Free Speech Policies on Online Content by Internet Companies

Introduction

The freedom to express ourselves has been improved by technology, and sharing of information has been made easier through the internet and social media. Awareness and initiatives can be shared and promoted to reach more people to the extent of causing a worldwide reaction. However, the internet and freedom of speech comes with obstacles and setbacks such as sensitive content and inciting messages that potentially offend some audiences. The need to enjoy freedom of expression competes against the need to protect people from offensive content. Somini Sengupta in her article mentions that ‘*hate speech is a pliable notion, and there will be arguments about whether it covers speech that is likely to lead to violence (think Rwanda) or demeans a group (think Holocaust denial), just as there will be calls for absolute free expression’* (Sengupta). Internet companies have the responsibility to preserve healthy cultural guidelines as they host large amounts of content, some of which may be harmful to some audiences. Maintaining responsibility is a hard task considering the freedom of speech and billions of messages on social media each day. However, it is a task whose price is also way too valuable. Looking at the article“Free Speech in the age of YouTube” by Somini Sengupta, I claim that consumers of online content need to be protected not by laws that allow them to exercise freedom, but by policies that protect them from potentially harmful content. Internet companies should, therefore, be banning content that goes against the protection of public safety and order.

Expressing one’s views and opinions is alright; however, is it okay if it can potentially offend another person? Hate speech brings about a vast view to the extent that it can be defended as free speech. The freedom of speech makes it easy for hate speech to be perpetrated and this is a battle that is challenging to fight for internet companies. In many times, people have been attacked because of their identity, the intent of such messages are not expressive but oppressive. There is the tussle between protecting offense and protecting freedom of speech, this is why defining hate speech for internet companies by looking at intent and offense in speech would go a long way in minimizing its execution. The internet is one of the largest changes in the 21st century, billions of data is shared almost every second. The internet has made expression simpler, but internet companies have a hard time ensuring that their customers have a comfortable experience online. It is appropriate to protect the users of the internet from irrelevant content as an infringement of comfort disrupts traffic. People would avoid visiting websites that have irrelevant and offensive content depending on their interests.

Free speech in this age is ‘enjoyed more’ considering that the internet has made sharing of information easier. The internet is known for its traffic in messages. In every minute, there are billions of messages passed in different formats, text, media, and documents, among others. *Internet companies are a different breed. Because they traffic in speech — rather than, say, corn syrup or warplanes* (Sengupta). Companies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat are the leading companies in the social media sector. The social media platforms allow people to connect and share information, though restricted to certain guidelines and procedures. With such large amounts of data, internet companies make decisions on what kind of content is allowed. The management of such content is a task that is difficult to accomplish under the pressure of deciding on which laws or values they will rely upon (Sengupta). Speech protection for public safety is an unending task in content management by internet companies.

Hate speech content or any content that is offensive to some audiences is not allowed on most of the social media platforms. The terms and policies of many internet companies prevent people from posting content that might be profiled as hate speech. Google, the company that owns YouTube has taken steps to educate users about offensive content as well as developing terms and policies that inhibit people from sharing offensive content (Sengupta). It is, however, difficult to separate hate speech from free speech since a message that is well understood by one audience may be perceived as hate speech by the other.

Every internet company has its community guidelines which are policies that users are made aware of before they start using their platforms (Sengupta). Following community guidelines should be enforced by internet companies as these guidelines protect people from offensive content. Internet companies have the obligation to ensure their customers are protected from potentially ill content such as pornographic or discriminative posts. Companies like YouTube and Facebook have policies that protect their users from potentially offensive content. This is a commendable step towards curbing hate speech. Enforcing community guidelines would be a bold step in reducing hate speech as the platforms have the power of majority users.

 Even when there is a policy against certain type of content on the internet, hate speech is still protected either way. Therefore, little action can be taken against owners of ill or offensive context. International law does not also prohibit hate speech and this causes it to be a prone occurrence on the internet as people know that they are protected. People sit boldly behind screens and keyboards knowing that they are untouchable. However, when internet companies consider the enforcement of community guidelines as they do with copyright infringement, protection against ill content will become easier. On YouTube, Google uses artificial intelligence to detect copyrighted content and henceforth block it from public access. The same technology could be used in implementing community guidelines and protecting people from hate speech. Watch on certain words, using artificial technology would make it simpler for internet companies to spot offensive content and hinder it from public access. Sengupta in her article mentions that content management for internet companies is a hard task; however, the article was published at a time when artificial intelligence was not so prominent (Sengupta). In the modern age, artificial intelligence could simplify content management in protecting people from offensive content.

Internet companies should also redefine offensive content because hate speech is a very relative subject. Privately, internet companies have been wrestling with the definition of offensive content for a while. The Global Network Initiative has its guidelines, which are voluntary (Sengupta). Therefore, it is up to specific internet companies to further design content policies. It is commendable what some internet companies such as Facebook and YouTube are doing in protecting audiences from offensive content. Before uploading a post on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube, the program informs you against posting if you are about to post offensive content. The initiative to protect users of internet companies will be effectively attained when hate speech is defined as per the Anti-Defamation League.

Every person deserves the right to enjoy technology without worrying about getting exposed to the wrong content. Internet companies need to ensure that their internet traffic is protected from offensive content. Vetting and approving content is a hard task to do, however, considering the large volumes of traffic internet companies would want to keep, the safety of their opinions is crucial. Hence, the need to protect people should outdo the need to practice freedom of speech.

Conclusion

As clearly demonstrated above, in the modern world, passing a message is easier not just to one person but to multiple recipients. Technology through the internet and social media has made communication easy and fast as well. This has improved the freedom of speech as messages can spread widely. The internet has become a hub of content, large amounts of content comprising of both useful and offensive information. It is the duty of internet companies to protect the public from the harm of the internet. Each internet company has community guidelines, these guidelines should be known to users so that content is properly managed. It may be hard to distinguish which speech is offensive to what particular audience; however, artificial intelligence should be employed to discern offensive content from the allowed content. Internet companies should focus more on the safety of their audiences in order to preserve a peaceful culture on social media. Internet company policies should, therefore, enforce the objective to protect its users from any offense.

Works Cited

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