

Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

**Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy**

Emilie Rubayita

April 4, 2023

## Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

In the famous words of Isaac Asimov, "The saddest part of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom" (Asimov, n.d.). Quoted in 1988, it is obvious that Asimov was living ahead of his time, as evidenced by the enormous challenges presented by social media today and the traps it has trapped society in. In itself, social media is comparable to the ancient chopping stones that Neanderthals crafted to ensure their survival, and it is hardly much different from the telephone, a civilized tool that eased communication on unfathomable scales. Despite the benefits it extends, such as its use for influencer marketing, sharing expertise, networking with friends and colleagues, and educating people by enabling them to cultivate knowledge that interests them, social media has birthed complex problems that threaten democracy. Far from the listed merits, social media has distorted the limits of free speech and diminished democracy, as clearly seen with Brexit and the 2016 Trump election campaign. By operating beneath the mainstream media, social media has permitted people to exercise their freedom of speech maliciously. The integrity of the nation's democracy depends on regulating free speech on social media, whose potential for harm cannot be overlooked, especially in an era of vicious ideological conflicts fueled by social polarisation and political division both inside and outside the nation.

Etiquette and cultural sensibilities have been challenged as traditional forms of media become obsolete, ideas of popular taste created and upheld by a small group of creatives are now constantly outperformed by viral content from anonymous sources, and online content producers have taken the place of culture industry consumers. Social media has complicated the distinction between performance and reality, the faux-ironic from the ironic, and the abstract from the material concerning how free speech is exercised (Nagle, 2017). While the extent of the threat

## Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

that social media poses to the limits of free speech causes alarm, the concern is not whether or not it will run dry but rather that valuable communication is lost in a flood of animosity, fake news, and bot-generated viral misinformation. Carole Cadwalladr's groundbreaking investigation that uncovered the Cambridge Analytica scandal and its connection to Facebook makes a case for social media regulation. This paper holds the position that there needs to be regulation of social media and, by extension, tech firms accountable due to their inability to self-regulate and the failure of organizations like Facebook to uphold information assurance.

While Facebook's brand switch to Meta might be due to its current involvement in the metaverse, suggesting that it might be a move to clean up its tarnished brand would be a reasonable speculation. Alongside whistleblower Christopher Wylie, Cadwalladr revealed how Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ, influential data analytics companies in the Brexit and Trump campaigns, harvested data from nearly 88 million Facebook users without seeking their consent (Glendinning, 2018). The gravity of such revelations and the connections with people in power is unfathomable from any standpoint. Shockingly, most of the criminal acts happened during the election, which makes matters worse. Companies like Facebook have developed into powerhouses with enormous resources that match or exceed many countries' GDPs. Susskind made reference to the need for regulations in his questions for society when he said that those with such power but a dismissive attitude towards duties like preserving democracy by ensuring that free speech on their social media platforms is democratic justifies the use of such regulations. The sea of information that is impossible for people to navigate paves the way for invaders of democracy, such as misinformation, which mixes via social media with the intent that spans personal gain, and political interference, such as was in the case of Trump's 2016

## Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

campaign. Through their impacts, misinformation and fake news threaten effective governance and democracy in many ways. Fake news can influence opinions, alter public opinion, and frame behaviours from taking a particular stance on varying public issues to voting. It can also spread confusion and doubt, foster toxic narratives, and heighten social polarization, impacting democratic decision-making. Combined with the power of social media to spread extreme political views like antisemitism, which are the opposite of democracy, much is at stake if social media is left unregulated as it currently is.

Users, too, have become empowered by their anonymity, using social media without worrying that they would need to be accountable for their content. With regard to social media as high ground for such people, nobody phrases it better than Angela Nagle, "When we've reached a point where the idea of being edgy/countercultural/transgressive can place fascists in a position of moral superiority to regular people, we may seriously want to rethink the value of these stale and outworn countercultural ideals." As Nagle (2017) states, misconduct has become so common that contemporary art critics must choose between supporting misconduct and condemning the risk in the face of conservative criticism's suspicions. As a result, negativity and nastiness have been cultivated, and democracy has been reduced to a fleeting ideal that can be undermined and corrupted.

Regulations are necessary for tackling the corrupt use of social media, which threatens democracy through the unregulated use of free speech. In response to allegations regarding their behaviour, companies like Facebook should be held accountable by lawmakers and the parliament, according to Cadwalladr, who also recommends that electoral laws be completely redesigned (Glendinning, 2018). Due to the rapid evolution of social media platforms and the

## Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

variety of roles that tech companies now play, democracy now requires that every individual engages in a collective process to organize online content moderation in a way that aligns with international standards for freedom of expression. The argument that particular social media platforms are biased in some way is not necessary for the regulation case to succeed. The concern is that they could affect democratic discourse without the proper checks, as they are prone to error. They may make choices that go against the fundamental norms of a free society. Individuals who take on the power to control speech should be subject to some level of regulation, just like bankers, lawyers, and doctors who are professionals in positions of social responsibility.

ARTICLE 19, an organization focused on protecting freedom of speech globally, has proposed the development of the Social Media Council (SMC). This multi-stakeholder accountability mechanism would be transparent, open, and accountable, and it would be a platform for addressing issues of content moderation on social media platforms based on international human rights standards (Docquir, 2019). The SMC model is premised on voluntary participation in content moderation oversight. The stakeholders involved (social media platforms and other participants) agree to comply with the SMC's decisions out of their own free will and without legal obligations. The model's efficiency relies on social media platforms' compliance, whose commitment will be to execute and respect the decisions or recommendations of the SMC in good faith (Docquir, 2019). Despite being an important regulation, it shouldn't be based on a voluntary approach. Every corporation, especially the big ones that rule the internet and social media, should be held accountable by law. Such a policy would shield society for a long time and ensure that accountability takes its place in preserving democracy, which is currently under

## Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

serious threat. However, a body that monitors the dynamics of regulation should make sure that the government does not go beyond its legal boundaries to restrict freedom of speech. The US is slowly losing its true democracy, as it is classified as a deficient democracy in the "Rankings of Countries by Quality of Democracy" (Universität Würzburg, n.d.). Arguably, social media has played a considerable role in undermining the country's democracy due to the scale of its abuse by people in power and big tech companies.

Regulatory perfection is difficult, if not impossible, to attain. However, a reasonable regulatory system would rank social media platforms based on their scale of social risk. At the lower end of the spectrum would be small social media platforms and spaces such as community forums. These would only require a minimal amount of regulation and would be exempt from liability for any content hosted there. On the contrary, large social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter would be on the opposite end of the spectrum. These platforms have the ability to quickly distribute content, and influence the behaviour and political agenda of millions of people. Due to the fact that these social media platforms are necessary for daily civic and professional activities, it is also challenging for users to leave them and for competitors to challenge them. Significant oversight of these social media platforms would be required, such as parliamentary questioning.

Social media platforms are being used by more people than ever to access information and take part in ongoing social and political discourse. This means that social media can be a tool

## Social Media, Free Speech, and Democracy

for either liberation or repression and powerful social media companies have developed their businesses to the point where they have a significant amount of control over what their users post on a daily basis. This great power has the potential to undermine democracy and tarnish its integrity if used wrongfully, as was the case with Facebook. In addition to social media platforms, many people with bad intentions abuse the platforms by publicizing false information and producing content with the intention of causing chaos. Regulations are crucial because the use of free speech on social media threatens democracy at its core.

## References

Asimov, I. The Triumph of Ideology in an Increasingly Fact Free World.

Docquir, P. F. (2019). The Social Media Council: Bringing Human Rights Standards to Content Moderation on Social Media. [cigionline.org](https://www.cigionline.org) | Cloudflare.

[https://www.cigionline.org/articles/social-media-council-bringing-human-rights-standards-content-moderation-social-media/?utm\\_source=google\\_ads&utm\\_medium=grant&gclid=Cj0KCQjw8qmhBhClARIsANAtbocHgeuXKSJtgJMdsEDrDiGUnokbmQmciUCY18gnRSBhr7sGz8iu8gaAvNkEAL](https://www.cigionline.org/articles/social-media-council-bringing-human-rights-standards-content-moderation-social-media/?utm_source=google_ads&utm_medium=grant&gclid=Cj0KCQjw8qmhBhClARIsANAtbocHgeuXKSJtgJMdsEDrDiGUnokbmQmciUCY18gnRSBhr7sGz8iu8gaAvNkEAL)

Glendinning, L. (2018, September 29). Exposing Cambridge Analytica: 'It's been exhausting, exhilarating, and slightly terrifying'. the Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2018/sep/29/cambridge-analytica-cadwalladr-observer-facebook-zuckerberg-wylie>

Nagle, A. (2017). Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right. John Hunt Publishing.

Universität Würzburg. (n.d.). Ranking of Countries by Quality of Democracy. Startseite |

Democracy Matrix. <https://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking>