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Democracy, a Victim of Capitalist Social Media

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Abstract: Systemic biases against queer people and other non-hegemonic groups in social media disenfranchise people and destabilize democracy in the United States of America. The legitimacy and altruism of current social media management by powerful tech magnates is challenged using Critical Queer Theory and Imani Perry's Heteropatriarchal Triad.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has profoundly affected not only society, but the characteristics of American democracy. As the internet has become more consolidated and more profitable, moneyed interests have increasingly wanted to shape power dynamics within the Internet to be favorable to their interests. Social media moderation policy, public opinion and knowledge of certain groups and events could be drastically affected. What is most pressing about the rapidly increasing influence of social media on our lives is the increasing consolidation of a now-essential public service into the hands of a few phenomenally rich tech oligarchs. These oligarchs, being unelected and unaccountable to the people, are an undemocratic center of power that can easily subvert the will of the people in favor of promoting their own agendas.

This work is in partial fulfillment of the ENGR184 course using the blueprint curriculum in Ref [1,2] and captured in a collection. [3]

METHODS

Imani Perry's model of the "heteropatriarchal triad" will serve as the basis for much of the social media analysis. The triad is composed of three components: the sovereign authority that grants property rights and defines personhood, the understanding of what is property and who owns it, and who falls within and without the bounds of personhood [5]. As social media is a uniquely formatted microcosm of wider society, such a lens of social analysis seems appropriate.

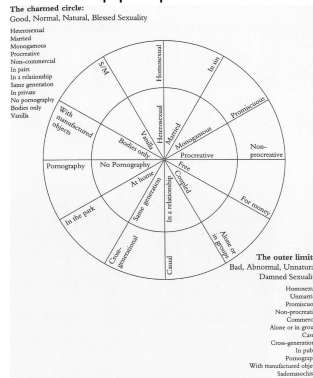


Fig. 1. Rubin's sex hierarchy model (Ref. [4], Fig. 1)

Critical queer theory pioneered by authors like Gayle S. Rubin will also inform significant portions of the social media analysis. Rubin's model of the "charmed circle" and "outer limits" defining what is sacred or profane is useful in understanding social media's censorship policy. Especially with how much both oppressive systems excuse their crackdowns on liberty as "protecting the children", pulling from sex theory seems appropriate. I will further define "queer" not merely as holding an LGBTQ+ identity, but being identified by power as undesirable and in need of modification. Thus, queerness can not only affect gender and sexual minorities, but it can also affect children, racial minorities, disabled people, and any other group that inconveniently disrupts the narratives of power.

DISCUSSION

This discussion shall begin at the rhetorical justification used by most of capital for their increasingly invasive and oppressive social media policies: “protecting the children”. As elucidated by Rubin, conservative censorship of “deviant” behavior becomes more potent in accordance with the supposed presence of children [4]. Much of the rhetoric in favor of social media age restrictions and government identification integration revolves around protecting children from child predators and sparing them from the potential of social media addiction. However, the reality of the situation paints quite a different picture. Currently on Instagram is an AI-generated video featuring Jeffrey Epstein and Sean “Diddy” Combs replacing characters in scenes from the hit television show, *Breaking Bad*. Some of the dialogue is altered to more closely relate to the infamous sexual exploits of the men. Through overlaying these real-life criminals onto fictional characters, and writing humorous dialogue, the post makes these child predators into kid-friendly “meme” characters. Jeffrey Epstein wasn’t a terrifyingly wealthy business magnate that trafficked children to the most powerful men on the planet [16], he’s just a guy with an island: Sean Combs wasn’t a serial abuser of women [17], he’s just a guy that loves baby oil. It seems the supposed push against child abuse on social media does not include preventing or sounding the alarm about normalizing child predators. Furthermore, this desire to separate children from “danger” on social media is likely to only further harm children. Queer children especially are vulnerable to social media restrictions, due to them often living in areas that restrict their access to queer resources. Blanket bans on social media for children under a certain age will often isolate queer children from the communities that allow them to socialize openly as themselves, and leave children in regressive areas unable to access many educational resources. Worse still, this blanket removal of young people from social media will disincentivize social media corporations from investigating ways to make their platforms safer for everyone, and present any kids who circumvent the ban with a social media that is not prepared for them [8]. Rubin’s analysis once again proves useful, by emphasizing the fallaciousness of the supposed binary between sexless child and fully sex-aware adult. Children being exposed to sex is seen as outrageous obscenity, but exposure to brutal violence is relatively normalized [4]. Thus, children in communities unwilling to teach them about sexuality can only resort to outside resources on the internet and elsewhere to understand themselves. Trying to prevent children from seeing content deemed too “sexual” for them is fraught with its own issues. As mentioned before, children do not suddenly become fully capable of understanding all aspects of sex the moment they reach some age cutoff in their late teens. Thus, boundaries on what is or isn’t considered sexually “taboo” are nearly impossible to define without negative consequences. Especially with the far right’s predilection towards labeling anything associated with the LGBTQ+ community as “grooming” and “sexual deviancy”, almost any language seeking to prevent sexual violation of children can be used in bad faith to censor LGBTQ+ content, including educational and helpful content. Once FOSTA-SESTA, an anti-child sex trafficking bill, was passed, numerous social media platforms began censoring all sexual content, and even began suppressing users for using terms like “queer” or “trans”. Especially in the wake of Donald Trump’s 2024 run for president, US states have become especially focused on passing anti-LGBTQ legislation, federal services for LGBTQ+ youth have had their budgets cut; and even Meta, the company behind Facebook and Instagram, suppressed search results with queer hashtags for teen users, while still allowing for graphic and violent content [7]. The problem is twofold: Sexual puritans and other politicians with censorious goals will try to suppress queer content for as many people as possible, and corporations are prone to sacrifice any semblance of principled anti-censorship in favor of inviting less controversy. Attempting to implement a binary filter that separates content into “child-appropriate” and “child-inappropriate” is fundamentally at odds with how people develop. Children gradually develop greater cognitive capacity, allowing them to properly process more types of information. Additionally, youths progress through puberty at different rates, to different effects. Instead of cordoning all children to an isolated corner of the internet until the moment they reach the age of majority, children should be allowed exposure to different aspects of the internet world over time, similar to a healthy model of maturation in the physical world.

Since censorship and age restriction of social media do not seem to be particularly useful in preventing child predation or accurately mediating a child’s social media feed, what purpose do these

sorts of policies actually serve? In the spring of 2024, US Congress passed a law demanding that TikTok be sold and divested from its Chinese-owned parent company, or be entirely restricted. The law was passed on the heels of increasing panic over TikTok being a national security threat, potentially allowing China to use a government backdoor to access American user information. Due to a lack of privacy regulations in the US, Harvard Law lecturer Timothy Edgar, with cybersecurity expertise, asserted that the divestment did not significantly quell the national security threat of the platform, and likely made the app more vulnerable to a variety of hacker attacks. What worsens the situation is the laxing of prior American scrutiny on TikTok with TikTok's transition into being an American-owned company. Edgar even cites a potential risk of political donors paying for TikTok to artificially sway public opinion, and a lack of censorship vigilance leading to algorithmic suppression [9]. Ultimately, the concerns about an American TikTok being easier to exploit and censor were vindicated. Utah Senator Mitt Romney, speaking at the McCain Institute, explained that much of the support for banning TikTok in Congress originated from TikTok's pro-Palestine bent and the inability of Israel to sufficiently counter that messaging [10]. As the popularity of Zionism wanes and Israel's horrific destruction of Gaza has continued [10], politicians and corporate interests in favor of continued US-Israel military relations have sought to forcibly suppress dissent against Israel. After TikTok's successful sale to American investors with close ties to President Donald Trump, the app was accused of heavily censoring and limiting content opposed to Trump and his administration. Videos about Immigrations and Customs Enforcement raids and the killings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by federal agents were suppressed. Furthermore, mentions of Jeffrey Epstein in direct messages between users were blocked, and many users reported stark changes in the content recommended to them. Though TikTok denied the accusations of state censorship, TikTok's updated user agreement allowing for even more location data and other sensitive information to be collected by the company sparked further concerns [11]. Analyzing TikTok using the heteropatriarchal triad model places the stark power dynamics into focus. TikTok's new American investors were likely selected for their loyalty to President Trump's administration, in essence turning TikTok into a covert arm of the American government. The breadth of property ownership asserted by TikTok over its users' data was significantly increased as well, with such an increase also being tied to demands for increased government loyalty. The personhood and individual autonomy of TikTok users has been significantly decreased, not only by likely censorship efforts, but also by coercing users into giving more of their data to TikTok. The increasing prominence of censorship has further clarified a relationship that has always existed: TikTok is not a neutral platform made for people to communicate with each other, but the governing body of a communication service that can quash any content it likes, and monitor its users for the benefit of capital. This realization makes the idea of social media as a deliberate ideological project even more threatening to those who value democratic autonomy.

Elon Musk's "X", which shall hereafter be referred to as Twitter, is a clear example of how a social media platform can be twisted into an ideological machine. As of October, Musk had spent \$75 million on his America PAC, a financial entity that served to secure Donald Trump's victory during America's 2024 presidential elections. During the 2024 US elections, Elon Musk's America PAC paid Twitter to run 59 pro-Trump ads targeting "swing states", US states that have an outsized impact on the presidential election; evidently a conflict of interests. Musk also hosted an exclusive interview with Donald Trump in August 2024 via Twitter Spaces, further promoting both Trump and his own social media platform. Musk's America PAC has offered money to swing state voters for signing the PAC's petition, and also promised to give \$1 million each day to a random petition signee [12]. Not only is this an explicit attempt to buy support for his political ideology, the sheer madness of his behavior is ripe fodder for Twitter clickbait, as many people learn about current events from social media. Arguably more concerning is Musk's use of wealth and influence to foment racism and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories. Elon Musk's money has funded numerous ads against Trump's opponent, Kamala Harris; including an advertisement in Georgia claiming that the state was "filling up with illegal immigrants" thanks to Harris "releasing" illegal immigrants into America. Musk's money has also funded other advertisements seeking to depress the Harris vote in swing states. Musk has even gone so far as to publicly appear at Trump rallies and promote voting for Trump with alarmist rhetoric [Musk Election]. Having such an overtly right-wing person run Twitter allows Musk to shift public opinion in favor of extremism while hiding behind the guise of running a "neutral" platform. Musk's escapades with his Twitter AI, Grok, have also exposed the sheer danger inherent to undemocratic control of artificial

intelligence and technology in general. In June 2025, when Grok was asked by a user whether the political right or political left was more violent, Grok responded by declaring that right-wing people have been more violent since 2016. In response, Musk claimed that Grok's answer was incorrect due to "parroting legacy media", in spite of Grok citing studies in favor of its claims. In the wake of a Democratic state senator in Minnesota being assassinated, Musk baselessly claimed, "the far left is murderously violent", a claim Grok later explained was unsubstantiated. Prior attempts to tweak Grok's behavior led to Grok responding to most questions by spreading misinformation about a supposed "genocide" against white South African farmers; due to Musk being a white South African deeply embroiled in far-right and white supremacist ideology, most assume Musk himself made this tweak [13]. In July 2025, shortly after Musk claimed to have improved Grok, Grok began referring to itself as MechaHitler. This altered version of Grok also began espousing anti-Semitic rhetoric, and endorsed Adolf Hitler as a figure that would "decisively... deal with such vile anti-white hate". Far-right Twitter users also coaxed Grok into supporting a second Holocaust, and writing violent rape fantasies about other Twitter users. These changes seemed to stem from an update instructing Grok to "not shy away from making claims which are politically incorrect", and "assume subjective viewpoints sourced from the media are biased"; seemingly to fulfill Musk's promise to "rewrite [Grok's] entire corpus of human knowledge" to appease the ideological sensibilities of him and his supporters [14]. Considering that Elon Musk delivered what looked like multiple Nazi salutes at Donald Trump's inauguration [14], Musk's politics are far from normal or sensible. Allowing an open bigot to control technologies many people regularly use can easily pose an existential threat to the accessibility of social media to queer and other marginalized individuals, and redefine standards of acceptable behavior in favor of malicious far-right actors. Recent incidents of Grok severely violating the privacy and consent of Twitter users inspires further concern about unaccountable oligarchs governing public technologies. In January 2026, Grok began accepting requests by users to generate images of other users in bikinis, many of the victims being women and children. In response to these credible threats, the account of Twitter's parent company, xAI, claimed such reports were "Legacy Media Lies", and Elon Musk himself responded to such images with laugh-cry emojis. A letter from numerous child safety and civil society nonprofits in August warned xAI that Grok could easily be weaponised to digitally undress people against their will, but xAI evidently failed to prevent Grok from generating these "nonconsensual deepfakes" [15]. Knowingly permitting such an abusive power dynamic can easily be understood as Musk and the other directors of Twitter using their power to normalize their deeply dehumanizing and objectifying view of women and children. Letting any user forcibly place a user of their choice in revealing outfits legitimizes the idea that women and children are the sexual chattels of men, which can be spontaneously sexualized and objectified without their consent. Social media transforms from being a platform for communication between equal people, to a hostile enforcer of social hierarchy and normativity against anyone the oligarchs in charge are unwilling to defend. Even seemingly perverse or abnormal behavior, like lusting over children, promoting racist conspiracy theories, or generating violent and sexually invasive content about others, are still permitted and seen as "normal" by those in power so long as these acts reinforce the existing power structure.

CONCLUSIONS

What sort of internet do governments, corporations, and the powerful people in charge of them want to create? One of the most evident strengths of a corporate internet is the ability for corporations and governments to manufacture and tweak discourse according to their interests. By controlling what speech is promoted or suppressed, these moneyed interests are able to inflate the popularity of opinions they favor, and force opinions counter to their agenda into the shadows. Algorithmic moderation allows for rapid detection of dissent as soon as it manifests, rather than dissent only being detectable when it's loud and public. Unlike the physical world, where even extremely powerful authorities have limits on what they can control, social media allows for shareholders and governments to exercise immediate and complete authority over every aspect of the social media experience. Society must vigilantly monitor the threat private social media poses to democratic freedom, lest powerful oligarchs shape society like they have shaped social media.

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