Turning Tech Companies Into Spies Won't Work

Adaptation of article by Lee Rowland, ACLU

Following the news that one of the murderers from the San Bernardino shooting supported ISIS on social media, we are seeing politicians call for increased **censorship** of the Internet. They are demanding that companies (like Twitter, Facebook, etc.) clear their platforms of terrorism-related content and propose a federal bill that would turn social media companies into state-mandated reporters of "terrorist activity."

These responses are misguided for two reasons. First, pure censorship of speech is just a very bad idea. Silencing speech that is not itself illegal goes directly against our free speech values. Censorship makes censored speech all the more dangerous because we lose our most powerful tool to combat unjust ideas: the ability to identify them and respond with better ideas.

Mandating tech companies to report on "terrorist activities," is also a flawed idea. Social media companies should and do notify the government if they learn that a user is threatening immediate violence. But online service providers are not experts on terrorism. There is no magical line that separates "good" from "bad" speech, no special formula that Facebook can use to figure out exactly what speech should be reported to the government.

This bill would also be terrible for political speech. Speech supporting terrorism is is a small margin away from speech *about* terrorism, foreign policy, drones, the Middle East and Islam. The idea that speaking about these controversial and important policy issues might get you in trouble would be enough to stop many from having those conversations which are at the heart of the First Amendment.

These concerns are real- private companies have a history of censoring speech for reasons that turn out to be misguided. For example, Apple blocked applications that allowed users to identify sites of U.S. drone strikes because it was considered "objectionable material." Drone strikes are definitely objectionable, but talking about our own government's actions is definitely not.

Another reason why this bill is misguided is that censoring and monitoring social media speech just *isn't* an effective solution for radicalization. Social media companies do not and cannot monitor every bit of speech that is posted on their networks. It is a huge mistake to expect or require private social media companies to be in charge of national security just as it is a huge mistake to blame the Internet for exposing the hate that is sadly, already in our human minds and human hearts.

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Censorship: prohibiting of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.