

The Rise and Power of Social Media Censorship

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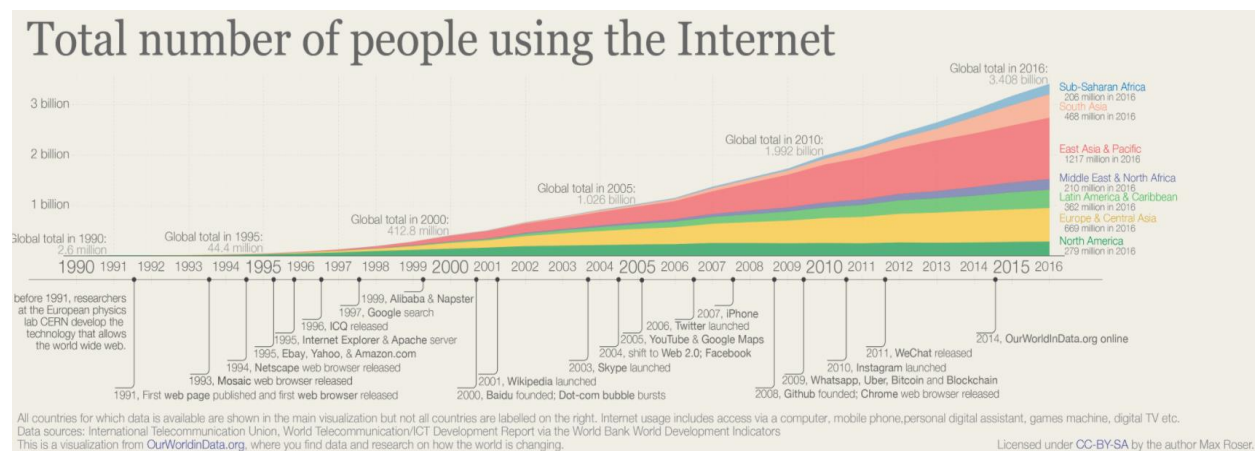
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Introduction

The internet has provided people all over the world the ability to look up any information at the touch of a finger, the ability to post opinions and ideas out online for the world to see and the ability to do much more. The internet is a tool that many don't take the time to truly understand and often use it aimlessly. People are often told not to believe everything they read on the internet, but that information still plays a big role in what forms our thoughts. However, what is more frightening than reading false information is having no information at all. The power to control the people now lies not in what information they can see, but the information that they cannot see.

Internet censorship is on a rise and has been more prevalent than ever due to the growing number of web users. Internet has been made more widely available recently due to pushes from certain countries to be the main provider of internet for developing countries.



Along with the rise of the internet, social media has been a driving force that has replaced news sources for many and has even allowed the organization of government uprisings. In 2019, 79 percent of the population in the United States had a social networking

profile (Tankovska, 2021). The number of worldwide social media users has reached 3.5 billion in April 2019. As a major proportion of the population is active on social media, the effects that social media can have on public perception are huge. This gives these social media organizations an unethical amount of power and influence.

Governments are known to move slow, while the internet moves fast and always has a new trend. Government regulation has had trouble keeping up with internet developments in America. This leaves a lot of freedom for social media sites to dictate what they want to show and censor on their sites, giving them a lot of power.

The actor-network theory can be used to identify important relationships between the social media companies, the government, the users, and the backers. This will give us a better understanding of the current situation and identify viable solutions related to social media and internet censorship.

Literature review – Social Media Influence and Regulations

Social media sites have political and financial incentives to use a certain social media algorithm that benefits them (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). Twitter has not been one to hide its influence. Multiple bans and active censorship often happen to keep its site politically correct and its user base happy (Clark et al. 2017). This can result in an abuse of power, as recently the 45th President Donald Trump has been permanently banned from their site. Twitter has been able to censor whoever they want even the president. Although, most of the time the majority of its users go along with what the site chooses, it still begs the question on how exactly these

ensorships are decided. Just because the majority thinks it's right, doesn't mean that it really is. If someone is unjustly banned is there anything that they can do?

Social media sites choosing favorites and censoring its users often calls upon the natural human right of the freedom of speech. The First Amendment of the constitution protects the freedom of speech and expression against all levels of government censorship. However, this act only protects social media platforms from what is said on their sites and allows them to abuse censorship. The opposite of what our forefathers wanted.

Social media platforms are protected by this first amendment along with Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act that says "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" ("47 U.S. Code § 230 - Protection for Private Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material").

In short, this means that social media sites are not held accountable for what users post of their platform. The first amendment and the Communications Decency Act protect private entities such as social media platforms to censor their users. It allows these platforms to express their policies and opinions on their own site. Since they are private companies and not directly regulated by the government. This allows them to take radical actions to censor statements and views that they do not agree with, such as Twitter censoring Donald J. Trump. This is a misuse of the regulation as the goal of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act was to protect these platforms and allow open forum debates and an exchange of ideas.

However, the sad reality is that these social media sites use this as an excuse to push their own private agendas onto its unknowing users (“Executive Order on Preventing Online Censorship”).

Literature review – Government Influence and China’s Censorship

Government parties want to spread their influence to gain support and more power.

China is currently spreading its influence in the growing Southeast Asia. It has created a Digital Silk Road which comes at the cost of digital authoritarianism and surveillance technologies (Mochinaga, 2021). For example, Laos’s infrastructure is highly dependent on Chinese technology. Huawei has been a driving factor in the construction of the country’s telecommunication infrastructure and also its highways and railways. Huawei also has a very close connection with the Chinese government. China is also spreading its influence along the Vientiane which would connect to Bangkok and Singapore. The increase of China’s influence and becoming a technological presence in Southeast Asia may change the region’s geopolitical importance and grow the CCP’s influence (Mochinaga, 2021).

China is known to have one of the strictest and greatest censorship policies, with the Great Firewall of China (Ensafi et al. 2015). China is known for its “Chinonet” which is used to aggressively monitor and censor content in China. China uses its censorship policy to advance its political and economic agenda. The Communist party can select what type of information is available to the public, by censoring and blocking certain terms and events from being searchable and posted online. The Communist party also extends their influence onto private companies. They give certain companies privileges if they follow the communist party’s agenda and restrict others if they don’t. Examples of this are the bans of Google, Facebook, Twitter,

Wikipedia and many others non-Chinese companies (J. Li). The Great Firewall of China has IP banned these sites and rendered them inaccessible to the Chinese population. A side-effect of foreign censorship is the stimulation of the Chinese market (T. Li). Many Chinese tech alternatives have popped up to replace the gap of big social media. Social media apps such as WeChat and Weibo have dominated the Chinese market in more ways than one. Tencent's WeChat has over 1.2 billion monthly active users and is an app that almost everyone in China has downloaded. WeChat has been known to take down accounts that do not comply with rules that they have set (K. Zucchi). If accounts post anything controversial or against the Communist party, these accounts are either shut down or "handled". The Internet censorship policies that are used by China can also be extended to other countries such as North Korea, Cuba, Iran and many other countries (J. Li).

Current ruling regimes also use censorship as a weapon against opposing political parties (J. Li). A common use of internet censorship is to block websites related to religious and minority groups that could pose a threat to the current ruling regime. In China searches related to the religious group, Falun Dafa, are restricted and practicing Falun Gong is punishable by death (J. Griffiths). In today's world many people live in the luxury of the internet and do not pay attention to the growing problems of internet censorship. Some people want to live in ignorant bliss and might not even be aware of the issue.

Literature review – Net Neutrality

The term net neutrality was introduced and coined by Columbia University media law professor Tim Wu. In 2015 the rise of net neutrality was popularized. Net neutrality is the idea that all internet traffic should be treated equally – with no internet service provider (ISP) having the power to favor one source over another by blocking, throttling, or providing paid prioritization (K. Finley). Paid prioritization is a form of internet censorship that is not blocking or restricting access to certain sites but is to slow down the connection to these sites. This gives power to internet service providers and corporations. Big corporations can pay the internet service providers to slow down their competitors services and speed up their own. This paid prioritization means that different agendas will always be pushed. An effect of this could be tech giants monopolizing the online market by having the only fast and accessible sites (R. Chhabria).

“In the USA, the FCC repealed the regulation of net neutrality on June 11, 2018, which means they no longer govern the provisions of net neutrality” (Garg). Net neutrality would provide a more ethical option to Internet Service Providers and big tech behemoths. Although, the cost of usage would be seen as more, this might come with the additional benefit of better content providers because you are paying for better service. One of the ethically issues with net neutrality is that since everyone has a fair share of bandwidth, it makes it impossible for one to have a “fast lane” when it is necessary. An example is when a life is at stake, such as remote surgery with video streams. If the video stream fails it could have very severe consequences, however, in this case they are still regulated to use the same bandwidth link.

Discussion – Solutions

A possible solution to big tech having an unethical amount of influence on their platforms is to create a platform that is government regulated. A social media platform that is created by the government will not be allowed to censor speech based on spontaneous reasons, since it must follow the first amendment. However, the trade – off is that the government will now have access and record of all things that are said on this created site. This solution to limiting big tech will have an effect very similar to that of China’s Great Firewall. The government would love to be able to access all this data in a very centralized manner, but although the power no longer lies with the big tech companies the power is not removed, just transferred.

The ethical issue that stands out the most here is privacy. With the government overseeing every movement, it removes the presence of private party influence, but sacrifices our privacy. Although, not an issue now, it might also lead to an abuse of leadership authority. If access is given to the government, there might be laws that are slowly passed to increase their power.

Another solution to this social media censorship is to treat social media platforms as a tool used by influencers. Since users are influencers on each individual platform, everyone could be treated as their very own small social medias. Since everyone is entitled to their own opinions and the goal is to have them speak their opinions freely, they should be allowed their own page. For example, Twitter has a Twitter page on Twitter and Facebook has a Facebook

page on Facebook, these platforms should use their own influencer “social media accounts” to extend their ideas. This way they are not affecting the entire platform.

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act puts the responsibility of one’s words on social media sites on the individual who posts them (“47 U.S. Code § 230 - Protection for Private Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material”). Social media platforms are not held accountable for what is said by an influencer, they should not have control over what the influencer says on their platforms (D. Lilly).

This alternative solution is to have a radio station of social media users. These stations can have many radically different purposes and ideas. If you do not like what is on a station you can switch the station. The idea here is that the radio is just a tool use to display different stations but doesn’t have actual control over what is said in each station. These stations would be free from social media control but would still be using their platform. Social media platforms could adopt a similar approach and treat their platform like a radio and their influencers as radio stations. This way social media platforms could take a more hands-off approach to keeping their platform clean as each user on their platform could subscribe to the influencers that they want to hear from.

The current state of social media site is unethical because of the hidden influence they have on unknowing users. They are able to censor topics and accounts that do not meet their standards.

“Today, roughly half (51%) of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 say they use Facebook, notably lower than the shares who use YouTube, Instagram or Snapchat.” (“Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018”)

The problem lies with our most venerable age group of users. Many users of social media and the internet today are the youth. They have grown up with this technology and are the most effected by it. At such a young age their brains are still developing and the information and views that they experience as a youth will have a lasting impact on their future. It is important that we do not let big companies brainwash an entire generation.

Conclusion

Social media and other online platforms have become the equivalent of the 21st centuries public square. These platforms have the power to control what people see or do not see. The freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution is a core element of the American democracy (“Executive Order on Preventing Online Censorship”). Online platforms such as Twitter have been selective on tagging tweets as political bias. Tweets from Representative Adam Schiff about the Russian Collusion Hoax have not been tagged while other tweets have (“Executive Order on Preventing Online Censorship”). Online platforms can be inconsistent and unpredictable with their power to censor speech on their platforms. The Supreme Court has noted that social media sites, as the modern public square, “can provide perhaps the most powerful mechanisms available to a private citizen to make his or her voice heard” (“Executive Order on Preventing Online Censorship”).

Social media platforms need to promote a nice clean fun image for their users (Naughton, 2019). They are also private companies, which means that they are incentivized to make decisions that will bring in the most revenue for their company and stockholders. The fault lies in the way they go about achieving their goals. It is unethical for them to push hidden agendas and censor certain views without users knowing. It is incredibly important for citizens of America and users of social media platforms to be aware of what these social media platform's goals are and speak up against wrongful actions.

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