

Legacy Social Media: Free as in Beer, Not as in Speech

On October 5, former Facebook product manager Frances Haugen testified before the US Senate, decrying her former employer's "destructive impact" and warning that "without action, divisive and extremist behaviors we see today are only the beginning."

Per Haugen's theory, lack of "action" by social media platforms is the cause of social ills such as violence in Myanmar and Ethiopia. Because, as we all know, Myanmar and Ethiopia were oases of tranquility before Facebook came along and ruined everything.

What kind of "action" Does Haugen advocate?

Presumably the kind of "robust content modification" US Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) demanded from Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey last November to combat election "misinformation."

And presumably "robust content modification" of the kinds of posts that, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki admitted in July, the Biden administration "flags" for Facebook as "problematic" for differing with the administration's claims about COVID-19 vaccines.

In their early days, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook held themselves out as part of the "public square," with value sets that at least implicitly included unfettered speech.

That quickly changed as those platforms came up against the need to sell ads. Mortgage brokers and insurance firm don't want their ads appearing alongside porn, Holocaust denial, etc.

Which is fine: Their platforms, their rules. It's not a freedom of speech issue, because they're not preventing you from saying anything. They're just deciding whether you get to use their platforms to say it. That's not censorship. If you don't like their rules, there are other platforms with different rules (in fact, some with no rules at all).

But, increasingly, the government's getting involved. Richard Blumenthal and his friends on both sides of the partisan aisle agree that they should get to control what you're allowed to say. They just disagree on the details.

The Big Two in social media — Facebook and Twitter — are obviously ready to make a deal. In return for government regulation that protects them from competition by raising the costs of getting into the social media market, they're willing to suppress speech on behalf of whoever happens to be in charge in Washington, DC.

And that IS censorship.

Richard Stallman tells us to “think of ‘free speech,’ not ‘free beer’” when discussing the free software movement. The marriage of legacy social media platforms to government censorship reverses that proposition. Use of the services is “free” (actually, you pay with your data and attention), but you only get to say what the politicians tell those platforms to allow you to say.

Free speech requires complete separation of social media and state.

The most direct route to that goal would be for politicians to abide by the First Amendment, but that’s obviously not happening.

The less direct route — and the inevitable result of the direct route being closed off — is users moving to social media platforms that aren’t, and in fact can’t be, regulated by government.

Such platforms do exist. Punch “distributed social media platforms” into your preferred search engine to find them.