# Freedom, decentralisation and the regulation of content on social media

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**Abstract.** Regulation of social media is an important issue, given its prevalence and relevance, particularly with young people. Yet, regulation may be an exercise in futility, with an increasing focus on decentralisation and an emphasis on internet freedom.

Regulation makes sense on large, for-profit sites, but tackling issues such as the high levels of social media usage observed with young people and encouraging people to make better decisions about their social media use may be better uses of our energy than attempts at regulation.

## 1: Introduction

Social media plays a huge role in our society. It is very apparent that the majority of people use social media and most of us use a small handful of platorms [8]. We need to consider social media because of this. We have the power and potentially the responsibility to regulate or not regulate social media, in a way acts for the benefit of people and their freedom.

The beauty of the internet is how it makes people free in new, unprecedented ways, but thusly rather difficult to regulate. These freedoms may benefit corporations in making money from what could be perceived as the collective mind space of a population, at the detriment of that population. Encouraging choice and the ongoing shift towards decentralisation seem to be a direct reaction and perhaps solution.

# 2: Examples of social media

## 2.1: Public social media

### 2.1.1: YouTube

YouTube is the most popular social media [8], and its product is not meaningfully unchallenged. YouTube's parent company, Google, clearly puts a lot of resources into moderation, and this results in them removing large amounts of content [21]. For YouTube which is used a lot by children [13], this level of internal regulation may be acceptable, maintaining relative order on the site.

### 2.1.2: Twitter

Twitter, in a similar way to YouTube employs internal regulation methods. Recently Twitter suspended the account of Donald Trump, following violent events at the US Capitol [12]. This shows how regulation does and doesn't work. Twitter has taken Trump off Twitter, which other users may see as a good thing, yet not off the internet. It's worked to regulate who Twitter users see, yet does not regulate beyond the bounds of Twitter.

Although people such as Angela Merkel [17] have spoken against the idea of private organisations regulating in such ways, Twitter exists to make money for its owners, employees and shareholders. This puts Twitter in a position to take anyone they please off of their platform; Twitter's services do not belong to us, and the final decision is theirs.

### 2.1.3: 4chan, 8chan, and the futility of regulation

4chan is rather interesting in its regulation, or rather lack thereof. We see it as a blur of humor and hate [19]. This is the social media that some of us want and some of don't want, which does reflect the choice we have, which is probably a good thing. 4chan also allows

users to be anonymous, something the internet itself affords, but something that using a service like 4chan allows even more, which may be a refreshing relief for some from a sense of a "persistent identity" online [10].

8chan, a similar site, was taken down as a result of a mass shooting linked to the website, through the action of private companies, this time much lower down the stack, at the web hosting level [14]. This is where regulation might not be a good thing. With the companies that control the infrastructure that the internet relies on non discrimination becomes very important [9] given their position of basic necessity.

Yet, 8chan still operates on the clearnet under the name "8kun", and even if it couldn't it would still be accessible via onion rooting. The problem with regulating the internet is exactly this; we can't and efforts such as taking down a site will only hide it from view, not get rid of it.

For those who want a place without heavy moderation, they seem to exist. There are places such as Twitter for those of us who are happy with moderation, and other places like 4chan for those of us who don't, and there's really not that much we can do about that.

## 2.1.4: Pleroma

Pleroma is an open source, community developed project for a Twitter like social media [3]. Anyone can host an 'instance' and there are already many online. The benefit is no centralisation at all, unlike all of the other platforms discussed. Anyone can make their own instance and the 'Fediverse', which consists of all of the Pleroma instances as well as other services, cannot be taken down due to the level of fragmentation.

This separates it from all of the other platforms, as Pleroma just can't easily be gotten rid of. Individual instances are easy targets, as they may even be hosted from someone's home, but there is an emergent property of resilience particularly as the Fediverse is showing signs of growth [1]. Decentralisation further invalidates regulation attempts, and shows the want for a free internet.

## 2.2: Private messaging

Unlike public social media, private messaging must put privacy first. This means the use of end to end encryption and a system which we can trust. Even metadata can be used against us [18] and so ensuring it is secure too is very important. True private messaging is arguably very dangerous, as people can, and have used in such malicious ways as terrorism [20], yet it seems to be an option we don't have. Although we create risk, there is a greater risk as to what private interests and governments can and will do if what we say is not sufficiently secured.

### 2.2.1: WhatsApp and other major messaging platforms

Messaging platforms include the likes of Instagram, which includes messaging functionality, alongside services such as WhatsApp, which are more messaging oriented.

The popular services are not privacy focussed as some others. WhatsApp implements end to end encryption [23], but many others do not [20].

Furthermore the code that runs these platforms and servers is not open source, therefore, our trust in their security and what they are doing with our data is blind. We need to be able to know what is happening with our data, in the interest of privacy. Thusly, WhatsApp and similar services are deeply flawed. Regulation can attempt to solve this, particularly with data protection laws, yet it seems that an individual can take steps to protect their own privacy faster than lawmakers.

### 2.2.2: Telegram and Signal

When we learn that Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, the parent company of messaging giant WhatsApp himself uses Signal [6], a messaging service focused on privacy which Elon Musk and Jack Dorsey have shown support for [16], one can't help but think. It's almost ironic but it makes a lot of sense. Zuckerberg clearly

understands technology very well, and so he simply uses a privacy focused messenger.

Telegram and Signal use encryption, in nature similar to WhatsApp, but don't have the parent group of Facebook. They both advertise the fact that they are also open source alongside the level of encryption they use [5] [4]. Telegram and Signal have seen increased use recently, particularly following Musk's endorsement [16]. This seems like a step towards more private messaging, yet there is still more to be desired.

### 2.2.3: Decentralised approach

Telegram and Signal are privacy focused but they require a telephone number to register which some may see as a compromise of privacy. They are also ultimately centralised, a threat to their existence and to our trust in them. Matrix is a decentralised solution, where people host instances of, and anyone who wishes to host their own instance of may [2].

With many interconnected servers and by being open source, Matrix maintains privacy with encryption and can guarantee that data or metadata is not misused or sold, particularly when one hosts their own instance. Steps that can go even further, such as new ideas for metadata private messaging services, may be a further extension and recent developments in this area are truly exciting for a future of privacy [22].

## 3: Conclusions

## 3.1: Children

We can argue that social media is not for children. The fact figures like Steve Jobs would and do heavily limit their own children's technology usage, yet their creations are so heavily used by other children can be shocking yet rather sobering [7] [11]. Social media can consume young people, who its largest users [8].

Child usage of social media is important but there might not be much we can do to change it. Arguably children have simply grown in a world of social media. We need to help parents to help their children to use the internet in a healthy way [15].

Until then, regulation on platforms that children do use a lot, may be the best option. We may consider it lucky that sites children use such as Youtube [13] engage in self moderation.

## 3.2: Decentralisation

Decentralisation and its increasing prevalence may show a shift towards making use of the internet's potential for freedom. If we want social media to be free we can make it so, and regulation not only struggles, but fails to limit this.

Internal regulation will remain necessary on sites such as YouTube that many people use, yet, for those who want it, the internet can be as free as we want. In essence, the openness of the internet makes it possible to both have places with a lot of moderation, such as the larger platforms, and also places with little to no moderation, and we are as individuals free to use platforms we wish to, without outside intervention.

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