



The Loss Of Free Speech Was Predictable And Preventable

Description

As technology has disrupted key elements of society, Technocrats have taken advantage of the chaos to not only implement their own agenda but also to erect barriers to competition or resistance. If this had been recognized early enough, it could have been easily blocked. Now, the mere barriers have hardened into fortresses.? TN Editor

The First Amendment is at a critical juncture. Recent congressional hearings on the Twitter Files brought the matter into full public view. Freedom of speech and of the press are hanging by a precarious thread. Do we want a future in which information flows freely, or one in which an information elite controls those flows "for our own good?" The choices we make over the next few years will determine which of those futures we get.

It's tragic that we have let the problem reach this dangerous state. What heightens the tragedy, however, is that the war against America's most cherished freedoms was predictable and preventable. If those of us who value freedom want to win, we're going to need a strategy grounded in a clear understanding of what's happening and why.

The Twitter Files story is shocking. Allegations that big tech and social media manipulate information have been around for as long as we've had tech and social media companies. Allegations of bias among the mainstream media are even older. In recent years, however, both the allegations and the supporting evidence have ratcheted upward to unprecedented levels.

When Elon Musk acquired Twitter, he opened his company's internal archives to scrutiny. He assembled a team of journalists with a curious pedigree: registered Democrats with a distaste for Donald Trump and his supporters, whose track records skewed considerably left of center, and whose recent work has demonstrated deep concern about the politicization of journalism.

Musk gave them unfettered access. They found a deep, broad, and disturbing pattern of collaboration between big government and big tech designed to promote “official stories” on multiple issues, throttle competing theories and arguments, and sanction those who dared to question government propaganda.

When two of those journalists – Matt Taibbi and Michael Shellenberger – testified before Congress, their Democratic inquisitors sought to belittle their credentials, question their motives, and tar them as part of some Republican-funded, far-right conspiracy. The still-left-leaning journalists are trying to absorb their shock at the depths to which the formerly civil-libertarian left has fallen.

Far from shocking, however, that fall was predictable – and predicted. In 2001, amidst the public disgust with tech companies following the collapse of the dotcom bubble, I set out to make sense of life during the transition from the late industrial age to the early information age. I analyzed what I called the first four front-page stories of the information age: the dotcom bubble, the Microsoft antitrust trial, the rise of open-source software, and the Napster-driven wars over digital music. Contrary to popular opinion of the time, I believed that these stories were far from distinct. I saw them as four manifestations of a single underlying phenomenon. My goal was to understand that phenomenon.

I found it. It appeared most clearly in the digital music arena, but it ran through all four stories – and through much that has happened since. It appears just as clearly in today’s war on free speech. It involves an entirely predictable pattern of opportunity, action, and reaction.

The starting point is digitization and quantification. The Internet changed the economics of information. Throughout human history, information was scarce, hard to acquire, and expensive to process. Skilled professionals – spies, scholars, lawyers, accountants, clerics, doctors – could command a premium for their knowledge. When the Internet went public, anything that could be digitized and quantified suddenly flowed freely. Information was there for the asking. The premium shifted to filtering – the ability to discard unwanted information and arrange what remained.

Economic shifts generate massive opportunities for creative, entrepreneurial people and bring glorious benefits to millions of consumers. The Internet was no exception in this regard, and neither was the predictable backlash against it. Anything that benefits new businesses and empowers consumers is a warning shot across the bow of powerful incumbents who’d grown accustomed to serving those consumers in a predictable, profitable, manner.

In the music industry, anything that let individual consumers share digital music files reduced the revenues, profits, power, and control of record labels. Pre-digitization, these powerful incumbents determined what music got recorded and how it was packaged, distributed, presented, and priced. It was a comfortable business model that gave us the music industry “as we knew it.” The Internet undermined it entirely.

Powerful incumbents never fade quietly into the night when challenged. They fight, using whatever weapons they can muster. In our society, the most effective ways to undermine new technological and economic opportunities tend to lie in law, regulation, and public policy. The record labels fought – largely successfully – to apply and reinterpret existing laws and to change laws in ways favorable to their interests.

There’s the pattern: Technology creates opportunities. New businesses exploit those opportunities.

Consumers benefit. Powerful incumbents fear their loss of control. Threatened incumbents seek allies in government. Government changes laws and regulations to protect incumbent interests. Media campaigns “educate” the public on the merits of the new policies. The new laws ensure that the next wave of technological change runs largely through the powerful incumbents, rather than against them.

By 2003, I had distilled this pattern, showed numerous ways that it had already unfolded, predicted that it would soon hit parts of our economy and our lives far more significant than the music industry, and suggested some ways that we might prepare ourselves for the coming battles.

It took another two years to get my analysis published. It went largely unnoticed. Twelve years later, then-Senator Ben Sasse described the ways that this pattern had forever disrupted the dynamics of employment. This, too, went largely unnoticed.

Today, we see that disruptive pattern threatening the most basic of our civil liberties. Its manifestation in the arenas of speech, propaganda, and censorship is clear. Consider how each step in the process I identified above has played out here:

Technology creates opportunities. The Internet opened entirely new vistas for the creation and exchange of ideas, information, theories, opinions, propaganda, and outright lies.

New businesses exploit those opportunities. The companies founded since 1995 that created and control the world’s most important conduits for information have joined the ranks of history’s most powerful entities.

Consumers benefit. The centrality of these communication systems to our lives (for better or for worse) proves that they confer real value.

Powerful incumbents fear their loss of control. The twin political shocks of 2016 – Brexit and Donald Trump – highlighted the extent to which official channels had lost control of the narrative. With the entirety of elite media, government, big business, and the intelligentsia aligned behind Remain and Hillary, the newly empowered masses understood – for the first time – that there were viable alternatives to the official story.

Threatened incumbents seek allies in government. A coalition of elite forces assembled quickly, laser-focused on stomping out the populist threat. Masses empowered to conduct their own analyses, draw their own conclusions, and share their opinions among themselves threatened the stability of the power structure “as we know it.”

Government changes laws and regulations to protect incumbent interests. Prior to Musk’s Twitter, the entirety of Silicon Valley committed itself to “protecting” the public from “disinformation,” roughly defined as anything that threatened to undermine an official, sanctioned narrative. Allies throughout the administrative state, Congress, and the Biden White House are working to embed those “protections” in law.

Media campaigns “educate” the public on the merits of the new policies. The same mainstream media that vilified Napster, Grokster, and Peer-to-Peer (P2P) file sharing is now working to turn public opinion against the evil purveyors of alleged “disinformation.”

Will the information age be an era of informed, empowered citizens – or an era of a dominant, information-controlling elite? Stay tuned. That's the question we need to answer.

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Date Created

04/13/2023