

Deplatforming: The Risk of Success

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From spring 2020 onward, anti-fascists secured a series of victories by calling on social media platforms to remove right-wing online platforms. Although this approach has been successful, under circumstances that will be hard to replicate, it also has deep flaws, and reliance on it tends to reinforce unhealthy top-down dynamics within the left.

Let us start, though, with the victories. In a February 2020 article, Shane Burley, one of the sharpest observers of the U.S. right, noted some of the examples that had already taken place. The white nationalist *Daily Shoah* podcast had been removed from Twitter, Facebook, and the iTunes podcast app. The *Daily Stormer*, another neo-Nazi website, was banned by the domain registrars GoDaddy, Google, Namecheap, and Cloudflare. And while the personal YouTube account of alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer was “somehow” still trucking, Burley wrote, it was plainly doomed. (Indeed, his page was taken down just four months later.) “Deplatforming,” Burley wrote, “meaning removing certain figures and groups from the mass platforms that they share with the rest of us, was a death sentence for key players in the Alt Right.”¹

In June 2020, Unilever announced that it would cease to advertise on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, blaming the prevalence of “divisiveness and hate speech” on these platforms. Over the following weeks, YouTube banned former Klan leader David Duke, while Reddit deleted the user-created board “The Donald.”²

In November 2020, former Trump adviser Steve Bannon called for FBI director Christopher Wray and the infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci to be decapitated and their heads posted outside the White House as a “warning.” In response, Twitter banned Bannon.³ Then, following Trump’s role in summoning his supporters to march on Washington in January 2021, the former president became the highest-profile casualty of deplatforming, losing his Twitter audience of 89 million people.

If we focus on winter 2020 and 2021 and ignore the preceding decade, then the equation is straightforward: the social media companies were willing to stop hateful voices who had brought them bad publicity. Their interventions whittled down the right’s potential audience and made it harder for fascists and their allies to organize. In this piece, I critique that premise: the idea that, in the words of another anti-fascist writer Joe Mulhall, “deplatforming works.”⁴

Why was this tactic suddenly so successful, when over the previous ten years it had produced only

meager results? For a long time, whistleblowers emerging from within social media companies had been complaining that while their employers knew their sites were promoting hate, they had made the calculation that it was better for their bank balances to tolerate the far right. A 2018 episode of the documentary series *C4 Dispatches* showed the training Facebook gave to its staff, in which employees were shown images of a toddler being beaten by a man and a girl kicking another young woman unconscious. The show described how Facebook staff were encouraged to see such violent images as means to drive viewer engagement.⁵ As one early investor in Facebook, Robert McNamee, explained, right-wing extremism was “the crack cocaine of their product—the really extreme, really dangerous form of content that attracts the most highly engaged people on the platform.”⁶

Each time Trump took to Twitter, he drove traffic to the site—along with those of the newspapers and television companies that reproduced screenshots of his latest insult. For Twitter’s owners, he was giving his own time freely to boost their profits. One prediction was that if Trump had to leave Twitter, the company’s value would fall by \$2 billion.⁷ As it turned out, this was an underestimate. After deplatforming Trump, Twitter’s shares fell by \$5 billion.⁸ Thus, businesses gained more from hosting Trump than they could by challenging him.

The platforms relied on a thriving economy outside the computer screen, with real-world companies seeing Facebook, Twitter, and others as previous generations might have a busy urban street: as an opportunity to plaster advertising messages. Therefore, there was always the possibility that if enough advertisers spoke out, the math could turn against the right. And this was precisely what happened in summer 2020, spurred on by the campaign Stop Hate for Profit, which drew in some nine hundred corporate supporters, including Coca-Cola and Ford, who urged the social media platforms to tighten up their rules.

But the victories that were won were only possible in the favorable context of the dying days of the Trump administration, under pressure from Black Lives Matter protests. Deplatforming was an attempt by the companies to relate to a much broader social movement: the uprising in America against racism following the police murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. By the start of July 2020, some 20 million people had participated in BLM protests.⁹ The movement was of such breadth that it forced the owners of social media to do “something,” in the same way that sports franchises had to permit their stars to take a knee, or that universities took an anxious look at the names of their historic buildings, or that book publishers began to reassess their backlists.

On the left, we believe that the far right lacks the resources to host itself, and is dependent on the goodwill of the social media platforms. But there have already been examples of far-right celebrities whose complaints of censorship and invocation of the morality of self-defense have stirred sufficient sympathy to build their audience outside those platforms. For instance, conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer was banned from Twitter in November 2018 after denying the citizenship of Muslim politicians, interrupting a New York Public Theatre performance of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to denounce “violence against the right,” and boasting about her refusal of Uber rides from “Islamic immigrant” drivers. Loomer was removed from social media, but this only raised her profile. In August 2020, she secured the Republican nomination for Congress in the Palm Beach district of Florida;¹⁰ and while she ultimately lost to the incumbent Democratic candidate, she won over 150,000 votes.¹¹ Similarly, Twitter’s March 2018 ban on another prominent anti-Muslim activist, Tommy Robinson, led to some of the largest far-right street protests in all of British history.¹² So, while a ban is rarely in the interest of any of these figures, it nevertheless provides an opportunity for the right; and where the right takes up that chance, it can magnify its audience.

Over a longer timescale, the right may yet succeed in gaining a platform of its own. It might do so by building up its existing social networks on services like Gab or Parler, until they reach the point

where they are mass media providers, capable of competing with Facebook or Twitter; or, it might seek to rebuild its audience on encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram. After all, as early as January 2021, Telegram was claiming to have 500 million users worldwide, leaving Twitter, with a mere 350 million, far behind.¹³

The conflict between left and right is a struggle marked by repeated bursts of political creativity, with each side capable of adapting to hostile circumstances. It thus follows that no single strategy is guaranteed to be effective permanently; indeed, experience has shown that the best any anti-fascist tactic can achieve is a few years of relative success. From that perspective, we should anticipate that the right will retaliate to online deplatforming with strategies of its own. If, as of spring 2021, deplatforming appears to work, it is unlikely to seem quite so effective in five or ten years' time.

This brings me to a final question: whether the left should be trying to deplatform its opponents, or whether the strategy contains hidden costs to our side. The left and the right are never simply fascist or anti-fascist, but combine multiple other causes. What we achieve in one moment of struggle can have all sorts of unintended consequences elsewhere.

One of the most censored forms of political speech has been pro-Palestinian activism. So zealous has Facebook been in prohibiting such speech that campaigners responded with a hashtag, #FBCensorsPalestine.¹⁴

In September 2020, Facebook temporarily closed accounts of activists who had shown support for the campaign led by indigenous people in the Wet'suwet'en territory against the construction of a 416-mile hydrofracturing ("fracking") gas pipeline through British Columbia. Two hundred people were told that they had "infringe[d] or violate[d] others' rights or ... violate[d] the law."¹⁵

In late 2020, Facebook and Instagram began to refuse links to anti-fascist and anarchist pages, including tIt's Going Down, CrimethInc., and the German site Enough Is Enough. Facebook accepted that these groups were not "dangerous organizations," nor did they "organi[ze] violence." However, their supporters had shown "violent behavior," and on that basis, it was appropriate to "restrict [anti-fascists'] ability to organize on our platform."¹⁶

Social media platforms are intensely undemocratic. There are no elections to decide the composition of Facebook's board of directors, or that of its governance or oversight committees. Its members hold their positions for as long as they retain the support of the group's founder, and the company's corporate structure gives him a lifetime majority in any contested decision.¹⁷

In 2020, the wealth of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg passed \$100 billion, almost all of it held in company stock. Since the company went public in 2012, Facebook's stock value has been growing at the rate of roughly \$50 billion a year, earning Zuckerberg a personal wealth bonus (an effective income) of about \$8 billion a year. Part of the reason his wealth has been able to increase at this rate is that his company has opted out of the tax system: it only declares a small proportion of its annual earnings as profits. Of the money it chooses to declare as profits, almost all is then routed through offshore tax havens, principally Bermuda, Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.¹⁸ If somehow his wealth could be frozen tomorrow, and Zuckerberg simply never earned another cent in his entire life, his wealth of \$80 billion would be as much as the average American worker could reasonably expect to earn in the next two million years—a duration roughly equivalent to that of human existence on this planet. In the face of wealth concentration on this scale, the left cannot be silent.

Insofar as the left prioritizes deplatforming over other anti-fascist strategies, we contribute to a political culture that is polarized around values, rather than the debate we want to have about power and class. We fail to build our own movements, our own democracy.

Notes

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