

SILENCED



With social media being home to an abundance of opinions, news and debates, discussions surrounding censorship have emerged.

BY MAYA CHU AND JANE LAM

Twitter announced April 25 that it accepted Elon Musk's offer to buy the social media platform for \$44 billion. Musk, the CEO of Tesla and an avid Twitter user, hopes to make the platform a hub for free speech. He also said March 10 that he plans to reverse Twitter's ban of former President Donald Trump's account. Musk's plans for Twitter have sparked debate over whether social media companies should censor content they deem inappropriate. Miles Clark '22 believes Musk's Twitter takeover is a step in the right direction.

"One of his primary goals ... is to encourage the making of a platform where everyone can say their own thoughts, and they won't have fear of getting banned from the website," Clark said. "It's going to be an intellectual hub for all different ideas."

To Clark, social media censorship is almost always a bad thing because it can create a less informed society. He believes even if something is not factually correct, it is still productive and allows people to interact with information.

"If you have a large quantity of viewpoints represented in your discussion circle ... then you can do what's called 'testing' of those ideas," Clark said. "That includes arguing against said ideas and finding out what is wrong or right with those ideas. That's why having intellectual diversity is good — it allows all of the viewpoints to get thoroughly examined and then have the best one rise to the top."

One example Clark provides of this argument testing comes from debates over COVID-19 vaccines.

"Whenever I argue with someone who doesn't like the COVID vaccine, they always come up with some point that I could have never imagined existed," Clark said. "So I can never prepare a response to it beforehand ... because as soon as [a user] would post it, it would get taken down."

West alumni Jeff Albright is the President of Yanmar America, a global diesel engine and manufacturing company based in Japan. In the early 2000s, he did business in Shanghai and witnessed the effects of censorship in China, which has one of the world's most restrictive media environments. Albright says that although social media has the potential to connect many viewpoints, it often fails to happen due to online

echo chambers, where people are only exposed to their own beliefs.

"There are two different things going on: users won't see that information and most people aren't looking for opposing viewpoints," Albright said. "Most people are looking to simplify life."

Albright's experience in China shaped his views on censorship and led to a greater appreciation for the comparatively uncensored media culture in the US.

"I've come to value our approach to the world. Politicians in America, their corruption is often first rooted out by the press. Business people, their misdeeds are often pointed out by a free press or open speech," Albright said. "That is a really important fabric of who we are."

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When taken to such an extreme, the effects of censorship can shape how young people grow up and formulate opinions. Albright observed this as a graduate student in Hong Kong.

"In my opinion, more and more Chinese youth are very nationalistic [and] they see a very narrow view of the world," Albright said. "A few of [my classmates] were very sensitive to any criti-

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SPEECH

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cism of the Chinese government.”

Although Albright believes it is difficult to draw a line for when censorship goes too far, he says there should be restrictions for speech with dangerous implications.

“For people who are trying to incite violence or disadvantage others ... there should be some kind of guardrails,” Albright said.

Even for content such as hate speech, Clark thinks censorship sets a bad precedent.

“Allowing people to take down what they deem as hate speech ... could lead to the ability to have complete suppression,” Clark said. “It’s hard for me to think of a case where hate speech should be banned unless it is actively calling for violence against a specific person.”

Briar Martin ’24 often uses Instagram to speak out on social issues and is conflicted about social media censorship. She believes in giving people a platform to speak on issues that matter to them, but says it is important to minimize harm and avoid perpetuating hate online.

“A lot of the time, certain companies will censor things that shouldn’t be [censored]. For example, on TikTok ... there are videos that are taken off the ‘For You page’ because they’re calling out racism or things like that,” Martin said. “I think censorship should only be against things that are actually harmful.”

The discussion surrounding damaging content reached a peak when whistleblower Frances Haugen ’02 exposed Facebook’s practice of boosting the visibility of violent and controversial content to spark more interaction with posts and the app overall. This claim initiated further

debate about the power of big social media corporations.

On the other end of the spectrum, companies have also come under fire for too much censorship. Flagging posts and banning users may seem unconstitutional to some, but the First Amendment does not protect freedom of speech on social media as it only applies to the government restricting speech, not private actors like Twitter or Instagram.

Even so, there are instances in which users believe social media companies are unfairly removing content. For example, Clark believes politically-targeted censorship is almost guaranteed.

“You look at the Twitter staff, and [almost all] of their donations go to ... the Democratic Party, and so they’re going to have their own bias inserted into what they flag, whether they like it or not,” Clark said.

Musk’s recent purchase of Twitter has been praised by those who disagree with past actions of the platform. One example of this is Twitter’s removal of a New York Post article which exposed negative content from Hunter Biden’s laptop.

“They released [the article] right before the election, and it’s a factually correct story. And Twitter banned them and stopped the spread of that article specifically,” Clark said. “Censorship of some ideas can influence election results [at the extreme], but broadly, having less informed societies is a bad thing too, maybe even worse than the results of one specific election.”

On many popular social media apps, a combi-

nation of artificial intelligence technology and staff who professionally review posts influence content censorship. Apps also allow users to report harmful content that violates standards set by the platform. These reports are then reviewed by real content moderators. However, personal bias can impact reviews of the content, which raises major questions over how social media censorship should be structured.

“In reality, you’re not going to be able to satisfy everyone,” said Tommy Pierce ’22. “Something [can be] offensive to one person, but there’s too much gray area to decide what qualifies as offensive.”

Some apps have begun looking into AI for answers, hoping for a non-biased perspective from a machine without the ability to connect on a personal level. However, these algorithms can be equally as harmful when determining which posts should be flagged or taken down.

For example, activists who wish to reclaim hurtful words or slurs are often flagged because some algorithms target the usage of particular terms. A study by the University of Washington and Carnegie Mellon University found that tweets written in African American Vernacular English were twice as likely to be flagged and labeled as offensive.

Pierce emphasizes how censorship can hinder social media’s role as a platform for people to express their thoughts.

“People won’t be able to speak up or speak about ... issues important to them because they have no way to do so,” Pierce said.