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Blurring Reality

Free speech and internet censorship have been in the news again recently as the Supreme Court takes up two cases, which as the ACLU breathlessly **proclaims**, “could forever change the way we interact online.”

Both of these suits were brought by the families of citizens slain by ISIS in terrorist attacks. They claim that Twitter and YouTube essentially became accomplices by failing to block or take down content urging violence.

They hinge on something called **Section 230**, originally part of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which the ACLU successfully had voided for its anti-indecency provisions **violating** the First Amendment. But Section 230 was retained as the legal foundation for the net as it functions today.

These cases are quite serious and important, yet there are many other methods to regulate online content, some very subtle and effective, that few people even recognize. The rise of AI may soon make the situation immensely more complicated for both sides.

Rules of engagement

Every place where people talk relies on rules, mostly unstated, for what topics and ways of speaking are proper for that spot and audience. This is why sermons from a pulpit should not sound like locker-room pep talks or vice versa even if both are encouraging.

What **Section 230** does is to absolve the owner of the “pulpit” – the website or ISP hosting it – from responsibility for anything said from it by guests who are solely accountable for their statements. So the issues are not whether the websites supported terrorism, or even if the calls to violence led to anything.

They are about content being automatically **recommended** by the platforms. The big civil rights concern here is “**You might also like**”.

This is because to keep eyes fixed on their sites, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and countless other websites depend on feeding them additional posts that users will want to see. This unending flood of new content easily overwhelmed the understaffed human controllers, so machines do most recommending.

The hosts fear that if these options are not allowed, then viewers will abandon their sites. Most of what is offered is selected by algorithms based on the users’ own likes. But what can be done if the users themselves, or their posts, are malicious in intent or lying?

Protecting the public

Censorship is as old as writing – Egyptians chiseled out the names of disgraced kings from monuments, for instance. And the medieval church long forbade the translation of the Bible into common languages for fear of losing control of the interpretation of its content, even though very few could read.

It was only with the spread of mass communications that the need to regulate them to prevent civil unrest became obvious. The social media posts that led up to **January 6** should settle any lingering doubts about that.

With radio and TV, that control has to be applied fast to work. Talk radio was responsible for the first **broadcast delays** to insert **bleeps** to cover up profanity. Yet on February 1, 2004, during the halftime show of the Superbowl, America was **shocked** to witness the **exposure** of Janet Jackson’s right breast by Justin Timberlake for about half a second.

To spare us from such traumas ever again, a brief time gap was instituted for most live events – which also allows them to conveniently cut away in case of protests, bloopers, or even **UFOs**. Now, of course, it is all computerized but it is **still being used** today: the slightly different delays of the various TV networks become instantly obvious to viewers switching channels during a live presidential speech or Congressional hearings.

“Technical difficulties” used too often may betray the censor’s heavy hand, so cutting away is saved for real emergencies. Broadcast, and all other media meant for consumption by the general public, faces a growing tide of subtler censorship, however. This can be political backed by cash threats, like China demanding **changes** in movies shown there.

Or it can rely on modern forms of **blurring**. One may note **pixelated** body parts (or anything resembling them), plus symbols like swastikas, signs, or even logos on T-shirts. Closed captions can also be subject to alteration. Some is to forestall angry viewers but most might be just for **copyright concerns**.

Many other ways to safeguard the people from annoying information exist, some of them decidedly old-school. **Shame** still works wonders. China, for instance, has battalions of state-sponsored trolls to applaud official policies online or to silence perceived foes.

They are called the “**50-Cent Party**” for the fees supposedly paid for each post, but effective **online trolling campaigns** that use both real social media and **bot accounts** to viciously drown out opponents, including advertisers, have happened here as well.

Its most extreme form is so-called “**cancel culture**” where disgraced figures are consigned to oblivion along with all their work, good or bad. Scott Addams, the artist behind the cynical **Dilbert** comic strip, is the latest to have shot his career dead with his mouth.

Often, now-distasteful work is just simply buried, like Dr. Seuss’ **racist cartoons**. Or beloved works may be subtly rewritten, like what befell **award winning Willy Wonka** kid’s author Roald Dahl, much to the **horror** of many other writers. It’s hard to imagine, but even the **James Bond novels** are soon to be subjected to the blue pencil treatment, with the full approval of Ian Fleming’s estate.

Such edits verge on rewriting history – like the proposed **banning** of corsets in historical dramas by the BBC and Netflix even while adding minorities to the aristocracy. These small changes could easily morph into censorship’s positive twin – **propaganda**.

Other traditional means to control content include lawsuits, threats, bribes, boycotts, legal pressure, counter-attacks, and more.

Technological control

Yet plenty of technical means exist for **internet censorship**, mainly by blocking or slowing down connections. This can occur at various places throughout the data retrieval process, from the internet backbone to ISPs to individual devices’ installed software. Yet the real cause might not be very traceable.

Blacklists are a very popular way for users to censor their own communications, by forbidding certain addresses, domains, or even topics or keywords to appear in their inbox. But blacklists can also be manipulated at higher levels by governments to manage conversations. Protesters aware of this practice often disguise their meaning, which regularly leads to a kind of escalating game of internet whack-a-mole by authorities against them.

But all these methods may soon be obsolete due to **Artificial Intelligence**. Experts are already issuing dire warnings about the ability of **generative AI** to create seamless **deepfakes**, and huge amounts of cash are being thrown at the problem. For it is already becoming an online arms race, as each measure leads to a counter-measure and so on.

Yet AI is not without severe problems of its own. Chief among these are built in **biases** absorbed from training data and AI’s ability to **hallucinate** – that is, make up great-sounding BS completely untethered from reality.

With AI, it might not even be possible to tell what it’s doing or why, so applying it to censorship could be risky. Yet, it is safe to say that such applications are not only inevitable, but may be already in use. Some broadcast blurring, for instance, not only hides actual nudity but bare statues, paintings, and anything else that might look like a naughty bit.

Reality may become a lot harder to ██████████.

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