

Excessive free speech is a breeding ground for more Trumps



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There was a bit of good news about the future of public discourse this week. The United States Supreme Court, even though stacked with right-wingers, sounded like it was ready to give the Biden administration the go-ahead to try to persuade social-media platforms not to put out content promoting nonsense about the presidential election, conspiracy theories about the pandemic and other assorted bilge and crackpottery. The states of Missouri and Louisiana accused the government of stifling their speech by pressuring platforms to downgrade or drop their posts. But the justices, including conservatives Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett, didn't sound like they were buying it.

Good. Hopefully the court's final decision will tell the complainants where to get off. It would be a victory for regulation of the internet. But no one should get too excited. The genie is already out of the bottle and there is little likelihood of getting it back in. The greater likelihood is that extremes of free speech will continue to be tolerated, creating a pathway for more Donald Trumps.

The extremes came following the arrival of the internet and social-media platforms. They created a tsunami of free expression. Despite the grumblings we still hear about the lack of free speech, these platforms gave more of it to the masses than anything ever before.

When other communications revolutions like the printing press, radio, and television came along, they were still largely controlled by the elites. But when the internet came along, regulatory bodies like Canada's CRTC backed off. It was open season for anything that anyone wanted to put out. No license needed. No identity verification.

What a far cry from the days when the masses had no outlets save things like "man-on-the-street" interviews or letters to the editor or protest placards. We moved from one extreme to the other.

The masses were finally weaponized – not with arms, but with a communications instrument that empowered them against establishment forces like they had never been empowered before. The change represented one of history's significant power shifts. With the multitudes given megaphones, what a wonderful democratic advance it was. But it came with a rather massive irony. Free speech became as much a slayer of democracy as an enabler.

Unchecked, the internet dumped megatons of raw sewage on the public square. With filters that had been around for ages now removed came mountains of misinformation and disinformation. And propaganda, polarization, child pornography. And threats against leaders and bigotry and conspiracy claptrap.

Would the rise of the hard right and Mr. Trump have been possible if the internet had been given guardrails? Not a chance. The internet gave him – before his account was suspended in 2021 – 88 million Twitter followers. With that came the freedom to circumvent traditional media and create an alternate universe, a smearsphere wherein he could lie like he breathes and get away with it.

The internet undermined the established newspaper business model, greatly reducing the number of papers and coverage and creating a void for Mr. Trump and the like-minded to fill. His cries of fake news had the impact – it's charted well in former Washington Post editor Martin Barron's book, *Collision of Power* – of compartmentalizing the media landscape into left-right silos, which helped bring on the extremes of polarization.

The way to reverse the trend is with rigid regulation, but the free speech lobby in the United States is as fierce as the gun lobby. The historic triumph the internet gave free speech is all but forgotten. The amnesiacs scream censorship. Joe Biden is out "to crush free speech in America," Mr. Trump ludicrously charged recently.

A *New York Times* analysis this week spelled out how Mr. Biden was intent on regulating the big tech companies, but in the face of the opposition from the free speech lobby he has pretty much given up.

In Canada, the Trudeau government's regulation attempts are being met with intense opposition – deservedly so in some cases, because legislation such as Bill C-63 goes way overboard in calling for life sentences for speech crimes and needs to be redrafted. But the dangers of the deregulated informationsphere is nowhere near what it is south of the border, where Mr. Trump and company have turned free speech into warped speech and could take the country off the rails. Small victories like we saw from the Supreme Court this week are too little too late – not enough to rein in the demons that have been set loose.