

PLATFORM NEUTRALITY

WE ARE ALL CONTENT CREATORS

Since the early 2000s, the explosion of self-publishing technology and social media sites has made it so that everyone with an internet connection and a smart phone or computer can be a content creator. Anyone can go viral with a simple meme or video being seen by millions.

Social media platforms are firmly integrated in many societies, but their role is incredibly complex due to the monetization of user-created content and personal information about users. The significance of social media has increased in our daily lives since it has become *the* place where people need to make connections and post content if they want to successfully convey their message to others.

Social media platforms have certainly allowed many individuals and groups to form social connections and spread information in positive ways. But the inverse is also true: social media is particularly suited to spreading misinformation, divisiveness, and hate. Social media companies have come to be an essential factor for public discourse, but they are also private businesses whose only goal is to profit financially on users' content and personal information.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL PLATFORMS' RESPONSIBILITIES

In the complicated information landscape, many questions arise that cannot be easily answered. Here are some of the as-yet unanswered questions about social platforms' legal and ethical responsibilities regarding content that their users post.

Questions about content restriction

- When hateful / violent content or deliberate misinformation is posted, are platforms responsible for taking it down, or blocking it in the first place?
- Can companies who only want to make a profit be relied on to make decisions that are beneficial to society?

Questions about openness

- If content is regulated, who decides what is censored? If governments are allowed to decide, free expression is in danger, and socially marginalized or vulnerable groups might be excluded.
- When only a few giant companies dominate the internet landscape (i.e., Google, Facebook, and Amazon), how can we ensure that the information we seek and services we use are transparent and fair?

We can't begin to answer these questions here, but some governments and non-governmental organizations have started taking measures to check the powers of influential platforms.



Image description: the word misinformation on a drawing of a phone surrounded by related words: spam, trolls, fake news, hate speech, rumours, conspiracy theories, bullying.

Image created using a presentation template by [Slidesgo](https://www.slidesgo.com/).

MEASURES TO REVIEW CONTENT AND LIMIT MONOPOLIES

Some social platforms have responded to pressure to moderate content, implementing policies that can include:

- Verifying accounts claimed by well-known figures (such as politicians and celebrities),
- Restricting or banning political ads,
- Adding fact-checking labels on potential misinformation, and
- Labeling accounts run by governmental or state-sponsored media.

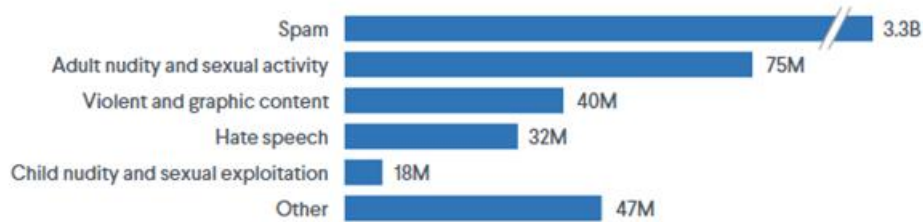
However, the long-term implementation of these measures is up to the whims of the platforms' CEOs and are subject to change.

Social Media Platforms Block Millions of Pieces of Harmful Content

Content removed or subject to other action in the first half of 2020

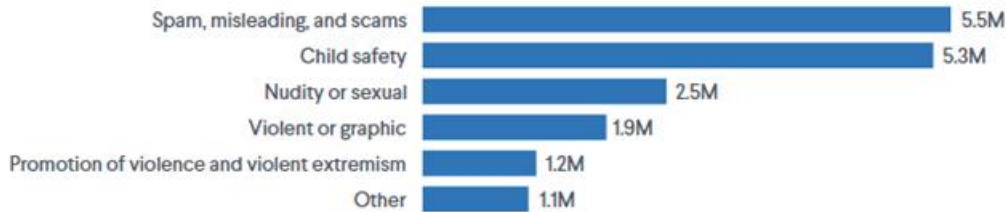
Facebook

Pieces of content removed, covered with a warning, or subject to other action



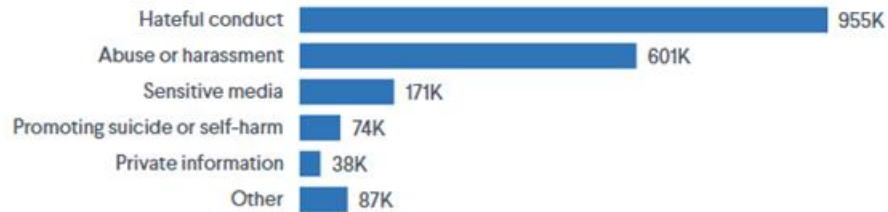
YouTube

Videos removed



Twitter

Pieces of content removed



Note: Categories are unique to each company and not comparable across companies.

Sources: Facebook; YouTube; Twitter.

COUNCIL on
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

Image description: A bar graph shows content removed or subject to other action by different social media platforms in the first half of 2020. On Facebook, the pieces of content removed, covered with a warning, or subject to other actions were 3.3 billion for spam, 75 million for adult nudity and sexual activity, 40 million for violent and graphic content, 32 million for hate speech, 18 million for child nudity and sexual exploitation, and 47 million for other content. On YouTube, the number of videos removed were 5.5 million for spam, misleading, and scams, 5.3 million for child safety, 2.5 million for nudity or sexual content, 1.9 million for violent or graphic content, 1.2 million for promotion of violence and violent extremism, and 1.1 million for other content. On Twitter, the number of pieces of content removed were 955K for hateful conduct, 601K for abuse or harassment, 171K for sensitive media, 74K for promoting suicide or self-harm, 38K for private information, and 87K for other content.

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In addition to content moderation, a key facet of platform neutrality is whether online platforms display all content that is relevant to users equally, or whether they design feeds and search results in ways that benefit the company. Tech giants like Amazon, Facebook, and Google certainly shape the content that is displayed on their sites in order to increase their profits. For example, according to an analysis conducted in 2020, 65% of Google searches resulted in people finding the information they needed through previews on the search screen, or from websites/products owned by Google.

Many countries are introducing laws that attempt to stop online platforms from discriminating in favour of their own services. For example, the European Union passed the *Digital Markets Act* in 2022 that designated certain large tech companies as “gatekeepers” and required them to give the same access to their competitors’ information and products as to their own. Other legislation designed to regulate monopolistic business practices and protect privacy have been passed or proposed in many countries including India, the US, Germany, South Korea, and France. In Canada, bill C-18 (voted 2022) resulted in Meta (parent company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) to remove news content from its platforms, with Google also considering a similar strategy.

Image sources: Anshu Siripurapu and Will Merrow. [Council on Foreign Relations Social Media and Online Speech](#). *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021 February 9. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, using social media platforms and online service providers is a way of life for most of us. These platforms promote digital commerce, innovation, and both personal and business communication. The platforms go beyond exchanges of information and knowledge by enabling collaboration, community building, and activism.

Based on the function these platforms serve and the power they retain, one might argue that they have a responsibility to maintain neutrality, acting as intermediaries and bringing people together in digital spaces. However, in practice, platform neutrality is not a realistic outcome when it's dependent on the world's largest for-profit companies.

Cyberspace does not belong to a single country, and there is no consensus on how digital platforms should be regulated. What do you think – how can balance be found among the sometimes-contradictory values of freedom of speech, free commerce, social responsibility, respectful discourse, and protection of vulnerable groups?

QUIZ

1. Why is it difficult to decide who should be responsible for content moderation on social media?

A. Social media companies just want to make a profit and therefore can't be relied on to ban users or remove content simply for the good of society.

B. If government agencies decide what content should be removed, people's right to free expression is in danger.

C. Most of the harmful content on social media is posted by bots.

D. Both A and B

Feedback: The dilemmas of content moderation are not easy to solve. Most people agree that social media content should be reviewed and harmful content removed, whether it's posted by humans or bots, but it's difficult to determine whether the responsibility for determining what content is harmful lies with social media companies, governments, or both, because there are limitations in both cases.

2. An analysis conducted in 2020 showed that 65% of Google searches resulted in people finding the information they needed through previews on the search screen, or from websites/products owned by Google. Why is this a problem?

A. Google forces people to click more times to reach their search results.

B. When people end their web searches without leaving Google and its products (like Google Images, Maps, etc.), it means that other sites don't benefit from users visiting their sites.

C. Google searches don't include results from other large companies, such as Amazon.

D. Both A and C

Feedback: If people find their results from Google's page previews and other products, people don't leave Google during their search. This makes it more difficult for other websites and service providers to get business or ad revenues from clicks and views on their own sites, thereby increasing Google's monopoly over internet information.

ACTIVITY



Purpose: This activity is meant to spark your thinking about how you share the content you create.



Task: Open a video on your phone that you've previously recorded. If you haven't recorded one before, follow these instructions to [record videos with Android](#) or [record videos with iPhone](#). You can also visit the Technology Sandbox to [borrow equipment for creating videos](#).

As you look at your video, think about: where did you share this video, or where might you share it with others? Do you think you should be allowed to post this video if it showed violent, hateful, or otherwise harmful content?

- **Time:** This activity should take about 5 minutes to complete.

ACTIVITY



Purpose: This activity allows you to discover how search engines shape the results you see.



Task: Watch this [video about how Google shapes and displays search results](#) from the Washington Post. Next, think about the most recent web search you did. If you use Google, how easy is it to get beyond Google-sponsored content? If you use a different search engine, like [Duck Duck Go](#), do you get better or more transparent results—or at least results that aren't Google products?

 **Time:** This activity should take about 5 minutes to complete.

Reflection

Let's reflect on the complicated topic of platform neutrality.

 **Task:** Write approximately 200 words to answer the question: what do you think are social platforms' legal and ethical responsibilities regarding what is posted or offered through their platforms?

 **Time:** This reflection should take about 10-15 minutes to complete.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Webpage: [Freedom on the Net 2021 The Global Drive to Control Big Tech](#)

Report on the battle between governments and technology companies.

Book: Digital dominance: The power of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple by Moore, M., & Tambini, D. (Eds.). (2018).

Book about the the global power of new digital monopolies. Available in the [Concordia Library](#).

Video: [What obligation do social media platforms have to the greater good?](#)

TED Talk by Eli Pariser on how to create trustworthy online communities.

REFERENCES

Gallant, D. [What About Social-Media Neutrality?](#) *The Wallstreet Journal*, 2018 January 28.

Siripurapu, A. and Merrow, W. [Council on Foreign Relations Social Media and Online Speech.](#) *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021, February 9.

Huddleston, T. [How Much Revenue Tech Giants Like Amazon and Apple Make Per Minute.](#) *CNBC*, 2021 May 1.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Things for Digital Knowledge. Concordia Library.

Megan Fitzgibbons, Librarian.

Intro slide: Concordia library logo.

Interviewer: I've heard some news story about platform neutrality lately, but I'm not really sure what it means. Could you explain it a bit? [question displayed on the screen]

Megan Fitzgibbons: So, there's not really a concrete definition that I can give you, but I can talk about some of the key concepts that are related to platform neutrality. Over the last 20 years or so, we all have become content creators. Anyone can write whatever they want and put it on the Internet very quickly.

Visual image description: a person uses a phone to take a picture of food

Megan Fitzgibbons: And so, what this has meant is that we've seen how powerful social media can be to form communities and to spread information and to support activism and societal change. But at the same time, we've really seen how social media lends itself to divisiveness and to hate speech and to deliberate misinformation; and the companies, the platforms that we use to share information are for profit companies. And so that's where the question comes in: How can these for-profit businesses be neutral? Or should they be neutral when users post harmful content on their platforms?

Visual image description: two screens with a pair of hands with boxing gloves on stick out from each screen.

Visual image description: a screen with social media icons: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WeChat, TikTok.

Interviewer: Sounds complicated. Could you tell me more? [question displayed on the screen]

Megan Fitzgibbons: Yeah, for sure it's complicated. So, the social media platforms and the online services that we use are huge companies, they are for profit and they make a lot of money. And because of that, since their main motive is making money, it's not in their best interest to turn away users who might share personal information or post content or buy things on the platform.

Visual: A bar chart shows the amount of US dollars that tech giants make per minute in the first quarter of 2021. From Left to right: Amazon: 837,330.25; Apple: 691,234.57; Alphabet (Google): 426,805.56; Microsoft: 321,805.56; Meta: 201,936.73; Tesla: 80,162.04; Netflix: 55,270.06.

Megan Fitzgibbons: And we also have the idea of the town square: social media has really been a place where everyone can have a say. If we exclude people from social media, they're excluded from society.

Visual: video clip shows people passing by in an open space, mimicking the idea of a town square.

Megan Fitzgibbons: But on the other hand, detrimental information or harmful information can have real world consequences. It can hurt people in real life – social media is real life. And so that's the puzzle – What can we do about this?

Interviewer: Can the government just put some regulations on the platforms? [question displayed on the screen]

Megan Fitzgibbons: Yeah, that's a tricky question because a lot of societies have the value of free speech, whether that's a right of citizens or just a societal value. But when governments are involved in deciding what information can be shared or what can be said, that's censorship. And you can see why that's a tricky area to get into. And another thing to think about is who will monitor all of this content? Who will decide what information can be shared?

Visual image description: a computer screen shows social media banned, blocked, deleted, censored.

Interviewer: Do you think the social media platforms bear some responsibility on this? [question displayed on the screen]

Megan Fitzgibbons: Yeah, for sure. Part of this has to do with the platforms, but again, it's tricky to answer. As I've said, if their main motive is profit, how can we really rely on them to make choices that benefit society? And there's also the issue of the tech giants and the monopolies that they have.

Visual: video clip shows social media icons floating in the air

Megan Fitzgibbons: So again, this is Google and Amazon and Facebook and Apple. They don't really have a lot of competitors in whatever their services that they're offering. And so how can we rely on these huge monopolies to have services and information that's transparent and fair?

Visual: video clip shows all social media icons

Interviewer: I don't have an answer for either of the questions. Is there anything, any measure to regulate this? [question displayed on the screen]

Megan Fitzgibbons: Yeah, there are some regulations and some measures that are emerging. So, for the platforms themselves, for example, Facebook and Twitter have been under a lot of pressure to moderate content. They've put into place some things like, for example, verified accounts for well-known figures, and also labels on government or state-run accounts so that it's clear who's sharing information. They also have labels for potential misinformation, trying to alert people to find more information before reading or sharing.

Visual slide text: should companies block violent content and deliberate misinformation? Figure shows a bar graph showing content removed or subject to other action by different social media platforms in the first half of 2020. On Facebook, the pieces of content removed, covered with warning, or subject to other actions are 3.3 billion for spam, 75 million for adult nudity and sexual activity, 40 million for violent and graphic content, 32 million for hate speech, 18 million for child nudity and sexual exploitation, and 47 million for other content. On YouTube, the number of videos removed are 5.5 million for spam, misleading, and scams, 5.3 million for child safety, 2.5 million for nudity or sexual, 1.9 million for violent or graphic, 1.2 million for promotion of violence and violent extremism, and 1.1 million for other content. On Twitter, pieces of content removed are 955 thousand for hateful conduct, 601 thousand for abuse or harassment, 171 thousand for sensitive media, 74 thousand for promoting suicide or self-harm, 38 thousand for private information, 87 thousand for other content.

Megan Fitzgibbons: And there's also some human-done content moderation as well. In terms of governments or legislation, there have been some measures taken, both related to monitoring content and to trying to reduce the power of monopolies. So, there's some legislation being considered in the EU right now. It hasn't been passed, as we're talking here right now, but it's called the Digital Markets Act and it's expected that this will come into force. And what it does is label some of the big companies as gatekeepers. And these gatekeepers will be required to give their competitors equal opportunities to use their platforms and have access to services outside of the tech giants.

Visual: screenshot of news, an article titled deal on the Digital Markets Act: EU rules to ensure fair competition and more choice or users.

Interviewer: That indeed sounds promising. What about us? What should we do as content creators?
[question displayed on the screen]

Megan Fitzgibbons: You're right that individual users also have a role to play here. So, the first thing, hopefully it's obvious to everyone: don't post hateful content online or misinformation. But beyond that, it's really important to look at the source of information before you share it and do a fact check before you spread the information to others. Visual: video clip shows the word, 'fact check'

Megan Fitzgibbons: And also, it's important to not follow accounts that post misinformation or that are trying to mislead people. So, we all have a role to play in trying to not spread misinformation and harmful content.

Visual image description: news article with magnifying glass highlighting the word 'fake'

Visual: thank you and credit. CREDITS: This presentation template was created by Slidesgo, including icons by Flaticon and infographics & images by Freepik. Music: Lofi Summer Background by Vladislav Kurnikov on Pixabay.