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Utopian Roots and Hybrid Futures:

The Ideology and Governance of Social Media Platforms

Torsten Kathke

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND STATECRAFT POLICY BRIEF

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His second book project analyzes the market for and influence of popular non-fiction books in the United States and West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s. As a fellow of the GIGA's Digital Transformation Lab (DigiTraL) on Digital Diplomacy and Statecraft, he has been researching the nexus of social media, politics, and the historical ideologies embedded in networking technologies.

"Digital Diplomacy and Statecraft" is part of DigiTraL, a research project funded by the Federal Foreign Office. It explores how digitalisation offers new opportunities, challenges, and instruments for foreign policy. By bringing together international experts, it identifies prospects and threats of digitalisation. Digital technologies are fundamentally transforming societies worldwide. The Global South is an important shaper of this change. The project analyses drivers and consequences of digitalisation across the world regions and delivers useful impulses for German foreign policy and for timely responses of (digital) diplomacy.

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Abstract

A few large social media platforms owned by multinational corporations have an outsized influence over important venues of global public debate. These platforms constitute a centralized layer on top of the distributed infrastructure of the internet which is controlled by the specific needs and ideologies of these corporations. A proposed alternative is the return to open, interoperable protocols. Yet, underlying both approaches is a joint ideology of the internet as an open "frontier" that emerged out of a U.S. Cold War/ countercultural context. Any discourse regarding the use by government officials, governance, or regulation of the internet in general, and social media in particular, must take this ideology into account. Policymakers and stakeholders must question in which ways it is compatible with core democratic principles, especially free speech and minority rights, and how a virtual public sphere can be constituted that emphasizes critical debate.

Policy Recommendations

- Any approach to communication on social media should be specific to the platform or community. This requires knowledge not of "social media" as a whole, but of specific microcultures in virtual spaces.
- Open protocols that allow several providers of social media to connect to one another while each retains responsibility for moderation can combine the advantages of platform-based social media with those of protocol-based approaches. These should therefore be privileged in utilization and regulation.
- Government regulation and the enforcement of legal rules against social media platforms has for the most part concentrated on regulating specific utterances of speech on those platforms. There should be regulatory focus and public pressure to require any platform of a considerable size to have accessible APIs for research and an indemnification against legal action of researchers trying to reverse-engineer such access. This will enable data to be produced that demonstrates where platforms succeed and fail in terms of accountability and compliance with existing laws. This should also be part of a larger conversation on potential protections for adversarial interoperability.
- Nationally and internationally, the labor (and connectedly, human) rights of social media moderators should be addressed as intrinsically connected to the functioning of social media as a venue for debate in an open society.

I. Introduction

Social media as it exists in the 2020s has several origins. Yet, ultimately, all of them are tied to technological and cultural developments that emerged in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century. The large platforms that prevail today are a far cry from what the internet boosters of the 1990s expected the world wide web to be, though some were quite attuned to its potential promises as well as its dangers (such as Rheingold 1993 who worried about people sharing personal information and a Baudrillardian "hyperreality" in which illusions would proliferate).

In its early stages, the internet, on top of which the world wide web was created as a simple, visual mode of navigating between a variety of "sites" of information, relied solely on a host of protocols at multiple levels. Importantly, all of these, whether the basic TCP/IP stack that made communication across a global network of computers technically possible, or the higher-order protocols such as POP, IMAP, and SMTP for e-mail or HTTP along with the HTML coding language for websites, were meant to be interoperable.

Though it might look different depending on which mail client or browser one used, every e-mail or website was coded in such a way as to be accessible through any number of clients or browsers. While this quickly lead to non-standard extensions of protocols when certain uses not intended in the current version of the protocol became popular (Netscape and Microsoft, two early makers of web browsers both implemented non-standard parts of HTML, some of which became standardized in later iterations), the fundamental idea that all user agents implementing a protocol should be able to interoperate remained central (Raggett 1998). The creation of material for the internet was still relatively complicated during the 1990s, with only a small minority of users learning how to code, or to create websites using templates and specialized software.

When the early euphoria surrounding the internet waned after the Dot-com crash of the early 2000s, internet-based business models transformed and user creation of content became increasingly the norm. It could only do so because publishing on the internet had been made easier by a large margin, as centralized platforms provided a built-in audience and simplified tools for "blogging" or "microblogging." Over the past decade and a half, these services have grown in popularity so immensely as to effectively constitute yet another layer on top of the world wide web that for many constitutes most of their internet use.

This gave rise to a wholly novel culture of public expression and deliberation. It also created economic opportunities and spaces for virtual communities. Yet, at the same time it channeled and limited societal conceptions of what the internet is and could be during exactly the period in

which it was becoming a fact of life for a majority of people. In North America, more than 50% of the population had an internet connection by 2001, in the European Union that mark had been passed by 2006, while in the world at large it was reached in 2019 (Roser 2018; Share of the Population Using the Internet 2022). While platforms have frequently come under attack for not adequately responding to threats (as defined variously in different polities around the world), in part due to their origin in the United States and therefore adherence to U.S.-centric conceptions of what is and is not admissible in the public sphere, an even more fundamental layer of ideology on which they are based has often been less visible: that of the internet itself as a quasi-spatial "frontier" which beckoned with opportunity.

II. The Ideology of the Internet

It is vital for any discussion about the future direction of networked communication to understand that the way in which we generally conceive of the internet has its origin in the technologies and software that make it possible as much as it does in popular conceptions of what these technologies could enable socially. These conceptions congealed into a general common-sense idea of what the data network often described as "cyberspace" or the "information superhighway" in its early years was for, who should make its rules, and how it could be used.

As Fred Turner traces painstakingly in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, some of the most influential thinkers on the new digital world had come from the same intellectual tradition. This tradition had been shaped by the collaborative culture of American Cold War science and countercultural ideas of "New Communalism" – in essence, the conviction that rather than to protest against or attempt to reform existing political systems, one should simply disengage and create new communities outside of governmental reach. It had further tied these to an admixture of Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, the writings of Buckminster Fuller, and the media theories of Marshall McLuhan, among others, and injected a measure of the kind of libertarian individualism found in the novels of Ayn Rand. Rand also inspired numerous founders of Silicon Valley technology ventures who could see themselves reflected in her godlike heroes (Daub and Markwardt 2020; Bilton 2016; Davis 2021; Turner 2008, 35–36, 237, passim).

Many of those who would come to decide the shape that the internet took in the American, and then the world's, imagination in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, were connected to Stewart Brand. Brand had founded the *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968, a highly influential magazine/ catalog hybrid that countercultural communards relied on for information, education, and exchange. Apple co-founder Steve Jobs called it "Google 35 years before Google came along" and cited

Brand's phrase "Stay hungry. Stay foolish" in a well-publicized commencement speech at Stanford University in 2005 (Jobs 2005). Brand, together with entrepreneur Larry Brilliant, expanded the brand into an online community, somewhat sheepishly dubbed the WELL, or *Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link*. Given free accounts, journalists flocked to the online forum for which frequent participant Howard Rheingold would coin the term "virtual community" (Rheingold 1993).

WELL-ers books and articles found an audience in journalists trying to understand the nascent online world. Later *Wired* magazine, founded by WELL users, among them its editor Kevin Kelly, did its part to spread the *Whole Earth* ideology. That ideology thus became connected to the internet as a public and social space as a matter of course. Rheingold's engaging report from the online world and the WELL itself, like the works of Esther Dyson, John Perry Barlow, and a number of other writers and journalists who reported on their experiences with the WELL and later other websites and services, were picked up by publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and seeped into magazines and breathless television features about the chances the new electronic world offered. They also showed up in politicians' speeches and in open letters and manifestos urging for a light touch when it came toward regulating the emerging internet. The protagonists of Brand's network also founded the advocacy group *Electronic Frontier Foundation,* inscribing an imagined connection of the internet to the powerful expansionist myth of the American *frontier* in the West even in its name (Turner 2008, 156).

All told, they provided a handy vocabulary and many essential frames that were often reproduced uncritically by legacy media. Ideas of ad-hoc governance through electronic means and the lifestyle of the "digital nomad", always ready to pack a small bag and jack into a phone line somewhere on the globe to re-find their electronically connected community, were taken up as generalizable to the whole internet and all of society when in fact they were closely tied to the experiences of a reasonably privileged cohort of white, overwhelmingly male and well-off former counterculturalists who worked in, or adjacent to, the technology sector (Turner 2008, 172, 189).

III. Protocols and Platforms

The early (before the Web 2.0 era that began in the early 2000s) internet relied on a set of protocols that allowed intercommunication and information spread either from person to person via e-mail or other forms of direct messaging, from person to several persons via newsgroups and e-mail lists, or from one person or organization to the wider web via websites. While this made it technically possible for one person to reach a wide audience, that audience typically would have

to exist either outside the internet already (as with news organizations and celebrities) or be built slowly through networking on a number of separate fora.

This changed with the establishment of point-to-multipoint websites that networked all of their millions or even billions of users to each other. Early ventures such as Blogger and WordPress simplified the publication of longer missives and let users connect through publicly visible and sometimes interlinked comment fields. True platform social networks like Friendster, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, among many more, including other, niche and/or long-dead services like Vine, Digg, or Bebo, took the ease of creating what more and more became universally known as "content" to the next level in terms of lowering barriers and providing simple interfaces (Gillespie 2018, 18–21).[1]

They also, for the first time in the history of the commercial internet, offered large common spaces on which users could connect, and on which they could also easily share posts, songs, images, or videos either they themselves or others on the platform (or even other platforms and websites) had created, allowing for medial virality. While many platforms provided for either fully private accounts or had and have options to make only some of the activity one shares on one's feed public, open sharing to all platform users was usually the default. This quickly created complications. As most social media platforms shared a cultural and geographic origin in California's Silicon Valley and had been built by (mostly middle and upper class) white and male founders and programmers who had attended elite U.S. universities, abuse directed at women and minorities was not something they experienced directly, and thus platform after platform found itself scrambling to address questions of moderation (Gillespie 2018, 12).

As Tarleton Gillespie has convincingly argued, moderation is not merely an additional service of minor importance for platforms but, in essence, what constitutes them as platforms (2018, 21). While the kind, frequency, and severity of moderation is always contested, the fact that it is necessary is never in doubt. When protocol-based alternatives, such as the Fediverse (including Mastodon, all built on the ActivityPub protocol) or Bluesky (built on the AT protocol) are suggested as taking up the mantle of commercial platforms controlled by one corporate entity, the problem of moderation does not disappear. Instead, it is transferred to the smaller constituent "instances,"

[1] I will use Gillespie's definition of "platform" here, even though it does not expressly include federated social media like Mastodon. Scholars such as Gehl and Zulli have implicitly accepted it as also applying to non-centralized social media networks, however (Gehl and Zulli 2022, 2–3). This definition does not only apply to social media platforms, but this paper focuses on social media, and others are therefore excluded. An even broader definition of "platform" can be found in Nick Srnicek's concept of "platform capitalism," in which companies as diverse as Siemens, GE, and AirBNB are all considered platforms (Srnicek 2016). While Srnicek's heuristic is helpful in thinking about the larger historical changes to capitalism during the past half century, the narrower definitions outlined above are sufficient for my immediate purposes here.

interconnected servers run by different organizations or individuals that together make up the network, and thus responsibility for it is spread around.

In part, the decentralized structure of such a social media network can stand in for moderation: if an instance with many bad actors is banned by others, its users lose reach, making the need to delete illegal content or hate speech less pressing. Users are often the first line of defense as reporters of posts they deem problematic or suspect. Any report by one user likely means the content has already been seen by scores of others who did not bother to, or did not know how, to report it. If fewer users see something, it is less of an issue to the community at large, and since deleting all illegal content from the internet is an impossibility, concentrating on that which has the largest reach has the most immediate effect.[2]

This may, however, also severely limit the possibility for reports of violence or discrimination to surface in public discourse. In some well-publicized cases, minority users of Fediverse instances have already been banned or their posts deleted for hate speech when they reported on discrimination they themselves experienced (Cf. e.g. Okereke 2023). Affordances such as content warnings meant to spare users from upsetting posts, if strictly required, as they are on some instances, also curb the reach of images and videos that gain their potency precisely from shock value. Structural granularity of a network can also never completely eliminate the need for human moderation, especially where a grey zone of content is concerned that may or may not be illegal in some countries, or may or may not be something that the instance's community is willing to put up with.

While, if operating under the laws of a country that bans national socialist symbols, it is relatively straightforward for an instance moderator to delete all images of swastikas, it becomes much harder to decide whether a less prominent symbol typically used by right-wing extremists is outright banned, used legally in a right-wing context (which may still be something a community rejects), or simply shares accidental commonality with such symbols. The number 420 may, for example, be used in its nazi context, denoting the birthday of Adolf Hitler, or in its less sinister meaning stemming from marijuana culture; the letters B&H may point to the neo-nazi organization banned in Germany or the photography retailer owned by Hasidic Jews in New York, certainly two very different uses. Often only a significant amount of context can make meaning clear, and since moderation is a problem of scale and speed, moderators usually simply do not have time to assess context beyond one or a few posts (Gillespie 2018, 114–117).

[2] Christina Dunbar-Hester has termed the variance between what users of different instances see on Mastodon "lossy distribution" (Dunbar-Hester 2024, 2).

Large platforms create guidelines regarding such moderation which can be – even if imperfectly – followed by their moderators. Platform companies' incentive is to provide a reasonably good experience on the platform, as they extract monetary value from it, usually through advertising interspersed in the user-created content and the selling-on of data they collect about users. Both require a continued and lively presence of a large number of people on the platform. In a federated model where instances are run by any number of commercial, governmental, or non-governmental organizations or even private individuals, who may often be unaware of legal requirements, such pressures do not necessarily exist.

Yet that does not mean large, commercially run platforms are better equipped to deal with illegal content, abuse, or disinformation on the internet, or that they are otherwise an inherently more viable model. Writer and *Electronic Frontier Foundation* activist Cory Doctorow has coined the evocative term "enshittification" to describe the trajectory of startup companies whose useful main product gets diluted by the need to turn profits for investors and shareholders (Doctorow 2023). Whether this concept invariably holds true, or if so, for all platforms, has not yet been subjected to the test of time. It is likely, however, that the incentive for platforms to improve the experience for users become secondary to extracting value from the platform once a lock-in effect has occurred. To keep users in the same virtual space that everyone else they care to find on the internet already occupies only requires the experience not to deteriorate to a point where this is no longer the case, at which point the same network effects that concentrate users on one platform often lead to a concerted exodus to another, such as with the original popularity of Facebook at the expense of MySpace.

IV. Federation

Federation is a promising innovation (or, depending on perspective, return to older forms of virtual community) because it offers an alternative of shared virtual sociality that includes the possibility of escaping data collection and individualized advertising, things that users otherwise must accept as an implicit corollary of engaging on a platform. Also referred to as Decentralized Online Social Networks (DOSNs), federation offers a meaningful way of participating in a smaller community that is connected to, but not commensurate with, a larger non-centralized network (La Cava, Greco, and Tagarelli 2021). Communication scholars Robert W. Gehl and Diana Zulli, building on Daniel Elazar's concept of covenantal federalism, have called the model a "digital covenant" (Burgess 2012; Gehl and Zulli 2022). This model of federated, open social media,

according to the authors, stands in contrast with the contractual governance (expressed in extensive legal rules and terms of service) on commercial platforms:

> Non-centralization and consent are directly related; through non-centralization, Mastodon users consent or withdraw their consent to be governed. Consent happens at the network level by all members agreeing to abide by Mastodon's general ethos. At the local level, users consent to specific instance rules and grant administrators access to/control over their data […]. However, non-centralization allows users to migrate their data from instance to instance, effectively withdrawing and transferring consent at the individual level (2022, 7).

Gehl and Zulli consider their contribution as offering a conceptual alternative to two other models of social media governance, corporate control and "a putative 'Wild West' of alt-right alt-tech." They provide convincing arguments for federation, including the finding that Mastodon reacted quicker to alt-right trolls than commercial platforms, yet they also identify the exclusionary trait of "techno-elitism" as inherent in its complicated structure which requires an understanding of non-centralization and its effects in order to make full use of the platform (Gehl and Zulli 2022, 13).

In addition, as already espoused above, race is another factor along which lines of inclusion and exclusion in the Fediverse often fall. While direct and open white supremacy may not be tolerated, discrimination still occurs. Techno-elitism often maps onto a population that is more privileged – more male, more white, more well-off, more likely to reside in the Global North – than the population at large, and for whom sexism, structural racism, and the everyday experiences of people of color are not immediate concerns. This worldview necessarily trickles down into platform and instance governance, especially in a federated system that relies on unpaid volunteers to do much of the work of moderation. In such a model, those who have the resources in terms of money, technical knowledge, and time to dedicate themselves to actively participate in moderation and governance naturally will skew richer and more educated.

In that sense, the issues that arose with early corporate social media, namely that the people in charge did not predict and could not relate to problems many users who did not stem from their background had, are replicated in federated social media. Since there is at present no monetary need to address this kind of discrimination, and because the Fediverse generally prizes its existing culture, with veterans of its services frequently admonishing newcomers to obey established

rules, there is also no clear incentive to tackle it. This is, however, a marker of specific existing communities, and not an inherent feature of decentralization. On the other hand, commercial platforms must both moderate effectively to keep people on their platform, while also disavowing that major moderation is going on in order to preserve a semblance of free idea exchange. The fact that in the history of the internet, either small communities with strict community-enforced rules or large platforms with looser governance whose rules are largely outside of the control of any one community using them have existed may make those two sensibilities appear inherently linked (Gillespie 2018, 192, 212–213).

This is partially true. Structurally, smaller virtual communities are a more direct representation of the norms of a community than large platforms can be, since the latter must cater to a much more variegated audience. They emphasize, de-emphasize, ban, or allow content in ways that are limited by geography, algorithms, as well as platform architecture and the whims of its owners, moderators, and the governments that create the rules under which they operate. Only through the latter do users officially have some – very diluted – role to play in creating platform rules. Though user input into platforms is manifold, decisions about platform content removal are made by platform management, and not transparently.

Neither large platforms nor federation as it currently exists, then, solve all the problems associated with social media. But what about a combination of large platforms running on open protocols? The answer to this third possibility depends heavily on the specific implementation, which is reliant on regulatory choices that exceed the what of allowed speech and touch on the how of technological implementation. A hybrid solution between federation and control by entities large enough to effectively moderate (be they corporate, cooperative, or governmental) has a significant potential to come into being, with most people either choosing the large instance for convenience or smaller, specialized ones for specific needs or interests.

This would recreate the current split in users between large, often ad-supported e-mail services and smaller servers set up either by organizations and corporations, mostly for work-related messaging, and private persons. Social media is not e-mail, so the comparison only goes so far. But a hybrid model between open protocols that allow several providers of social media to connect to one another while not depending on federation to do the work of moderation can combine the advantages of platform-based social media with those of protocol-based approaches. In a sense, this is already apparent in the experience of the Mastodon social network, where the “main” server run by Mastodon gGmbH, the non-profit primarily responsible for the development of the network’s code, exceeds 2 million accounts, while the next-largest instances all have under

2 million users, most significantly fewer (Mastodon Instances 2024). Since some of the platform's functions, such as search, discoverability, and immediacy of propagation work best when people are on the same instance, this creates a draw to join the most popular server.

V. Regulation

Governmental regulation of platforms has often relied on establishing reporting requirements and time periods within which illegal content must be removed. It has not usually targeted the question of protocols for services built on top of infrastructure. One exception is the European Union's Digital Markets Act.

The European Union's Digital Markets Act has made communication interoperability a condition for companies designated "gatekeepers."[3] As of fall 2023, when the first decisions were made by European policymakers, there were six of these, Alphabet (owner of Google), Amazon, Apple, ByteDance (owner of TikTok), Meta (owner of Facebook and Instagram), and Microsoft (Digital Markets Act 2023). This means that social media networks not owned by these companies, including the highly influential but deemed-too-small Twitter/X, are not considered gatekeepers under the act, and thus will not have to comply with its stringent interoperability requirements. (Though they do have to comply with provisions of the Digital Services Act, or DSA).[4] Even for those platforms which do have to provide for full interoperability, the exact requirements are at this point not yet clear.

While the DMA may succeed in bringing interoperability to a small number of important services, it is unlikely to force smaller social media platforms (and if Twitter/X is considered small, then even those platforms can have a massive cultural and political effect) to switch to open protocols. The DMA creates rules to combat anti-monopolistic behavior, explicitly making it possible for smaller players to use their smaller size and non-monopoly status, and therefore fewer regulations pertaining to them, to innovate. This, however, also creates the somewhat incongruous situation that only some products by the largest platform companies are forced to open up. The DMA has robust provisions to deal with the main problem it was created to solve,

[3] It defines interoperability as "the ability to exchange information and mutually use the information which has been exchanged through interfaces or other solutions, so that all elements of hardware or software work with other hardware and software and with users in all the ways in which they are intended to function" (Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2022 on contestable and fair markets in the digital sector and amending Directives (EU) 2019/1937 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Digital Markets Act) 2022, Art. 2).

[4] As evidenced by EU Commissioner Thierry Breton reminding Twitter/X owner Elon Musk of the site's obligations in a letter on October 10, 2023, following terrorist attacks by Hamas on Israel and resultant widespread disinformation on the platform (Breton 2023a). Breton followed this up by opening an account on the rival Bluesky service later that day and reposting the letter (Breton 2023b).

anti-competitive behavior. It has far less bite when it comes to issues of transparency, especially as they concern second-tier but still significant platforms. While Twitter had a comparably open policy towards sharing its APIs until the 2022 change in ownership, prompting a lot of sociological research into online behavior generally, but therefore also Twitter specifically, these have all but disappeared for researchers without the deepest of pockets, essentially making academic research of the platform's data impossible without convoluted workarounds (Stokel-Walker 2023; Markham and Baym 2009).

This makes the formerly well-researched platform a black box, putting an onus not only on research that analyzes internet trends and behavior on a societal level, but also on the kind that could make details regarding its moderation transparent, and therefore reveal problems that need either legal or regulatory redress. While it is likely neither possible nor desirable to force standardized open protocols on all social media (as ever, some of the innovation that adds to a technology's future viability is likely to arise from workarounds and extensions that may break compatibility), a regulatory focus on requiring any platform of a considerable size to have accessible APIs for research or at minimum an indemnification of researchers trying to reverse-engineer such access against legal action, could be advisable.[5]

A further aspect of regulation not frequently discussed is that of labor rights in the context of human moderation. Moderation is an oftentimes mentally challenging and potentially traumatizing task. Yet, most of human moderation is undertaken by only minimally trained moderators who have little time to make decisions, little leeway in how to make them, and who, due to the nature of moderation that spans a global network and must take into account global cultural contexts and languages, are subject to outsourcing and therefore face constant precarity (Gillespie 2018, 119–123). Human moderation is guaranteed to continue to be a significant part of how social media platforms deal with illegal and/or unwanted content. While large language models (what is often simply called "artificial intelligence" in current public discourse) can make it easier for networks to recognize banned content, the sheer number of people constantly contributing to social media makes innovation in evading its safeguards all but a certainty, assuring that sooner or later human intervention is always needed. At the same time, a diverse set of human moderators attuned to cultural preferences and subject to different kinds of issues on social media themselves is less likely to simply rotely reproduce the biases built into any large language model (Noble 2018, 2021, 205).

[5] This should be part of a larger conversation on potential protections for adversarial interoperability (Doctorow 2019).

VI. Conclusion

This paper has given a necessarily abridged overview of the history of social networking, emphasizing the origins of an underlying ideology that is inscribed not only in the networking sites themselves, but in popular conceptions of the internet in general. It has found that it is necessary not only to take a surface-level look at the specific issues that social networks pose to democratic governance, but to understand both the technological and social concepts that are fundamental to how social media functions in order to be able to use it smartly while also curbing potential adverse effects.

Social media has enabled people or groups of people to take part in the "critical debate" of the public sphere who heretofore had been excluded from it. This has led to an expansion of societal discourse to include more citizens, which in democratic societies is inherently one of the highest goods. Yet problems of, bluntly put, how to weigh free speech against hate speech and information against disinformation, which preexisted social media, have seen new variations and sprung to the fore in novel ways that are corrosive to democratic societies in an unparalleled fashion. They are, on a basic level, an issue of large numbers of people communicating on the same plane.

These issues, however, cannot be meaningfully solved by simply creating ever more specific legal frameworks that oblige social media companies to allow or censor certain categories of utterances in accordance with existing laws. As the history of the emergence of social networks has shown, they are inherent to certain kinds of online spaces. Some could be addressed also, and perhaps more importantly, on a pragmatic regulatory level, such as requiring open APIs or the expanded use of interoperable protocols so the networks themselves can be independently accessed and studied, allowing for transparency when it comes to understanding how widespread certain issues are. This way, future concerns would be able to be identified as they emerge.

Whatever the future of shared virtual platforms and interoperable protocols, stakeholders of all kinds have to be meaningfully involved in any policy made regarding social media – including on social media. Vitally, the historical genesis of widespread conceptions of the nature and function of online spaces should never be ignored when their future is decided. The past two decades have shown the immense promise of social media. Similarly, the enormous danger of unmitigated attacks on individuals and disadvantaged groups, and of the unchecked spread of disinformation has become clear. The preservation of a lively public debate that encompasses the largest number of informed citizens is at the heart of democratic societies. To ensure it both in established venues as well as in emerging ones will remain a fundamental concern.

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