

Tech giants still stumbling in the social world they created

By Barbara Ortutay
AP Technology Writer

Who knew connecting the world could get so complicated? Perhaps some of technology's brightest minds should have seen that coming.

Social media bans of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones have thrust Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and others into a role they never wanted — as gatekeepers of discourse on their platforms, deciding what should and shouldn't be allowed and often angering almost everyone in the process. Jones, a right-wing provocateur, suddenly found himself banned from most major social platforms this week, after years in which he was free to use them to promulgate a variety of false claims.

Twitter, which one of its executives once called the "free speech wing of the free speech party," remains a lonely holdout on Jones. The resulting backlash suggests that no matter what the tech companies do, "there is no way they can please everyone," as Scott Shackelford, a business law and ethics professor at Indiana University, observed.

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, Twitter's Jack Dorsey and crew,

and Google's stewards of YouTube gave little thought to such consequences as they built their empires with lofty goals to connect the world and democratize discourse. At the time, they were the rebels aiming to bypass the stodgy old gatekeepers — newspaper editors, television programmers and other establishment types — and let people talk directly to one another.

"If you go back a decade or so, the whole idea of speech on social media was seen as highly positive light," said Tim Cigelske, who teaches social media at Marquette University in Wisconsin. There was the Arab Spring. There were stories of gay, lesbian and transgender teens from small towns finding support online.

At the same time, of course, the companies were racing to build the largest audiences possible, slice and dice their user data and make big profits by turning that information into lucrative targeted advertisements.

The dark side of untrammelled discourse, the thinking went, would sort itself out as online communities moderated themselves, aided by fast-evolving computer algorithms and, eventually, artificial intelligence.

"They scaled, they built, they wanted to drive revenue as well as user base," said technology analyst Tim Bajarin, president of consultancy Creative Strategies. "That was priority one and controlling content was priority two. It should have been the other way around."

That all got dicier once the election of President Donald Trump focused new attention on fake news and organized misinformation campaigns — not to mention the fact that some of the people grabbing these new social-media megaphones were wild conspiracy theorists who falsely call mass shootings hoaxes, white nationalists who organize violent rallies and men who threaten women with rape and murder.

While the platforms may not have anticipated the influx of hate speech and meddling from foreign powers like Russia, North Korea and China, Bajarin said, they should have acted more quickly once they found it. "The fact is we're dealing with a brave new world that they've allowed to happen, and they need to take more control to keep it from spreading," he said.

That's easier said than done, of

course. But it's particularly difficult for huge tech companies to balance public goods such as free speech with the need to protect their users from harassment, abuse, fake news and manipulation. Especially given that their business models require them to alienate as few of their users as possible, lest they put the flood of advertising money at risk.

"Trying to piece together a framework for speech that works for everyone — and making sure we effectively enforce that framework — is challenging," wrote Richard Allan, Facebook's vice president of policy, in a blog post Thursday. "Every policy we have is grounded in three core principles: giving people a voice, keeping people safe, and treating people equitably. The frustrations we hear about our policies — outside and internally as well — come from the inevitable tension between these three principles."

Such tensions force some of the largest corporations in the world to decide, for instance, if banning Nazis also means banning white nationalists — and to figure out how to tell them apart if not. Or whether kicking off Jones means they need to ban all purveyors

of false conspiracy theories. Or whether racist comments should be allowed if they are posted, to make a point, by the people who received them.

"I don't think the platforms in their heart of hearts would like to keep Alex Jones on," said Nathaniel Persily, a professor at Stanford Law School. "But it's difficult to come up with a principle to say why Alex Jones and not others would be removed."

While most companies have policies against "hate speech," defining what constitutes hate speech can be difficult, he added. Even governments have trouble with it. One country's free speech is another country's hate speech, punishable by jail time.

Facebook, Twitter, Google, Reddit and others face these questions millions of times a day, as human moderators and algorithms decide which posts, which people, which photos or videos to allow, to kick off or simply make less visible and harder to find. If they allow too much harmful content, they risk losing users and advertisers. If they go too far and remove too much, they face charges of censorship and ideological bias.

CONSTRUCTION

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the work on the Pinehurst apartments across from the Oregon Trail Electric Co-Op.

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Johnson is invested in the Elgin community. He lives there with his wife, Khirenda, who works as a part-time secretary for the business, and their three children.

To reach Johnson's Quality Construction for free quotes, call James Johnson at 541-786-0125 between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.

GOOGLE

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your precise latitude and longitude — accurate to the square foot — and save it to your Google account.

The privacy issue affects some two billion users of devices that run Google's Android operating software and hundreds of millions of worldwide iPhone users who rely on Google for maps or search.

Storing location data in violation of a user's preferences is wrong, said Jonathan Mayer, a Princeton computer scientist and former chief technologist for the Federal Communications Commission's enforcement bureau. A researcher from Mayer's lab confirmed the AP's findings on multiple Android devices; the AP conducted its own tests on several iPhones that found the same behavior.

"If you're going to allow users to turn off something called 'Location History,' then all the places where you maintain location history should be turned off," Mayer said. "That seems like a pretty straightforward position to have."

Google says it is being perfectly clear.

"There are a number of different ways that Google may use location to improve people's experience, including: Location History, Web and App Activity, and through device-level Location Services," a Google spokesperson said in a statement to the AP. "We provide clear descriptions of these tools, and robust controls so people can turn them on or off, and delete their histories at any time."

Google's explanation did not convince several law-

makers.

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia told the AP it is "frustratingly common" for technology companies "to have corporate practices that diverge wildly from the totally reasonable expectations of their users," and urged policies that would give users more control of their data. Rep. Frank Pallone of New Jersey called for "comprehensive consumer privacy and data security legislation" in the wake of the AP report.

To stop Google from saving these location markers, the company says, users can turn off another setting, one that does not specifically reference location information. Called "Web and App Activity" and enabled by default, that setting stores a variety of information from Google apps and websites to your Google account.

When paused, it will prevent activity on any device from being saved to your account. But leaving "Web & App Activity" on and turning "Location History" off only prevents Google from adding your movements to the "timeline," its visualization of your daily travels. It does not stop Google's collection of other location markers.

You can delete these location markers by hand, but it's a painstaking process since you have to select them individually, unless you want to delete all of your stored activity.

You can see the stored location markers on a page in your Google account at myactivity.google.com, although they're typically scattered under several different headers, many of which are unrelated to location.

To demonstrate how powerful these other markers can be, the AP created a visual map of the movements of Princeton postdoctoral researcher Gunes Acar, who carried an Android phone with Location history off, and shared a record of his Google account.

The map includes Acar's train commute on two trips to New York and visits to The High Line park, Chelsea Market, Hell's Kitchen, Central Park and Harlem. To protect his privacy, the AP didn't plot the most telling and frequent marker — his home address.

Huge tech companies are under increasing scrutiny over their data practices, following a series of privacy scandals at Facebook and new data-privacy rules recently adopted by the European Union. Last year, the business news site Quartz found that Google was tracking Android users by collecting the addresses of nearby cellphone towers even if all location services were off. Google changed the practice and insisted it never recorded the data anyway.

Critics say Google's insistence on tracking its users' locations stems from its drive to boost advertising revenue.

"They build advertising information out of data,"

said Peter Lenz, the senior geospatial analyst at Dstillery, a rival advertising technology company. "More data for them presumably means more profit."

The AP learned of the issue from K. Shankari, a graduate researcher at UC Berkeley who studies the commuting patterns of volunteers in order to help urban planners. She noticed that her Android phone prompted her to rate a shopping trip to Kohl's, even though she had turned Location History off.

"So how did Google Maps know where I was?" she asked in a blog post.

The AP wasn't able to recreate Shankari's experience exactly. But its attempts to do so revealed Google's tracking. The findings disturbed her.

"I am not opposed to background location tracking in principle," she said. "It just really bothers me that it is not explicitly stated."

Google offers a more accurate description of how Location History actually works in a place you'd only see if you turn it off — a popup that appears when you "pause" Location History on your Google account webpage. There the company notes that "some location data may be saved as part of your activity on other Google

services, like Search and Maps."

Google offers additional information in a popup that appears if you re-activate the "Web & App Activity" setting — an uncommon action for many users, since this setting is on by default. That popup states that, when active, the setting "saves the things you do on Google sites, apps, and services ... and associated information, like location."

Warnings when you're about to turn Location History off via Android and iPhone device settings are more difficult to interpret. On Android, the popup explains that "places you go with your devices will stop being added to your Location History map." On the iPhone, it simply reads, "None of your Google apps will be able to store location data in Location History."

The iPhone text is technically true if potentially misleading. With Location History off, Google Maps and other apps store your whereabouts in a section of your account called "My Activity," not "Location History."

Since 2014, Google has let advertisers track the effectiveness of online ads at driving foot traffic, a feature that Google has said relies on user location histories.

The company is pushing

further into such location-aware tracking to drive ad revenue, which rose 20 percent last year to \$95.4 billion. At a Google Marketing Live summit in July, Google executives unveiled a new tool called "local campaigns" that dynamically uses ads to boost in-person store visits. It says it can measure how well a campaign drove foot traffic with data pulled from Google users' location histories.

Google also says location records stored in My Activity are used to target ads. Ad buyers can target ads to specific locations — say, a mile radius around a particular landmark — and typically have to pay more to reach this narrower audience.

While disabling "Web & App Activity" will stop Google from storing location markers, it also prevents Google from storing information generated by searches and other activity. That can limit the effectiveness of the Google Assistant, the company's digital concierge.

Sean O'Brien, a Yale Privacy Lab researcher with whom the AP shared its findings, said it is "disingenuous" for Google to continuously record these locations even when users disable Location History. "To me, it's something people should know," he said.

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