



On the Fence Debate in the Era of Social Media

*Self-governance depends on
exercise of free speech*

*Free exercise of speech in public
discourse is vital to a free society*

Technology disrupts societies.

The invention of the printing press in the 15th century enabled the rapid spread of new ideas. It helped usher in the Reformation and the Renaissance, upending existing institutions.

The Internet and social media platforms are technologies as disruptive as Gutenberg's press.

Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter have been around for only a dozen or so years. But take a moment to reflect how these tools already impact virtually every aspect of your day-to-day life. The quantity, speed and ease of information flow are astonishing. Indeed, it's why we have embraced these new technologies — to easily connect and collaborate with friends, family and colleagues.

Unfortunately, there are less desirable consequences of this power. Mark Twain said, "A lie can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots." With the Internet, that lie can travel at the speed of light and be posted and reposted tens of thousands of times in the blink of an eye.

In fact, we have a whole new lexicon to describe the unsavory aspects of the internet and social media — hacking, spam, rage-tweeting, phishing, clickbait, flame wars, troll farms — to name a few.

We are seeing the disruption of social media playing out in real time. For example, we now know Internet trolls deliberately planted false news stories using fake social media accounts in a wide-ranging and concerted effort to derail our civic discourse.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, "You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts." Today, someone may unknowingly claim "facts" from what is disguised as a legitimate source, but is anything but.

The anonymity of the Internet doesn't only mask information sources. It can embolden individuals to be belligerent and disrespectful. This plays havoc in online discussions. Trolls will post inflammatory messages to deliberately start quarrels, derail reasonable debate, and provoke emotional reactions.

The breakdown of reasonable online discussion in early Usenet groups



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prompted attorney and author Mike Godwin in 1990 to propose Godwin's Law: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches 1." He saw in long discussions, sooner or later, someone or something would be compared to Hitler or his deeds. Godwin did not think such comparisons were always wrong. He was simply opposed to lazy, hyperbolic comparisons that frustrated debate.

"Although deliberately framed as if it were a law of nature or of mathematics," Godwin wrote, "its purpose has always been rhetorical and pedagogical: I wanted folks who glibly compared someone else to Hitler to think a bit harder about the Holocaust."

These few examples show how much more difficult open and honest debate can be in the era of social media. The difficulties can cause many people to disengage.

In fact, according to a Pew Research Center study, 37 percent of social media users are "worn out" by the amount of political content; 59 percent find interactions with others holding opposing political views "stressful and frustrating"; 64 percent say such encounters "leave them feeling as if they have even less in common than they thought."

If people disengage from others who hold opposing views, we all become more isolated. As more people get their news from self-selected social media outlets than from print media, we have narrower common ground to stand on. If we see ourselves as having less in common with others, then we become more fragmented as a society.

I don't have an answer for the upheavals we are experiencing as a society. But I think we can share some basic rules of the road to move forward: Be respectful. Know your sources. Be skeptical. Keep an open mind. Agree to disagree.

We must all remember the success of our 240-plus year-long experiment in self-governance depends upon an informed citizenry willing to come together and debate.



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online berating an artist and demanding that the artist take down her art, which consisted of photographs of a model representing the beauty of cultures across the world.

My daughter spoke up for the artist (who lived states away, and whom she had never met) and was instantly subjected to hateful threats unparalleled by anything I had seen before. They likewise demanded that my daughter stop defending the artist and immediately take down any supportive posts.

When my daughter persisted in saying no one had done anything wrong, one individual — who lived across the country — tracked down my daughter here in Union County, found out where she worked and reached out to her boss, demanding that she be fired for her political beliefs and no longer be allowed to work around children. My daughter's boss called her in and insisted that she remove all references to her place of employment on social media. It was shocking to observe digital bullying leap off of the screen and into her real life. And for what? For my daughter using her freedom of speech to appropriately speak up for another woman who was being viciously berated for using her freedom of expression.

This great country of ours was founded upon the concept of a "free marketplace of ideas."

The free exercise of speech in public discourse is absolutely vital to a fully functioning free society, and artificial, subjective shackles upon expression serve only to reduce our liberty, ultimately hurting every man, woman and child, and our nation as a whole. Governmental power derives only by the exercise of coercion, and liberties, once lost, slip into the pages of history without further struggle to reinstate them.

Our country is stronger than this newfound fragility imposed by the minority. Let's remember that and speak our minds with respect, while fully allowing others the same right.

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