Why removing protections on social media in the name of free speech is bad for peacebuilding

May 9 2024, by Paul Reilly

Credit: Jacek Dylag/Unsplash

On May 16 the world will mark the UN International Day of Living Together in Peace. It is a rallying call for people to listen respectfully to others and promote tolerance and understanding.

Perhaps someone should tell tech entrepreneurs Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. The online platforms they head up—Facebook, Instagram,

Twitter/X—have become synonymous with fake news, [hate speech](#), misinformation and other online harms.

Social media has been widely blamed for destabilizing democracies and fomenting civil unrest in Europe and North America. In July 2023, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, [proposed](#) restricting access to online platforms in order to quell rioting.

This is a far cry from 2009, when Facebook [proudly claimed](#) it had created "friendships" between seemingly irredeemably rival groups: Sunni and Shia Muslims, Muslims and Jews, Pakistanis and Indians, Greeks and Turks, conservatives and liberals.

"Peace on Facebook" was a classic example of what social scientist Nicholas John [refers](#) to as "social media bullshit." Such PR blurb is designed to convince the public these tech companies are a force for good. They purposefully describe themselves as "platforms"—rather than commercial entities—to emphasize how benign they are.

In reality, these companies financially benefit from every click, like, share and comment users on their platforms make. The more inflammatory the content, the more profitable it is. [My research](#) shows that such online incivility only makes it harder to promote peaceful coexistence

Divisive content

There appears little chance of social media platforms taking stronger action to remove divisive content. Since tech entrepreneur Elon Musk's acquisition of the X (formerly Twitter) microblogging platform in October 2022, the guardrails designed to protect minorities have, in fact, been dismantled.

Twitter's Trust and Safety Council was dissolved in December 2022. This move, among many other policy changes, prompted an insider to [go public with their fears](link) that the site could no longer protect users from trolling, disinformation and sexual exploitation.

Musk has reportedly described himself as a ["free speech absolutist"](link). This is particularly problematic for those whose real job it is to promote peace in deeply divided societies.

There is already [extensive evidence](link) that online platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have been used to spread hate speech. They have been used to incite sectarian violence, too, in countries including [India](link) and [Myanmar](link).

In Sri Lanka, following anti-Muslim rioting in 2018, Facebook [issued an apology](link) for its role in the unrest. The company hired Article One, the human rights consultancy, to investigate what had happened. It concluded that the hate speech and misinformation that was amplified by Facebook users online "may have led" to violence offline.

[My research](link) shows that rumors, misinformation and disinformation have frequently been amplified by social media during contentious parades and protests in Northern Ireland. There is little evidence that such online activity inevitably leads to sectarian rioting. The indirect effects of online incivility, however, is that it makes it harder to promote reconciliation between former antagonists.

In effect, [online platforms](link) at present focus more attention on what divides rather than unites different communities.

Research shows that [unsupervised intergroup contact](link), both on and offline, is unlikely to foster positive peace in societies that are transitioning out of conflict. Reducing prejudices against outgroups is

much easier when there are rules in place to respond to content that inflames tensions between different communities. In other words, rival groups are unlikely to find common ground in unregulated online spaces where hate speech flourishes.

Clearly, frequent exposure to the online hate speech amplified by social media platforms is unlikely to aid peacebuilding. Communities who do not typically share the same physical space are unlikely to think differently about each other when they see such negative stereotypes being perpetuated online.

Social media such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) might not be the best place to promote peace. These platforms are designed to generate profit, not improve community relations.

For intergroup dialogue in contemporary societies to be effective minorities and vulnerable communities need stronger protections, not less. A public service internet, guardrails included, might be a better way to promote reconciliation in divided societies.

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