

Third Place - College

### The Internet Was a Mistake: Censorship Beyond the State

Back when it was still called the World Wide Web, many users celebrated the internet for enabling the democratization of communication, connection, and the sharing of ideas. Rather than supplicating to the elite gatekeepers in the news, publishing, film, and television industries, ordinary people could broadcast their thoughts and opinions with the click of a button. From the original text-only, online multi-user dungeons all the way to Facebook and TikTok, the internet revolutionized the possibilities for free expression in our democracy, as the marketplace of ideas and the collective knowledge of humanity could be shared with anyone who had a dial-up, broadband, or wireless connection. Government censorship could not keep up with every chatroom, website, and forum. Many shared their thoughts and circulated information without being filtered through the commercial or political biases of the mainstream media. All this should have made us freer, smarter, and more connected to the rest of humanity.

Instead, many people in democracies around the world today have become more narrow-minded and less free to engage in democratic debate. Bombarded with fake news, many of us have lost the ability to communicate with our ideological opponents, leading to more disconnection and alienation from our families, colleagues and neighbors. So, what went wrong?

Rather than liberating expression and protecting citizens from censorship, the internet has created a new form of automated censorship: algorithms. In particular, the way that social media sites feed us information and decide what we do and do not see is a form of censorship, although most people don't recognize it as such. We are used to thinking of free speech as being limited by governments who crack down on dissenting voices, like the vicious attacks on Russian

journalists daring to criticize the war in Ukraine<sup>1</sup> or the Chinese government outlawing books about and images of Winnie the Pooh because he bears a striking resemblance to Xi Jinping.<sup>2</sup> But market incentives can also produce a form of censorship. Social media sites rarely guide us *intentionally* in a certain direction, but because their profits come from engagement and time spent browsing, they have developed algorithms that pinpoint what content will get us to engage and spend more time on their sites so they can serve up more relevant advertising. This means that, although we are allowed to post anything we like, whether anyone will see it is mostly in the hands of large corporations.

The consequence of this automated, corporate censorship is profound political polarization. This is the monster that algorithms create and then feed, and it affects modern politics, social relations, and the economy. The role of Twitter discourse in political discussions illustrates this nicely. Twitter is one of the most prominent social media sites today. With “217 million monetizable daily active users,”<sup>3</sup> Twitter is used by journalists, academics, and professionals who look to it for the latest updates and political opinions. Until I started college in the fall of 2020, I had never downloaded Twitter because my high school friends preferred Instagram. When I started dating a Twitter addict, I decided to give it a shot. At first, my feed was filled with the personal tweets of my peers, ranging from jokes and life updates to memes and commentary on current TV shows and celebrity scandals. But as I began following more accounts, I discovered “discourse.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Russian journalists labeled as ‘foreign agents,’ detained, and attacked while reporting,” Committee to Protect Journalists, April 11, 2022. <https://cpi.org/2022/04/russian-journalists-labeled-as-foreign-agents-detained-and-attacked-while-reporting/>

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Haas, “China bans Winnie the Pooh film after comparisons to President Xi,” The Guardian, August 6th, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/07/china-bans-winnie-the-pooh-film-to-stop-comparisons-to-president-xi>

<sup>3</sup> “Twitter by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts,” Omnicore Agency, February 22, 2022. <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/#:~:text=1..a%20few%20drops%20from%202015.>

Discourse is often started by an inflammatory tweet or series of tweets (a thread), which then accrues replies and “quote tweets” as users agree or disagree with the original author’s sentiments. This can spiral into blind rage and abuse—as it often does with celebrities—or it can be intellectually probing and productive. The abundance of replies under viral tweets, which rabbit-hole into replies to replies to replies, means that I have often spent too much time scrolling through the replies of a single tweet. It can be a fun and interesting learning experience, especially when users link articles to support their statements or speak to their own experiences. But the sheer volume of responses to a single tweet can also be overwhelming, especially when they all seem to agree on one thing, to the point where one begins to think that it must be the “correct” opinion or at least the opinion that I *should* have about a particular issue.

The problem with Twitter is that it does not represent reality. I have often felt that an opinion is dominant just because of who I see on Twitter retweeting it and engaging with it, and how many “likes” they get. But as with all other social media, who sees which tweets is determined by an algorithm that knows who they are and what is likely to keep them scrolling on Twitter so they can insert more ads. For example, I often see discourse about gender and racial issues mainly because that is what I and the accounts I follow are interested in. Based on engagement, likes, and other nebulous factors, users are categorized in a way that allows tailored content to be presented to them.

This creates a false perception of popularity for a given opinion. People are aware of this, and often talk about how it creates ideological echo chambers where our political opinions are rarely challenged. This is notably the case on places like Facebook, where groups can be formed around ideologies that constantly self-perpetuate. This limits free expression and damages our democracy because it allows a very small group of tweets that have gone viral to influence large

swaths of public opinion. And those tweets have gone viral because algorithms have amplified them in order to keep more users scrolling through their feeds. More well-considered and less inflammatory opinions are usually marginalized because they rarely fuel the engagement-oriented algorithm.

Even if only one woman tweets that men should be rounded up and put in cages as retribution for their patriarchal wrongs, that tweet is likely to go viral because of its engagement potential. This is because antifeminist Twitter, which tends to react to these kinds of tweets in large volumes of replies and quote tweets, will increase attention and make the tweet go viral. This distorts their own image of what feminists actually believe. In other words, the Twitter algorithm is incentivized to feed inflammatory tweets to people that are likely to disagree with them, specifically inflammatory tweets that look ridiculous and offensive to those opposing groups. This also means that users' more extreme opinions, when tweeted, are more likely to be successful, which then reinforces those opinions in their own minds. Not only does this phenomenon harden people's own beliefs, it also drives polarization because they become convinced that their ideological opposition is crazy. Rather than representing feminists as reasonable adults protesting the myriad instances of patriarchy that plague our society, Twitter's shareholders profit from showing crazy "feminazis" tweeting about killing all men.<sup>4</sup>

Here is a specific example: in December 2021, Billie Eilish spoke out on pornography on the Howard Stern show, citing her discovery of online porn at age 11 as the cause of a lot of psychological damage that she felt "destroyed [her] brain."<sup>5</sup> For a week after this happened, the

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<sup>4</sup> Zoe Williams, "Feminazi: the go-to term for trolls out to silence women" Theguardian.com, The Guardian. September 15, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/15/feminazi-go-to-term-for-trolls-out-to-silence-women-charlotte-proudman>

<sup>5</sup> Lianne Kolirin, "Billie Eilish says watching porn from age 11 'really destroyed my brain,'" CNN, December 16th, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/15/entertainment/billie-eilish-porn-scli-intl/index.html>

most prominent article on my feed was one titled “Billie Eilish Goes on Stigmatizing Anti-Porn Tirade on Howard Stern's Show.”<sup>6</sup> This article got a lot of engagement from my corner of Twitter, which vehemently disagreed with it. Most of the reply tweets came from profiles who were already opposed to sex work and pornography, and who found this article to be insensitive and dismissive of Eilish’s experiences and criticisms. It dawned on me that their opinions against porn were only reinforced when they were exposed to an article blaming Eilish for not knowing how to safely consume pornography when she was 11 years old.

The website that published the article, Xbiz, calls itself “the world's leading source for adult industry news and information,”<sup>7</sup> which includes news articles about new cam websites, how to contract pornographic models, and legal news about persecution around the US and the world. Of course their business would be in danger if people critically engaged with Eilish’s comments. Of course it would behoove them to try to make Eilish seem like the villain here, especially if it drove up engagement on their site.

But because the issues of sex work and pornography are hot topics among progressive feminists, Xbiz’s own interests are obscured by an article written to make Eilish seem like she is “stigmatizing” harmless and exploited sex workers. But I doubt that many of the Twitter users engaging with the original Xbiz article considered the legitimacy of the individuals quoted who supposedly “responded” to Eilish’s comments. These Twitter users likely had little idea that the piece was not purely motivated by genuine concern about the stigma around sex work, but rather by profit. On the webpage where the owners of Xbiz try to convince advertisers to put ads on

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<sup>6</sup> Gustavo Turner, “Billie Eilish Goes on Stigmatizing Anti-Porn Tirade on Howard Stern's Show,” Xbiz.com, Dec 14th, 2021. <https://www.xbiz.com/news/263603/billie-eilish-goes-on-stigmatizing-anti-porn-tirade-on-howard-sterns-show>

<sup>7</sup> Xbiz Media, <https://mediakit.xbiz.com/> Accessed April 15th, 2022.

their site,<sup>8</sup> they boast their “2 million digital impressions” and their “publication audience” of thirty-five thousand. Even if no one reads the article, a viral Tweet is great for their bottom line. But this also means that the people who saw the article may have moved on with their lives thinking that there are others out there—who get a lot of engagement on Twitter—who have these extreme opinions about Eilish’s traumatic experiences with pornography. In the end, the side effect of Twitter and Xbiz’s profit-seeking engagement machine is that those who are anti-sex work and anti-pornography (and who are more likely to stigmatize sex workers in a harmful way) perceive progressives to be callous and insensitive. This reinforces their pre-existing prejudices.

This is not unique to Twitter. Across platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, commercial algorithms play a large role in deciding people’s political inclinations, and of effectively censoring less provocative, and therefore less engaging speech. I am certainly not the first person to point this out, but I feel that too many discussions of “free expression” focus too much on the state-driven censorship of authoritarian governments and not enough on the ways that commercial algorithms lift some voices while silencing others. What is the point of free expression when all but the most inflammatory speech is marginalized by corporations who only value opinions and sentiments that will drive user engagement? Before he was suspended in January 2021, Donald Trump had amassed over eighty-eight million Twitter followers<sup>9</sup> compared to the nineteen million of the current Dalai Lama of Tibet whose message of peace, contentment, and cooperation is far more needed by humanity today.<sup>10</sup> The far-right French

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<sup>8</sup> <https://mediakit.Xbiz.com>

<sup>9</sup>“Social media use by Donald Trump,” Wikipedia, Accessed April 15th, 2022.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media\\_use\\_by\\_Donald\\_Trump](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media_use_by_Donald_Trump)

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama>

politician Marine Le Pen has around three million Twitter followers<sup>11</sup> compared to only one million five hundred thousand for the Louvre Museum, the home of the Mona Lisa and other masterpieces of art and archeology.<sup>12</sup> The 14th Dalai Lama inspires millions of followers around the globe and the Louvre gets almost ten million visitors per year, but, at the end of the day, their tweets are boring.<sup>13</sup> They don't make us angry enough to engage. And without engagement potential, the algorithms will ignore them.

If we are to resolve this issue, free expression—the right to speak and the opportunity to be heard—must not depend on producing content which amplifies division and sows the seeds of discord. Instead, we must cultivate an online environment where we are able to genuinely communicate and connect with each other, rather than only engaging with the most outrageous content. As the World Wide Web has expanded, it has been commercialized in a way that limits free expression and intellectual development to an extent that endangers our democracy and our trust in each other.

As long as profit is the number one motive behind the development of social platforms like Twitter, this issue will not go away. Although these corporations are not trying to guide users towards a specific political ideology like governments do, their form of censorship is just as harmful because it disregards the impacts of inflammatory speech on social trust and interaction. The internet was a mistake because it has been so heavily monetized. To fix this, we need to return to the utopian dream that inspired the early years of the internet.

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<sup>11</sup> [https://twitter.com/MLP\\_officiel](https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel)

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/MuseeLouvre>

<sup>13</sup> “Number of visitors to the Louvre in Paris from 2007 to 2020,” Statista Research Department <https://www.statista.com/statistics/247419/yearly-visitors-to-the-louvre-in-paris/>

If we want to change things, especially for digital natives like me, PEN America must support the creation of social media platforms that are not-for-profit. This is not just a pipe dream: since its inception, Wikipedia has become the most widely trusted and reliable online encyclopedia, largely owing to its lack of advertising and non-profit nature. People know they can trust the crowdsourced database partially because it is so heavily monitored by volunteers. If we were to create a social media platform with the same model as Wikipedia (maybe something like “Socialpedia”), we would have the opportunity to listen to others without the mediation of for-profit algorithms. Obviously, some voices will always be heard more than others. But the organization of social media feeds around what we will engage with (that is, what will generate revenue) is harmful and cannot sustain true freedom of expression. We each have the right to speak—but we also have a right to be heard.