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Is Censorship A Necessity?

Imagine logging onto a social media app to relax and interact with friends and family, only to be met with a barrage of negative and insulting engagements. Well, this is the reality for some American users as reports show "Over 40% of Americans have experienced online harassment" (Anti-Defamation League). This not only affects individual users; it can also affect the general public as, when the mental health of a large group is altered. There will be strange and often violent outliers. To combat this, it is common practice to censor specific content deemed as hate speech, misinformation, or fake news. While some debate this censorship should not be allowed due to reasons like the first amendment protecting free speech, I would disagree. I do believe social media websites should be trusted to censor and remove content containing hate speech, misinformation, or fake news. Public safety is important and if hate speech is allowed, it can lead to real world harm and an increase in hate crimes. Misinformation must also be curbed to protect the public and the integrity in our societal institutions. The spread of misinformation can cause physical harm, social divide, confusion, and distrust in societal institutions like media and government. However, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formally known as Twitter) do have a track record of bias, overreach, and political manipulation. This stems from the fact that the U.S. government cannot regulate these platforms due to rapidly changing technology, jurisdiction issues, an outdated law. Furthermore, social media platforms serve a crucial role in fostering connectivity across the world giving a voice to the marginalized groups in society. Social media also allows for large social movements, diverse perspectives, and a feeling of inclusion.

To begin with, public safety has to be preserved, if hate speech is allowed on public platforms. It can soon lead to real world harm amongst many other possibilities. Studies show that this kind of hate-filled rhetoric leads to an increase in hate crimes. A great example of this would be "the spike in physical violence against Asian-Americans across the nation was whipped up in large part by bigotry and conspiracy theories that grew online, fanned by national leaders, including former President Trump’s incendiary rhetoric blaming China for the pandemic and referring to the virus as the China plague or kung flu. ADL researchers saw an 85 percent increase in negative sentiment on Twitter towards Asians following news that he contracted the coronavirus"(Anti-Defamation League). This quote proves my point by linking an influx of online hate speech toward Asians to an increase in Asian hate crimes. I can personally attest to this as well, as I had never seen an Asian hate crime before Covid. With that being said, it is important to regulate this kind of speech. Another great example would come in 2018 from Robert Bowers. "Bowers faces 29 charges in a rampage that left the historic Jewish neighborhood of Squirrel Hill and the rest of the nation stunned. The attack is believed to be the deadliest on the Jewish community in US history, the Anti-Defamation League said in a statement"(“At Least 8 Dead”). This quote is significant because one of the deadliest attacks on the Jewish community started online. This hate crime was prefaced with multiple posts by Bowers on a social media website called Gab that puts no restrictions on speech, seemingly empowering him in the pursuit to harm others. "A law enforcement source told CNN that investigators believe an account on Gab, a social media platform, that espoused anti-Semitic views belonged to Bowers…In one post, Bowers claimed Jews were helping transport members of the migrant caravans. He believed that those in the migrant caravans were violent because they were attempting to leave countries that had high levels of violence. And Bowers repeatedly called them invaders"(“At Least 8 Dead”). This shows that Bowers was an avid user on Gab spewing hate speech freely and openly, this would not be accepted on other platforms. Because this would not be accepted on other platforms, it makes sense that Bowers would be on a platform like Gab using it almost as an echo chamber to seat deeper in his sadistic beliefs.

Next, misinformation must be curbed on these platforms to preserve the health of the general public, spreading misinformation can cause physical harm, social divide, confusion, and distrust of societal institutions like the media and government. Misinformation is very dangerous for example "A man believed the Pizza gate story that Jones promoted during the 2016 election cycle and took an assault rifle and fired inside that establishment. Shouldn't media platforms actually regulate this kind of speech?" ("Censorship On Social Media"). This example shows what can happen when misinformation is disseminated on a large enough platform and the impact it has on others. This incident refers to Edgar Maddison Welch "The North Carolina man who commandeered a pizza restaurant at gunpoint in Northwest Washington to investigate a false Internet rumor of a pedophile ring…Welch ultimately did not shoot anyone and surrendered after he found no evidence of hidden rooms or sex trafficking"("'Pizzagate' Gunman"). This quote shows that misinformation from a source one deems as reliable can cause people to commit crimes thinking they are doing the right thing, like Mr. Welch. He assumed he was doing the right thing by trying to stop what he thought was a sex trafficking ring. Only to find out he is just one of many victims of misinformation spread by conspiracy theorists in America.

However, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formally known as Twitter) have a track record of bias, overreach, and political manipulation. This stems from the fact that the U.S. government cannot regulate these platforms due to rapidly changing technology, jurisdiction issues, an outdated law. " Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), … announced Wednesday that he had sent subpoenas to the CEOs of Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Meta and Microsoft seeking information on "the federal government's reported collusion with Big Tech to suppress free speech." … Conservatives have claimed for several years, often with primarily anecdotal evidence, that social media companies are "censoring" conservative viewpoints online and favoring Democrats"(Lerman). This quote is significant as it shows how bias these social media companies can be and that they must be acted upon legally to address the claims seriously. It is stated that conservatives have had these anecdotal claims for several years but I would argue this bias has gone on much longer.

In addition, social media platforms serve a crucial role in fostering connectivity across the world giving a voice to the marginalized groups in society. Social media also allows for large social movements, diverse perspectives, and a feeling of inclusion. One social justice movement called "The #MeToo movement, which emerged on social media in 2017, exposed the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault and provided a platform for survivors to share their stories. The hashtag #MeToo went viral, encouraging individuals from all walks of life to come forward and contribute to the collective narrative"(Nwankwo). This quote was important to show one of the first popular online movements that caused real change in an industry like the film industry. As there is a large power imbalance that caused women to be taken advantage of. This is not exclusive to film there were and are many movements like Arab spring, black lives matter, all lives matter, Fridays for future, and many more.

In conclusion, I firmly believe social media platforms should reserve the ability to censor or remove content they consider fake news, hate speech, or misinformation. I’ve included examples of how hate speech can turn into very gruesome real-world violence. The same with misinformation, if not curbed the spread of misinformation can cause harm, social divide, distrust, and confusion. That being said, social media does play a crucial role in globalization and giving a voice to the most marginalized in society, which is why the censorship is needed. However, these platforms have a tendency to overreach, exhibit bias, and play a role in political manipulation. That begs the question, how long will it be until the disruption these platforms cause is so undeniable that we are forced to regulate one of them, and how will we do it?

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