

Contest 07: Commentary Writing

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Write your commentary using any word processing program you choose.
- Next, convert the file to a PDF for submission.
- Entries must be uploaded by 6 p.m. CDT Oct. 18, 2021.

DO NOT INCLUDE YOUR NAME OR SCHOOL NAME ON YOUR ENTRY.

WHAT JUDGES LOOK FOR

- Writer's opinion is clear.
- Commentary addresses the high school audience.
- Voice of the commentary makes the reader think about the subject in a new light.
- First person is used effectively.
- Commentary follows AP style.
- Commentary contains few errors in conventions.
- Commentary uses resources for support of argument.

ASSIGNMENT:

Use the assigned topic and provided material to write a commentary of no more than 350 words and submit your entry as a PDF file. Do not do any additional outside research to support your opinion. Do not use any reference to your school or publication.

TOPIC:

Should social media be more strictly regulated by the government to stop the spread of misinformation?

Social Media and Online Speech:

How Should Countries Regulate Tech Giants?

by Anshu Siripurapu and William Mellow Feb. 9, 2021

The role of social media and online speech in civil society has come under heightened scrutiny. The deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 is just one example of violence which national security experts say was fomented in large part on social media platforms. Elsewhere in the world, social media has contributed to religious and ethnic violence, including against Muslims in India and Rohingya in Myanmar. Harmful misinformation, including about the COVID-19 pandemic, has also spread with ease and speed.

Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become the de facto public squares in many countries, and governments are adopting varying approaches to regulating them.

How do the major platforms regulate content?

The most popular platforms, most of which are run by U.S. companies, have similar content moderation policies. They bar posts that glorify or encourage violence; posts that are sexually explicit; and posts that contain hate speech, which they define as attacking a person for their race, gender, or sexual orientation, among other characteristics. The major platforms have also taken steps to limit disinformation, including by fact-checking posts, labeling the accounts of state-run media, and banning political ads.

These platforms generally comply with the laws of the countries where they operate, which can restrict speech even further. In addition to using moderation software powered by artificial intelligence, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (which is owned by Google) employ thousands of people to screen posts for violations.

What are some of the controversies?

Critics say these platforms do not enforce their rules consistently. For example, both Twitter and Facebook have allowed accounts they say serve the public interest—most notably those of politicians such as former U.S. President Donald J. Trump—to post abusive or misleading content that might have been removed if it were posted by an ordinary user.

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In Trump's case, the companies instead appended fact checks to some of his posts, which some experts who track social media and misinformation criticized as insufficient. The two platforms eventually banned Trump, following the U.S. Capitol riots, but both have faced criticism for not taking similar actions abroad. YouTube has also come under fire for allegedly treating its star users, who bring in more revenue, more leniently. It was also criticized for not removing videos with false claims of U.S. election fraud and other misinformation quickly.

Critics say the companies are not incentivized to regulate hateful or violent speech because their ad-driven business models rely on keeping users engaged. At the same time, politicians in some countries, including the United States, argue that social media companies have gone too far with moderation, at the expense of free speech.

For their part, social media companies have argued that their policies are difficult to enforce. It can be tricky at times to distinguish hate speech from satire or commentary, for example. Some companies say the onus should not be on them to write the rules for the internet and have called for government regulation.

In the United States, social media platforms have largely been left to make and enforce their own policies, though Washington is weighing new laws and regulations. Other countries have implemented or proposed legislation to force social media companies to do more to police online discourse. Authoritarian governments generally have more restrictive censorship regimes, but even some Western democracies, such as Australia and Germany, have taken tougher approaches to online speech.

Some Data About Social Media from procon.org

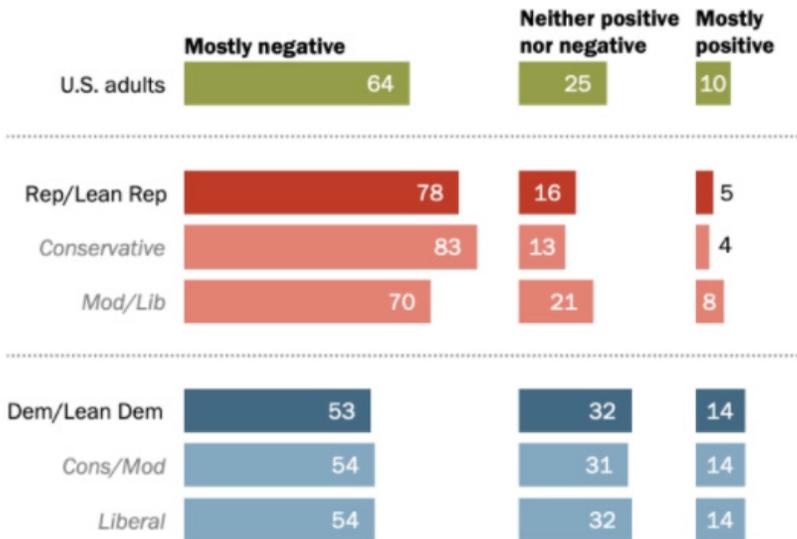
- 78.5% of traditional media reporters polled used social media to check for breaking news.
- 59% of Twitter users and 31% of Facebook users polled followed breaking news on these sites.
- Social media sites are one of the top news sources for 46% of Americans, compared to 66% for television, 26% for printed newspapers, and 23% for radio.
- Social media users have been responsible for reporting events before traditional media outlets, including the Paris attacks in France on Nov. 13, 2015 (Twitter, Facebook, and Vine), the Ebola outbreak in Nigeria and Sierra Leone in July 2014 (Twitter), the Boston marathon bombing on April 15, 2013 (Twitter) and the Aurora, Colorado, theater shooting on July 20, 2012 (Twitter and YouTube).
- In 2017, President Donald Trump said that the immediacy that Twitter affords him is the reason why he tweets, noting that press conferences and press releases take too long to reach the public.
- 64% of people who use Twitter for news say that they have encountered something they “later discovered wasn’t true,” and 16% of Twitter news users say that “they had retweeted or posted a tweet they later discovered to be false.”
- A 2018 study published in the journal *Science* found that lies spread six times faster than the truth on Twitter, and “fake news” is retweeted more often than true news.
- In 2017, A University of Michigan study found even when false information is corrected, the number of people who see or share the correction via social media is lower than number who saw or shared the false information in the first place.
- Facebook users reported in a 2016 study they were more likely to vote if they saw their friends had voted on the site.
- Among students who are somewhat, not sure, or unlikely to vote, 35% stated that social media was most likely to influence them to vote in the 2016 presidential election; this was higher than all other mediums including television (30%), radio (14%), print (9%), and direct mail (6%) or email (5%).
- Students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, used social media to mobilize a gun control movement following a deadly shooting at their school. The student activists used Twitter to promote nationwide protests on March. 24, 2018, that drew over one million participants and registered thousands of new voters.
- A July 4, 2011, tweet from @Adbusters with the hashtag #occupywallstreet started the American Occupy movement. In 2015, the Black Lives Matter grassroots campaign addressed racism and police brutality in the United States and successfully pressured the 2016 presidential candidates to publicly address the issue.
- 52% of students have reported being the victim of cyberbullying with 84.2% naming Facebook as the site through which they have been bullied, followed by Instagram (23.4%), Twitter (21.4%), and Snapchat (13.5%).

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Pew Center Research Survey Results

Majority of Americans say social media negatively affect the way things are going in the country today

% of U.S. adults who say social media have a ___ effect on the way things are going in this country today

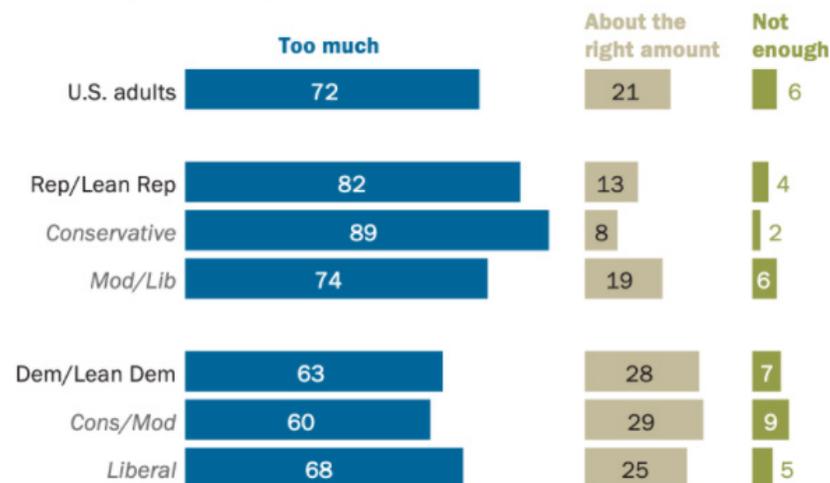


Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 13-19, 2020.

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Majorities across parties believe social media companies have too much power and influence in politics; Republicans are especially likely to say this

% of U.S. adults who say social media companies have ___ (of) power and influence in politics today



Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.

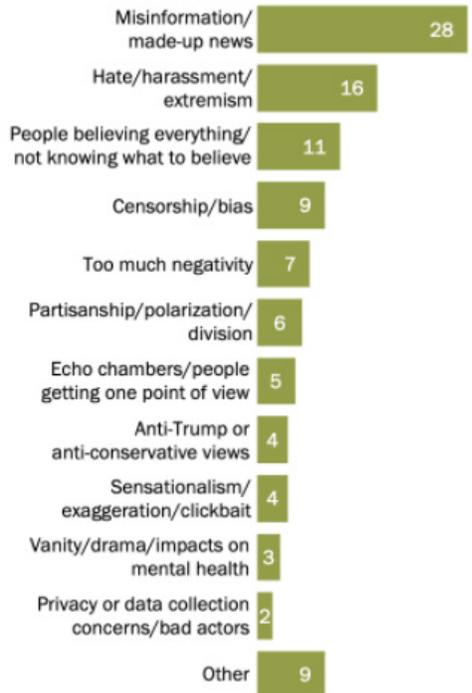
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Roughly three-in-ten who say social media have a negative effect on the country cite misinformation as reason

64% of U.S. adults say social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in this country today



When asked about the main reason they think social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in this country today, % who mention ...



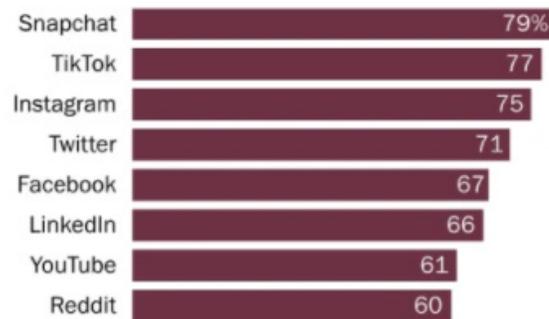
Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown. Verbatim responses have been coded into categories. Figures may add up to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 13-19, 2020.

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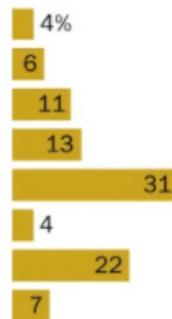
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Nearly 80% of Americans who regularly get news on Snapchat and on TikTok view social media as an important way of getting vaccine news

% of Americans that regularly get news on ___ who say that social media is an important way of keeping up with news about COVID-19 vaccines



% of U.S. adults who regularly get news on each site



Note: Twitch and WhatsApp not shown due to insufficient sample sizes.
Source: Survey conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

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Roughly half of Americans get at least some news about COVID-19 vaccines on social media...

% of U.S. adults who say they have been getting ___ news and information about COVID-19 vaccines on social media



...still, most don't see social media as an important way of keeping up with this news

% of U.S. adults who say social media is ___ of keeping up with news about COVID-19 vaccines



Source: Survey conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

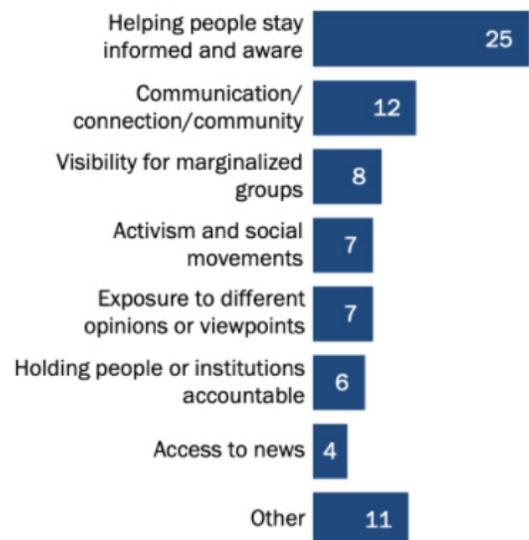
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25% of Americans who say social media have a positive impact on the country cite staying informed, aware

10% of U.S. adults say social media have a mostly positive effect on the way things are going in this country today



When asked about the main reason they think social media have a mostly positive effect on the way things are going in this country today, % who mention ...



Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown. Verbatim responses have been coded into categories. Figures may add up to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 13-19, 2020.

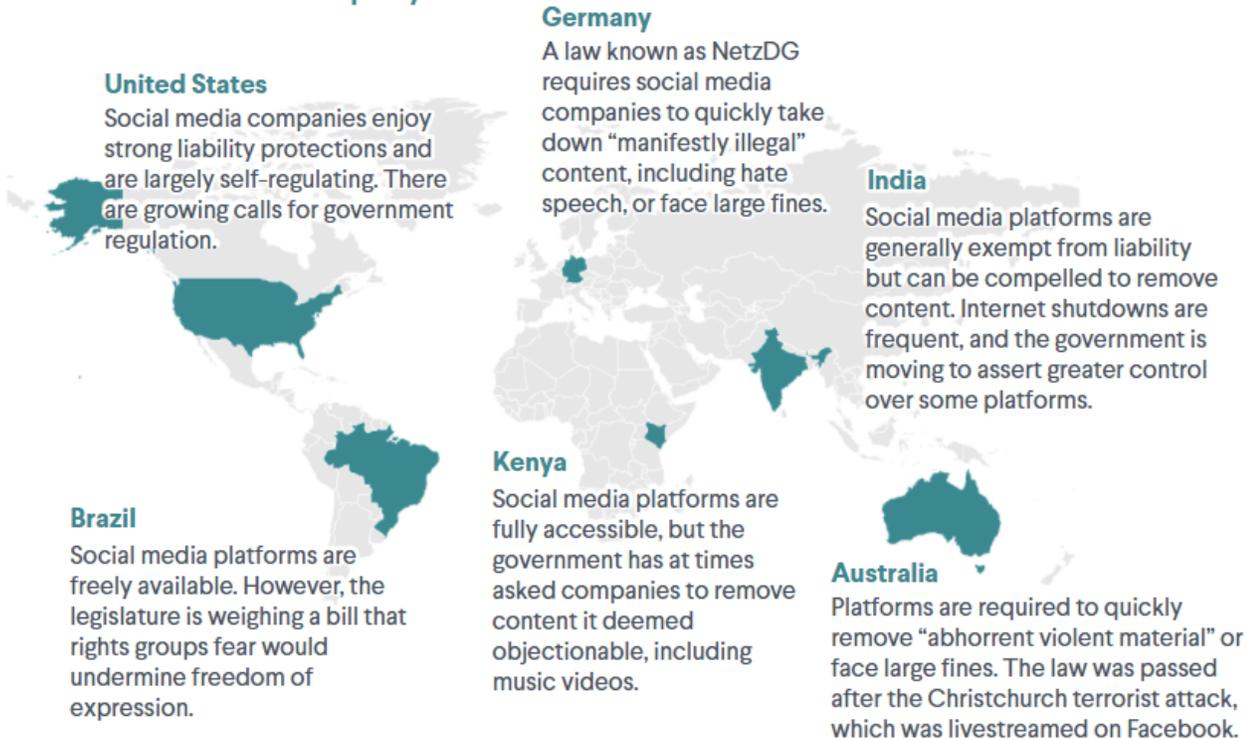
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Countries Regulate Social Media Differently

Regulations in selected countries, grouped by level of internet freedom according to Freedom House

Where the internet is free or partly free



Where the internet is not free



Sources: Freedom House; CFR research.

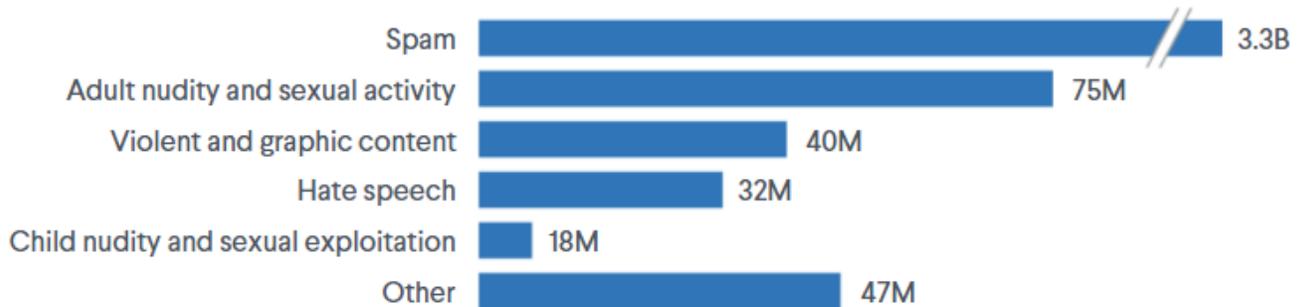
COUNCIL *on*
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

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Content removed or subject to other action in the first half of 2020

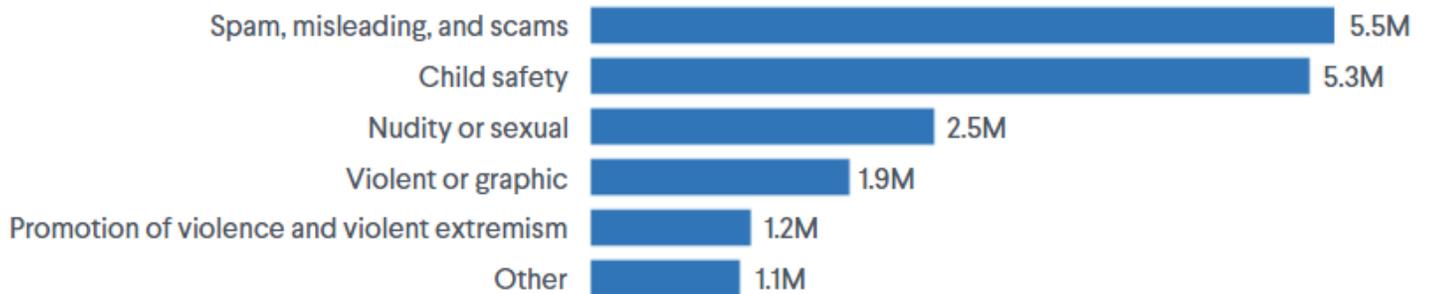
Facebook

Pieces of content removed, covered with a warning, or subject to other action



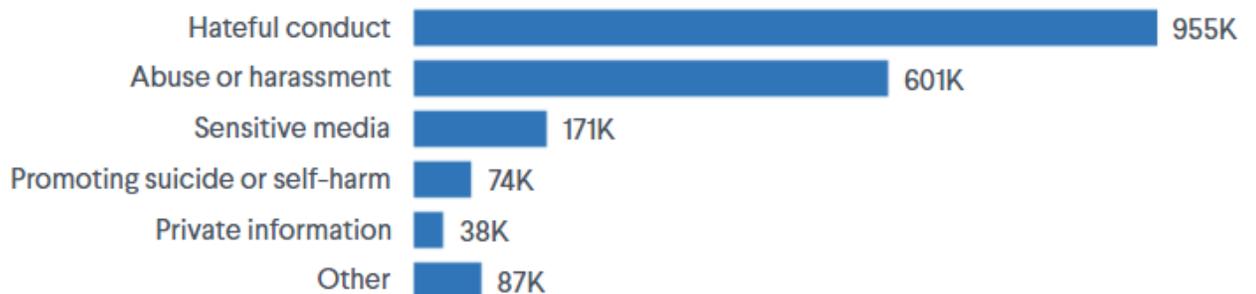
YouTube

Videos removed



Twitter

Pieces of content removed



Note: Categories are unique to each company and not comparable across companies.