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### The Possibility for Civil Social Media

Throughout its eruption into society, we have seen social media act as a valuable tool for spreading critical information, but we have also seen the rampant spread of misinformation and disinformation on popular for-profit sites. Social media platforms exist on the internet in different forms with different set goals. Many of the most popular social media sites have fairly loose and unclarified regulation policies in place which can lead to bias in their human content moderators and their AI content moderators (considering they are engineered by humans). This issue has been extremely relevant since the 2016 presidential election, and since then, people have started asking questions about these social media monopolies as well as trying to pursue alternative options. With unclear and broad regulation policies being the norm for big social media companies, I believe it is in America's best interest to begin pursuing other options of online discussion that will contribute to our democracy rather than harm it.

 An opinion piece written by Robert Reich, a professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, described information and ideas as the most powerful and valuable items in our society today, whereas slaves or property used to be among the most valuable. "The most valuable intellectual properties are platforms so widely used that everyone *else* has to use them, too," said Reich, referring to mainstream social media. He made note of the power that internet monopolies hold, explaining how Amazon is the first stop of one-third of Americans looking to buy anything. When companies hold this sort of power, consumers end up paying more than they would if the market were less concentrated. Huge companies like this also tend to suppress

innovation by making sure that most of the profits that come from small creators go straight to the platform owners, leaving little to nothing for the actual innovators.

Reich explained in his piece that since the late 1970s, the number of new businesses forming has noticeably decreased and that tech businesses are no different; because of big tech's "sweeping patents, standard platforms, fleets of lawyers to litigate against potential rivals and armies of lobbyists have created formidable barriers to new entrants." Reich explained that as long as America continues to separate the "free market" and government, big internet monopolies are not likely to have their power checked.

Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit are the most frequently accessed social media pages in the US as of May 2020, according to an Ahrefs blog post. Upon learning this, I decided to evaluate each of these platforms according to what I could find about their regulation policies. This wasn't easy, however, as many private social media companies are not obligated to share their regulation methods with the public. I set out on a journey to observe these company's policies and to see how others react to them.

First on the list is Facebook, a website that many people frequently use to catch up with distant relatives, learn more about local businesses, or plan events. It's described as a "social media conglomerate corporation" by Google.com, which seems accurate, considering users can join groups, add friends, etc. But more people are starting to realize the negative impacts the site can have on American citizens; the site inadequately patrols hate speech, language promoting violence, fallacies in political advertisements, and plain fake news. These posts can wreak havoc on democracy, and civil rights advocacy groups are calling for Facebook to take action. In June of this year, a massive Facebook ad boycott was planned and some of Facebook's top advertisers

such as Verizon and Coca-Cola CO. vowed to pull ads off the site for the entire month of July, according to a Washington Post article written by Tae Kim and Alex Webb. Big corporations taking a stand against the site is a great place to start, but with Facebook's top 50 advertisers making up only 4% of their sales last year, this ad boycott isn't likely to influence the company to change its policies. On July 10, The Washington Post released a story stating that they had spoken with anonymous sources who said the company was considering temporarily banning political ads for the few days leading up to the November election, but Facebook has made similar promises before and failed to follow through.

Facebook has long been scrutinized for the content the company permits on its platform, but the company as a whole seems to be largely unbothered by critics. Reporter Ali Breland, who covers internet disinformation made note in a Mother Jones article that Facebook paralleled Microsoft by pioneering systems that allow the companies to make money while disregarding any type of regulatory framework. When their systems teeter on the line between ethical and unethical, they call upon lawmakers to set up rules for their platforms. Rob Leathern, Facebook's director of product management, explained Facebook's reasoning for this: "Ultimately, we don't think decisions about political ads should be made by private companies, which is why we are arguing for regulation that would apply across the industry." While this seems like a decent approach, Facebook has a surplus of high-paid-lobbyists able to sway regulation policies made by the government in their favor, and it's no secret that governments have things to worry about other than issues created by private companies. Even if policies are put into place by lawmakers to curb the spread of hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation, there is a high possibility

that ads of all kinds (deceptive or not) will continue to occupy the site. With this in mind, it's hard to imagine Facebook ever being a place for constructive public discourse.

Unlike Facebook, Twitter has responded to critics by banning political advertisements as of last summer. This does not mean there is no misinformation or disinformation spread on the platform. An article written by Kalev Leetaru for Forbes displayed Twitter's inability to comment on its moderation policies. The company had no response to being asked if there was any possibility of releasing to the public the training material for their content reviewers. The company refused to release any demographics about its moderators, which critics say could help identify bias in their moderation tactics. The article also discussed how satirical accounts on the platform often look so similar to real accounts, it's hard for users to tell the difference. Many of these parody accounts pose as powerful politicians, which can further confuse the American public.

Besides Twitter's unclarified moderation policies, the platform's goals are messy and undefined. Twitter is described by Google as a "microblogging and social networking service," which is precisely the format of the site; it allows whoever possesses a Twitter account to post messages up to 280 characters (per post). John Herman writes on technology for the New York Times; his article "Twitter's Misguided Quest to Become a Forum for Everything" explained how the platform was designed with intentions for everyone to eventually join. This means there are no organization tools (besides hashtags) built to help differentiate groups on the site— it's composed of people shouting into the abyss. With a platform that big and wide and with so many different cultures and ideas mixed into one, it's practically impossible to set intentional

guidelines as smaller forums do. So Twitter isn't designed to facilitate constructive dialogue either.

The third most visited social media platform in the US is Reddit, which according to Google.com is a “social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website.” Reddit has all the regular guidelines that other social media companies employ— no child pornography, no harassment, no spam, no soliciting services— but beyond that, each community on Reddit (called a subreddit) has its own set of guidelines that are upheld by their community moderators. If these moderators act in ways that the community users don't agree with, they can push that moderator out or create new subreddits with different guidelines. Already, the design of this platform is more structured and goal-oriented than Facebook or Twitter.

An article by Courtney Linder for Popular Mechanics discussed how the founders of Reddit believe that a combination of AI, human moderators, community guidelines, and user regulation have all benefited their site. Reddit's first-ever paid employee, Chris Slowe, emphasized the fact that the majority of the regulation on the site is performed by humans rather than bots, and that a lot of the humans are simply volunteers (the site only has 550 paid employees). He also stated that “bots in Reddit's ecosystem are one of the site's greatest assets.” He mentioned that most of the site's bots are created by human users or moderators of the site, so they inevitably have the user's best interests in mind. This article is a clear statement to Reddit being more open to sharing their moderation policies, something that Facebook and Twitter are more reluctant to do.

What I've learned from these different social media sites is that setting guidelines for an all-inclusive platform leaves a questionable amount of grey area for its users. Set guidelines for

niche forums seem to leave more room for constructive dialogue (as long as the blanket rules are applied equally across the entire website). And while I understand the appeal of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, my argument is that they are not conducive to creating open and honest conversations about current events. The sites are not laid out in ways in which people are encouraged to converse with people of different opinions and values. And while the sites are useful to communicate with family and friends or to observe memes or the lives of celebrities, they are not useful for people looking to further their knowledge by learning innovative ideas and discussing them with others. It is also no secret that Facebook and Twitter are home to conspiracy theories and fake news. For these reasons, I believe it is important to consider other options of online social media— instead of for-profit monopolies dominating the social media market, would nonprofit sites built specifically for public discourse be beneficial to our country?

A journal article written in 2002 by Katarina Stanoevska-Slabeva laid out some pretty incredible frameworks for online communities. Even though popular use of social media sites was just beginning to take off during the early 2000s, the author completely understood the necessity of structure and organization in online platforms if those platforms want to be successful in their objectives. She broke down online communities into a few categories, one being discussion communities, which social media falls under. However, for all internet platforms, she recommended “valid rules for communication,” which she described as policies and rules put into place upheld by members of the community and the community's organizers. She concluded her argument for valid communication rules by stating that upholding these rules is essential for building trust in the community.

If Stanoevska-Slabeva is correct, that explains why the platforms Facebook and Twitter

are prone to large amounts of conspiracy on their sites; if the platform is too broad then the rules are too broad, letting all kinds of negative activity occur on the site. From false accusations to fear-mongering, users of these sites are never sure what to believe. Furthermore, the site's human moderators that ban hate speech can be biased, and even Twitter's algorithms can target certain people disproportionately. An article written by Shirley Ghaffary for Vox explained a study done to evaluate the top AI programs for assessing hate speech; what researchers found was that these systems were 1.5 times more likely to flag a tweet as hateful when they were posted by an African-American user and 2.2 times more likely to flag the tweet if it was written in African-American vernacular English.

One billion people are active on Facebook and 330 million people are active on Twitter but the sites only have blanket regulation for discussion, are not open with their users about their regulation methods, and continue to be biased in their moderation strategies. Reddit uses subforums to create targeted discussion and also employs guidelines for each subforum written by community founders and users; the company is open about using volunteer moderators and transparent about the way bots are implemented into the site. While Reddit's structure seems to be more on course with Stanoevska-Slabeva's article about creating successful online communities, the site still contains a lot of fluff that is not pertinent to learning about current events, and it still displays ads and works off an algorithm to display content.

Jimmy Wales, the creator of Wikipedia decided to create a new type of social media and released the site in October of last year. It's called WT.Social; Google describes it as a "microblogging and social networking service on which users contribute to subwikis" and says that it was created as an alternative to Facebook and Twitter. The site does not display ads

because it is part of the Wikimedia Foundation Incorporation which is a non-profit organization, so it relies on donations. The site is completely free to anyone who wants to use it, however, when the site first came out there was a waitlist to join, and to bypass that waitlist a user could donate to the site. It also claims to not use any sorting algorithm while displaying articles on the homepage of the site.

Jono Bacon wrote an article for Forbes in November of 2019 before being able to use WT.Social in which he stated that he had high hopes for the platform as long as the creators of the site craft the platform in an efficient way. Jane Hu wrote an article for Slate in December 2019 after being able to join the site and said that she found “crickets,” or in other words, not many people were actively engaging with the site. I decided to join the site myself to see if it was something that could eventually replace Facebook and Twitter. I love the idea behind this social media site; I love the fact that there are no advertisements, there’s no storage of my personal data, and everything on my feed relates to things that I am interested in (the site prompts the user to join a few subwikis when signing up) but it didn’t seem like the site was bursting with energy. Bacon states in his article that Wales hopes to draw 50 million users to the site (with no given time frame) and as of July of 2020, the site has 450,000 users.

The idea of creating a social media network that is not for profit, encourages exposing misinformation and disinformation, and doesn’t even entertain memes on the site (unless they pertain to something of importance like engineering or science) seems so far from the norm. However, I think the more people who are introduced to this sort of radical social media platform, the more excited America will become about the possibilities this could hold. While I think mainstream, for-profit social media sites creating stricter rulers on the regulation of fake



news is something that would exponentially benefit our society, I don't think those policies will be put into place anytime soon. So in the meantime, I think it is important that people in the realm of technology and technical writing explore what it means for online digital communities to be in the form of public infrastructure.

Ethan Zuckerman, Director of the Center for Civic Media at MIT and Associate Professor of the Practice at MIT Media Lab, wrote a piece for the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University titled "The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure." In this essay, Zuckerman first described how powerful and influential radio was when it became popular. He said the radio, like the internet of today, completely changed modern life. He explained how in America, radio broadcasting exemplified free-market capitalism because large companies came to dominate the industry and non-profit stations made up only 2% of the market by the 1930s. Contrarily, radio broadcasting in the Soviet Union was implemented in all public places and set to one station: a Soviet station that educated people on the benefits of communism. In the United Kingdom, the BBC was created, and while it was independent of government control over programming, it became a monopoly because the Post Office said that it wouldn't make sense for there to be a large number of broadcasting firms. Zuckerman stated that the BBC "had a guaranteed revenue stream from the annual license fees levied on each radio receiver sold."

Zuckerman believed it was important to begin with this knowledge of how radio was used across the world because it gives the reader a model to compare how the internet has been adopted globally into different societies. He explained how companies were ecstatic when the internet was booming because it gave them a new medium on which to display ads, but when companies implemented these ads they found they were rarely interacted with and produced very

little sales numbers. This brought the surveillant model of advertising into the mix, allowing Facebook to obtain personal information from posts and Google to do the same from one's searches. This granted them immense power in the field. The internet in China is extremely different from here in the US; government censorship has caused Google and Facebook to have practically no power. Zuckerman described the state of their online platforms as a "capitalist hypermonopoly" because one social platform has surpassed all others in the country without storing one's personal data for targeted ads.

Zuckerman then described Wikipedia, a website that is extremely popular and successful considering that its budget relies on donations. The company can run on small operating costs because the content is generated, edited, and discussed by an army of volunteers that are dedicated to providing a "neutral point of view" on the platform. "The victory of the U.S. and Chinese models has a strong tendency to make other models seem impractical," Zuckerman said, which causes people in the U.S. to believe that it is impossible to create new online services outside the existing market models. And while Zuckerman realized that it is unlikely for America to adopt a BBC-like structure of the internet, he believed abandoning the idea wasn't the right choice.

Zuckerman then proposed a radical, yet sensible "thought experiment": suppose a 1% tax is placed on the digital advertising industry, which amounts to a staggering \$333 billion global market. The outcome would be a \$2 billion annual budget— or 22 times the amount of Wikipedia's annual budget. He mentioned that this idea has been proposed previously; Free Press proposed a surveillant ad tax that they claimed could help fund journalism that has fallen apart in

recent years while supporting new “news-distribution” models that would not rely on data harvesting.

Zuckerman’s goal for public service digital media is to add services to the digital realm that have been depleted because of market-driven solutions while adding “an emphasis on the creation and adoption of tools that strengthen open and democratic societies.” These tools would seek to inform and educate the user rather than the other way around. But due to most engineers and entrepreneurs trying to be successful in the marketplace they often don’t consider the civic needs of digital platforms, which is why there are not a lot of current ideas for the case for digital infrastructure. However, the creator of the World Wide Web is experimenting by creating an alternative to his first creation called Solid, which would allow the user to have control over their private data instead of platforms owning personal data. If the creator of the World Wide Web is interested in this new type of technology, I suppose the rest of the world should be too.

Specifically on social media, Zuckerman acknowledged the extreme issues that dominant platforms have created. He believed that platforms that cater to local communities and communities of interest are the best way to implement successful and adaptable rulesets. While he stated that focus on ways to regulate the monopolies of social media is deserved, this process could result in a never-ending fight if innovation for the future is left out. “This critical defensive work needs to be complemented with a wave of funding focused on experimentation around what might be possible with purpose-built social networks, specialized search engines, new technologies for revenue generation, and other digital public services.”

There is so much information to be found on the internet about the wrong-doings of large social media companies. Conversations about alternative platforms are few and far between.

Equipping researchers and innovators with the successes and failures of current mainstream social media platforms would be costly, but exceptionally necessary because a lot of current regulatory policies are based on uncertain conclusions of how social media impacts society. But Zuckerman believed this idea of public infrastructure social network building to be a possibility, as long as a provable concept for revenue for all aspects of the idea— experimentation, research, and development— is available.

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