

The case for social media to be closely regulated is clear



Photo: AP 10 Jun 2021, [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

Arbitrary editorial interventions by platforms, such as labelling political content fake even before an inquiry, is one among many reasons that we just cannot let them go unregulated

Are social media firms exceeding their limits? Have creators of the global virtual public square become unaccountable? Or are they being victimized by the powers that be? A debate is raging over Facebook (2.74 billion users), YouTube (2.29 billion), Instagram (1.22 billion) and Twitter (350 million), and it isn't confined to India. Barring China, where major American social media outlets are banned, pretty much the entire world is caught in a moment of great introspection about the conduct of these all-pervasive companies.

After the hotly-contested decision by Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to suspend the then US president Donald Trump's accounts in January 2021 on grounds that he was inciting a "violent insurrection", there was an uproar in right-wing circles over a liberal ideological bias among Big Tech firms.

After all, several dictators who carry out state-organized repression of their own citizens, or fuel radical violence around the world, continue to use these social media platforms as bullhorns. Even China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats and media mouthpieces, which threaten all-out war against foreign adversaries and camouflage the ugly truth about genocide in Tibet and Xinjiang, have a free run to do propaganda on Facebook and Twitter. The only constraint placed on them is a label on top of their accounts saying they are 'state-controlled' or affiliated to a particular government. The lack of consistency by social media giants in applying rules of content has been a glaring anomaly. The kind of editorial moderation which these internet colossuses are increasingly resorting to opens room for subjective and iffy calls. For instance, Twitter's recent deletion of a post by Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari warning rebels in the southeast of his country about a forceful state response was a borderline case. Buhari's tweet was interpreted by some as a genocide threat against an ethnic

group, but others viewed it as the President trying to enforce the writ of the state over a lawless territory.

While Facebook, Twitter, et al, are getting bolder in selectively targeting some high political office-holders, these digital behemoths are conversely also under pressure from local authorities on a daily basis to take down posts deemed illegal or inimical to 'order' and 'stability'. In many countries, Facebook and Twitter deal with constant threats of expulsion if they do not obey local governmental requirements to remove incendiary content.

The misuse of these platforms to instigate ethnic riots or terror attacks through rumour-mongering, inflammatory, or fake comments and videos, has been widely documented. Scrubbing such material off should be a no-brainer. But it gets trickier when the domestic politics of a country gets entangled and platforms are either forced to take a stance or adopt their own ideological lenses to decide which posts should stay and which should be marked as dubious or deleted.

The recent storm in India when Twitter tagged posts by some senior functionaries of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party against the opposition Congress Party as "manipulated media" is an example. Though the veracity of the claims and counter-claims by the two parties about the authenticity of an alleged 'toolkit' for political propaganda had not yet been determined, Twitter's staff jumped the gun and labelled the tweets as fake.

Whether social media companies are liberal masters of the universe or helpless casualties of a supercharged and polarized political environment, one fact is undeniable: their ownership is narrowly concentrated and they are over-globalized. The California-headquartered Facebook owns both Instagram and WhatsApp (2 billion users), and Google, also based there, owns YouTube. These iconic American companies are registered in various countries where they operate and make money, but there is a Western universality to their thinking and functioning that often clashes with local mores and sensitivities. The amount of consumer information these transnational corporations have accumulated is truly staggering, and this gives them power to defy sovereign states as well as activists opposed to states. 'Big Data' megaliths are now monopolies and practically indispensable.

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As essential media that shape public discourse, these platforms are vital. Even if the managers and staff members of these companies seem to be either overstepping or caving in, it is in everyone's interest to keep these platforms alive in a reformed and regulated way.

Like all multinational corporations, the social media titans have governing boards of directors, specialist employees catering to different regions of the world, and shareholders. But since the services of these firms amount to global public goods and the landscape they cover stretches to the farthest corners of the planet, they must be overseen by the 'international community' as a whole. Does that mean the United Nations or another entity? That is a matter for deliberation and consensus. Piecemeal tightening of regulations at the national level is insufficient because the same types of disputes and contentious trends in social media are cropping up worldwide. A multilateral regime

with a broad-based international governing mechanism is needed to ensure consistency in content-related decisions and to handle appeals on 'de-platforming' and post deletion. The companies must accept and implement verdicts delivered by this monitoring body. The alternative of leaving social media powerhouses untouched or subject to a patchwork of national legislations is a recipe for deepening chaos and endless conflict about what they are doing and ought to be doing.

Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs.