Google

The Good Censor

How can Google reassure the world that it protects users from harmful content while still supporting free speech?

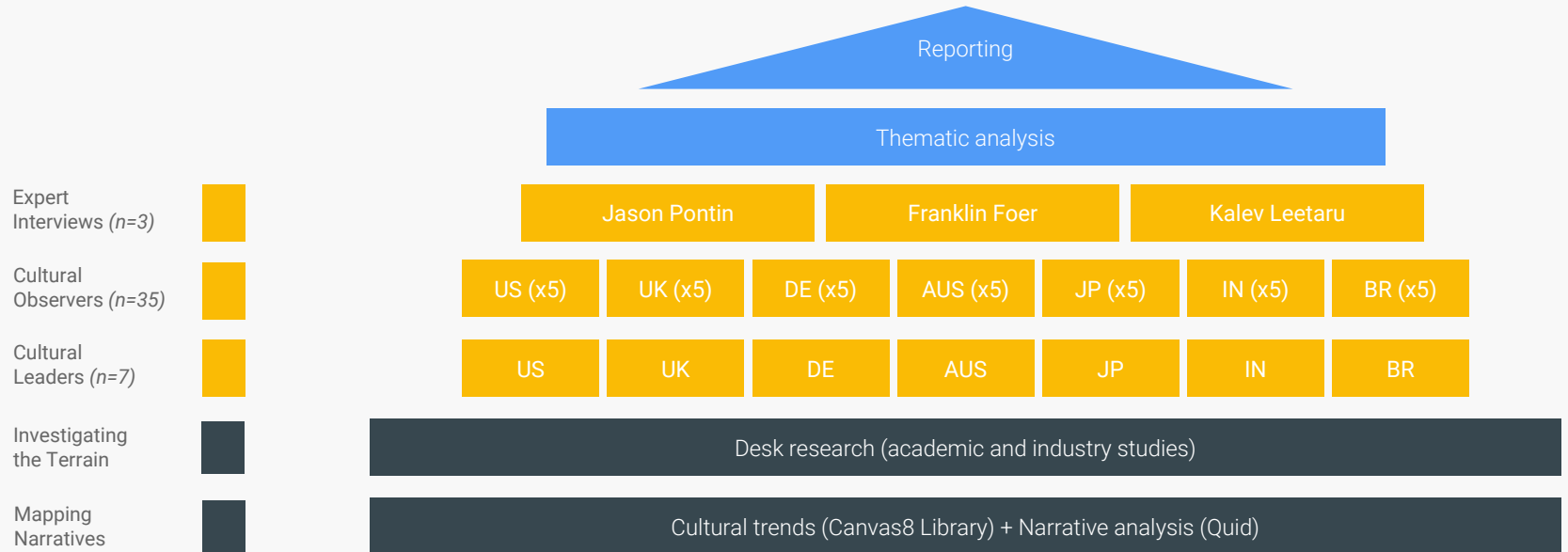CULTURAL CONTEXT REPORT - MARCH 2018

Can Google protect free-speech *and* police harmful content?

From elections and political propaganda, trolls and gendered bigotry, to hate speech and religious extremism, **debates about who can and should be heard on the internet rage like never before.** As governments struggle to apply existing legislation to the Wild West online, **users are asking if the openness of the internet should be celebrated after all.**

Bots and troll farms lash out at free thought and controversial opinion, while faceless users attack each other without empathy. **Free speech becomes a social, economic and political weapon.** Automated technologies lack the sophistication to adjudicate effectively. In response, people think twice before airing their thoughts aloud, while critique is buried under avalanches of automated rebuttals, vitriolic attacks and nonsensical rhetoric. **As the tech firms struggle to deal with the issues, the public and governments grow increasingly impatient.**

Yet, amongst all this negativity, seeds of political harmony, gender and racial equality, and tolerance are sown on the internet. **Is it possible to have an open and inclusive internet** while simultaneously limiting political oppression and despotism, hate, violence and harassment? **Who should be responsible for censoring 'unwanted' conversation, anyway? Governments? Users? Google?**

Google

This report is the result of several layers of research

Reporting

Thematic analysis

Expert Interviews *(n=3)*		Jason Pontin	Franklin Foer	Kalev Leetaru			

Cultural Observers *(n=35)*		US (x5)	UK (x5)	DE (x5)	AUS (x5)	JP (x5)	IN (x5)	BR (x5)

Cultural Leaders *(n=7)*		US	UK	DE	AUS	JP	IN	BR

Investigating the Terrain — Desk research (academic and industry studies)

Mapping Narratives — Cultural trends (Canvas8 Library) + Narrative analysis (Quid)

Google

We worked with cultural leaders and
local observers to deepen our understanding...

Local cultural leaders

Dr Peter Chen
Academic, Australia

Bia Granja
Entrepreneur, Brazil

Joana Breidenbach
Anthropologist, Germany

Nobuyuki Hayashi
Journalist, Japan

Grant McCracken
Anthropologist, USA

Nikhil Pahwa
Entrepreneur, India

Richard Watson
Futurist, UK

21x Micro Observers
(3x per market)

Google

We've worked with some leading thinkers in this space
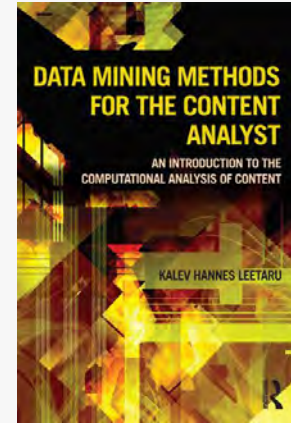

Jason Pontin

Journalist and former editor
in chief of MIT Technology
Review

Franklin Foer

Author of *World Without
Mind* and former editor of
The New Republic

Dr. Kalev Leetaru

Senior Fellow at the George
Washington University
Center for Cyber &
Homeland Security

Google

1. The importance of free speech

2. Bad behaviour and censorship online

3. Fighting back against bad behaviour online

4. Tech firms - free speech or censorship?

5. How do people want Google to respond to this predicament?

Google

With free speech, individuals can hold 'the powerful' to account...

The freedom to speak holds the key to our two most valuable possessions...

Personal liberty

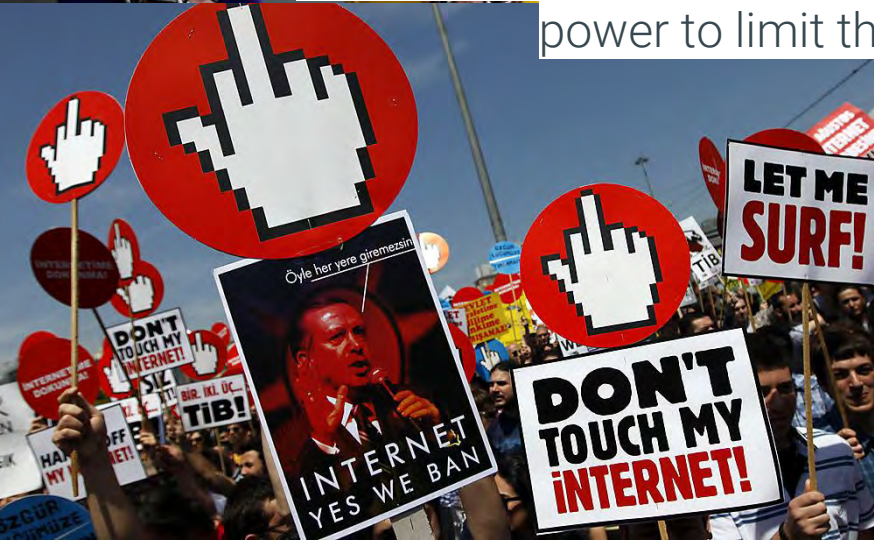And the ability to express yourself freely

+

Collective wellbeing

And the prevention of harm

Google

... but censorship can give governments – and companies – the power to limit the freedom of individuals

Underpinned by the First Amendment and belief in an "equality of status in the field of ideas" - the US is especially committed to free speech[1]

" The reason that we only [ban] speech when it's intended to and likely to cause imminent violence is because as long as there's time enough to deliberate and to discuss— [there's faith that] **the best remedy to evil counsels is good ones**, that **counter-speech is more appropriate than suppression**, and that **reason will ultimately prevail**… it's the essence of our constitutional system.

Jeffrey Rosen, 2016

The Deciders: The Future of Free Speech in a Digital World, Harvard Kennedy School[2]

Google

And conversations about the importance of free speech are alive on both sides of the political spectrum
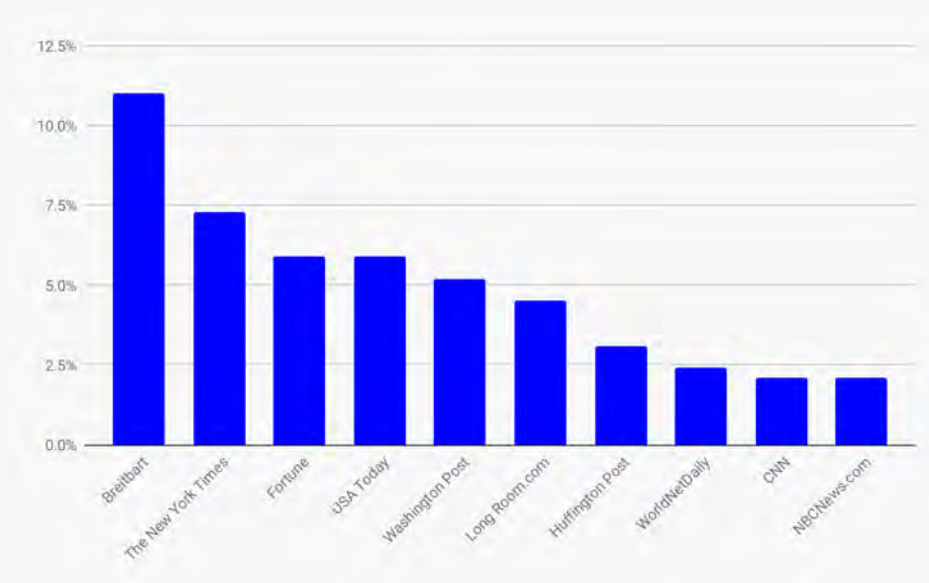
Google

The internet was also founded on utopian principles of free speech...

Google

"

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

John Perry Barlow, 1996

A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace

Google

This free speech ideal was instilled in the DNA of the Silicon Valley startups that now control the majority of our online conversations...

"[Google's] atmosphere of creativity and challenge... has helped us **provide unbiased, accurate and free access to information** for those who rely on us around the world."

Larry Page and Sergey Brin
2004 Founders' IPO Letter[1]

"[Facebook is a tool to create] a **more honest and transparent dialogue around government**. [The result will be] better solutions to some of the biggest problems of our time."

Mark Zuckerberg
2012 manifesto for investors[2]

"[Twitter is] the **free speech wing of the free speech party**"

CEO Dick Costolo
2017[3]

Google

An important US Federal statute from 1996 supports this position of neutrality

Under section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, **tech firms have legal immunity from** the majority of the **content posted on their platforms** (unlike 'traditional' media publications).

This protection has empowered YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Reddit to **create spaces for free speech without the fear of legal action** or its financial consequences.

"It's hard to say what the global internet would look like if Section 230 had never become the law of the land. **Would YouTube have even been possible?**"

April Glaser, Slate

And the internet has certain, unique qualities that have supported these ambitions further...

Communication is **fast and frictionless**

Anonymous conflict is possible

Everyone has a **voice**

We meet **like-minded** people

Scale is unprecedented

This commitment to free, uncensored conversation has had positive outcomes...

The Arab Spring was the the high point of this positivity - a visceral example of the power of digitalised free speech.

Google

Free speech flourished online as governments struggled to contain it

"

On the global scale, **the internet and the social platforms have been a wonderful boon for free speech**. *The internet has given platforms to billion of people to express themselves and has made it* **almost impossible for governments** *– even in highly controlled nations like China –* **to control people's speech effectively.**

Jason Pontin

Google

But recent global events have undermined this utopian narrative
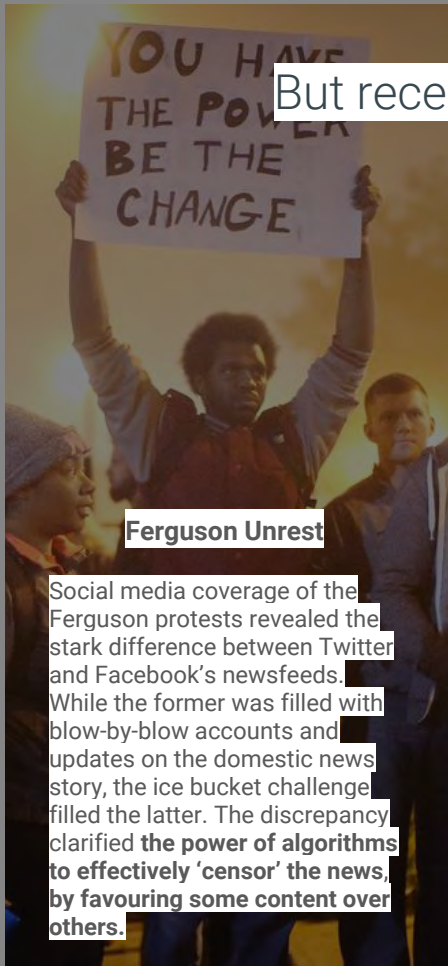
Ferguson Unrest

Social media coverage of the Ferguson protests revealed the stark difference between Twitter and Facebook's newsfeeds. While the former was filled with blow-by-blow accounts and updates on the domestic news story, the ice bucket challenge filled the latter. The discrepancy clarified **the power of algorithms to effectively 'censor' the news, by favouring some content over others.**
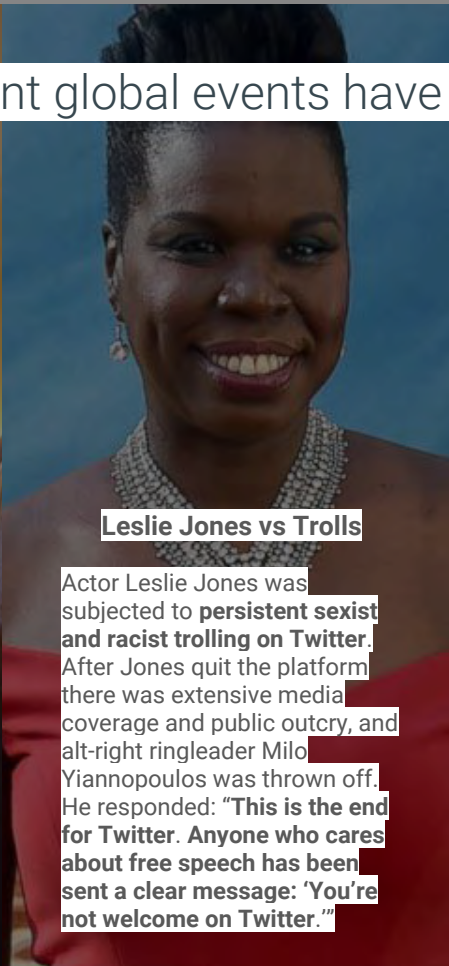
Leslie Jones vs Trolls

Actor Leslie Jones was subjected to **persistent sexist and racist trolling on Twitter**. After Jones quit the platform there was extensive media coverage and public outcry, and alt-right ringleader Milo Yiannopoulos was thrown off. He responded: **"This is the end for Twitter. Anyone who cares about free speech has been sent a clear message: 'You're not welcome on Twitter.'"**

US Election 2016

The revelation that 80,000 posts made by Russian-based entities were seen by up to 126 million Facebook users ahead of the US election revealed **the scope and potential impact of fake news on democracy.** Facebook's Samidh Chakrabarti said the Russian entities **"essentially [used] social media as an information weapon."**

Kashmir Clashes (IN)

Facebook and Twitter were implicated in **governmental censorship of clashes between rebels and Indian authorities in Kashmir.** The platforms removed posts and suspended accounts about the events, including images of rebel Burhan Wani's funeral, highlighting the **platforms' complicity with government censorship** as they attempted to stay on the right side of global authorities.

Google

But recent global events have undermined this utopian narrative

Philando Castile

The aftermath of the shooting of Philando Castile was broadcast on Facebook Live. Where traditional media would have had time to consider how to broadcast such sensitive, violent and controversial content, live-streaming sidesteps this editorial process. The clip **highlights the huge importance of context in moderation and the fluctuating line of appropriate censorship.**

The Rise of the Alt-Right

The rise of far-right political parties and institutions such as Britain First, Germany's AfD and Unite the Right opened people's eyes to how alt-right beliefs have been able to flourish on the internet. **Once controversial voices have been emboldened by like-minded individuals and are making their way offline, both on the streets and at the polls.**

Queermuseu (BR)

The conservative *Free Brazil Movement* used social media platforms to rally against an art exhibition called Queermuseu, because it discussed homosexuality and paedophilia. The exhibit was eventually shut down, raising concerns about **freedom of expression in digital spaces and the censorship of online/offline spaces in Brazil.**

Logan Paul

Hugely popular Youtuber, Logan Paul drew criticism for an insensitive clip of him seeing a suicide victim in Aokigahara forest, Japan. Youtube responded by removing Paul from its premium advertising program and reforming its ad restrictions. **The controversy raised the question of how much censorship we should demand from Youtube and whether it is putting profit before people.**

While revelations and exposés increased calls for change

Extremist Content

Major brands, including the UK government, Marks & Spencer and McDonald's, **boycotted YouTube** after it was revealed that their **ads were appearing on controversial clips and extremist content.** Google responded with promises of an **overhaul to advertising policies**, including more control and transparency for advertisers, but **fell short of promising to rid the platform of such content entirely**, as the latter would place them squarely in the realm of 'curator and censor'.

Peppa Parodies

Articles by the New York Times and writer James Bridle called attention to **troubling and inappropriate video content on YouTube**, which is not only accessible to children but often **targeted at them using popular kids' characters** like Peppa Pig, Frozen's Elsa and Spiderman, and tags to game the platform's algorithms. The resulting outcry led to **promises of reform from YouTube** and revealed the **shortcomings of relying on algorithmic filtering.**

Google

As the "we're not responsible for what happens on our platforms" defence crumbles, users and advertisers are demanding action...

" We're through the first early utopian period of social media and free speech, we're through the middle period, where there was excitement about the benefits of these platforms, and now **we're into a third era where we've become more jaded about their functionality**. Now **we're looking to the networks themselves to better manage their own utility**, and there is **conversation about governmental obligations** on these networks as well.

– Jason Pontin

Google

1. The importance of free speech

2. Bad behaviour and censorship online

3. Fighting back against bad behaviour online

4. Tech firms - free speech or censorship?

5. How do people want Google to respond to this predicament?

What's driving this furore around free speech and censorship online?

Google

"

The early utopian period of the
internet has collapsed under the
weight of bad behaviour....
Jason Pontin

Users, Governments
& Tech firms
are all behaving badly...

How are users behaving badly?

Hate speech

Although people have long been racist, sexist and hateful in many other ways, they weren't empowered by the internet to recklessly express their views with abandon. From film-stars to activists, viciousness is aimed at a diverse range of users.

Reprisals and intimidation

Online and offline worlds are blurring as more people are physically assaulted for speaking on the net. In 2017, a Christian cartoonist was murdered in Jordan for mocking Islamist militants' vision of heaven, while a journalist was killed in Myanmar for using FaceBook to post about corruption.[2]

Trolling

By provoking arguments and flaming disruption, trolls threaten valuable debate and infuriate users. The problem has become so rampant that several websites have even resorted to removing comments entirely.

2.6 million

tweets contained anti-Semitic speech during the US presidential election[1]

8 countries

witnessed murderous reprisals for online speech in 2017[3]

26%

of American users are victims of internet trolling[4]

How are users behaving badly?

Cyber harassment

From petty name-calling to more threatening behavior, harassment is an unwelcome component of life online for all too many users. With sustained stalking and one-off incidents defining the spectrum, some experiences are easier to escape than others.

40%

of internet users
have been harassed online[1]

Cyber racism

Supremacy, destiny and nationalism. Otherness, separation and hostility. Cyber racism exists in many guises, but it most often describes a "range of white supremacist movements in Europe and North America" and "the new horizons the Internet and digital media have opened" for them.[2]

"We're stepping off the internet in a big way. We have been spreading our memes. We have been organising on the internet. And now we're coming out."

Robert Ray, Daily Stormer (neo-Nazi website), at the Charlottesville protests[3]

Venting

When they're angry, people vent their frustrations. But whereas people used to tell friends and family about bad experiences, the internet now provides a limitless audience for our gripes. As more and more people vent, online conversations fill with anger and nastiness.

"Just pick a random, poor, innocent idiot on the internet and just attack them. Go after them. And find others to join you, who are also angry at that moment."

Kalev Leetaru

Google

Why are users behaving badly?

" **Human beings en masse don't behave very well.** They particularly don't behave very well if there aren't clear rules, and especially if speech is unaccountable, consequence-free, and in many cases anonymous. What happened on these networks is that, **in the absence of rules and consequences, everyone has behaved maximally badly.**

– Jason Pontin

Google

And the same reasons why the internet is great for free speech mean it's also primed for bad behaviour...

// Insights Lab

Why are users behaving badly?

On the net...

Communication is fast and frictionless

Anonymous conflict is possible

Everyone has a voice

We meet like-minded people

Scale is unprecedented

which means...

Relentless, 24/7 online conversations encourage people to **dive-in with their opinion** before it's too late, even if they're misinformed. And because we think with our emotional brain before our rational one, instant responses **amplify emotion-led discourse** not thoughtful debate.

The **social norms** that hold society together and keep people from hurting one another offline, **shift faster online**. It's more tempting to be nasty and aggressive when there are **no warning signals or hurdles** to slow people down. And because the internet removes physical communication barriers, **users are detached from the effects of their actions**

Google

Why are users behaving badly?

On the net...

Communication is fast and frictionless

Conflict can be anonymous

Everyone has a voice

We meet like-minded people

Scale is unprecedented

which means...

When they can't be seen or found, **people are more likely to cheat, lie and attack each other.** Anonymity isn't the full story - group dynamics, online cultures, and even the time of day can encourage bad behaviour - but the opportunity to **behave badly without fear of repercussion** does bring out the worst in people. **This is especially true when we aren't forced to empathize**

Offline, we avoid confrontation because it can more easily lead to physical harm - but with online anonymity, people don't worry so much. When we think nobody can see us, **we're keener to transgress moral norms**. And the ability to have multiple identities enables people to **say one thing and do another**.

Google

Why are users behaving badly?

On the net...

Communication is fast and frictionless

Anonymous conflict is possible

Everyone has a voice

We meet like-minded people

Scale is unprecedented

which means...

The **'little guys and girls' can now be heard** - emerging talent, revolutionaries, whistleblowers and campaigners. But **'everyone else' can shout loudly too** - including terrorists, racists, misogynists and oppressors. And because "everything looks like the New York Times" on the net, it's **harder to separate fact from fiction**, legitimacy from illegitimacy, novelty from history, and positivity from destructivity.

When consumers/producers feel like they 'own' their media platforms, their **experiences of free speech and censorship feel more personal** too. They increasingly value their ability to speak freely, but also feel personally assaulted when confronted through their own channels, **lashing out more violently** when their voice and opinions are threatened.

Google

Why are users behaving badly?

On the net...

Communication is fast and frictionless

Anonymous conflict is possible

Everyone has a voice

We meet like-minded people

Scale is unprecedented

which means...

The internet has **united political activists, dissidents and like-minded communities** of all shapes and sizes, including the oppressed minorities. On the flip-side, **minority groups once pushed underground** by public opinion of their abhorrent views **have discovered a safer space** in which to communicate, organise and reach-out to new sympathizers.

Because the **internet helps people to bunker down**, surrounded by similar opinions, mindsets and behaviours, **opportunities for learning and life-changing experiences are threatened**. These closed filter bubbles and echo chambers make **positive and transformative political debate less likely,** not more.

Why are users behaving badly?

On the net...

Communication is fast and frictionless

Anonymous conflict is possible

Everyone has a voice

We meet like-minded people

Scale is unprecedented

which means...

Across the supranational platforms of the net, **local stories become global events. People unite across borders and time zones**. But this global explosion has created a land grab for power.

Regional laws lose their significance and influence. Borderless filters aren't relevant everywhere - who decides what is or isn't censored? Jokes and critique don't always translate well. **Crummy politicians jump on the confusion** to expand their influence. **Users' bad behaviour falls between the cracks.**

Google

If that's how users are behaving badly…

What about governments?

According to Freedom House, only a quarter of the world's internet users reside in countries where the internet is 'Free from Censorship' [1]

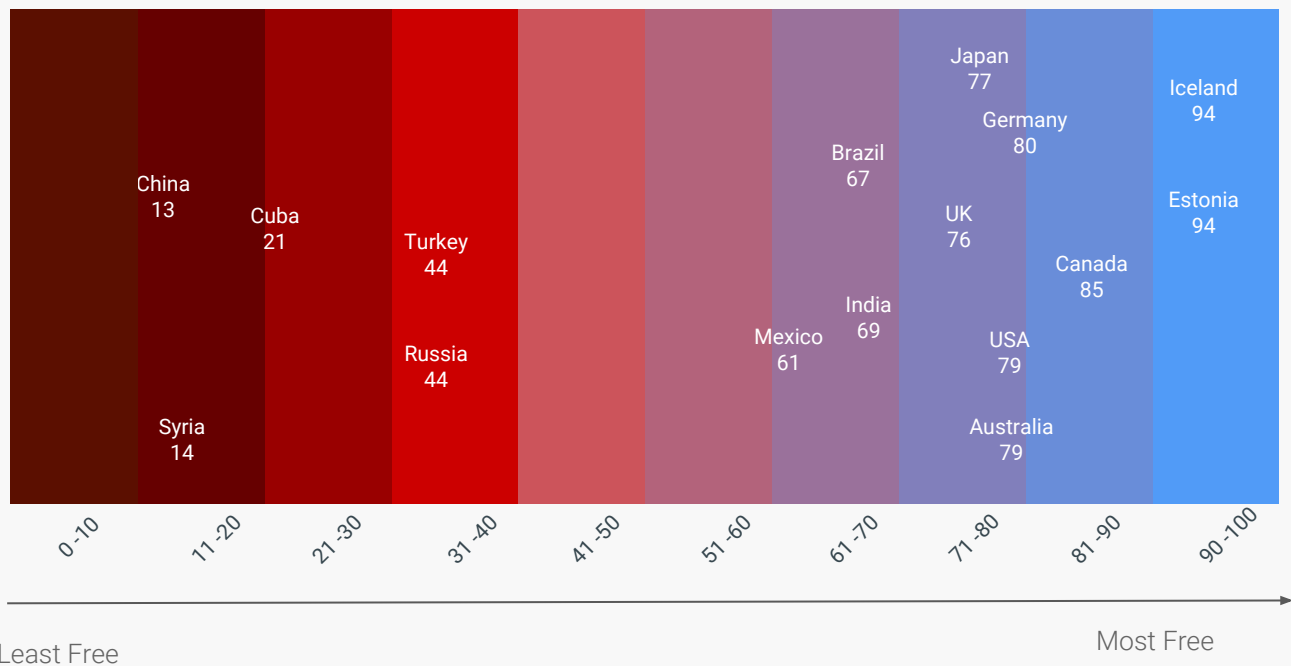Not Assessed 13% • Not Free 36% • Partly Free 28.% • Free 23%

Percentage of total global internet users, by 'freedom of net' status

'Free from Censorship' means there are…

No major obstacles to access
No onerous restrictions on content
No serious violations of user rights in the form of unchecked surveillance
No unjust repercussions for legitimate speech.[2]

Freedom on the Net 2017

The spectrum of global internet freedoms isn't especially surprising, but...

China 13
Cuba 21
Turkey 44
Russia 44
Syria 14
Brazil 67
Mexico 61
India 69
Japan 77
Germany 80
UK 76
USA 79
Australia 79
Canada 85
Iceland 94
Estonia 94

0-10 11-20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70 71-80 81-90 90-100

Least Free   Most Free

Countries are ranked on a 100-point scale based on three broad categories: obstacles to access, limits on content and violations of user rights.
The higher the score, the more restrictive a country's internet controls.

// Insights Lab

Global internet freedoms have gone **downhill** for the past seven years

Google

// Insights Lab

Political interference is on the increase….

Online manipulation and disinformation influenced elections in more than 18 countries in 2017, including the US[1]

Despite having a more vibrant and diverse online environment than most, disinformation and hyperpartisan content are having a bigger impact.

Google

And there are worrying signs of new government encroachments

Eg.1

When a Twitter user objected to Trump's immigration policy in January 2017, U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents responded by asking the firm to reveal their identity, before backing off when Twitter fought them in court.

Eg.2

In August 2017, the Department of Justice contacted DreamHost (a hosting company) to demand the names of 1.3 million users who had visited #DisruptJ20 - an anti-Trump protest website.[1]

How are governments behaving badly?

Bots

Bots account for more web traffic than humans.[1] Governments employ impersonators, scraps, spammers and and hackers to manipulate conversations, quell dissent and discredit information. From Washington to Moscow, bots are deployed by governments against foreign adversaries and domestic opponents.[2]

Troll farms

With shadowy secrecy, governments employ armies to manipulate online discussions in their favour.[3] This fabricated support silences opponents and critics at home and abroad. And the propaganda makes it more difficult to know which opinions are 'real' and who is *really* supportive of those power.[4]

Restrictions and cyber attacks

Governments are increasingly restricting mobile internet services for political gain or security reasons.[6] And users were stopped from live streaming anti government protests in more than nine countries in 2017. To limited free speech further, states are also restricting encryption and virtual private networks (VPNs).[7]

28.9%
of all web traffic is estimated to come from 'bad bots'[1]

448 million comments
posted by users employed by the Chinese government to impersonate ordinary citizens[5]

34
countries witnessed cyber attacks against government critics in 2017[8]

"

The use of paid commentators and political bots to spread government propaganda was pioneered by China and Russia but has now gone global. The effects of these rapidly spreading techniques on democracy and civic activism are potentially devastating.

Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House[1]

Google

Governments also trying to tighten their grip on political discourse by asking Google to censor more and more content
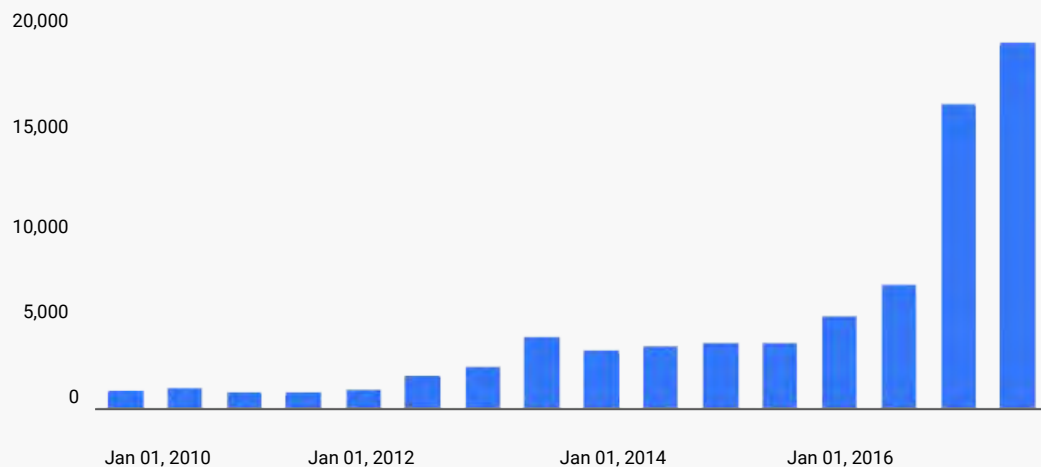
Total number of content removal requests made to Google by courts and governments worldwide

50.6% of these requests relate to YouTube and **19.8%** to Search.

What's the role of the ==tech firms== in all of this?

Google

How are tech firms behaving badly?

Incubating fake news

Untrustworthy sources and misinformation have thrived on tech platforms. Dubious distributors have capitalised on a lack of sense-checking and algorithms that reward sensationalist content. And rational debate is damaged when authoritative voices and 'have a go' commentators receive equal weighting.

'Fake news' referrals[1]

20% FB

1.9% Google

0.9% Twitter
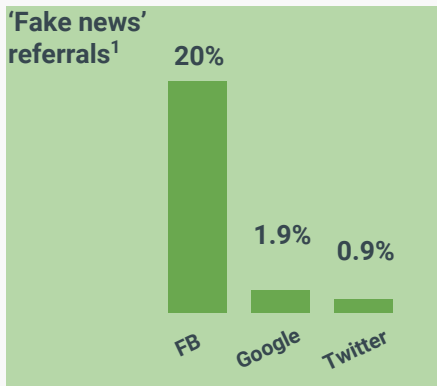
Ineffective automation

Wth 400 hours of video uploaded to YouTube[3] and 340,000 tweets[4] sent every minute, it isn't surprising that platforms outsource moderation duties to AI and automation. But even the most sophisticated tech can censor legitimate and legal videos in error, while erroneous content can elude the safeguards.

"We got it wrong...
Our system sometimes make mistakes in understanding context and nuances

YouTube Creator Blog[2]

Commercialized conversation

Shares, likes and clickbait headlines - monetized online conversations aren't great news for rational debate. And when tech firms have an eye on their shareholders[5] as well as their free-speech and censorship values, the priorities can get a little muddled.

"For a business, free speech can only be a meaningful value if it doesn't really cost anything"[6]

Sarah Jeong, VICE Motherboard

Google

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 FT[1]

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 Guardian[2]

Google

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, 2014 [2]

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

Google

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...

Google

1. The importance of free speech

2. Bad behaviour and censorship online

3. Fighting back against bad behaviour online

4. Tech firms - free speech or censorship?

5. How do people want Google to respond to this predicament?

Google

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

FIGHT BACK

Google

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.

// Insights Lab

Google

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.

gab.ai
#SPEAKFREELY

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.

// Insights Lab

Google

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.

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 coverage[1]

Google

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.

// Insights Lab

Google

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.

Google

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.

// Insights Lab

Google

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?"

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.

// Insights Lab

1. The importance of free speech

2. Bad behaviour and censorship online

3. Fighting back against bad behaviour online

4. Tech firms - free speech or censorship?

5. How do people want Google to respond to this predicament?

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

Google

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 'quarantining') 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.

// Insights Lab

Google

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.

// Insights Lab

Google

So, it's problem solved? Right?

No. Not quite...

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

Create unmediated 'marketplaces of ideas'

Create well-ordered spaces for safety and civility

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

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

Google

In the past, their position was clear...

Create well-ordered spaces for safety and civility

Create unmediated 'marketplaces of ideas'

"Neutral"
"Aggregator"
"Platform"
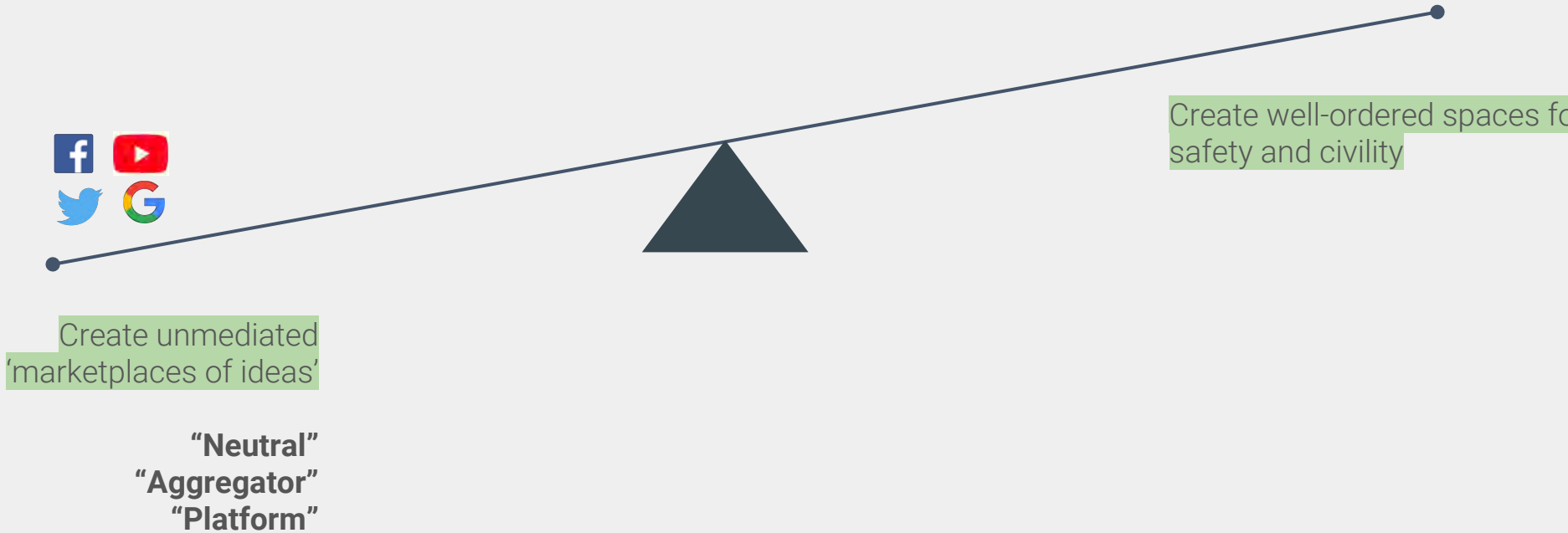
But tech firms have gradually shifted away from unmediated free speech and towards censorship and moderation

Create unmediated 'marketplaces of ideas'

Create well-ordered spaces for safety and civility

"Politicized"
"Editor"
"Publisher"

Google

// Insights Lab
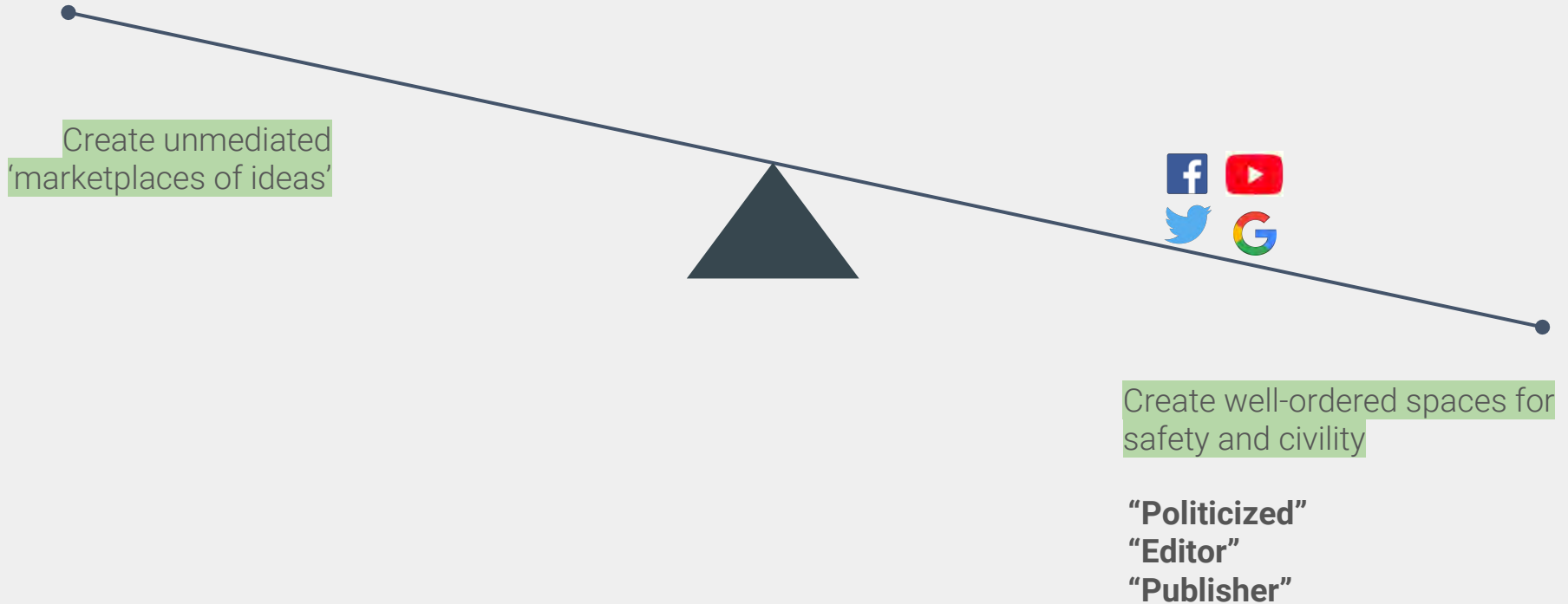
" For a long time, we thought of censorship in terms of government and nation states, and I think now we're in an era in which **people are starting to realise that private companies**, probably more than ever before, **control people's ability to amplify their voices**, and whether or not their speech 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

Google

// Insights Lab

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   2018

"**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

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

Google

" "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.**
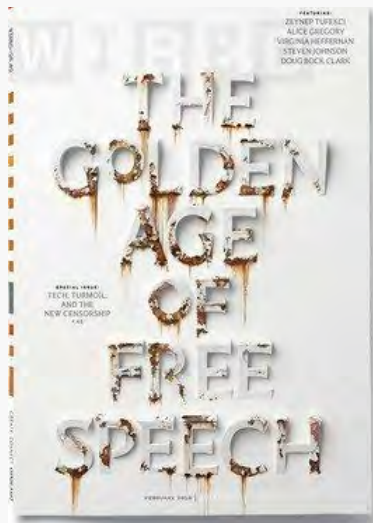
– Franklin Foer

Google

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

FRONTPAGE MAG

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

BREITBART

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

ZDNet

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

The Guardian

Google

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

BBC

Why is Silicon Valley fighting a sex trafficking bill?

The Guardian

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

FORTUNE

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

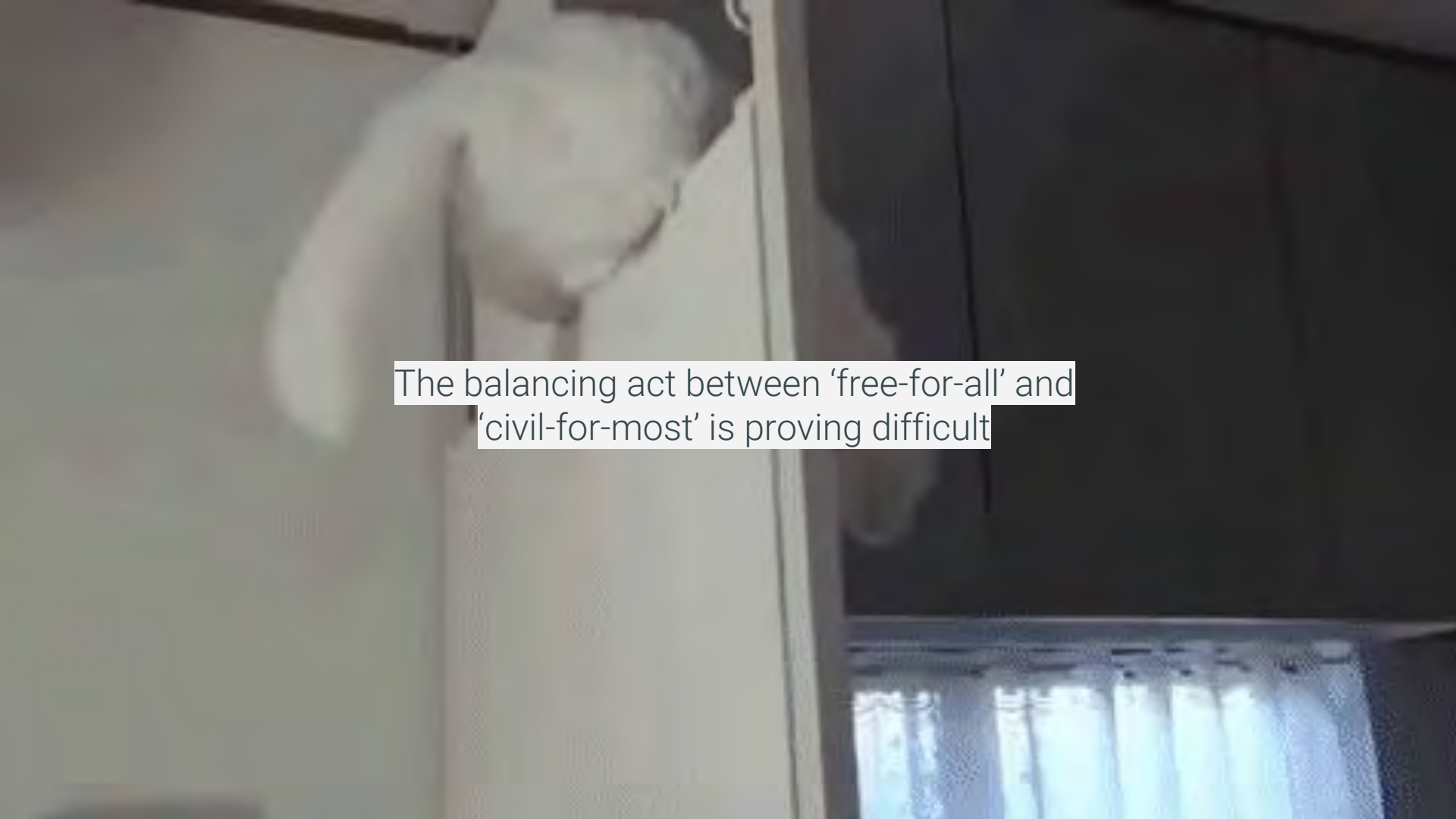THE HILL

Twitter Is Not a Media Company, CEO Says

Mashable

Google

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 Republic[1]

Google

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

1. The importance of free speech

2. Bad behaviour and censorship online

3. Fighting back against bad behaviour online

4. Tech firms - free speech or censorship?

5. How do people want Google to respond to this predicament?

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 incties 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

Google

Be more transparent

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

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

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

Google

// 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 talk[1]

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

Google

// 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

Thank you.

Explore more cultural insights at
go/culturalcontext