

# Between the Lines

## On freedom of speech in an age free of accountability

**The New Big Brother**

By Edén Knoop

In the aftermath of Logan Paul's buffoonish video of a dead body in Japan's suicide forest, YouTube and other social media platforms have been forced to reckon with **the disturbing materials they distribute**. This reckoning comes after scrutiny beginning with outrage over monetized channels that exploited children. Paul was not social media's first controversy, but he pushed YouTube to change the way it handles content.

Although  **censorship may seem like an easy solution, it's not an effective one**. Censorship leads to little improvement at **the expense of free speech**. Previous attempts to regulate content led YouTube to demonetize some LGBT-related videos and Facebook to remove photos of breast-feeding moms and the historically important Napalm Girl. However, YouTube's most recent regulation is its worst. In an effort to regulate monetized channels, the platform demonetized small channels, hurting their visibility and growth. They are now paying for Paul's actions—literally.

**Censorship hurts the most vulnerable**. Restrictions of speech usually come at the behest of governments using platforms to control information. At the Indian government's request, Twitter **banned** users sympathetic to Kashmiri independence. Facebook **blocked** the co-author of the Panama Papers for criticizing the Maltese government. In Israel, the government pressures platforms to **censor** Palestinians. In the case of Tamara Abu Laban, posting the words "Forgive me" in Arabic was enough to have her **arrested, fined,** and given five days of **house arrest**.

Platforms also often put the tools of censorship in the hands of users, who **target speech that they dislike**. In particular, Twitter has a problem with **users seeking to prevent speech they oppose** by mass reporting, typically targeting minorities, women, and journalists. Ukrainian news site Liga was blocked from Facebook following false reports of its content. Rose McGowan was suspended from Twitter during her campaign against Harvey Weinstein. More damaging is the apparent selectivity of these rules, with white supremacist accounts remaining up and harassment reports often going unanswered.

But what **may simply be political speech** to some **may be offensive** to others. The distinction isn't always clear, such as in the case of Alex Zaragova, whose article was removed from Facebook for its opening line: "Dear dudes, you're all trash." Was it humor? An attempt to draw awareness to the complicity of many men in harassment? Or was it sexism? Where do we draw the line? **Can we tell the political from the hateful, the opinion from the propaganda?**

This is why increased censorship is an ineffective solution. Instead, **platforms must enforce the rules they already have in place** and practice transparency. Twitter must start taking harassment reports seriously. Facebook must recommit itself to warning users of fake content. Users need to know that the rules are applied consistently and fairly. Likewise, platforms need to take responsibility for their decisions, both good and bad. Only then can the dream of **a free and safe Internet** be realized **for everyone**.

**Keeping the Internet Ecosystem Green**

By Reese Hill

**Social media is a way of life** for us in this day and age. Most teens have social media accounts. Platforms like Twitter and YouTube are frequented by millions. Internet stars have developed on these platforms, gathering followers, fame, fortune, and influence. **It's time the content they post is evaluated and properly regulated**.

Recently, many platforms have faced problems with censorship, particularly YouTube. The platform's biggest star, PewDiePie, was attacked for posting **anti-Semitic** jokes and **Nazi** imagery. Later came the discovery of channels dedicated to videos featuring **exploited children** in revealing clothing, which had managed to dodge YouTube's child safety guidelines. Most recently, vlogger Logan Paul faced backlash after posting a video in which he filmed **the body of a suicide victim** in Japan.

That this content can be uploaded and seen by millions is unacceptable, especially since **the majority of subscribers to these channels are young people**. (Logan Paul's 15 million subscribers are mainly white females from age 11 onward.) Our society is powered by the Internet. It is our primary source of news, entertainment, and communication. But, as the old saying goes, **"you are what you eat."** By this logic, the content that is allowed on the Internet should not be hateful or insensitive. An onslaught of harmful media will **desensitize us to hate and promote a world of indifference**. In other media, regulations are already in place. The FCC has a policy prohibiting profanity on public television. This offensive content could not be aired on television, so **there is no reason it should be put online**.

Freedom of speech is a critical part of our Constitution. But it's common sense that freedom of speech means the freedom to express oneself, not the freedom to be a bigot or instigate hate with volatile opinions. **Freedom of speech is not an invitation to be a public menace**, and too often we let hate slide online.

The problem is, YouTube does have protections and regulations set up, such as child restriction, flags, and "strikes" against users who post harmful content. So why did Logan Paul's video, which was reportedly reviewed before it was posted, get 6 million views before it was taken down? The answer is the critical flaw in artificial intelligence. An algorithm can distinguish offensive words or images, but lacks a moral code or any ability to judge using ethics. YouTube hosts 1 billion active users each month, and with 300 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute, it does seem that artificial intelligence is the only realistic or feasible method of regulation. Still, heavier guidelines must be set. Some videos could be **reviewed by real people** before being posted. **Stricter punishments** against users who abuse the terms of agreement could help as well.

In the end, the Internet is the primary way we connect, learn, and grow. Like our natural environment, it should be a healthy, civilized place where rules and freedom do not contradict each other, but maintain order. And just as the Internet has dark corners and harmful content, real life isn't perfect. But **we can, and always should, try to do better**.