

In responding to public pressure, tech firms haven't managed the situation particularly well, either...

“

I think they've done an incredibly bad job at staying ahead of the public narrative.

They seemed incredibly reactive and inconsistent as well, which is really dangerous... They should've been able to articulate a principle-based approach that was fairly applied to everyone, regardless of their political viewpoints... but they've really failed to do so... And as revelations have come out, **they've come to seem not only inconsistent, but misguided and sometimes actively dishonest.**”

- Jason Pontin

How are tech firms mismanaging the issues?

Inconsistent interventions

Human error by content moderators combined with AI that falls short when faced with complex context mean that digital spaces are rife with user's frustrations about removed posts and suspended accounts, especially when it seems like plenty of bad behaviour is left untouched.

"[Richard] Spencer doesn't get to be a verified speaker; Milo gets kicked off, but I know plenty of pretty abusive feminist users or left wing users, **expressing themselves in exactly the same way** that the right is being penalised for, **who are permitted** to perform certain kinds of speech. That's going to get Twitter into trouble."

Jason Pontin

Lack of transparency

The tech platforms' algorithms are complicated, obscure and constantly changing. In lieu of satisfactory explanations for why bad things are happening, people assume the worse – whether that's that Facebook has a liberal bias or that Youtube doesn't care about weeding out bad content.

"Some entity complains about a major internet company's practices, **the company claims that its critics don't understand how its algorithms sort and rank content**, and befuddled onlookers are left to sift through rival stories in the press."

Frank Pasquale, Professor of Law, quoted in the FT¹

Underplaying the issues

When faced with a scandal, the tech platforms have often underplayed the scope of the problem until facts prove otherwise. They've frustrated users by not giving their complaints and fears the respect and attention they've deserved, creating a picture of ill-informed arrogance.

"After the election, I made a comment that **I thought the idea misinformation on Facebook changed the outcome of the election was a crazy idea**. Calling that crazy was dismissive and I regret it."

Mark Zuckerberg, quoted in the Guardian²

How are tech firms mismanaging the issues?

Slow corrections

From a users' perspective, the tech platforms are quick to censor and slow to reinstate content that was wrongfully taken down. While the platforms can suspend an account in an instant, users often endure a slow and laborious appeals process, compounding the feeling of unfair censorship.

"Here's the frustrating thing for me as someone who uses Facebook: when you try to find out what the community standards are, **there's no place to go.** They change them willy-nilly whenever there's controversy. **They've made themselves so inaccessible.**"

Janis Ian, quoted in Propublica ¹

Global inconsistency

In a global world, the platforms' status as bastions of free speech is hugely undermined by their willingness to bend to requirements of foreign repressive governments. When platforms compromise their public-facing values in order to maintain a global footprint, it can make them look bad elsewhere.

In 2014, the Electronic Frontier Foundation said Facebook was **"complicit in political censorship"** for restricting content in Turkey and Pakistan.

EEF, 2014²

Reactionary Tactics

When a problem emerges, the tech platforms seem to take their time and wait to see if it's going to blow over before wading in with a solution or correction. The lag gives users and governments plenty of time to point fingers, gather supporters and get angrier.

"What you're seeing is this **very reactive element.** The big tech companies tend to kind of sit back quietly, wait for big storms to brew. They typically **sit quietly until it really reaches the breaking point,** and then they engage."

Kalev Leetaru

When it comes to users, all of this bad behaviour and mismanagement...

Impacts trust

**"It's a nightmare.
I can't trust YouTube any more."**

Matan Uziel, who's videos protesting sex trafficking and gendered abuse were demonetized

Incites criticism

**"How a half-educated tech elite
delivered us into chaos"**

John Naughton, the Guardian

Increases calls for regulation

**"Why we need to regulate the
tech platforms"**

Rana Forochar, The Financial Times

Breeds conspiracy theories

**"Google's search engine was suppressing
the bad news about Hillary Clinton"**

Donald Trump, 2016

Leaving users feeling powerless, frustrated and confused...

1. The importance of free speech
2. Bad behaviour and censorship online
3. Fighting back against bad behaviour online
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5. How do people want Google to respond to this predicament?

With so much bad behavior it's not surprising that **users** and **governments** have been fighting ways to

FIGHT BACK

Users are self-censoring to avoid repercussions

With a growing realisation that content remains on the internet 'forever' and can be seen by everyone – in addition to the possibility of attracting of trolls – people are self-censoring more online. As a result, the utopian public sphere envisioned by the internet's founders is becoming much less vibrant, especially in spaces where our real names are required.



E.g...

TEENS ARE EDITING THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA FEEDS BEFORE COLLEGE

A third of college admissions officers now routinely check applicants' social media posts. In response, students are 'scrubbing' their accounts in their senior year to ensure their Twitter feeds line-up with 'the best self' they are peddling in their applications.

Users are migrating to other platforms

Unhappy with the level of censorship on certain platforms, users are emigrating to ones with more – or less – restrictive rules. Twitter, which has failed to satisfy either side of the argument fully, has been particularly susceptible to this emigration.

Victims of trolling or those unhappy with toxic atmospheres are leaving Twitter, often for Facebook, which is seen as a more protected and controllable space.

Meanwhile, as Twitter tries to counteract this by taking on a more curatorial and moderatorial role, communities that disagree with these changes are moving to less restrictive platforms.



E.g...

CONTROVERSIAL TWEETERS ARE USING CHALLENGER APP GAB

Twitter once declared itself the "free speech wing of the free speech party", but growing criticism of its failure to address hate speech means it has pushed controversial figures out. Some of those who are now unwelcome, such as far-right group Britain First, are signing up to challenger site, Gab.

Users are protesting bad behaviour

Empowered by their digital soapboxes, those unhappy with the current rules of digital spaces are protesting them. Campaigns are led by journalists, academics, celebrities or everyday people, but find their power in the support of disgruntled users.

Individuals have made public protests through art and writing. For example, German artist activist Shahak Shapira spray-painted abusive tweets he had received and reported onto the ground outside the Twitter headquarters.

Proactive users have also used their collective numbers to draw attention to what they perceive as misplaced censorship – such as #WomenBoycottTwitter after Rose McGowan's Twitter account was disabled.

Hoffnung + Empathie + Humanismus + Toleranz + Partizipation + Dialog + Mut + Demokratie + Vernunft + Fairness



E.g...

#ichbinhier

#ichbinhier – which translates to I am Here – is a Facebook group created by German man Hannes Ley.¹ It has 27,000 members and works like a digital flash-mob fighting back against hate on the internet through friendly counter-commenting on unpleasant posts.

Users are (re)turning to trusted sources

With digital platforms implicated in the spread of 'fake news' and misinformation from questionable sources, people are turning to mainstream media outlets for trustworthy information.

The New Yorker, New York Times, Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and the Guardian all saw bumps in subscriptions in 2017, with the biggest growth coming from young people.



E.g...

AFTER HEARING ABOUT 'FAKE NEWS'...

23% of people were **more trusting** of printed news magazines



58% of people were **less trusting** of social media's political coverage¹



Governments are asserting power over global policy

As the tech companies have grown more dominant on the global stage, their intrinsically American values have come into conflict with some of the values and norms of other countries.

Now, governments are seeking to balance their national values with those of the tech giants through increasingly strong measures. And because the internet is a global platform, many want those nationally-desired protections to be enacted globally – influencing how the entire internet functions.



E.g...

THE RIGHT TO BE FORGOTTEN

The European court of justice has already ruled that Google has to delete some information from its index on request. But France is calling for the law's reach to be wider, arguing that it is not a national issue, but a global one, and that citizens who win the right to have data removed should be granted that right across the entire internet. The case would set a precedent for how far national governments' powers stretch online.

Governments are fighting back against interference from abroad

There is an increasing awareness that technology platforms can be – and are – used by foreign governments to influence domestic issues, through content manipulation. In reaction, governments are using a variety of tactics to suppress such possibilities.

Some moves – such as the Ukrainian authorities' blocking of Russia-based services, including the country's most widely used social network and search engine – legally restrict internet freedom, while others – such as US Congress questioning Facebook, Twitter, Google *et al* about Russia-backed agents – push the platforms to make changes in order to pre-empt regulation.



E.g...

US CONGRESS vs RUSSIAN ADS

The scandal surrounding Russian involvement in the 2016 US election made it clear how vulnerable to outside manipulation the tech platforms are. In response, Congress demanded answers of the tech platforms, who then implemented new policies to make ads more transparent.

Governments are making digital censorship more like offline censorship

The internet has long been a 'Wild-West' of rules and regulations - with all forms of speech frequently going unchecked and unpunished. This same leaning towards openness and unfettered dialogue helped its platforms to grow exponentially - embracing all and any who wished to gather there to talk and perform.

But now governments are taking steps to make online spaces safer, more regulated, and more similar to their offline laws. Protected from hate speech on the street? Now you are on the net too...



E.g...

NETZDG vs DIGITAL HATE SPEECH

Germany has some of the world's toughest laws around hate speech, put in place after World War II. To ensure the same rules apply online, it created the controversial Network Enforcement Act. Often referred to as the "Facebook law," social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Reddit can be fined up to €50 million for leaving posts classified as hate speech online for more than 24 hours.

Governments are looking to media regulations for inspiration on how to control big tech

Traditional national media, such as radio and newspapers, has always been beholden to rules and regulations. In the UK, for example, impartiality and the need to present breadth and diversity of opinion is a requirement of the BBC. For the most part, the internet has sidestepped much of this regulation.

Yet, as users and governments recognise that our online platforms hold as much (if not more) sway over public opinions and the outcomes of elections, more people are asking - "Isn't 'big tech' really 'big media' in disguise?"

local places 277

- events
- bars/clubs
- restaurants
- salons/nails/spas

community 457

- childcare
- classes/workshops
- general
- groups
- lost & found
- volunteers

buy/ sell/ trade 9,701

- antique/collectibles
- appliances
- boat & motorcycle
- business
- computer/electronics

automotive 15,959

- auto/truck/rv
- auto parts
- services

musician 695

- available/wanted
- equipment/instruments
- instruction
- services
- plug the band

rentals 405

- roommates
- apt/condo/house
- commercial
- vacation
- miscellaneous
- rentals wanted

jobs 23,455

- account/finance
- admin/office
- computer/technical
- customer service
- domestic
- driver/delivery/courier
- education
- focus group/studies
- job wanted/resume
- mgmt/professional
- medical/health
- miscellaneous
- part-time jobs
- real estate
- rest/retail/hotel
- sales/mktg
- salon/spa
- show biz/audition
- trades/labor

dating 529

- women > men
- men > women
- men > men
- women > women

adult

- escorts
- body rubs
- strippers & strip clubs
- dom & fetish
- ts
- male escorts
- phone & websites
- adult jobs

services 12,745

- biz opps
- business
- cleaning

[all cities...](#)

Minnesota
 Bemidji, mn
 Duluth, mn
 Mankato, mn
 Minneapolis, mn
 Rochester, mn
 St. Cloud, mn

Top 20:

Atlanta, ga
 Boston, ma
 Chicago, il
 Dallas, tx
 Denver, co
 Houston, tx
 Las Vegas, nv
 Los Angeles, ca
 Miami, fl
 Minneapolis, mn
 New York City, ny
 Philadelphia, pa
 Phoenix, az
 San Diego, ca
 San Francisco, ca

E.g...

ALLOW STATES AND VICTIMS TO FIGHT ONLINE SEX TRAFFICKING ACT OF 2017

After several families waged a legal battle against Backpage.com for its facilitation of child sex trafficking, American politicians moved to amend Section 230 Communications Decency Act. While the proposed amends only cover illegal content - the move would open the door to 'media company-like' regulation online. Such a shift would redefine YouTube as we know it, and might do the same for Search and Reviews.

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How are the tech firms responding?

Tech firms have been tightening their terms of service

Recognising the anxiety of users and governments, tech companies are adapting their stance towards censorship, and changing their terms of service to reflect the current mood. This could mean taking a more hardline approach to hateful content, as Twitter has done, or preventing the monetization of questionable videos, as YouTube has done.

Whatsmore, companies are publicly declaring these new values, making them as intrinsic to the platforms' identities as their unwavering support of freedom of expression once was.



E.g...

TWITTER UNVERIFIED WHITE NATIONALISTS

Twitter's new rules mean an account may be unverified if promotes, incites or engages in hate, violence or harassment. It revoked the verification of a number of prominent white nationalists, making their social media accounts less powerful as a platform. The move enabled Twitter to disassociate itself with such voices without censoring specific forms of their content.

// Insights Lab

Tech firms have been moving from passive facilitation to active curation

In response to public outcries about the accessibility of unsavoury and harmful content, tech firms have been adjusting their software to make it harder to stumble upon it. Google's autocomplete blacklist means it's less likely that children will link to pornography while completing their biology homework. And by banning ads from payday lenders, Google also made it a little less likely that their parents would become entrapped by exorbitant interest fees.

Where once Google wished to organize the world's information, it's also long taken steps to protect users from the phishing and malware they might encounter while looking for it. By blocking access to (or 'guarantining') potentially harmful sites, Chrome and Search guide users away from threats (and stop traffic from flowing to flagged sites).



E.g...

THE DAILY STORMER

In the wake of violence in Charlottesville, internet domain registrar Go Daddy, Google and website security company Cloudflare ended their relationships with alt-right site The Daily Stormer, effectively booting it off the internet. While some free speech advocates were troubled by the idea that 'a voice' could be silenced at its source, others were encouraged by the united front the tech firms put up.

Tech firms have been amping up moderation

Following a series of public and media outcries around problematic content online, such as the '[Peppa Pig scandal](#)', tech companies are slowly stepping into the role of moderator – one which they have long sought to avoid because of the associated responsibilities.

Specifically, platforms are significantly amping up the number of moderators they employ – in YouTube's case increasing the number of people on the lookout for inappropriate content to more than [10,000](#). With [Perspective](#), an API that uses machine learning to spot abuse and harassment online, [Google's Jigsaw initiative](#) is also "studying how computers can learn to understand the nuances and context of abusive language at scale" and finding ways to "help moderators sort comments more effectively".



E.g...

YOUTUBE BANS POPULAR CHANNEL TO PROTECT KIDS

Controversial kids' YouTube channel Toy Freaks, the 68th largest channel on the platform, was terminated by YouTube for "violating YouTube's Video Guidelines", presumably because some of the videos are potentially exploitative of the two children it features – showing them upset and in pain as well as in general gross-out situations.

So, it's problem solved? Right?

No. Not quite...

BREITBART NEWS
EXCLUSIVE

Tech firms are performing a balancing act between two **incompatible positions...**



Create unmediated
'marketplaces of ideas'

100% commit to the American tradition that prioritises free speech for democracy, not civility

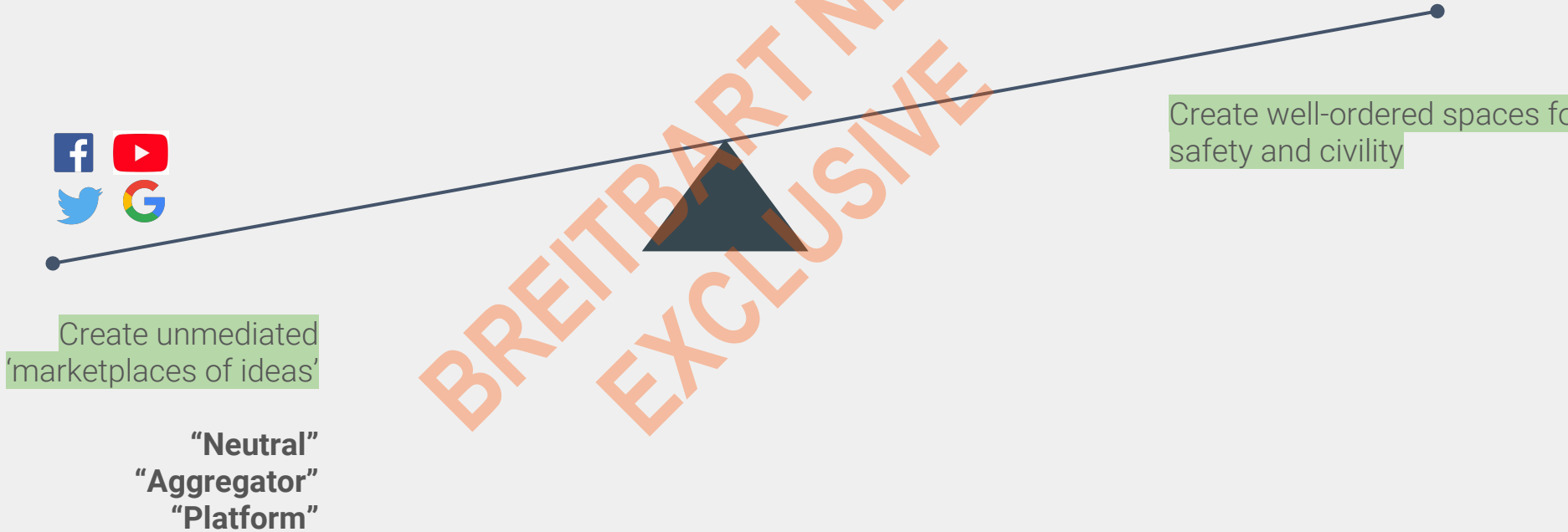
By creating spaces where all values, including civility norms, are always open for debate

Create well-ordered spaces
for safety and civility

100% commit to the European tradition that favors dignity over liberty, and civility over freedom

By censoring racial and religious hatred, even when there's no provocation of violence

In the past, their position was clear...



But tech firms have gradually shifted away from unmediated free speech and towards censorship and moderation

Create unmediated
'marketplaces of ideas'



Create well-ordered spaces for
safety and civility

"Politicized"
"Editor"
"Publisher"

“

For a long time, we thought of censorship in terms of government and nation states, and I think now we're in an era in which **people are starting to realise that private companies**, probably more than ever before, **control people's ability to amplify their voices**, and whether or not their speech stays up or comes down, also what they see and what they can listen to, what they can read.

– Kalev Leetaru

Why the shift towards censorship?

Create unmediated
'marketplaces of
ideas'

Create well-ordered
spaces for safety
and civility

In the absence of
rules, bad behaviour
thrived

User demands

Appease users,
maintain platform
loyalty

Governments were
unhappy to cede
power to corporations

Government Demands

Respond to regulatory
demands, maintain global
expansion

It's impossible to
neutrally promote
content and info

Commercial Demands

Monetize content
through its organisation,
increase revenues

Advertisers were wary of
unintended placement
and endorsement

Commercial Demands

Protect advertisers from
controversial content,
increase revenues

This new position as ‘moderators in chief’ has been coming for some time...

2008

2013

2016

“As more and more speech migrates online, **the ultimate power to decide who has an opportunity to be heard, and what we may say, lies increasingly with Internet service providers**, search engines and other Internet companies like Google, Yahoo, AOL, Facebook and even eBay.”

Jeffrey Rosen, [The New York Times](#)

“As online communication proliferates—and the ethical and financial costs of misjudgments rise—the Internet giants are **grappling with the challenge of enforcing their community guidelines for free speech.**”

Jeffrey Rosen, [New Republic](#)

“We’re witnessing a **massive shift** in the whole idea of the internet; from an **open platform** for the discussion of ideas **to something that must be moderated and editorialised.**”

Brendan O'Neill, [The Spectator](#)

“**The web is evolving from its roots** as the anti-censorship platform of free speech and **towards the very corporate-controlled moderated medium** beholden to commercial and governmental interests that it rebelled against.”

Kalev Leetaru, [Forbes](#)

But users and their governments are questioning the censorial powers and responsibilities of tech firms like never before...

2017

"Tech companies are under fire for creating problems instead of solving them. [Amazon, Google and Facebook] are making decisions **about who gets a digital megaphone and who should be unplugged from the web.** Their amount of concentrated authority resembles the divine right of kings, and is sparking a **backlash that is still gathering force."**

David Streitfeld, [The New York Times](#)

2018

People are no longer willing to see the platforms as neutral mediators of social life. Whether it's 'fake news' or the knowledge of widespread behavioural targeting during elections, I think **there will be much more of a push to hold the platforms to account."**

Nathaniel Tkacz, [Dazed and Confused](#)

“

“It’s unclear whether Facebook knows the extent of the collateral damage [that’s coming from its censorship strategies], or the other companies as well. But we do know that **journalism, activism and public debate are being silenced** in the effort to stamp out extremist speech. **With these companies having so much power over the public discourse, they need to be held accountable.**

– Franklin Foer

Being critical of big tech's censorship powers was once a niche stance, coming mostly from those on the Right



FACEBOOK THREATENS TO BAN CONSERVATIVE SITES IF THEY DISAGREE WITH THE LEFT



GOOGLE DOUBLES DOWN ON PURGING CONSERVATIVE SPEECH



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

TECH

Google Search Results Can Lean Liberal, Study Finds

The conclusions stoke a debate about the influence of a handful of internet companies

FINANCIAL TIMES

Opinion Digital Media

Big Tech can no longer be allowed to police itself

THE SPECTATOR

The internet's war on free speech

The web was meant to empower us all. Right now, it's empowering censors

But now, concern about big tech's 'abandonment of neutrality' has gone mainstream...

We've heard increasingly loud calls for media-esque regulations...

Time to treat Google and Facebook as the media giants they really are

CITY A.M.

Google's identity crisis: Media or tech company at heart of ad row

sky NEWS

**FACEBOOK'S
OFFICIALLY A
MEDIA COMPANY.
TIME TO ACT LIKE
ONE**

WIRED

Media company or tech platform? The hugely important battle to redefine Facebook



Technology company? Publisher? The lines can no longer be blurred

The Guardian

while the platforms cling to Section 230 and reduced liability for the content that lives on its platforms

Google News boss: We're not a media company

Why is Silicon Valley fighting a sex trafficking bill?

BBC

Why Facebook Won't Admit It's a Media Company

The Guardian

FORTUNE

Anti-online sex trafficking bill gets crushed under Big Tech's lobbying

Twitter Is Not a Media Company, CEO Says

THE HILL


Mashable

The platforms' legal and moral demands create an unresolved tension

“

The platforms have to deny that they're media companies in order to retain their immunity from liability. **But at the same time, they're exercising more influence as media companies...** than CBS News did in its heyday, and therefore, in order for democratic values to flourish, **they need to embrace free speech standards.**

– Jeffrey Rosen, Professor of Law at The George Washington University and legal affairs editor of The New Republic¹



The balancing act between 'free-for-all' and
'civil-for-most' is proving difficult

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The answer is not 'find
the right amount of
censorship' and stick to
it...

People vary in their opinion of how much censorship there should be online, often switching their position from issue to issue depending on the latest controversy, **and there's no international consensus** about how much censorial power the tech firms should enact either.


Let free speech thrive? Censor particular content and voices?
Let governments decide?

Whatever the chosen response, **Google won't please everyone**, nor can it hope to escape controversy or its responsibility for how society functions and progresses.

Google might continue to shift with the times - changing its stance on how much or how little it censors (due to public, governmental or commercial pressures). If it does, **acknowledgment of what this shift in position means** for users and for Google is essential. **Shifting blindly or silently in one direction or another rightly incites users' fury.**

Whatever pathway is taken - Google has an opportunity to make the most of it.

Here are nine principles to kick-start the journey...



Be more consistent

Don't take sides

People are asking for equal treatment, regardless of politics or popularity

"The rules are invisible, and what makes it so complicated is that you know that there are rules, yet they seem to be arbitrarily applied. Why does Richard Spencer get booted from Twitter, yet Donald Trump managed to continue having a platform? ... I think there's this feeling that the space is being governed, yet the rules are not clear."


Franklin Foer

Police tone instead of content

People are asking you to oversee safe spaces that still encourage debate

"My recommendation is to focus on regulating tone. If someone is threatening someone, regardless of the topic, that's something that a lot of people can agree has no place online. I think that's the least politically precarious situation. 'Hey, look, if you threaten someone's life, it gets pulled.' If you just argue with each other, that's fine."

Kalev Leetaru



Be more transparent

Justify global positions

People are asking you to continue justifying your position regarding censorship in other markets

"US-based IT monopolies are already tempted to compromise themselves in order to gain entrance to these vast and fast growing markets. The dictatorial leaders in these countries may be only too happy to collaborate with them since they want to improve their methods of control over their own populations and expand their power and influence in the United States and the rest of the world."

George Soros

Enforce standards and policies clearly

People are asking for clearer explanations of censorship policies and mechanisms – particularly when things go wrong

"Much of social media's editorial guidelines are a black box, inaccessible to the public since they belong to private companies. That lack of transparency means it's unclear what factors go into the decision to take down a post."

Chava Gourarie, Columbia Journalism Review

Explain the technology

People are asking you to tell them more about how your technology actually works

"For Google in particular [public confusion about how it works] is a huge problem, because the math behind autocomplete, and how the news feed and search are managed, are not only relatively obscure, but also change all the time. So, the short answer that Google gives about how the technology works is really not sufficient to the degree of anxiety people have about Google's centrality to how people receive their information."

Jason Pontin

// Insights Lab



Be more responsive

Improve communications

People are asking for more responsive customer service when it comes to censored content and complaints about bad behaviour online

"They need to be more transparent about their enforcement mechanism, and they need to have clear grievance and appeal mechanisms, so people can get their content reinstated."

Rebecca Mackinnon, 'We Can Fight Terror without Sacrificing our Rights' TED talk¹

Take problems seriously

People are asking for you to acknowledge the scope of problems in good time, and own up to your responsibilities as both a cause and a solution

"As revelations have come out, they've come to seem not only inconsistent, but misguided and sometimes actively dishonest. I think lots of people don't believe it. They find it difficult to believe that Facebook didn't know the scale of the fake news problem as late as they did."

Jason Pontin

insights Lab

Be more empowering

Positive guidelines

People are asking for guidance on how to behave on your platform, rather than solely how not to

"Facebook, Twitter, and Google have never really expressed what their values are, or what they would like to see on their platforms... As 'bartenders for a great global community' – they didn't do what every other hospitality organiser has done, in saying: 'We're this sort of place, this is the type of speech we would like to see here, and you are part of a community when you join us. We hope you enjoy it and we hope that you make it pleasant for other people as well. Here are some ways that you can do that.'"

Jason Pontin

Better signposts

People are asking for empowering tools that help them identify contentious issues and content, rather than platforms that control conversations

"If you think about someone searching, for example, 'iPhone rebooting', there probably is a limited diversity of what people are doing that for. Versus [searching for] 'Is Hillary the devil?' There's probably a little more diversity there, in terms of searches. Being able to search your way [through that] and to understand that certain things are more polarised [would be helpful]... People have no idea how much their inclinations are mediated."

Kalev Leetaru

if insights Lab

Thank you.

Explore more cultural insights at
[go/culturalcontext](https://www.google.com/culturalcontext)

BREITBART NEWS
EXCLUSIVE