ARGUMENT

Tech Companies Are Ruining America's Image

The United States has become identified with the global internet economy — for better and worse.

BY JOSHUA A. GELTZER, DIPAYAN GHOSH | MAY 14, 2018, 10:22 AM

ot long ago, Americans used to worry — constantly and loudly — about what their country's main cultural export was and what it said about them. In the 1990s, after the Iron Curtain came down, many Americans wondered whether the appealing lifestyles the world saw on U.S. sitcoms and blockbusters deserved some credit for energizing global resistance to communism. Then, as the optimism of the '90s gave way to the shock and horror of 9/11, Americans asked, with palpable chagrin, whether the materialism and vulgarity of their TV shows and movies were contributing to the virulent anti-Americanism that had spread throughout much of the globe.

These lines of inquiry helped Americans better understand how they were seen and treated by others, including foreign governments, corporations, and populaces. Of course, they also betrayed a certain self-regard, if not self-satisfaction — traits less common among Americans today in a fast-changing world environment that has challenged their traditional cultural dominance. Hollywood is still churning out blockbusters of course, but it is losing its influence year upon year. Similarly, American television shows have gradually lost their stranglehold on prime time in foreign markets and are increasingly forced to give way to local content.

But could the face of U.S. cultural influence simply be shifting? While Hollywood's influence has waned, America's leading internet companies — founded and headquartered almost exclusively in California — have taken the world by storm. Facebook, which offers a universe of tremendously compelling platform services, has 2.2 billion monthly active users. WhatsApp, one of the platforms owned by Facebook, is used for internet-based text messaging by a billion people *every day*. Gmail, Google's email service, similarly boasts a billion active users. YouTube, also owned by Google, has more than a billion users of its own. These services — alongside the likes of Twitter,

LinkedIn, Instagram, and more — have spread from Silicon Valley to all corners of the globe, even some untouched by American movies and TV shows.

It's time for Americans to recognize that they have a new major cultural export, alongside movies and television: the set of modern communications platforms created in the United States that have since overtaken the world. The question then becomes: If the world looks at America and sees Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter as its profile picture, what does the world think?

Americans should be concerned. We've reviewed how America's new major cultural export has been characterized in the international media and other public discourse lately, and based on that we've identified three key features that have become associated with it in the eyes of the global audience. They don't reinforce America's long-standing message to the world preaching tolerance and democracy — quite the opposite.

First, the world is learning ever more about Silicon Valley's hand in the spread of harmful and hateful ideas throughout the world, including the tendency of false speech to spread easily over social media platforms and the proclivity of the algorithms that power sites such as YouTube to foist extremist views on their many users. In the United States, these negative externalities erupted from the virtual world into the physical with the stunning display of white supremacism in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017—a gathering later shown to have been the culmination of extensive preceding activity online. Abroad, these same unfortunate side effects have contributed to outbreaks of hate-filled violence all the way from Germany to Sri Lanka to Ethiopia. All of this amounts to a cultural export that consistently associates the United States with the degradation of political discourse and the sowing of instability—fueled, below the surface, by a desire for profits.

Another feature associated with the spread of modern communications platforms from Silicon Valley to far-flung parts of the globe is the virtual invitation for foreign intervention in domestic politics. Some of the most polarizing online messaging that rocked America's 2016 presidential election represented the deliberate products of a carefully orchestrated information operations campaign hatched in Moscow, according to the U.S. intelligence community. Social media and file-upload sites thus represented a new vector for interfering with America's democratic processes that the existing array of campaign finance laws and other legal regimes simply didn't anticipate — and still haven't been updated to address. Other countries have faced the same basic threat to the integrity of their elections. All told, America's cultural export appears to bring with

it serious vulnerabilities for democratic functioning free from foreign interference. Given the nation's historical role as an agent of democracy, this is perhaps an irony too strong to withstand.

A third unappealing feature of America's new cultural export is the general surrender of individual privacy that it entails. Platforms such as Facebook have become profitable in part because they've taken the willing surrender of massive amounts of personal information from billions of people and monetized it, including by selling the opportunity for microtargeted advertising — even political advertising. Facebook isn't the only company presenting novel threats to individual privacy, of course; Apple, for example, quickly acquiesced to demands from the Chinese government that foreign firms planning to collect data from Chinese citizens establish data farms in China and cooperate with Chinese authorities when they want to review that data. With today's cultural export comes an abandonment of personal privacy, privacy offered up by generally underinformed users who don't realize how much they're surrendering and subtly nudged by companies whose default settings remain largely anti-privacy, misleading, and even unintelligible. And this systemic surrender of privacy has enabled the features noted above — from the spread of hate speech to the surge of political disinformation and election interference.

Americans are overdue for considering the newest major component of their corporate and cultural universe — the internet companies — and what those companies say about the United States to the international body politic. As distinctly U.S. commercial internet brands consumed by billions of people around the world, they necessarily shape heavily the image the United States projects to the global populace. These brands speak to many both at home and abroad of opportunities for peaceful dissidents to speak up, for community organizers to find one another and collaborate, for valuable lessons to be shared across state borders, and so on. But they also carry with them associations with hateful extremism, with vulnerability to foreign interference, and with the surrender of privacy.

The U.S. government cannot — and Americans as individual citizens cannot — simply keep preaching to the world its long-standing values of tolerance, democracy, and individual rights without recognizing that, at least in some respects, the country's newest major cultural export is projecting a very different image of what it stands for. The corporate powers of U.S. technology firms have their own loud voice, at times louder than any others. The world hears that voice and is drawing its own conclusions. Americans need to hear it, too, and consider asking the companies their country is ever more closely associated with to do something about it.

Joshua A. Geltzer is the executive director and visiting professor of law at Georgetown University Law Center's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection and a fellow at New America. He served from to 2015 to 2017 as the senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council and, before that, as deputy legal advisor to the NSC.

Dr. Dipavan Ghosh is fellow at New America and the Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School. He was a technology

Dr. **Dipayan Ghosh** is fellow at New America and the Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School. He was a technology and economic policy advisor in the Obama White House, and until recently worked on United States privacy and public policy issues at Facebook.

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