

The Critical Role of Social Media  
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In a very tangible way, social media has become an extension of the democratic process by encouraging participation in civil discourse. Freedom of speech thus perpetuates the spirit of a free republic by enabling expression of life, liberty, and happiness. While the advent of big tech has radically transformed how individuals have expressed themselves, the desire to engage in public debate and express opinions has only grown stronger. Today, billions participate in this marketplace of ideas by sharing content, photos, and websites that facilitate dialogue and encourage debate on topics ranging from public health to education to economic growth. Through healthy debate and exchange, the pursuit of truth—rather than popularity—is maintained. The great American experiment relies on such uninhibited discourse because without debate, there can be no exercise of reason, no discipline of thought and opinion, no defense of liberty. Truth ultimately prevails in a civil society that honors an individual’s inalienable rights. When individuals shirk their civic responsibilities and fail to participate in this experiment, free speech atrophies. By enabling constant discussion, questioning, and public engagement, media outlets serve a critical role in preserving freedom.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, however, social media has failed to provide an objective platform for the marketplace of ideas, controlling instead both the content and means of communication in the name of the public good. A 2020 study completed by the Pew Research Center, for example, revealed that nearly 75% of U.S. adults believe social media and big tech intentionally censor political viewpoints. In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Scottish economist Adam Smith likewise expresses concern when this “ideal [censored] society” is created and arranged at the expense of individual freedom. Austrian economist and philosopher Friedrich A. Hayek also warns of a fatal conceit that values oneness of mind over diversity of

thought. Hayek retorted that such a civil body would “not be very complex but extremely primitive.” Truly, controlling the content of speech limits the flourishing of a free society by removing the ability to question a fallible status quo and petition public authorities, governments, and officials for redress of grievances. There is no discourse, only silence.

Defending the free market, Hayek would further argue that the problem lies not in allocating resources or public favor but in the nature of knowledge itself. His article, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” demonstrates that all of human knowledge is scattered across countless market actors in a free society and that each actor holds a small fragment of knowledge particular to time, place, and experience. Only through free exchange does the actor reveal his limited knowledge to others: it is by revealing and sharing this limited knowledge that individuals are able to promote the public good.

When the liberty to freely share this knowledge on social media platforms is unilaterally censored, a pre-established narrative—not truth and critical thinking—dominates. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his *The Gulag Archipelago* warns his readers of the final result of such relentless censorship of freedom: “We forget everything. What we remember is not what actually happened, not history, but merely that hackneyed dotted line they have chosen to drive into our memories by incessant hammering.” Ultimately, the cost of overt censorship is liberty. When people of good will knowingly remain silent and fail to voice reason, they surrender liberty: ultimately, tyranny reigns sovereign.

Furthermore, no true academic or personal freedom exists when individuals dare not break away from the mold of societal conformity due to fear of retribution. Free speech rapidly degrades when individuals continue to engage in self-censorship rather than self-expression. When individualism is targeted on social media platforms, for example, the orthodoxy of

mainstream ideas provides irresistible security: what once served as the means of promoting freedom now halts reason and self-governance. While the Asch Conformity Study of 1951 is not directly related to the use of social media, the Study's conclusions demonstrate that individuals may knowingly deny what they witness firsthand when their perception of reality does not align with what the majority purports to be both true and acceptable. In other words, the fear of being rejected as a deviant or enemy to the public good motivates individuals to betray values, consciences, and truth in order to align with whatever is socially acceptable—even if they fundamentally disagree on philosophical, moral grounds. Group-think and herd mentality thus betray limitless power and influence because collectivist thinking becomes immune to individual scrutiny and offers protection from public shaming. Rather than thriving in a free society, ideas are banished into an underground black market of suppressed ideologies. James Buchanan warns that sacrificing individual freedom for the sake of such security reveals that many are “afraid to be free.”

Liberty indeed comes with great responsibility and while difficult to defend, challenges each individual to rise to the virtue of self-governance even when doing so remains unpopular. As an extended platform of the democratic process, social media may in fact strengthen the moral backbone of a free society by encouraging discussion and diversity of thought.

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