Do Social Media Platforms Have Civic Responsibilities?

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Executive Summary

Social media companies often use the language of civics to describe their goals, uses, and the duties of their consumers. By invoking their potential as a check on the state, these companies' founders create the perception that they are a global force for accountability. Digital platforms are heralded as the new public square, and with that comes the feeling that they are spaces for civic engagement governed by norms for the purpose of improving the conditions of the community.

But this is misleading. Social media companies are not in fact the new public square; the platforms algorithmically tailor content to each individual. Further, platforms like Facebook routinely censored content during the 2020 election and the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that demonstrate that their goals were political, not civic.

We should stop discussing these platforms as though they promote our civic institutions so that we can more properly appreciate their role as private companies seeking to turn a profit.

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Private companies such as Meta (which owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), Twitter, Snapchat, and the like are clearly not traditional civic institutions. They have users, not citizens; they offer terms of service, not rights; users have no duties to the platform beyond the surrender of their time and attention; and technology companies have great leeway when it comes to content moderation and censorship of users who violate those terms of service. They are for-profit businesses, not institutions devoted to the public good.

And yet the language of civics often infuses discussions of the power and impact of these platforms, and the leaders of these companies often invoke civic virtues to define their missions (and craft a more compelling public-relations narrative). "People see Twitter as a public square, and therefore they have expectations that they would have of a public square," Twitter's Jack Dorsey told *Rolling Stone*.[1] He later expanded that assessment, arguing, "Twitter is the closest thing we have to a global consciousness."[2] Elon Musk repeated the public-square claim during his bid to acquire the platform: "Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated."[3]

Such invocations of the public square or the town square by the founders of technology companies are not necessarily disingenuous, but they are misleading. These executives use familiar language about civic values even as their platforms at times allow or encourage behavior that actively undermines those values.

Consider a speech that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg delivered at Georgetown University in 2019. The speech made news thanks to Zuckerberg's announcement of the creation of the Facebook Oversight Board (on which John Samples has served and wrote about in *Social Media and the Appearance of Corruption*),[4] but the speech was also notable as an extended example of a style of Big Tech civic rhetoric that is becoming more common.

In it, Zuckerberg positioned himself as a champion of many fine American principles, most notably free expression. "I'm proud that our values at Facebook are inspired by the American tradition, which is more supportive of free expression than anywhere else," Zuckerberg said. He added,

> More people being able to share their perspectives has always been necessary to build a more inclusive society. And our mutual commitment to each other—that we hold each others' right to express our views and be heard above our own desire to always get the outcomes we want—is how we make progress together. . . .
>
> People having the power to express themselves at scale is a new kind of force in the world—a Fifth Estate alongside the other power structures of society.[5]

Zuckerberg's invocation of a "Fifth Estate" is meant to imply that, like the "Fourth Estate"—a phrase typically used to describe the press and its important role as a watchdog and check on the powerful—digital platforms perform their own important function in democracy and do so as an equally powerful institution of accountability.

But the Fourth Estate's position as a social force for good is built on public trust—a trust that has eroded dramatically in recent years. As declining rates of public confidence in the Fourth Estate suggest (only 16 percent of Americans have "a great deal/quite a lot" of confidence in newspapers, and only 11 percent have "some degree" of confidence in television news),[6] the Fifth Estate of social media platforms that Zuckerberg envisions is modeled on a decaying cultural institution.

Social media companies have experienced similar declines in public trust. When Gallup polled Americans in 2021 about which sources of information they trust the most, only 17 percent of Americans age 15–24 said they trusted social media, despite being heavy users of the platforms, and only 12 percent of those over age 40 said the same. (Doctors, by contrast, were trusted by 61 percent and 58 percent of those same age groups, respectively.)[7]

And Zuckerberg's use of the language of civic engagement, like that of the leaders of other large technology companies, sometimes rests uneasily alongside his goal of enhancing the reputation and profits of Facebook—a fact he only occasionally and obliquely acknowledges. Zuckerberg noted:

> But even American tradition recognizes that some speech infringes on others' rights. . . . A strict First Amendment standard might require us to allow terrorist propaganda, bullying young people and more that almost everyone agrees we should stop—and I certainly do—as well as content like pornography that would make people uncomfortable using our platforms.[8]

It's perfectly reasonable for a business to make profit its priority; this serves shareholders and contributes to free enterprise more broadly. Businesses regularly engage in image management as well, through advertising and publicity campaigns that emphasize a company's values and goals.

But the use of civic language by large technology platform companies is doing additional work in this context. McDonald's, for example, serves as a kind of de facto civic space in many small towns in the US. When Chris Arnade was working on his book, *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*, he visited more than 800 McDonald's restaurants.

> I began to see that all across the country, the McDonald's restaurants were in fact community centers. In towns where things are really dysfunctional, where government services are failing and non-profits and the private sector are failing to help people, McDonald's is one of the few places that still is open, still has a functional bathroom, and the lights are on.[9]

And yet the McDonald's CEO does not regularly boast that his restaurants represent a Fifth Estate, in part because his focus is on promoting his company's product and how it makes a customer feel ("You deserve a break today" and "I'm lovin' it," for example).

Unlike a physical public square, the social media public square is neither contained nor truly public.

Social media platforms take pains to avoid promoting that *you* are their product; your attention is the commodity in which they traffic and from which they profit. Lofty rhetoric about free expression serves the dual purpose of downplaying that fact while burnishing the image of the social media company.

This works well to a point; what Instagram influencer wouldn't feel good about her life choices after hearing that her makeup tutorials are in fact contributing to civic health? But it can lead to difficulties when lofty principles clash with the realities of how people behave online.

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It is individually tailored to each user's preferences. Everyone might be on the same platform, but we don't all participate in the same virtual space. Algorithmically refined content creates not a public square, but a space more akin to a virtual yard. You can let others play in your yard (and the neighbors will definitely yell at you if you make too much noise), but it does not function virtually in the same way that physical civic spaces traditionally do.

In addition, the designers and monitors of virtual "public squares" like Facebook and Twitter, who claim to want to "write policy that helps the values of voice and expression triumph around the world,"[10] as Zuckerberg states, have also demonstrated a tendency—either intentionally or not—to define politics and expression in ways that align with their own political values. Zuckerberg said as much in his Georgetown speech: "When people don't feel they can express themselves, they lose faith in democracy and they're more likely to support populist parties that prioritize specific policy goals over the health of our democratic norms."[11] Whatever your feelings about populism, it has a long history in American democratic politics; for Zuckerberg and his ilk, however, invoking populism as a danger is a way to signal opposition to political movements with which they disagree (voters who supported Donald Trump, for example) while retaining their platforms' image as a politically neutral space.

I have singled out Zuckerberg and Facebook not only because Facebook (and Meta's empire more broadly) is the dominant social media platform but also because some of Facebook's actions lately bely Zuckerberg's soaring civics rhetoric.

Appearing on Joe Rogan's podcast in August 2022, Zuckerberg acknowledged that in the lead-up to the 2020 election, Facebook actively censored news stories related to Joe Biden's son Hunter and the existence and contents of a laptop that belonged to him. Zuckerberg told Rogan:

> Basically the background here is the FBI I think basically came to us, some folks on our team, and was like "Hey just so you know, you should be on high alert. We thought that there was a lot of Russian

propaganda in the 2016 election. We have it on notice that basically there's about to be some kind of dump similar to that, so just be vigilant."[12]

(Twitter placed an outright ban on sharing the story, blocking users from linking to it.)

In this case, the social media platforms were wrong; the laptop story was not a Russian disinformation campaign. It was true. By the time the ban on saying so was lifted, however, the election was over.

It's not the first time the Biden administration has publicly encouraged censorship of controversial issues in the digital "public square." When Rogan's podcast featured questions about COVID-19 vaccinations that quickly spread on social media, for example, the Biden administration sent US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy onto MSNBC to scold Big Tech. These platforms are "the predominant places where we're seeing misinformation spread," Murthy said, and they "still have not stepped up" to promote only approved public health information. "This is not just about what the government can do," Murthy said. "This is about companies and individuals recognizing that the only way we get past misinformation is if we are careful about what we say and use the power that we have to limit the spread of misinformation."[13]

Similarly, in May 2021, Facebook ceased censoring stories related to the claim that the COVID-19 virus might have originated from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. "In light of ongoing investigations into the origin of COVID-19 and in consultation with public health experts, we will no longer remove the claim that COVID-19 is man-made or manufactured from our apps," Facebook announced.[14]

The timing of Facebook's about-face suggests it had little to do with its sense of civic responsibility and everything to do with politics. It coincided with the Biden administration finally acknowledging that a lab leak might be a possible cause for the origin of the virus—something many observers had been arguing (and been censored for arguing) for some time.

As these examples suggest, if social media platforms can be said to be practicing civic responsibility at all, it is a *reactionary civics*, one driven more by fear of potentially negative public relations (or

threats from sitting administrations to further regulate the platform) than by a sense of obligation or responsibility.

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Can platforms be moved away from reactionary civics to a sense of responsibility, absent the threat of further regulation? Many creative policy and governance proposals have explored this question, including many of the reports of my colleagues in the Digital Governance Project.

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I have a less technical suggestion: We should stop using the language of civic responsibility to describe platforms that have demonstrated little intention of promoting civic virtues. Despite the soaring rhetoric about the public square that people like Dorsey and Zuckerberg like to invoke, our behavior online is less about civic engagement than it is about enjoying an all-day, all-night, all-out brawl. It is time to abandon the idea that social media platforms serve as a kind of digital commons or digital public square.

Experience has demonstrated that these platforms don't serve the public interest—at least not in any way the public can agree on. Why do we continue to insist they should? Meta is not the Fifth Estate, and Twitter is not our town square. Their scale and ubiquity in people's lives suggest we need something

other than the language of civics to guide us in understanding them.

With Musk's recent acquisition of Twitter and his release of internal files and emails (the so-called "Twitter Files") to independent journalists who have documented how government officials used their power to advocate for the suppression of speech they did not like on the platform, social media companies' claimed devotion to the public interest appears even less robust than it did a few years ago. Indeed, at times, politically motivated censorship seems to have been Twitter's unwritten but eagerly followed policy, particularly regarding issues related to Hunter Biden or the COVID-19 pandemic. If a town square is assumed to allow for many voices to compete in open debate, time and time again Twitter proved itself unwilling to hold itself to that standard.

Many people who use these platforms already understand this, at least intuitively. Christopher Koopman and Will Rinehart at Utah State University, who have done extensive polling about Americans' attitudes of social media platforms, were struck by how many of their respondents in a recent survey rejected the idea that social media platforms acted as a kind of political town hall or public square:

> In our recent poll, only 8 percent of voters completely agreed that social media is the primary channel for sharing their political beliefs with others. Only 16 percent even *somewhat* agreed. This means that for 76 percent of Americans, social media is not where they share political ideas. In fact, only 39 percent of Americans feel comfortable sharing their politics online. Even more important, over two-thirds—68 percent—actively avoid political conversations online.[15] (Emphasis in original.)

In addition, Koopman and Rinehart found that rather than promoting the virtues of the public square, social media platforms tend rather to encourage the vices of the coliseum: "Far from a public square, social media is largely a spectator sport when it comes to sharing political views. When politics does come up, people come to watch others duke it out, while working hard to avoid participating."[16]

Indeed, if we think of Facebook and other social media platforms as mini-nation-states, we begin to see that their priorities are not in fact free expression but constant surveillance in service of maximizing ad revenue. That's fine for a business. But we should stop talking about them as civic institutions. And we should make it a priority to reckon with the scale and scope of their surveillance and its impact on the quality of information it enables, particularly when it comes to matters under political debate. As Elizabeth Losh argues in *Selfie Democracy: The New Digital Politics of Disruption and Insurrection*, "Masked by the appeal of greater direct democracy, both tech companies and authoritarian figures have amassed power largely through image management and opinion framing rather than through a true broadening of civic life."[17]

We should also distance our politics from branding by these platforms. Barack Obama was the Facebook president, Trump was the Twitter president, and although Biden thus far has made feeble attempts to be the TikTok president,[18] he has thankfully outsourced his social media presence to his staff. But a bipartisan pattern has been established: When these platforms facilitate a politician's partisan goals, they are hailed as worthy and educational; when they challenge those goals, the temptation, as we have seen, is for the powerful to label inconvenient stories "misinformation" and pressure platforms to censor. In other words, these platforms work most powerfully to influence, not to educate.

Influence on the scale exercised by social media platforms has significant political consequences.

As Jamie Susskind argued in *Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech*:

> Politics in the twentieth century was dominated by a central question: how much of our collective life should be determined by the state, and what should be left to the market and civil society? For the generation now approaching political maturity, the debate will be different: to what extent should our lives be directed and controlled by powerful digital systems—and on what terms?[19]

These are important questions for elected officials and government regulators to answer. But they are also important for citizens to ponder. We now know that when discussion of social media platforms' impact turns to broad discussions of civic engagement or democracy, this redounds almost entirely to the benefit of the platforms, which can claim to be supporting "democracy" while sometimes doing some undemocratic things. Sweeping appeals to civic responsibility are all well and good, but the devil, as always, is in the details.

About the Author

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Notes

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