemed as misinformation. It will take a closer look at who gets to decide what is and what isn't misinformation and are they right.

On the flip side we'll look at the impact that speech online, in all its forms, has to the wider society. Since the COVID19 virus has swept the world over, Facebook has doubled efforts to combat 'misinformation', and not just about COVID19, also about climate change and hate speech. Although what may surprise you, is that the fact-checkers themselves seem to be operating on their own 'opinion' [New York Post, 2021] and are outsourced by Meta (Facebook).

Wiki's definition of Social Media describes it as a technology that offers interactivity, channels of a digital nature that allows user to be creative while sharing ideas, art, videos and images. Although each Social Media giant differs, there four commonalities; it is a web 2.0 internet based application, they all offer user generated content, users are creating service profiles which are maintained by the companies, and they help to develop networks of all kinds by connecting people. Wikipedia(2022c).

## MAIN BODY

Freedom of expression has been around since the dawn of time and has gone through many changes ranging from oppression all the way up to written in law to protect it. Now we have the internet; an important issue to discuss is how the internet is affecting freedom of expression and how this is impacting on society. With news readily available at your fingertips, right or wrong we consume it ravenously and take it as gospel, social media has particularly become more dominant, with billions using different social media platforms every day becoming the world's most popular way of communicating with each other. Govindarajan, G. and Nanditha, R. (2020) concludes after conducting their own research and a survey, believe that there should be some form of censorship to preserve harmony within communities and to avoid discord among the wider society, in other words, for the greater good.

An example of an individual that some of society is seeking to get de-platformed, is Joe Rogan; Who has recently come under fire for apparent 'misinformation' and is in danger of becoming a part of societies 'cancel culture' Wikipedia(2022a) and dangerously close to being the latest in a string of modern day 'shunned' individuals who do not match up with societies expectations. Joe Rogan has a loyal fanbase and one of those coming to his defence is Jon Stewart; Stewart, J. (2022) who is imploring the general public to 'just engage' and to also consider what the many giants operating in the world of social media have been guilty of in the past, including misinformation relating to the Iraq war and the illegal invasion; Valki, L.(2016) based on misinformation coupled with heavy media coverage focusing on said misinformation regarding the invasion. With some artists removing their much less popular content brings us back to the question; who gets to decide what is right and what is wrong when looking speech online?

For the time being Spotify will be keeping him on their platform, but for how long? Will the peer pressure from above soon make Spotify cave into societies demands? When we look at the giant that Joe Rogan has become on many platforms, we see a man who has differing views and questions absolutely everything. There are calls to de-platform him and is in danger of becoming a part of the cancel culture. His fan base is in the millions, and he welcomes people onto his show that boast a variety of educational

backgrounds and experience. Yet some of society is calling out 'misinformation!' 'extremist views!' 'racist!' and the other half of society seems to respect a critical review and discussion on subjects that most people do not want to talk about. Who are we/society, tech giants to decide who is right and who is wrong?

Fig. 1. *Who decides what is free speech and what is hate speech online? robocop(2018)*



Another subject that is closely monitored by society is free speech and hate speech, the definition of the free speech principle is the support of others to exorcise their free will and state their opinions without fear of repercussions from the law, government, or society, in addition to this, it is recognised as a human right and similarly, most countries have the protection of free speech written into their constitution. Wikipedia (2019)

Hate speech is defined as "public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation"[1] Each country is different as to what is considered 'hate speech' and it is worth noting that America has many of the categories and terms that fall under hate speech protected within its constitution. Wikipedia (2022b). Everybody has free rein to say and do what they want, even under a pseudonym should an individual wish to do so, everybody also has a right to privacy.

O'Kelley, E.(2019) makes mention to the fact that more and more Social Media is used to promote political agendas and viewpoints, he also notes that as more people start to use the platform more individuals will seek to find the latest news and updates. This is a strong indication that these platforms will amass control and power over media giants and who sees what content. With the added pressure of 'fact checking' and peer pressure coming down from up-high as to what should or should not be promoted, meaning most platforms will be rife with corrupted news and politics and more likely to be swayed via means unknown. The main theme coming out of this journal seems to be centered around censorship and the lack of power government have over these giant corporations and subsequent output from said control of information to the masses. It makes point of saying that social media companies are actually private actors therefor able to decide for themselves, whether it is right or wrong, what speech gets banned. It discusses the need for an overhaul to how these private actors in the social media world operate and brings to conclusion the dilemma of politics moving towards using social media as a platform to get across their views and political stance, in the USA for example, they are looking at the dilemma state by state and applying the constitution to social media giants via assessment which is backed one hundred percent by the Supreme Court.

Glazzard, J. and Mitchell, C. (2018) took a look at the impact social media has on children and their mental health and aptly wrote a book to help schools combat this critical subject. They believe that social media and the mental health of our school age children are intimately entwined. This brings about the seriousness of the harm that social media can bring to society and alludes to social media impacting society from a young age and more needs to be done to research this particular subject to look at the true effects on society from a young age.

Myers West S (2018) discusses content moderation in the form of censorship, shadow-banning, and users' interpretations of content moderation through surveying individuals that have experienced one or more of these methods. With the way that these methods are implemented it is difficult so see rhyme or reason to the way that they are implemented and enforced and vary from platform to platform with the author referring to the user experiences as 'folk theories'[1]. The paper discusses the varied approach from platform to platform when it comes to how the wish to present to the world from a standpoint of community focusing on ensuring users are happy and then from the viewpoint of protecting free speech; both seem to cause friction and tension. An example would be that Meta outsourced content moderation to a company and therefor is a paid service done for profit, while many rely on users themselves to moderate the content they see online and encourage reporting of posts deemed violent, predatory, or extremist. It is noted that censorship is carried out on a large scale yet lacks opportunity for users to challenge the ban in whatever form it takes, leading to frustrated individuals and a huge gaping hole highlighting the fact that these social media giants are almost carrying out a spray and pray method of censorship, with little to no follow up, nor are there straight forward channels to speak to someone regarding this.

More recently a big discussion has been happening around Artificial Intelligence (AI) carrying out content moderation and brings into question the scalability of using AI in this way. (Gillespie, 2020) discusses whether we should moderate in this way even if it was possible and concludes that maybe there should still be some human element attached it to; reasoning that as humans there will always be evolving values that change and could impact how we moderate over time.

Fig. 2.    *Who decides who can say what? Unknown(2017)*

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

With the world of social media, a relatively new giant to the online world and society itself, there is little study done on the impact of hate speech online, trolling, cyber bullying, and misinformation online. More studies need to be conducted by an impartial source to explore the impact on individuals

and the wider society to enable a better and healthier use of online social media platforms. In addition to this, regulations and laws must be considered from all angles to ensure that private companies like Meta and other social media giants are held accountable for the impact their inventions have had and no doubt will have on current and future generations. On the flip side, big social media giants have the power to censor anyone who, in their opinion, have a rhetoric that may be disliked by a community or the wider society, many would say that this is the modern-day version of book burning prevalent during the second world war. History, T.(2013).

Social media is the new way of meeting people, keeping up with friends, posting pictures and videos of ourselves, making us vulnerable. Physical society is regulated and governed by laws; it is in which case we are able to presume that so should the virtual world. Meta have promised investment into AI to combat the myriad forms of online abuse although it is not quite there yet.

## CONCLUSION

Conducting this research paper seems to raise more questions than answers arising from censorship, shadow banning, etc, and who decides what, when, why, who and how. An important step forward would be to have a globally recognised independent board, that would be tasked with writing policies, implementing them and enforcing them; although this would be a mammoth task, too large and expensive for the social tech giants and for the governments across the world. It would be interesting to explore how it would work, the costs involved and if it is feasible. Research of this type is still in it's infancy, with the feeling of lack of competition amongst the main social media giants, similar to mainstream media competition, with Meta owning Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and many more. Reiff, N. (2020); who's to say they aren't playing favourites?

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