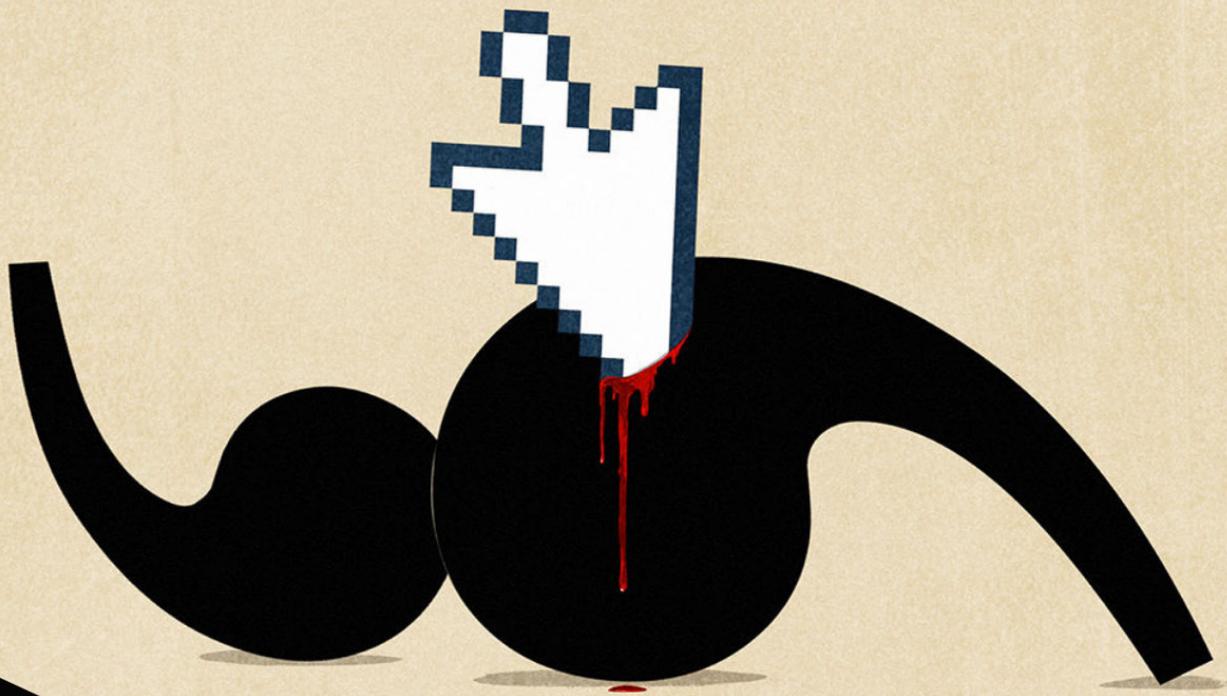


teensforpressfreedom.org

OUR DIGITAL SOAP BOX

**Social Media Regulation and
the Future of Press Freedom**



**Teens
for Press
Freedom**

**Contributions by
the Teens for
Press Freedom
Advocacy Team
Art by Andrea Ucini**

ADVOCACY TEAM
TEENS FOR PRESS FREEDOM
NEW YORK, N.Y.

JUNE 10TH, 2022

To Whom it May Concern,

The impending sale of Twitter to Elon Musk for \$44 billion has reignited controversies over what it means to have free speech within the context of our unregulated digital soap box: social media. In the past two years, these debates have grown stronger as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The disputation of facts and recognized science, now a hallmark of our troubled democracy, has been fueled by the deluge of information, trustworthy and not, that swamped social media users throughout the world. Those wishing to minimize the spread of disinformation that threatens the credibility of all press media, and our democratic discourse, have been countered by those who feel that any regulation of our modern tools for speech is a breach of a person's rights, even when the constitution does not protect their speech on a private platform.

Here at Teens for Press Freedom, our aim has been to provide our generation with credible facts and sustainable sources of information, while also encouraging them to exercise their freedom of speech by speaking up and writing about the issues that they face as advocates and students. As the primary actors in the digital world, our generation is in a unique position to guide business leaders and policy makers as they grapple with the free speech dispute.

In this report, we will attempt to walk the line between encouraging social media companies to be accountable for the misinformation spread on their platforms and by their algorithms, and protecting the right of the individual to their data privacy and digital agency. We are aware that the role of social media in our political discourse will have great influence on the fate of democracy. We must ensure that social media platforms do not become tools of oppression and alarmism that overwhelm the rational exchange of ideas.

We will clarify the importance of social media in our present press freedom crisis, analyze how algorithms influence our consumption of news and other media, dissect the roles of different social media platforms in the spread of disinformation, and propose our own solutions to the dilemma at hand.

Sincerely,
Athea Collier and Maybelle Keyser-Butson
Advocacy Team Leaders

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SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Niko Perez

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Social Media and the Press Freedom Crisis

FELIX STIMETS

Austin, Texas

Many think of social media as a great democratizer, easy to use and able to spread information quickly. But for the rising generation, it also means the disappearance of a truthful narrative. Because social media is the primary source of information for more than half of Gen-Zers, real reporters are struggling to compete. Rather than creating a free, more accessible press, social media contributes to a feeling of distrust, inhibiting the spread of real news and the free flow of opinion.

In order to ensure freedom of the press, action must be taken now to fight the influence of misinformation on social media.

Media organizations need financial support from legislation like a link tax, which has been adopted in many European countries. It forces big tech companies to pay news media when a user references or clicks an article. In Australia, Google and Facebook have propped up local and national media with A\$200 million in the past year because of this law. This would allow newspapers to avoid having ads or using cookies on their websites, which often discourages use of credible sites and encourages the use of social media. Alternatively, there could be legislation that directly bans the use of too many advertisements, pop-ups, or cookies on news websites.



Media organizations have also struggled to create an online presence, with many finding the transition from physical to digital media difficult, losing readers in the process. There needs to be a greater emphasis on finding talented web designers and developers for press companies to maintain a variety of credible sources and opinions within the press world. This struggle has been particularly pronounced for local media organizations, the most threatened press group in the United States. They need to receive more aid to update their format to the twenty-first century and fight against the domination of social media.

The connection between social media and the decline of press freedom is one of the least talked about issues in our generation. To maintain the standard of a free press in the United States, new safety nets must be installed to keep media sources alive, while new restrictions must be placed on social media corporations to prevent the dissemination of misinformation and fake news. Gen-Z, we need to fight for our First Amendment.



Algorithms and Political Bubbles

RAHUL RAMAN

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The term “algorithm” is one many are familiar with, often heard in connection with social media platforms. However, most lack knowledge as to what they really do, how they work, and how they impact users in their everyday lives. In their simplest form, algorithms are instructions applied to data by computers. As more data is computed, an algorithm “learns,” becoming able to make better decisions. The use of such technology benefits humans by being able to make decisions that will provide the greatest gain. However, algorithms have negative consequences as well. On social media, the implementation of algorithms can promote harmful content to users, create social and political “echo chambers,” and harness the data of users to aid machine learning without their consent.

As a relatively newer technology, legislation and regulations surrounding algorithms is relatively uncharted territory, allowing social media companies to continue harnessing these technologies for their own benefit, regardless of the effect on users. In the eyes of social media companies, algorithms are equivalent to profit and growth. For example, when platforms such as Facebook have billions of users, it becomes imperative to the company that algorithms sift through the heaps of available content and show posts relevant to each user based on the content they’ve interacted with in the past. The implementation of algorithms varies based on social media platforms that tailor this technology to fit a certain demographic or serve a specific agenda. Companies such as Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, and Twitter—with

a cumulative reach of more than 3 billion people—are all notorious for employing algorithmic technologies that have allowed them to grow so large.

Algorithms have great potential to harm users due to their nature of promoting specific types of content to users. In some cases, the promotion of content in line with a user’s personal beliefs and ideologies can contribute to the formation of a social or political bubble: a social media community where users are never confronted with opposing beliefs. In the past, this has resulted in the empowerment of hate groups who carry out agendas virtually or physically. For example, white supremacist bubbles on Facebook culminated in the 2017 “Unite the Right Rally,” a deadly rally in Charlottesville, Virginia which killed 3 and injured dozens. By showing users content that they want to see, these corporations are able to retain a large user population from which they can profit. Sources of profit for social media companies don’t just include showing targeted ads, but selling collected information about the users. Because of a lack of transparency from social media companies, most users do not know how they are being subjected to algorithms or how their data is being harnessed for other means. These breaches of privacy leave the question: How should user privacy and agency be addressed on a legislative level?

As of now, there have been a few policy proposals in the United States addressing algorithms. The Filter Bubble Transparency Act, proposed by Senators John Thune (R-SD) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), would force large tech companies to alert users to the use of any artificial intelligence (AI) on a platform, and give the option to opt out of it. Because algorithms themselves are computer instructions, it’s hard for humans to understand what they are doing and how they really work. This piece of proposed legislation tries to address that issue.

Another example of this legislation is the Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act of 2021,



proposed by Senator Edward Markey (D-MA) and Congresswoman Doris Matsui (CA-06). The bill aims to protect users from harmful algorithms and address discrimination built into algorithms through machine learning. Such legislation aims to hold tech companies accountable for the effects of their respective algorithms, whose consequences they have often escaped unscathed.

As we enter a new age where the presence of contemporary technologies such as AI and the use of algorithms surge, it is imperative that legislation is implemented to prevent harm in the uncharted waters of the unsavory effects of these inventions.



Artificial Intelligence

MICHAEL PORTER

Atlanta, Georgia

Artificial intelligence. AI company Deepmind calls it “the science of making machines smart.” The new and revolutionary innovation in technology is the future of society. But what heights can artificial intelligence reach? According to a new survey by Ipsos, 60% of adults around the world expect artificial intelligence to affect their daily lives in the next 3-5 years. Though the survey discusses how artificial intelligence could affect adults in the future, it’s already affecting millions of lives today. The first testing ground for this new wave of technology is social media. Every major social media platform is now using algorithms and AI to create databases for every user on social media.

AI can cater to what a user likes and dislikes, based on their activity. Although this seems like a convenient, and perhaps utopic, advancement, the tactic heavily increases bias within the information that everyone receives, especially on Instagram. The platform implemented big data and AI to enhance user experience, filter spam, and boost the results of target advertising. Instagram, however, has fueled the fire of extreme polarization, lending itself inadvertently to our crisis in press freedom. Artificial intelligence created a surge of false information and one-sided news to internet users around the world. This does not mean change is impossible, however. American legislation has stepped up in recent years, and certain states have tried to create laws to control the harmful uses of AI.

The state of California is trying to enact a new law to protect people from the dangers of AI. CA A.B. 13 “states

the intent of the Legislature that state agencies use an acquisition method that minimizes the risk of adverse and discriminatory impacts resulting from the design and application of automated decision systems.” California is one out of over 20 states that are trying to establish new laws against the dangers of artificial intelligence. Many states are creating laws to fight against the discrimination that artificial intelligence could cause for certain people of color. LinkedIn is another example of how AI has already promoted harm and discrimination. LinkedIn not only has the ability to suggest jobs to users, but it also helps companies filter out unqualified applicants by targeting specific qualifications in a candidate. This algorithm has the potential to create extreme discrimination against qualified people of color, as companies are able to filter out certain qualities in job applicants without being directly discriminatory.



If the world around us is being carefully curated to reflect our wishes and whims, we will become used to constant political and social comfort. Complacent citizens of a democracy stop being analytical of the information being presented to them, they fail to seek inconvenient truths, and they tune out all of the chaos and reality that is complicated, unpleasant, and feels safe only when it can be ignored. When we put the responsibilities of the human mind in the hands of machines that are meant to deceive our senses, comply with our demands, and adapt to our habits, we abdicate our role in creating a society in the pursuit of honest cooperation. Such qualities are essential to a free press.

Social Media Regulation: Case Studies

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Social media users are constantly at risk of being exposed to misinformation, despite attempts by Instagram and Facebook to regulate its spread. As Business Insider reports, Instagram recently followed Facebook in removing Covid-19 related posts from the explore page unless they were certified as truthful by a verifiable health organization. The two platforms have also assembled an international team of third-party fact checkers who work to flag and remove false or misleading content. Nevertheless, many experts have criticized the platforms for not doing enough to combat the proliferation of false information on their sites. According to a 2022 study conducted by online activism nonprofit Avaaz, Facebook largely fails to mitigate flagged content: “Facebook has taken no action on half of the disinformation content debunked by fact-checkers and targeting scientists included in this investigation. Our research shows that unactioned posts have around five times more engagement (comments, likes and shares) than posts to which Facebook has applied a fact-check measure.”

Tik Tok and Snapchat are the preferred social media platforms for younger generations; thus young users are most vulnerable to false information on those apps. According to Insider, Tik Tok has launched a new initiative to target misinformation on their platform: the “toolbox.” This “toolbox” provides warning labels for content that may be misleading; for example, identifying content about the war in Ukraine that is sponsored by the Russian state. According to Tom Sigel, former Vice President of safety at Google and co-founder of the internet safety company Trust Lab, these actions are “just the tip of the iceberg.” Snapchat, on the other hand, is structurally different from

TikTok and other platforms: information on Snapchat does not go viral. Their content platform, Discover, and entertainment platform, Spotlight, are heavily monitored. According to Snapchat’s 2020 Transparency Report, the platform stopped 5,841 pieces of harmful content from surfacing onto the internet. Social Media Today reports that Snapchat is one of few social media sites that does not encourage fake news, and does not have algorithms that perpetuate unregulated, falsified user-created content.

Twitter, by contrast, is heavily centered around news, and is widely recognized as a platform where misinformation has flourished. However, the platform has attempted to prevent users from engaging with misleading tweets. Twitter has launched “Birdwatch,” a so-called “community based approach to misinformation.” According to Twitter, Birdwatch allows users to “identify information in Tweets they believe is misleading and write notes that provide informative context.” Twitter has also become increasingly open to taking down accounts shown to consistently share misinformation, and through partnerships with news outlets, access to actual reliable information has also improved. On their website, Twitter states that when content fails to meet the “threshold for removal,” it is flagged for users and downvoted in circulation. According to AP News however, these programs “allow social media to sidestep the more difficult work of content moderation – that is, deciding whether or not to remove posts, photos and videos that spread conspiracies and falsehoods.” Twitter has also created a prompt that notifies users who are consuming content that has violated a policy before they share it with others. In addition to these measures, Twitter has started to launch prebunks, messages that counter misleading.

Social Media Regulation Proposals

MORGAN PERLSTEIN AND ELOISE GORDON

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Twitter has a somewhat extensive set of rules of regulations for what can and cannot be shared on the app. Twitter has multiple regulations that seek to prevent the spread of misinformation including its Covid-19 misleading information policy, which restricts their users from using Twitter’s services to “share false or misleading information about COVID-19 which may lead to harm.” Tweets that violate this policy may be removed, and multiple offenses could land users with their accounts temporarily locked down. Twitter also has a civic integrity policy which states that users “may not use Twitter’s services for the purpose of manipulating or interfering in elections or other civic processes,” including “posting or sharing content that may suppress participation or mislead people about when, where, or how to participate in a civic process.” This policy aims to protect the integrity of elections and other civic processes, or at least ensure that Twitter isn’t the tool being used to undermine the democratic process. Twitter has a synthetic and manipulated media policy which states users “may not share synthetic, manipulated, or out-of-context media that may deceive or confuse people and lead to harm.” This policy aims to curb the spread of misinformation and the spread of information that causes widespread confusion of matters of public safety.

Between these policies, Twitter is a fairly well regulated app compared to other tech giants like Meta, which controls Facebook and Instagram. Yet, to most users, Twitter is still considered a toxic, under regulated space. When you type “why is Twitter so...” into Google, the first results that appear are “toxic” and “awful.” While

the spread of misinformation and hate speech has decreased over the years due to Twitter’s stricter policies, they continue to run rampant on the site. Twitter remains notorious for its spread of hateful language and the toxic behavior of its users. The natural solution to this would seem to be more regulation, but some have other ideas.

On April 25th, 2022, Twitter’s board of directors accepted a proposal from Elon Musk to buy Twitter for 44 billion dollars. Elon Musk argues that Twitter is overly restrictive of free speech, and aims to fix it. On March 25th 2022, Elon Musk tweeted: “Free speech is essential to a functioning democracy. Do you believe Twitter rigorously adheres to this policy?” He later replied to his own Tweet: “Given that Twitter serves as the de facto town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy.” Since announcing his plan to buy Twitter, Musk has made his intentions for the site abundantly clear: remove regulations, welcome back banned users, and begin an era of free speech absolutism. Musk argues that if Twitter is to serve as a forum for public debate on issues regarding elections and democracy, which it undeniably does, it should be subject to the rules of the 1st Amendment. This argument, however, is flawed. The purpose of the 1st Amendment and the protection of free speech is to protect the people from the government, and being jailed or otherwise threatened for speech, not to ensure that anyone can say whatever they want wherever and whenever they want. Furthermore, as a private organization Twitter has no obligation to follow the 1st Amendment. In an interview with MIT’s Technology Review, Twitter’s CEO, Parag Agarwal said “Our role is not to be bound by the First Amendment, but our role is to serve a healthy public conversation.”

Removing Twitter’s policies and regulations will not improve or fix America’s democracy in any measure. PEN America Chief Executive Officer Suzanne Nossel stated “Musk is right that our current systems of content moderation are biased and flawed, but the idea that

the rules can be swept away wholesale is fallacy.” With regulations removed, the site is likely to regress to its state before the stricter restrictions it has currently and become once again filled with misinformation, which will harm the democratic process, and the spread of hate speech will increase drastically. While Twitter’s present regulations aren’t perfect, Musk’s plan of removing them entirely is not the solution.

When Twitter was first created, it was originally intended to be used as a platform to share messages with groups of people, as a communication device to be used between friends. But over the past several years, Twitter has taken a position as being one of the most widely used news sources globally. Twitter however is not the

only social media platform that has made a transition like this. Facebook which is widely believed to have been the platform used for the launching of the Myanmar Genocide based on its role in allowing the spread of misinformation that lead to the killing of thousands, and the main tool used for planning and facilitating the January 6th capitol riots has also taken this position through its news section. Meta, the company that manages Facebook, has declined to set up/enforce the same resources Twitter has when it comes to combating the spread of misinformation. In an interview with a former top executive at Facebook, in October, 2021, it was shared that Facebook deletes or “actions” posts on the app featuring hate and violence incitement, but the executive shared that this is as little as 3-5% of hate and 0.6% of violence and incitement actually ends up being actioned or deleted. In addition,

when Meta/Facebook curates the customized news feed of its consumers, the most hateful and polarizing content often gets shown because it is what gets the most engagement, whether the news being shared is factually accurate, is in many cases irrelevant.

The companies that run Social Media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, just like any other company, have a main goal of making the most amount of money possible, and in most cases, money is made through



engagement with the platform. Often, the more divisive and polarizing an app is, the more engagement there is on it. As a result, these companies are forced to decide between creating a divisive platform, getting more engagement, and making the most money, and

protecting the consumer but likely making less money as a company.

It is for this reason that many people believe a third party should be involved to help regulate these platforms. When social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook were created by college students in the early 2000s, with the intention of connecting small groups of people, a future of being regulated by the United States federal government would have likely seemed unfathomable. But as these platforms grow increasingly divisive, federal government officials have begun the process of developing and proposing items of legislation to assist in the regulations of these apps such as the Kids Online Safety Act, and the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act. Under the Kids Online Safety Act, sponsored by senators

Marsha Blackburn and Richard Blumenthal, Social Media companies would be required to provide privacy options such as the ability for users to disable addictive features such as to “like,” and to work to prevent and take action on their negative influences on minors, including suicide, sexual exploitation and more. In the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, introduced by Senators Amy Klobuchar, Chris Coons and Rob Portman, social media platforms are required to share data with “qualified” researchers who request information on topics such as algorithms, influences on users, etc.

Both of these items of legislation, and more broadly, regulation of social media platforms while seemingly largely agreeable in their attempts to reduce risk to public safety have proven to be very controversial. Representatives of social media companies claim that these regulations impede on rights to free speech, others feel as though it interrupts the lifestyle millions of people have grown accustomed to over the past few years, others pose the reality that due to the global use of social media, the U.S. introducing these regulations influences other countries. But ultimately, the idea of implementing regulations on something like social media which is used so broadly, and for both light hearted purposes like for entertainment, and for socializing for while simultaneously used for the purpose of planning genocides, spreading dangerous misinformation, and increasing suicide rates is almost impossible to regulate.

Like most social media platforms, Facebook uses a system of engagement based ranking to select which content is shown to users. Whether it be the specific advertisements shown, the order of posts that appear in user feeds, or the structure/content of the news section, previous engagement is the main factor. While human engineers are still used to implement new methods of increasing engagement and manage other aspects of Facebook, several years ago, Facebook transitioned into using machinery to manage and determine these specific factors. Because of this change, larger amounts of user data have become available to Facebook, and the ability to place users into even more fine grained categories

which are used to decide what content will be shown. Instead of Facebook interpreting users as being part of broad categories such as female or male, with Facebook’s newfound data, users can be placed into categories such as dog lover, college student, anti-vaxxer, etc. While these changes have brought more engagement to Facebook, they have proven to be a danger to users when not supported by adequate integrity and security systems. Currently, Facebook’s security and integrity systems do not support all of the languages used by Facebook users on the app, and to many people, Facebook does not do enough to combat the negative and dangerous effects that come with using machine based algorithms. When deciding what content users view, machines do not understand the dangers and repercussions of spreading the rhetoric used to promote the Myanmar genocide, or invitations/encouragement to join and participate in the January 6th Capitol riots. Machines do not understand what providing a recommendation to a user to join an extremist group can do. Despite the numerous legal actions pursued against Facebook globally, Facebook, and Meta the company that manages it have not taken proper actions to make up for the shortcomings of machine based algorithms. The information and content users want to be shown, and what users are likely to engage with is not always factually accurate or safe to spread widely. But when users see the content they want to see, Facebook makes money. Establishing adequate security and integrity systems would interrupt this system.

Similarly, Twitter suffers from a cycle of rage inducing posts being promoted. When users see a post that sparks their emotions, they are more likely to interact. More interactions means the post is shown to more users. In order for these posts to elicit such strong emotional reactions, they are either often faked or greatly exaggerated. This perpetuates a cycle of fake news and even hate speech. More human intervention in Twitter’s algorithm can work to combat this, as posts that promote incorrect information can be filtered out. Stricter regulations on posting fake news and hate speech that have harsher consequences for users can also be used to fight this issue.

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