Tech giants still stumbling in social world they created

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AP Photo
This photo combo of images shows, clockwise, from upper left: a Google sign, and apps for Twitter, Spotify and Facebook.

NEW YORK — 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 untrammeled 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 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.

"My sense is that they are throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks," Persily said. "It's a whack-a-mole problem. It's not the same threats that are continuing, and they have to be nimble enough to deal with new problems."

Ex-Nike employees sue company, alleging unequal compensation

PORTLAND (AP) — Four women who used to work for Nike filed a federal lawsuit alleging the company violated state and U.S. equal-pay laws and fostered a work environment that allowed sexual harassment.

The suit filed Thursday in Portland, Oregon, is among the first to hit the company since complaints about pay and bad managers became public earlier this year, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

Nike, based near Portland, responded to the controversy by ousting at least 11 executives earlier this year.

However, attorney Laura Salerno Owens, who filed the lawsuit, said Nike continues to have a "good-old-boy's culture" in which women enter the company with lower pay and receive smaller raises and bonuses.

"I think Nike wants to say that 'Just a couple people were responsible for the problem and we've gotten rid of them.' But we know that's certainly not the case," Owens said.

The plaintiffs are seeking unspecified monetary damages and a court order requiring Nike to pay its employees fairly without regard to gender.

Nike officials declined comment on the lawsuit to *The Oregonian* and did not immediately return a phone message from The Associated Press.

Plaintiff Kelly Cahill worked for Nike for four years — much of that time as a brand marketing director for Nike.com. She claimed in the lawsuit that she was paid $20,000 a year less in 2017 than a male co-worker doing much the same job.

> "In response, one of the directors said, in effect, that Nike has a culture that revolves around alcohol, that Ms. Johnston should let the incidents go."

She says she filed four complaints against her boss — one of the 11 executives who left the company last spring. Nike's human resources department took no action, the suit alleges. Cahill quit and went to work for Adidas.

Sara Johnston alleges that a male co-worker made sexual advances and retaliated when she rejected his propositions. She complained to her boss in early 2016.

"In response, one of the directors said, in effect, that Nike has a culture that revolves around alcohol, that Ms. Johnston should let the incidents go," according to the lawsuit.

The situation escalated after Johnston claims she learned the same co-worker was propositioning other women and had groped another.

She again tried to lodge a complaint with human resources but the department took no action and the male co-worker was promoted to a position where he would work more closely with Johnston, who decided to quit, according to the suit.

The other plaintiffs in the lawsuit are Samantha Phillips and Tracee Cheng.

BRIEFLY

Arrowhead gets pumped up for customer party

MISSION — A customer appreciation event at Arrowhead Travel Plaza will feature free food, live music, a bounce house, raffles and giveaways.

The lawn party is Wednesday, Aug. 22, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Arrowhead, located off Interstate 84 at Exit 216. People are invited to get pumped up by getting out of their cars and moving to the music of Nuketown or listen in on a live remote on 103.5 KWHEAT. Also, Arrowhead will offer a special fuel discount, so be sure to fill up. People can register for Rewards on the Rez program, which offers instant fuel discounts, bonus points and random prize drawings.

For more information, contact mary.liberty@wildhorseresort.com, 541-276-8080 or visit www.arrowheadtravelplaza.com.