

Home / Analysis / Hold tech companies accountable for fake news

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We need a regulatory outcome parity with other industries, and tailored for the consumer Internet. The unhindered gathering of personal behavioural information, systemic monopolistic exploitation of Internet consumers, and abstention of all responsibility cannot go on

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In the days after Donald Trump won the United States presidency, it became resoundingly clear that the Russians had engaged in disinformation operations to push millions of potential social media impressions at the American voting population — content that may have swung tens of thousands of critical votes in key swing states across the nation. But when questioned about the nefarious Russian activity by the American public, Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg’s response was predictably defensive; he claimed only “a very small amount [of all the content on Facebook] is fake news and hoaxes”. He added, “The idea that fake news on Facebook...influenced the election in any way is a pretty crazy idea.” And perhaps, most critically, he suggested that, in any case, the firm doesn’t want to be an “arbiter of truth” — in other words, that he did not want to put Facebook in the position of having to determine

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whether certain forms of content, like targeted political lies, should be taken down from the firm's platforms or not.

But the time for corporations to shirk this responsibility must come to an end. And it must be the government and the people who hold the corporate sector's hand through the process — or, if need be, pull the industry by the ear.

The damage done by leading Internet platforms has spread far beyond the US presidential elections; Brexit, the Brazilian elections, the Rohingya genocide, and the WhatsApp mob killings throughout India are front and center of the public eye. How can we assure that the content that proliferates and prevails over Internet platforms such as Google, Twitter and Facebook reflects the type of world we wish to cultivate? How can we insure that Internet platforms support — or at a minimum, leave alone — the secure functioning of our democracy, instead of destroying our society at its roots?

Perhaps, reassuringly, the many concerns around Internet platforms have prompted a new contention among policymakers: That we must develop a novel regulatory regime for the Internet to eradicate these problems. Notably, the media industry — comprising traditional platforms such as radio, television, and the press — has long been subject to stringent regulatory standards concerning content dissemination to protect the public interest from offending material such as disinformation and hatred. But the Internet, through a novel and different technological vector, has now overtaken the world — and, riding the coattails of pure American-bred profit-seeking capitalism, has escaped meaningful regulation since its birth.

But some — including members of the news industry — now wish to bring Internet firms under the umbrella of traditional media regulation. This would force companies like Facebook to comply with content stipulations set by industry self-regulators or governmental agencies. But, the Internet firms — seemingly coalescing under Zuckerberg's stolid belief that his firm should not be the arbiter of truth — have, to date, largely chosen to argue that they are not media entities, but rather simply technology platforms over which anyone can and should, be able to share anything. Correspondingly, they have used Section 230 of the American Communications Decency Act, which protects their status as agnostic platforms, to shield themselves from many regulatory efforts.

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For a time, this seemed fine. But in recent years, we have witnessed a new technological development integrated throughout the Internet platforms. It is the spectre of artificial intelligence, in the form of advanced machine-learning infrastructures, that is principally designed by the Internet firms to accomplish two things: Curate our social feeds, and target ads at us. It has considerable economic benefits, undoubtedly; but I would contend that this has essentially turned the Internet companies into media firms like news organisations. When, as an Internet firm, you have hundreds of versions of the same story thread — all slightly different from each other — and your algorithmic system unilaterally determines which of those versions the user should see, you are actively executing the sort of decision that has

traditionally been reserved for editors in the news media. As such, you should be accountable for that recommendation of content in the same way that a media editor is. For example, you would expect that, should the *New York Times* or *ABP News* misreport a story and were to come to know of the error, the outlet would ultimately stand by the truth, correcting itself as necessary.

But Internet platforms are neither here nor there, and face no such accountability. They are not traditional media entities in that they do not produce and promote their own content. Yet, they cannot claim to be independent technology platforms any longer, either. In unregulated status, they determine what content we shall see. And that is a circumstance that has facilitated the Russian disinformation problem, the annihilation of the Rohingya, and the lynchings of Indian nationals. This cannot be allowed to pass any longer.

What we need now is regulatory outcome parity with other industries, but in a manner tailored for the consumer Internet. The unhindered gathering of personal behavioural information, systemic monopolistic exploitation of Internet consumers, and abstention of all responsibility cannot go on. A new regulatory standard designed to protect Internet privacy, competition, and transparency must be adopted in the way forward. The time has come to replace the interests private commerce with that of democracy.

Dipayan Ghosh is co-director, Digital Platforms & Democracy Project; Shorenstein Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School; and author of the forthcoming book, Terms of Disservice. He has previously served as privacy and public policy adviser at Facebook, and technology & economic policy adviser in the Obama White House

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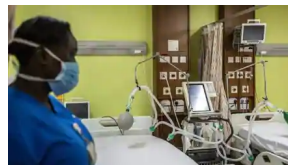
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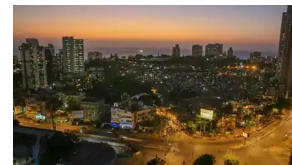
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