

False Profits

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As AI is being developed and rolled out, the world must ensure that its creators and policy makers learn from history and not repeat the same mistake that was made with social media companies: unfettered development of an information tool with profit as its only goal. A focus on only profit with no thought of societal impact in the global information market, be it with news, radio, cable, or social media, has led to polarization and misinformation so dangerous, it is destabilizing national security and society at large.

The arguments by social media platforms against regulation have gone like this: 1) It violates the constitutional right to free speech under the First Amendment and could lead to government censorship; 2) Social media companies can regulate themselves, and users should bear responsibility for their online consumption rather than government; 3) It stifles innovation; 4) It creates a competitive disadvantage with international actors operating under different rules. These arguments have given companies the license to use their algorithms and the private information they gather on users to keep people online seeing more ads to make even more money.

Let's take the common refrain that regulation would violate the First Amendment, equaling censorship and that social media companies and users are best positioned to regulate themselves. Those arguments have proven to be strikingly hollow since it is social media's algorithms that censor the truth, burying it amidst emotion evoking disinformation. A famous 2018 study by MIT showed that disinformation, purposely manipulated information that ignores or distorts facts and context, and misinformation, unwittingly false facts or contexts, spread much faster and wider than the truth.

The reasons for this relate to the business model of social media platforms, which depends in part on the algorithms to keep feeding users information that will keep them online, clicking from page to page, seeing more paid advertisements, leading to greater profit. [The study by MIT](#) and multiple studies by behavioral psychologists show that false or distorted information was seen as more novel than true news, inspiring feelings of outrage, fear, disgust, and surprise causing users to share it more than the truth, which inspired feelings like anxiety, anticipation, and sadness.¹

[Another study at Yale found](#) that "nothing goes viral like moral outrage," with that and another noting that moral outrage online has limited risk.² That and anxiety can speed sharing with friends and family, who may feel safer in expressing it themselves within a social group creating even deeper and wider echo chambers. All these emotions cause users to share novel and emotion evoking information [70% more](#) than true news.³ Certain types of information, novel or not, can also lead to faster spread. Health-related disinformation, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic around masks and vaccines, is spread more quickly than other types. In that way, it is the social media platforms' own algorithms which are depressing and "censoring" facts and the truth.

And that speed and distance of spread, through sharing, is further boosted by algorithms that move content into and up in the feeds of like-minded people or social identity groups. The algorithms utilize data from users' preferences to predict people who will find the posting interesting enough to also click on it, so they too will stay online and see more ads, earning the platforms more profit. But the algorithms are also pooling people into echo chambers and the psychological phenomenon of confirmation bias. The source of information, such as family and friends, leads to firmer belief in the truth of the information, or a [confirmation bias](#), leading to an "us and them" mentality when the information is questioned.⁴ That bias is shown in a tendency to interpret and recall facts in a way that confirms prior beliefs, declining to seek out or rejecting other information, deepening suspicion of other viewpoints and those who hold them.

This profit drive of social media platforms and partisan news channels, online or on cable, has made them less responsive to calls to alter practices leading to polarization and even violence in the United States, despite promises to "self-regulate," was not lost on foreign leaders, particularly Vladimir Putin. At tea at his dacha with Russia experts in 2004, Putin told me, in response to a question about his takeover of independent media there,

“There is no independent media. Whoever owns the media owns the truth and there is no truth.” His chief of Russian forces, Valery Gerasimov, later famously laid out how Russia would use disinformation as a weapon [in an article](#) about the future of “hybrid warfare.”⁵

In that strategy, Putin and his administration have weaponized social media’s business model of keeping people online through channeling outrage and novelty against the United States and other democracies. Gerasimov explicitly noted their focus would be “in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.” Despite its propaganda channel, Russia Today (RT), being banned in most democratic countries, the work continues through what its editor in chief describes as “an entire empire of covert projects,” like those alleged in [the indictment against two Russia Today \(RT\) contractors on September 4th](#), using American influencers to create and spread disinformation in order to influence the U.S. elections toward those supportive of Russian policies.⁶ The subjects they chose to spread are those that triggered emotions, sharing, and polarization, dividing and conquering through disinformation. Its line of attack, as an [RT editor noted](#) to one of its journalists in the UK, “is anything that causes chaos...”⁷

Even without such foreign interference, the emotions and polarization within society caused by a business model designed to keep its customers through mostly negative emotions has other effects on national security. [Researchers have recently shown a correlation](#) between emotion and trust in government, with fear creating more trust and anger less, and potentially less willingness to engage in the outside world—negatively affecting support for US engagement in foreign affairs.⁸

It’s clear that social media companies have been unable to police themselves and counter the negative effects of their business models. Likewise, users, inundated with information and disinformation that keeps them clicking, are unable to overcome psychological tendencies that lead to social polarization and isolation. Members of Congress are now trying to limit social media’s profit model by banning targeted advertising to children at least in the Kids Online Safety Act or KOSA. While it passed the Senate, the House has yet to vote on it. As one senator told me, “It’s a start,” and that Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which protects online service providers from being held liable for content provided by third parties on their platforms, will be under review in the near future.

But instead of doing “too little, too late” to prevent what damage has already been done, the United States need not repeat this history and should instead start now on understanding and regulating the downsides of artificial intelligence in ways that use its upsides, especially in the information space. The downsides may be worsened even now if the training models are taking information off the internet which may be polluted by disinformation, further spreading it, creating bias and polarization. Likewise, AI’s ability to synthesize pictures, sounds, and voices to create realistic “fakes” could distort its sources in ways that would make the information more trusted by users and their echo chambers.

The recent Aspen Strategy Group Summer Workshop focused on how AI can be used effectively to protect our national security. But it also focused on how AI can be used against the United States and to disrupt global stability, particularly its potential misuse in the information space. Russia’s use of disinformation on social media highlighted the United States’s vulnerability and we should ensure Americans and policy makers don’t fall for the same arguments that the creators of AI can police themselves, or that it’s the role of users to figure it out. The nation can also use AI to find and limit the spread of disinformation, or allow it to be used for profit, or worse, against its people, social unity, and national security.

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¹ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

² M. J. Crockett, "Moral Outrage in the Digital Age," *Nature Human Behaviour* 1, no. 11 (September 18, 2017): 769–71, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3>.

³ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146–51.

⁴ Bettina J. Casad and J.E. Luebering, "Confirmation Bias," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/science/confirmation-bias>.

⁵ V. Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Military Review*, 2016, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Value-of-Science-Is-in-the-Foresight%3A-New-the-Gerasimov/a132e441825bd5314b7135af33ac643bed422e7e>.

⁶ UNITED STATES OF AMERICA V. KOSTIANTYN KALASHNIKOV, a/k/a "Kostya," and ELENA AF ANASYEV A, a/k/a "Lena" (United States District Court Southern District of New York 2024).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Julian Erhardt et al., "The Emotional Foundations of Political Support: How Fear and Anger Affect Trust in the Government in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Swiss Political Science Review* 27, no. 2 (May 25, 2021): 339–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12462>.