Committee: SOCHUM 2

Topic: The question of the Regulation of social media

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Summary

Social Media, since becoming widely used in the early 21st Century has become an indispensable tool to many around the globe, with almost 4 billion users worldwide. We use it for communication, for entertainment, for news and for education. It allows us to share ideas and emotions with people around the globe. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of social media has increased massively, especially on platforms like TikTok.

Whilst there are many positives to social media, there are also some negatives. It can have adverse effects on mental health, leading, in some cases, to conditions like anorexia and depression. It can be easy for people to be cyberbullied on social media.
Social media can also be used to disseminate extremist or violent views amongst users, leading, in some cases, to increased levels of violent crime, such as school shootings. Social media can also be used to influence political events, with the use of bots and targeted advertising, to sway voters and change their views.

Social media is arguably, primarily a profit-making venture by large companies and so a heavy focus is put on advertising which is often targeted using personal data. This use of personal data, while often not malicious, can be found and accessed. Through data breaches or human error, data you may not want in public, like your credit card number or address, can be found.
Social media has also led to a rise in fake news as anyone can present their opinions as fact and there is nobody to check or regulate it. This leads to people holding factually incorrect views.

Definition of Key Terms

Social media – Websites and applications that allow users to share content and interact with others online

Bots – An automated program that can interact with users and systems online

Cyber bullying – Using social media or other electronic communication in order to intimidate or harass another

Targeted advertising – Is advertising that uses data collected on a user to provide specific advertisements to them based on their likes and dislikes

Whistle-blower – Person who speaks out about an individual or organisation seen to be acting in an illegal or unethical manner.

Data – Any information collected to be used for statistics or analysis

Fake news – Is false or misleading information that is presented as factually correct 'news'.

Legislation – Is the making of laws

Censorship – Is the suppression of speech or other communication that could be perceived as harmful by those regulating it.

The Great Firewall – Is a term used to define the regulation of the internet in China, using censors and legislation.

Background Information

As long as social media has existed, there have been attempts to regulate it. In the early days, some countries attempted to ban explicit content like pornography, made more easily accessible by the internet. As time moved on, more users joined sites and gave increasingly more personal information, sometimes unintentionally, to social media sites. This data was sometimes used without the user's consent, leading to the EU introducing GDPR legislation. After the U.S presidential election of 2016 and the Brexit referendum, the world was also shown how social media could be used to influence political decisions. The company Cambridge Analytica had been paid large amounts of money to create targeted ads, often presented as news, changing the minds of many voters. Russian bots were also used to share false content, swaying the electorate. In 2021, further attention was drawn to the issue after social media accounts were used to incite violence that led to the Capitol riots. Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistle-blower, has also drawn attention to the fact that social media sites are largely profit motivated and centred in the hands of a few individuals like Mark Zuckerberg.

Member nations, especially in the 'West', are waking up to the changes and threats posed by social media in light of recent events. The fact that there is little to no regulation of social media worries those who care about child protection and democratic stability. However, there are some who believe that freedom of speech is equally as important, and that social media should remain unregulated. The challenge is to ensure that individual freedoms of speech and expression are respected, while those of privacy, safety, justice, and democracy are also respected. Over the years, different countries and

organisations have had different approaches to combating the issue. Despite this, many of the solutions lag behind technological advances and are rarely internationally recognized.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

USA – The USA is home to many of the large technology companies (Meta [Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp], Alphabet inc. [Google, YouTube], Snapchat and Twitter) that own and manage social media platforms around the world. As a result, many of those companies are registered in the US and could be regulated by the federal government. However, the first amendment of the U.S constitution, protecting free speech has been used as a defence against legislation and regulation. The ideals that companies should have freedom to do as they like has also been used. Despite this, the country is gradually waking up to the threat posed. Any solutions should focus on the regulation of these large companies with the American government's support.

China – China, the home to many other popular social media sites (TikTok, WeChat, Weibo) is also a key country in any discussion surrounding regulation. They have strict censorship laws, forbidding violent, profane, or anti-government content. Most western sites have been banned. Despite this, their heavily regulated social media is still very popular. Chinese social media companies that operate around the world like TikTok are required under Chinese law to share information with the government if requested, potentially leading to security and privacy concerns in a government setting as opposed to a commercial one.

EU – The EU has been at the forefront of social media regulation, especially in legislating it. In 2016, GDPR was introduced, defining a number of new legal definitions in relation to the internet as well as limiting the amount of personal data that can be harvested by companies and the purposes it can be used for. There is also new legislation being proposed and introduced to protect people, especially young people, against harmful content. The EU has been one of the most proactive organisations in tackling the issue.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description

1989 – The World Wide Web was invented by Tim Berners Lee.

2002 – Friendster and Myspace, the first social media sites, in modern terms, are created.

2004 – Facebook is invented by Mark Zuckerberg

2005 – YouTube is founded

2016 – GDPR Legislation comes into law in the EU

2017 – TikTok, the fastest growing social media site, is founded

2018 – All organisations have to be compliant with GDPR within the EU.

2018 – Cambridge Analytica is exposed for its role in harvesting data without user consent by Christopher Wylie.

2020 – The COVID-19 pandemic leads to lockdowns worldwide, driving up social media use.

2021 – The Capitol riots take place, fuelled by inflammatory posts from then President Donald Trump.

2021 – Facebook whistle-blower, Frances Haugen, testifies before congress, shedding light on issues within the company.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Many different methods have been used by different member nations in order to regulate social media. In the EU, GDPR has been introduced, one of the most comprehensive pieces of legislation regarding the internet in the world. It ensures transparency regarding companies and the data that they are using. It is responsible for privacy policies and cookies. Despite this, it makes relatively little difference as consumers are inclined to disregard such information.

In China, a more radical approach has been taken, with the mass censorship of social media. Many western social media sites are blocked by the great firewall. The social media that remains is government censored. Whilst this cuts down on crime and extremism on social media it also infringes on many people's freedoms and rights to expression.

Age limits are often used to protect younger users from sensitive content but are easily bypassed.

Companies often ban accounts that are extremist or violent in nature to stop such views spreading. The issue with this method is that it can infringe on people's human rights and is not sustainable in the long term as new accounts can be created.

The attempts to regulate social media so far have been limited in success and either fail to protect people or infringe on their human rights. Any successful resolution will have to balance these two ideas.

Possible Solutions

1. Legislation and oversight. The most comprehensive way of regulating social media would be to create legislation dictating what is and what is not acceptable when interacting with social media. You could also look at oversight for social media, so that its effect on the world can be accurately reviewed as well as reviewing how social media algorithm's function. You could also look at the creation of quality standards that social media companies would have to comply with so that we know it is safe to use.

2. Educating the consumer on social media is also an important part to any solution. Making people aware of the dangers posed by fake news and extremist groups as well as how their data is used on social media is integral. This would allow consumers to make informed decisions before engaging online.

3. Online, fact checking organisations are at the frontline of combating fake news. However, they are often small, privately run groups relying on second hand information from reputable news sites. Improving and expanding fact checking services would help combat the spread of fake news.

4. The use of bots on social media to pose as real humans can easily deceive people. The removal of these bots and preventing them in the first place would help social media more accurately reflect humanities views.

5. If age limits could be properly enforced, they would be an effective tool in keeping children safe. This is something that could be looked at.

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(Title of source, author, date of publication – you may also wish to list some useful websites)

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