

**Prospectus**

**Ghost Popularity Identifier**  
(Technical Topic)

**Hidden Social Media Agendas and Censorship**  
(STS Topic)

By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Introduction**

Internet censorship by big tech organizations, especially social media giants, has been more relevant than ever due to their growing influence. Social media platforms have been the main source of spreading awareness and news about the COVID-19 Pandemic and political information on the recent election (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020). Like many news sources, these social media platforms also have their agenda, but at times it can be unclear to their users what their agenda is. Social media platforms are designed in a way that makes them seem unbiased, however, social media platforms can manipulate public attention and increase selectivity on certain topics to make them seem more important than they are. These big tech giants also divert attention away from major issues that could negatively impact their agenda (Feezell, 2018). As of now, all the social media giants are private corporations that are unregulated by the government. This means that they have free reign over all censorship on their site and can and should act in their own best interest. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this, the lack of transparency from investors to social media platforms to their everyday users is very troubling. Social media platforms are designed in a way so that their users do not think too deeply about what type of information they are consuming and why that information is shown to them. My two research papers will help address this issue by presenting solutions for transparency and presenting what has been attempted and alternative approaches from other countries on social media agendas and censorship.

## Technical Topic

Social media influencers, social media platforms, and companies all use social media to spread awareness of their brand and image. Social media platforms want to maximize user engagement and develop a type of community that brands want to be a part of. One way social media sites have encouraged engagement is by showing constant highlights and providing continuous rewards to people who are not receiving them in real life (*Social Media Addiction*, n.d.). Another way social media platforms promote engagement is by popularizing controversial posts and polarizing opinions to invoke interaction and reactions (Petrescu & Krishen, 2020). The illusion of a popular post getting millions of views and likes can manipulate a user into thinking that it is the majority opinion, when in fact it is not. Social media platforms want to create a certain type of community for brands to show their ads to. This can promote social media platforms to censor certain types of popular beliefs and push for others depending on who they are getting their money from (Hamilton, n.d.).

“A new study by three MIT scholars has found that false news spreads more rapidly on the social network Twitter than real news does — and by a substantial margin” (Dizikes, 2018). This means that social media platforms have an incentive to promote false news. Facebook has been reported to have had the power to stop 10 billion impressions from “repeat misinformers”, but didn’t (Hamilton, 2021). False news spreads the fastest because of the echo chamber effect found in social media groups (Chiou & Tucker, 2018). There are many companies and people who take advantage of the algorithm provided by social media platforms by popularizing their ads or content with artificial like or upvotes. Many people do not have the time or find it inconvenient to fact-check everything they see online. This

allows social media platforms, companies, and influencers to take advantage of the echo chamber effect and promote their content to the regular user.

My technical topic will aim to solve this problem by creating a browser extension in recognizing fake/real popularity on a post. The algorithm will use a weighted social interaction network to identify fake users and bots. Every user will have a weighted value assigned to them. This value will be based on their types of interactions such as if they make constant posts or if they regularly engage with the community. Much like how fake reviews are spotted, fake accounts will have a low weighted value (Freitas et al., 2015). Each post will have an average of the weighted values as its rating. The rating will be a percentage of how much real interaction and engagement the post is getting. The browser extension will be easy for each user to download and will solve the inconvenience of personally fact-checking each post. This browser extension will also solve the problem of echo chambers as each post will be more transparent with the user and the user will be able to know what they are seeing and why they are seeing it.

### **STS Topic**

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. In 2011, the Egyptian uprising showed scholars the effects social media can have on a population (Brym et al., 2014). Social media platforms can be used to enhance the capacity of demonstrators to extend protests and organize events. Scholars have also noted the effects social media has

on the spread of fake and real healthcare news to the public (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020).

Social media platforms can cause protests and riots along with social uproar. They hold the power to manipulate the public and influence elections.

My STS research will address the problem of hidden social media agendas and censorship, along with the problems of regulation and viable solutions. The paper will pull from previous attempts at social media restrictions such as China's social media practices, and the United States attempted regulations (Jian & Liu, 2018). The paper will address the political and financial incentives of the social media algorithm (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

Social media platforms all want to grow their platform. A crucial way to keep users using their platform is to keep it clean by censoring unwanted and vile posts. However, the way social media platforms classify these unwanted posts is all subjective. Although we are given the freedom of speech, the United States has taken an approach to internet censorship differently than other nations. The First Amendment of the constitution protects the freedom of speech and expression against all levels of government censorship. This is one of the most essential components of the American lifestyle. However, this act only protects social media platforms from what is said on their sites and allows them to abuse censorship. The actor-network theory could be used to identify important relationships between the social media companies, the government, the users, and the backers.

Counties such as China and North Korea have strict control over the information on social media. They can govern what can be seen through the government, unlike in the US. One way to limit the hidden agendas of social media platforms and have full transparency over what is censored and promoted is to create a government social media platform. The

government social media platform can be run with full transparency. This solution is very similar to what China and North Korea have except that it will be transparent and not a black box. I would be very interested in talking with a senator or other government IT employees about the viability of this solution.

Another solution to this social media censorship is to treat social media platforms as a tool used by influencers. Then treat the influencers on that platform as individual small social media. 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 will follow 47 U.S. Code § 230, and change social media into a platform that influencers control, instead of a platform influencers use.

### **Conclusion**

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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