**Opinion**Free Speech Is Killing Us

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Noxious language online is causing real-world violence. What can we do about it? For years, the founders of Facebook and Twitter and 4chan and Reddit — along with the consumers obsessed with these products, and the investors who stood to profit from them — tried to pretend that the noxious speech prevalent on those platforms wouldn’t metastasize into physical violence. In the early years of this decade, back when people associated social media with Barack Obama or the Arab Spring, Twitter executives referred to their company as “the free-speech wing of the free-speech party.” The internet was surely only a force for progress.

No one believes that anymore. Not after the social-media-fueled campaigns of Narendra Modi and Rodrigo Duterte and Donald Trump; not after the massacres in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and a Walmart in a majority-Hispanic part of El Paso. I no longer have any doubt that the brutality that germinates on the internet can leap into the world of flesh and blood.

The question is where this leaves us. Noxious speech is causing tangible harm. Yet this fact implies a question so uncomfortable that many of us go to great lengths to avoid asking it. Namely, what should we — the government, private companies or individual citizens — be doing about it? Nothing. Or at least that’s the answer one often hears from liberals and conservatives alike. Some speech might be bad, this line of thinking goes, but censorship is always worse. The First Amendment is first for a reason.

Using “free speech” as a cop-out is just as intellectually dishonest and just as morally bankrupt. For one thing, the First Amendment doesn’t apply to private companies. But even if you see social media platforms as something more akin to a public utility, not all speech is protected under the First Amendment anyway. Libel, incitement of violence and child pornography are all forms of speech. Yet we censor all of them, and no one calls it the death knell of the Enlightenment. Free speech is a bedrock value in this country. But it isn’t the only one. Like all values, it must be held in tension with others, such as equality, safety and robust democratic participation. Speech should be protected, all things being equal. Navigating these trade-offs is thorny, as trade-offs among core principles always are. But that doesn’t mean we can avoid navigating them at all.

In 1993 and 1994, talk-radio hosts in Rwanda calling for bloodshed [helped create the atmosphere](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/04/world/court-convicts-3-in-1994-genocide-across-rwanda.html) that led to genocide. The Clinton administration could have jammed the radio signals and taken those broadcasts off the air, but Pentagon lawyers decided against it, [citing](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/power.html) free speech. It’s true that the propagandists’ speech would have been curtailed. It’s also possible that a genocide would have been averted. I am not calling for repealing the First Amendment, or even for banning speech I find offensive on private platforms. What I’m arguing against is paralysis. Unchecked speech can expose us to real risks. And we can take steps to mitigate those risks. (508 words)