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Rethinking the Democratic Dilemma

Viewing tech giants like Facebook and Twitter as principal agents of free speech has far-reaching consequences on the health and functioning of a democracy.

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Political discourse in the latter half of 2020 and the dawn of 2021 was dominated by the issue of big tech censorship and the overarching influence that social media giants can exert on the public's viewpoint on any matter.

This contention reached a tipping point with Twitter famously placing a “warning tag” to former United States (US) President Donald Trump’s allegation of election fraud and subsequently banning him from the platform. Here in India, one was witness to the worsening relationship between the union government and Twitter over the social media giant’s refusal to comply with gag orders regarding the farmers’ protests. At the same time, both Twitter and Facebook received flak for silencing pro-farmer accounts and content. To the onlooker, it seemed as if the social media giants were trying to straddle two contradictory positions: not antagonising the incumbent government, and also not being perceived as disregarding the essence of free speech, given that the foundational values of many major social media companies are based on unfettered free expression. The important question one must ask is: who made these tech behemoths the principal agents of free speech?

This was not the first time that a social media platform had come to be at odds with state polity. The 2018 Brazil elections saw the Facebook-owned WhatsApp playing a pivotal role in a misinformation campaign that the opposition claimed to have helped Jair Bolsonaro win the presidential election. And further back in 2008, former American president Barack Obama owed his historical win partly to his campaign’s early advantage in rallying support through the emerging “new media.” This was to repeat again in 2012, when his campaign leveraged social media’s power with an in-house analytics tool that crushed Mitt

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Romney’s campaign by a massive margin. In 2014, Narendra Modi too had relied extensively on an “online army” of supporters that gave him control over the narrative while incorporating social media as a critical tool of communication for the very government that is now doling out gag orders. Facebook patted itself over its capability to nudge users to go out and vote during the 2010 US congressional elections showing the organisation’s commitment to being part of the democratic process. However, this euphoria would die with the multinational Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 that saw the big data gathered by Facebook used for political advertising.

There has been an increasing consensus that the political sphere across democracies has become more polarised over the years. One might correlate this with the expanding use of social media, but this quickly runs the risk of faulty causation. That said, we need to understand that the algorithms that run social media content are based on “homophily” or the tendency of people to associate with others sharing similar interests. This creates echo chambers uniting people on the basis of caste, race, gender, ideology, common interests, etc, which in turn influence the very way people access information and mould their world view. Again, it is fallacious to assume some sort of truism that this alone is wedging deep divides,

but one cannot refute social media's evident influence. Political advertising often uses profile-based screening to target content by prying on people's deepest psychological fears and insecurities. Social media is skewed—it often does not show the real picture, and at worst can completely manipulate the dominant narrative. The presence of ubiquitous “bots” accelerates the velocity of information flow, which, when combined with the emotive and novel nature of false information, makes the latter spread at a faster rate.

Ever since the Arab Spring in 2010, which saw people using social media as a rallying tool, social media has been (albeit problematically) dubbed the cradle of free speech. Regulating it is seen as an attempt to thwart the democratic nature of the medium. However, we must recognise that the space was never democratic and has always been skewed towards a younger and digitally literate population who have access to stable internet. Almost two decades have passed since the birth of the “primitive” form of social media, which was very different from today's fast-paced, cutting-edge technology powered options with an advertisement-led revenue model shaping its growth as well as guiding policies. These applications are only answerable to their stockholders at best and at a minimum level to the governments of the countries their operations are centred on. The foundational nature of the internet is Western-centric and the catching up by the rest of the globe to create a sort of level playing field in accessibility is a distant dream, with the major source of web content continuing to be diverted from the Anglosphere—“trends,” “buzzwords,” “fads” that take time to reach the rest of the world.

The attitude of tech giants towards government scrutiny has been often evasive, and they often portray themselves as an “idealistic” entity that sees beyond national or regional imaginations, always acting in the best interest of the public. They are also backed by a powerful array of transnational legal, economic, and cultural consultants and lobbying groups, which create and perpetuate a significant web of connections across the global economy that fragile or smaller democracies find increasingly hard to resist or become a part of. Together, there is very little of a force resisting and checking the social media that is manipulated by the tech giants of the global north. At the same time, all-powerful single-party states and dictatorships that these techno-giants claim to stand against simply cut off access to the internet or have no viable entry points for “democratic” social media in the first place. Of course, in no way should government scrutiny be seen as something positive or as an intervention made to protect the interests of the people. Often, such methods are enacted to deflate the rising narrative against the institutions or simply when the former feels threatened by the social media bubble.

In essence, one needs to see the various nuanced ways in which the essential nature of democracy undergoes change when big tech companies are made a critical stakeholder in the democratic process. When these tech giants are given a central role as intermediary and arbiter of sociopolitical

thought, it requires a fresh thinking of our understanding of how a democracy functions. Therefore, the rising debate on free speech, while welcome, must not exist wholly within, or bother itself only with, the framework of big tech censorship or the regulation of the same. It sets a dangerous precedent when the narrative of democracy and freedom of speech shifts in favour of big tech conglomerates.

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