

## Should social media platforms be allowed to censor?

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*This article argues that information on the internet must be censored if it leads to harm on others. An international watchdog needs to be established that is able to censor according to generally acceptable rules and regulations. Until this is done, someone has to take over that role. It is only reasonable that those platforms who place content online are also responsible for it.*

Social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook are nowadays among the major platforms that are able to quickly disseminate news to a large audience. For example, Facebook counts 2.5 billion users, and a message sent at one end of the world immediately reaches the other end. Politicians such as Donald Trump have understood that their messages spread much faster through social media than traditional news outlets. In fact, Donald Trump has used Twitter as a main means of communication. However, he has recently been banned from various social media platforms because he forwarded false claims about the election and, in addition, wrote tweets that, in Twitter's words, "are in violation of [its] Glorification of Violence Policy". This is the first time that a politician holding such a renowned office as the Presidency of the United States of America has been banned from social media and the reason for which the debate of censorship on social media platforms has arisen.

Some do not agree that social media platforms have the right to ban anyone. Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel, in a rare move that seemingly aids Donald Trump, argued that social media is not allowed to censor, as freedom of speech is a fundamental right. Others would, in addition, argue that social media platforms are now extremely powerful and if they can censor someone such as Donald Trump then they may hold the key to future elections and can direct the information and news that anyone on this planet reads. This is a power that, until not long ago, was only in the hands of national governments, while nowadays it is in the hands of a very few privately owned companies. The question is whether these privately owned companies are following some agenda and thus direct the news, or whether they are simply silent observers that only intervene if their policies are violated.

Given the fact that the major social media platforms have such a depth of reach it is clear that they have, to a large degree, overtaken the existing news broadcasting of the traditional news channels and are the main sources of information of many people. It is thus important to figure out whether these platforms should have the right to censor, or, if they should not have the right to censor, then who should be allowed to undertake this task. In line with this problem goes to the question as to how one should deal with the spreading of false news during the era of the internet where any kind of tweet can be immediately spread even into remote corners of the world and thus have a strongly cascading effect. There are several points at stake, which are freedom of speech, as well as responsibility of content.

While freedom of speech is a fundamental right, this right stops where the speech starts to harm someone else. As John Steward Mill wrote, "power can be rightfully exercised over any

member of a civilized community, against his will, [in order] to prevent harm to others." There is currently no internationally accepted regulation that makes social media platforms accountable for its content, and only the person who placed the harmful content online can be held responsible.

Making someone responsible is far from easy, as the lines between misinformation, malinformation and disinformation are fuzzy, to say the least. Misinformation is spreading false information, independent of any intent. Disinformation, in contrast, is spreading misinformation with intent. Malinformation is spreading true information but with the intent of harm. As one can see, it may not be a simple task to classify information into the one or the other category, though the researchers [Baines and Elliott have recently tried](#). Proving the intent of achieving a certain objective by spreading information is an even more complicated process.

For this reason there is a trend towards pushing responsibility, and thus accountability, onto the platforms that allow the harmful content to be placed online. Some countries such as Germany or France have already placed at least some responsibility on social media platforms themselves and ask these to remove hate speech or disinformation. While the European Union is moving towards placing responsibility on the social media platforms themselves, this has not been the case for the USA.

Until a clear regulation of responsibility and accountability is levied on the internet, social media platforms, in theory, have the right to include whatever content they like. Most social media platforms, however, do not simply want to publish just everything. When users sign up to a platform, then these users are asked to acknowledge certain rules and regulations. A user who does not adhere to a platform's rules must then face the consequences that the platform laid out in its terms of use. Some platforms differ in their approach. Platforms such as Twitter have clearly set rules and policies that a user must adhere to, while Parler allows about every opinion to be voiced freely. As Donald Trump did not adhere to the terms of use of various social media platforms, then it is in the right of these platforms to ban him from using these any further. If there is a proclaimed public interest that someone like Donald Trump should be allowed to give his opinion, then this in turn should be done via the official, governmentally-owned channels.

As noted above, since social media platforms have a much faster and deeper reach nowadays than even official government channels, some argument can be made to support the view that the ability to censor should not rest with a privately-owned company that may eventually use its power to direct opinion. This leads to the question of who watches the watchdog. Imagine that Donald Trump had owned Twitter, then he would certainly not have been banned but he might have instead banned other users that speak up against him. The fear that a privately-owned company succumbs to private interests when censoring content is certainly not far-fetched.

Thus, the responsibility and ability to censor should rest with a neutral, benevolent and independent body. Assuming generally acceptable rules and regulations can be laid out and assuming that an oversight institution of this kind can be put in place, then it seems clear it is preferable that censorship is undertaken by this institution than by a privately-owned

company. However, until an internationally acceptable oversight institution is put in place, someone has to regulate the social media. It makes sense then that regulation is undertaken by the platforms themselves who allow the content to be uploaded onto their servers. Just as newspapers or radio stations are responsible for the content that they print, social media platforms need to be responsible for the content that they help disseminate.

The bottom line is that the internet needs regulation that is able to blend modern social media with the kind of information that used to be provided by journalists that were adhering to the journalists' creed. Given the vast amount of information that is disseminated by social media every day, this is certainly a daunting yet necessary task.