

Free speech in the digital era

Are the business models of the big social media companies compatible with the principles of democracy? Can we protect free speech and at the same time ensure that social media companies take more responsibility for the content they spread, including hate speech? Can we turn the challenges into opportunities?

Big tech: big business with a big democratic impact?

The [social media](#) explosion has changed our online lives, in particular since Facebook entered the scene in 2004, followed by YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006. Some see social media as a [blessing](#) for freedom of speech: anyone with internet access and a smartphone can have a say, without gatekeepers. However, new aspects of this engagement are sparking questions about the impact on democracy. User attention is crucial for advertisers: time is money. In other words, the more time users spend on platforms, the more money companies earn. This can have democratic [consequences](#): algorithms tailor content to users, confirming their biases and blocking out other views. For example, YouTube's [algorithms](#) peddle extremist content and conspiracy theories: if you look up 'flu vaccine' you are fed anti-vaccine videos; if you search for Donald Trump you are exposed to white supremacist content; if you watch videos about US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, you are presented with leftist conspiracy theories. Facebook was a [key platform](#) for the spread of hate speech about the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, which led to [ethnic cleansing](#). Facebook is also facing severe [criticism](#) after the [disclosure](#) that user data were used to micro-target and mobilise voters in the US presidential election and the UK referendum on EU membership. These messages included [conspiracy theories](#), [disinformation](#) (deliberately misleading information) and [hate speech](#).

How regulation can undermine freedom of speech

All this has further fuelled calls for online platforms to take more responsibility for the content they share. They have resisted being labelled as [publishers](#), but have stepped up action to counter violations, including employing thousands of [content reviewers](#). Meanwhile, tightened laws in some countries have been criticised for going too far: a new German [law](#) that compels social media companies to remove hate speech and illegal content within 24 hours can lead to overbroad [censorship](#), said global watchdog Human Rights Watch. Use of the notion of 'fake news' as a slur for unwelcome media reports is itself threatening [media freedom](#). In April 2018, Malaysia approved a [law](#) bringing in prison sentences of up to six years for those spreading fake news. In India, where smartphone use has sparked a thriving fake news industry, the [founder](#) of one outlet was arrested for inciting hatred. Prime Minister Narendra Modi later abandoned a draft [law](#) under which journalists would be suspended for writing 'fake news' (which the [proposal](#) failed to define).

The European Union is cranking up the pressure on online platforms

In May 2016, the Commission and Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube unveiled a [code of conduct](#) to counter illegal hate speech online. Since then, more companies have joined and are increasingly meeting the goals, including removing illegal hate speech within 24 hours. In June 2017, Parliament [urged](#) online platforms 'to strengthen measures to tackle illegal and harmful content', including removing content related to hate speech. In September 2017, the Commission promised to monitor progress in tackling illegal content online, saying that 'if the tech companies don't deliver, we will do it'. In March 2018, the Commission adopted new, non-binding recommendations to boost efforts by online platforms. Vice-President for the digital single market Andrus Ansip [said](#) that online platforms, as people's main gateway to information, 'have a responsibility to provide a secure environment for their users.'

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

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PE 614.754– May 2018



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