

Should Social Media Platforms Protect Free Speech?

February 2019: I read this essay and added commentary for Episode 287 of the Everything Voluntary podcast.

On a recent Reason Podcast episode, Nick Gillespie spoke with two libertarians (Robby Soave and Mike Riggs) who had competing views on the question of what social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and reddit should do about free speech.

Robby Soave's view is that social media platforms should not police speech, and instead allow anything and everything (except obviously criminal threats) to have its day, all the while users may use tools to block or hide speech or content they don't want to see.

Mike Riggs' view is that when social media platforms fail to police content, they are degrading the experience for 99% of users who aren't trolls and don't engage with controversial topics.

My view is that both Soave and Riggs' views have merit. I'm not a troll, but I do engage with controversial topics. I would prefer that the social media platforms I use don't censor me. I would also prefer that the social media platforms I use don't allow things like shitposting and spamming. I don't allow shitposting and spamming within the real and virtual domains I own and control. But neither do I censor most controversial topics (no, you may not discuss my children's genitals).

There's no debate here on what rights social media platforms have to police speech. As private organizations, they may police speech as much as they'd like. The debate here is on whether or not social media is a better experience if speech is policed.

As long as users have the tools to block or hide content they prefer not to see, why must the platform also engage in policing speech? Facebook allows you to block people and leave incompatible groups. Twitter allows blocking or muting. reddit not only allows blocking, but segregates all content into subreddits where you choose to subscribe.

All of these tools seem sufficient to me to protect your social media experience. While I much prefer virtual platforms and real businesses and spaces to keep things I prefer not to see from my view, how much would doing so negatively affect me personally? As someone whose kids don't go to school, maybe nearby businesses and spaces won't allow entry to my kids during school hours. As a radical voluntaryist, maybe my views are just too controversial for others to abide.

Maybe our "safe spaces" are where we make them, and elsewhere we learn to use the tools available to us.