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During the Crisis, Free Speech Worked Brilliantly

BY  JEFFREY A. TUCKER JULY 15, 2024 CENSORSHIP, MEDIA, SOCIETY 6 MINUTE READ

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There is only one major social media platform that is relatively free of censorship. That is X, once known as Twitter, and owned by Elon Musk, who has preached free speech for years and sacrificed billions in advertising dollars in order to protect it. If we don't have that, he says, we lose freedom itself. He also maintains that it is the best path to finding the truth.

The crisis that broke out after the attempt on Donald Trump's life put the principle in motion. I was posting regular updates and never censored. I'm not aware of anyone who was. We were getting second-by-second updates in real time. The videos were flying along with every conceivable rumor, many false and then corrected, alongside free speech "spaces" in which everyone was sharing their views.

During this time, Facebook and its suite of services fell silent, consistent with the new ethos of all these platforms. The idea is to censor all speech until it is absolutely confirmed by officials and then permit only that which is consistent with the press releases.

This is the habit born of the Covid years, and it stuck. Now all the platforms avoid any news that is fast in motion, except to broadcast precisely what they are supposed to broadcast. Maybe that works in most times when people are not paying attention. Readers do not know what they are missing. The trouble was that during these post-shooting hours when nearly everyone on the planet wanted updates, there were no press releases forthcoming.

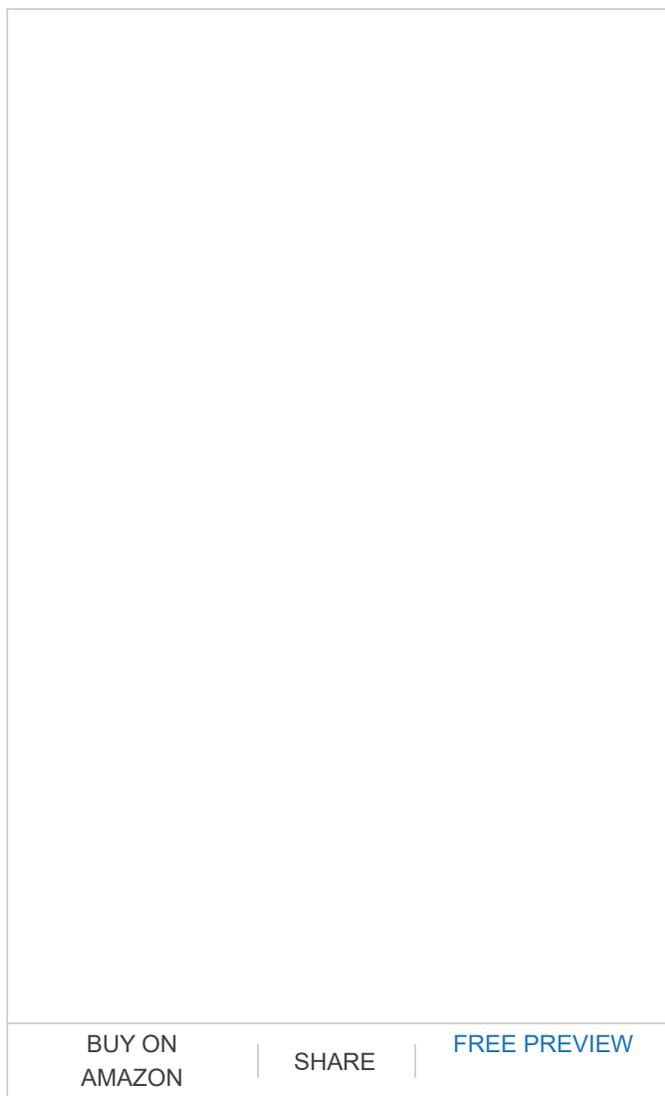
By habit, I reached for what was once called television. The networks had plenty of talking heads and newscasters with their usual eloquence. What was missing from all the broadcasts that I saw in these hours were any factual updates. They too were waiting for confirmation of this or that before putting out any information at all beyond the basics. They let their “experts” speak as long as possible just to waste time before rolling out new advertisements.

Over time, I realized something. X was driving the whole of the news, while the newscasters had to wait for permission before reading scripted lines.

Meanwhile, on X, the situation was utterly wild. Posts were flying fast and furious. New rumors would circulate (the shooter’s name and affiliations, stories about a second shooting, claims that Trump was hit in the chest, and so on). But shortly after the rumor circulated, so did the debunking. The feature called “Community Notes” kept the faulty news in check, while the truth gradually circulated to the top. This happened on topic after topic.

The wildest theories ever were permitted to appear, while others would debunk them with reasoned arguments. The readers could decide for themselves. You could see how the seeming chaos gradually organized itself into communities seeking verification. Posters grew ever more careful about posting claims that could not be verified, or at least explaining what they were.

X was single-handedly holding the whole of the corporate media to account, and reporters and editors very obviously came to depend on their X feeds to figure out what to say next. It

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was the same with newspapers. When *NYT*, CNN, *WaPo*, and so on would make major missteps, posters on X would call them out, the word would reach the editors, and the headline or story would change.

In the end, X became the one place where you could find the fullness of truth. All the while, the old-world media was dishing out the most ridiculous headlines one could imagine. For many hours, the *New York Times*, CNN, *Washington Post*, and other such venues refused to say it was an assassination attempt on Trump. The headline led people to believe that this was a MAGA rally with some random shooters that got carried away and so Trump had to be ushered out. This really did happen, and readers were outraged.

CNN was probably the worst offender, with the following headline: “Secret Service Rushes Trump Offstage As He Falls at Rally.”

It took many hours and repeated attempts but eventually the mainstream media finally said that the incident was “being investigated” as an assassination attempt, even though it was very obvious that it was an attempt on his life that he barely survived with the slight turn of his head.

It was the kind of flurry of nonsense that further discredited the old corporate media right there in front of an entire planet that was no longer believing anything they said.

It’s hard to know why the corporate press did this. Were they just cautious and worried about misinformation? If so, how come so many of their headlines were of the same sort, that which refused to say that someone just tried to kill Trump? Were they just in the habit of waiting for officials to tell them what to say? Was it raw TDS that was driving this? It’s hard to know but the failure was conspicuous and obvious to all.

What stood out above all else was the way free speech on X worked to ferret out the real story, while actually driving forward the mainstream press to correct its errors and get the story right. One shudders to think how it would have all taken place in absence of this one platform, which became the go-to place for everyone. The most important lesson: free speech worked. And beautifully.

All Western societies are currently struggling with the question of just how much speech to allow on the Internet. The trajectory for years now has not been a good one. Once-free platforms have become more frozen, more propagandistic, more staid, and duller, even as

this one platform has created a culture of freedom combined with community-driven accountability.

This freedom accomplished exactly what it was supposed to accomplish, while the censored platforms held onto misinformation much longer than they should have been.

Which makes the point. Too often, the battle over free speech is framed as misinformation/freedom vs. facts/truth/restriction. The very opposite has proven to be the case. The free platform proved itself capable of quick course correction alongside maximum agility in processing the floods of constant new information. Meanwhile, the venues in which “misinformation” has been anathematized ended up being the major source of exactly that.

Freedom works. As messy as it is, it works better than any other system. Meanwhile, governments of the world have targeted X for destruction. Advertisers continue to boycott and regulators continue to threaten.

So far, it has not worked and thank goodness. But for X, the last 24 hours would have looked very different: nothing but propaganda, apart from a few marginal places here and there. Therein lies another irony: the way X is managed is increasing trust rather than reducing it.

The lesson should be obvious. The answer to the problems of free speech is more of it.

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