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## How Should We Regulate the Internet? A Proposal

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## How Should We Regulate the Internet? A Proposal

### Abstract

With the invention of the internet providing newfangled methods of spreading information around the world, misinformation has also found home in these pathways, disrupting the general public's ability to discern fact from fiction and creating divides in society. Regulation must be enacted to stop the effects of misinformation, but the efforts of technology companies and the general public have been insufficient thus far. Regulatory control of the internet and its content should be the responsibility of the government, based on their constitutional right to intervene under certain circumstances and the fact that previous efforts by other parties to mitigate misinformation have been unsuccessful. More so, control should be ceded to a quasi-governmental entity so that regulation efforts are insulated against short-term political pressures, which could interject bias into internet regulation, and so that the demands of competing interest groups like Congress, social media companies, and the general public are considered.

### Keywords

government regulation, misinformation, disinformation, information disorder, social media, internet regulation, federal reserve, free speech, technology

### Cover Page Footnote

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## How Should We Regulate the Internet? A Proposal

Natalie Petruzelli

**Abstract:** *With the invention of the internet providing newfangled methods of spreading information around the world, misinformation has also found home in these pathways, disrupting the general public's ability to discern fact from fiction and creating divides in society. Regulation must be enacted to stop the effects of misinformation, but the efforts of technology companies and the general public have been insufficient thus far. Regulatory control of the internet and its content should be the responsibility of the government, based on their constitutional right to intervene under certain circumstances and the fact that previous efforts by other parties to mitigate misinformation have been unsuccessful. More so, control should be ceded to a quasi-governmental entity so that regulation efforts are insulated against short-term political pressures, which could interject bias into internet regulation, and so that the demands of competing interest groups like Congress, social media companies, and the general public are considered.*

While the internet and social media networks have allowed for greater public discussion and the efficient spread of information, they have also dramatically altered the information landscape in a relatively short period of time. The very same aspects of the internet that allow for information to be distributed have also allowed misinformation and disinformation to disseminate, altering the general public's perception of truth and reality. While the occasional conspiracy theory or false report may seem harmless, the implications of such have been proven to be anything but. As people instinctively believe what supports their worldview and discard the rest, fiction can become facts and divisions between groups with different opinions can grow. Thus, the internet and social media allowing virtually anything to be posted has only led to increased misinformation, hatred, and division online. Many would agree that the internet needs some kind of regulation to prevent the situation from worsening, but most attempts have been unsuccessful. Regulation by social media networks has been faced with opposition by those who feel their free speech is being infringed upon, while

Congress is hesitant to impose policies due to the quickly evolving nature of the internet. Ultimately, there needs to be regulation of the internet and its content, but it should not be under the direct supervision of Congress, the president, or social media companies, who have different and often competing interests. Regulatory control of the internet should be placed not only in the hands of the government, due to their constitutional right to intervene under certain circumstances and the fact that social media networks and the general public are unable to regulate for themselves, but particularly under the supervision of a quasi-public entity similar to the Federal Reserve, so that responses to challenges like misinformation are insulated against short-term political pressures and address the demands of multiple different interest groups.

Before any internet regulation can be created to alleviate the pressures on society caused by misinformation, it must be determined who will create and enforce it. While the government seems like the most natural option, there is a general caution towards this due to the fear that free speech will be infringed upon. This fear is especially

heightened when discussing politics; a Pew Research study that interviewed both Republicans and Democrats found that roughly 75% of U.S. adults believe that social media censors political viewpoints of all persuasions (Vogels et al.). This raises the question of why a government institution, quasi-public or not, should be allowed to regulate the internet. The simplest answer is that the government has a right — through limited to specific situations — to regulate under the Constitution, and that social media networks and individuals have been ineffective at monitoring their own engagement with online misinformation.

In terms of constitutional law, the government is prohibited from creating regulation against free speech, a protection designated in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights (Egemenoglu). One might think that supporting free speech and regulating the internet, a place of unrestrained free speech, is a bit contradictory, but the First Amendment does not actually permit completely unregulated speech. Contrary to popular belief, although the First Amendment does ensure against government interference, certain categories of speech are actually unprotected or less protected (Egemenoglu). Cornell's Legal Information Institute details the unprotected categories of speech, which include obscenity, false advertising, words that incite violence, libel, and attacks on privacy, as well as the less protected categories of speech, like commercial speech and indecent expression. This gives the government the right to intervene when these kinds of materials are expressed, though substantial justification must be given when doing so (Egemenoglu).

Much of the misinformation currently being spread throughout the internet falls under these categories, thus giving the government

the right to intervene on a constitutional basis. One of the most concerning implications of misinformation on the internet is the influx of violent attacks around the world. One prominent instance of this was the 2016 Pizzagate shooting, where a conspiracy theory claiming that a D.C. pizzeria was hiding a child trafficking ring led by the Clintons caused a man to attack the establishment with a semi-automatic rifle (Center for Information Technology and Society). While no one was hurt in the incident, there are many other violent events with casualties that have been partly attributed to misinformation, like the 2015 Charleston church shooting, where 21-year-old Dylann Roof shot and killed 9 African Americans after avidly following white supremacist websites (Johnson). These websites, like the Council of Conservative Citizens and Infowars, often post racially charged misinformation that encourages violence against marginalized groups. When asked what inspired the shooting, Roof responded, "It's pretty much the internet. All the information is there for you" (Johnson).

Even if misinformation on the internet does not spur violence, there are still far-reaching implications. Much of the misinformation on the internet is libelous, hurting people's reputations and livelihoods, though many are afraid to retaliate in fear of propagating the false claims against them, or worse, sending a new wave of internet trolls their way (Berman). Furthermore, an influx of misinformation can threaten democracy, as found in a study by *The Washington Post*. If voters are ill-informed, they are more likely to vote against their best interests at the polls, only leading to the election of incompetent or corrupt politicians (Hollyer et al.). This forms a feedback loop; if citizens see useless figures being elected, they lose faith in democratic processes and

in some cases, abstain from voting (Hollyer et al.). This makes the votes of those who are misinformed become more powerful with fewer informed votes to counter their influence. With democracy weakened, there is greater opportunity for authoritarian ideals to be adopted in society (Hollyer et al.).

Thus, an unregulated internet poses a significant threat to democracy, enough to warrant some degree of government intervention. Though not always, misinformation of a libelous or violent nature is spread on the internet often enough such that this content can be regulated under the First Amendment. As the government has set forth these rules in the Bill of Rights, it is only common sense that they should be sufficiently enforcing them, especially since these violations of free speech will only become more common over time without regulation.

Moreover, if the government does not regulate the internet, then who else could? Current attempts at monitoring the internet have been placed in the hands of social media sites, who have immense spheres of influence and coincidentally also harbor a massive volume of misinformation. Social media sites have faced backlash due to their unsuccessful attempts to reduce misinformation on their sites, particularly in the wake of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Kelion). The CEOs of Facebook and Twitter have even been cross-examined by the U.S. Senate multiple times regarding their missteps during the most recent election (Kelion). Much of the concern was based around social media companies taking “editorial decisions” about what to take down and what to leave up, as well as the general lack of responsibility taken by these companies for radical presences on their sites (Kelion). This concern is warranted; social media sites have had ample time to

adjust their platforms in the past couple of years, and yet, efforts towards misinformation seem lackluster and low effort. Most recently, Facebook banned political ads one week ahead of the election, which Dipayan Ghosh, co-director of Harvard's digital platforms and democracy project, says is largely ineffective given the number of people voting early and that ads submitted directly before the ban will still run (Sanz and Thorbecke). Facebook has also vowed to remove content that supports Holocaust denial or QAnon, a conspiracy group that believes that the Trump administration is fighting a satanic pedophile ring (Sanz and Thorbecke). This is particularly important due to the absurd nature of the misinformation spread by believers of these groups, much of it being motivated by extreme hate or political aims. Meanwhile, Twitter banned all political ads worldwide in 2019, which was a more effective move (Sanz and Thorbecke). However, political ads had far less of a presence on Twitter than on Facebook, so the decision had less of an impact (Sanz and Thorbecke). This marks the extent of some of the more productive actions taken by social media networks in recent years.

Other actions by social media companies, specifically the most visible ones, have left much to be desired. Facebook and Twitter have both adopted labeling systems, where posts that contain misinformation are linked to a fact-check page or are labeled as misleading, disputed, or unverified (Sanz and Thorbecke). In some cases, posts are hidden from view, but users can easily click to view the post or ignore the fact-check warning, essentially doing nothing to prevent the misinformation from being seen (Sanz and Thorbecke). According to Ghosh, “having this sort of label does not really change the mind of anyone who's consuming

it” (Sanz and Thorbecke). Furthermore, these sites do not present a united front against all misinformation, often selectively labeling some posts and not labeling ones of a similar disposition (Dizikes). A study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that selectively labeling posts reduces the effectiveness of all labeling because of the “implied-truth effect”, where unmarked but verifiably false information appears more legitimate to readers than marked false posts (Dizikes). Users seem to be aware of the labeling discrepancies as well; a Knight Foundation poll found that 88% of Americans did not trust social media platforms to make the right decisions about what could be posted. Ultimately, the most visible regulation attempts by social media companies are debatably making certain aspects of the misinformation problem worse, while other efforts seem to be coming too little and too late.

In addition to this, social media sites and other websites do not have a strong incentive to begin monitoring their pages. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider”, meaning that no social media site, blog, or other page on the internet is held legally responsible for the content posted by its users, including illegal or offensive posts (Electronic Frontier Foundation). With this in mind, there is absolutely no reason any internet site would be interested in enacting regulations that would undoubtedly decrease their user base — and their revenue — if they are not legally required to do so. Fundamentally, the interests of most social media networks and other sites will never align with the goal of reducing misinformation simply because they aim to

make a profit and limiting their ability to do so with regulation would be an undesirable choice. This is disappointing, since social media providers are private companies and can thus regulate what is said on their sites without fear of violating free speech (Spiggle). For instance, Pinterest has an extremely effective information policy that bans health misinformation, like anti-vaccine propaganda (Brodwin). Nevertheless, Pinterest has a much smaller user base than sites like Facebook and therefore has far more leeway to regulate, making this solution less adaptable to larger platforms (Brodwin). Essentially, massive social media sites are not presently incentivized to regulate misinformation posted to their pages since they are at no risk of being held legally liable for it, despite the fact that social media pages are often the birthplace of conspiracy theories and false information.

Finally, we cannot trust that internet users will regulate their own behavior online. Though the misinformation issue would be easier to solve if people simply did not believe false information, this will obviously not occur any time soon. Due to the “hostile media effect”, which states that individuals who receive identical coverage of a controversial issue will perceive it as biased against their side, internet users might always feel that they are seeing misinformation even if they are not, pushing them to seek out actual misinformation that will confirm their beliefs (Gunther and Liebhart). Thus, misinformation will always have an eager audience. Additionally, a Gallup poll found that people believe bias in others’ news is more of a concern than bias in their own news (Stubbs). This is known as the “third-person effect,” where people believe that media messages affect others more than themselves (Davison). This only proves that as long as people remain

influenced in this manner, they will not take responsibility for their own part in misinformation regulation, only blaming others. With the third-person effect influencing all people, it reigns true that individuals cannot regulate their own consumption of media on the internet.

With all of this in consideration, the government seems like the most sensible choice to monitor internet content, though their right to regulate free speech would have to be justified in order to allow intervention. Not only does the government have the ability to intercede with certain extreme cases of misinformation without violating constitutional protections for free speech, but it has also been shown that both individuals and social media sites cannot efficiently monitor their own information independently. Thus, the most efficient option would be if the responsibility of monitoring the internet were placed at least partly under governmental jurisdiction.

In light of this assertion, a quasi-public entity would be the best choice to regulate the internet and its content. By definition, a quasi-public entity, also known as a quasi-governmental entity, is a government agency which fulfills public services, but is under private ownership or control (Merriam-Webster). Many entities operate under this classification; most notably, the Federal Reserve and the U.S. Postal Service. While putting this responsibility directly in the hands of Congress and the president might seem like a solution that would optimize control of the internet, a quasi-public entity would ensure independence and flexibility in the face of a rapidly changing online information landscape. The most logical structure for this quasi-governmental institution would be one that is modeled after the Federal Reserve, which is responsible for maintaining stability in the

U.S. financial system. The structure of the Federal Reserve is particularly important because of two reasons: it is insulated against short-term political pressures and it also balances the often competing interests of the government, businesses, and the people. Though the Federal Reserve and this proposed regulatory body are concerned with two completely different facets of society, an internet regulation entity would benefit tremendously from this independent structure.

The Federal Reserve achieves its independence with three key characteristics. First, the Fed's monetary policy decisions are made by a Board of Governors, with each Governor appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate (Federal Reserve). The appointments are staggered over terms of 14 years to reduce the chance that one president would be able to select multiple appointees sympathetic to their political persuasion, keeping an even balance of opinion on the Board (Federal Reserve). Additionally, Reserve Bank Presidents, which manage the 12 Federal Reserve Districts in the nation, are appointed after much consideration by the Board of Governors (Federal Reserve). They are specifically selected so that they represent an intersection of different financial interests, including individuals from backgrounds of depository institutions, nonfinancial businesses, labor unions, and the public (Federal Reserve). Finally, the Fed's independence is secured because it is self-sufficient in terms of funding, meeting its expenses from interest on Treasury securities (Federal Reserve). Thus, it does not have to petition Congress for funds when deciding the annual federal budget.

The most significant result of this structure is political insulation. Since the Governors do not need to think about short-term

political pressures like elections or answering to those who appointed them, they are able to focus exclusively on the long-term economic objectives of the Federal Reserve (Blystone). For instance, presidents often push the Federal Reserve to enact something called expansionary policy, which boosts the economy in the short-term, prior to elections to improve their public image (Blystone). However, this growth is an illusion, and the economy will suffer in the long-term as a result of this move (Blystone). Thus, the Federal Reserve's independence allows it to separate itself from the short-term goals of politicians, who frequently act to preserve their station, in order to maintain long-term economic stability (Blystone). This independence not only defends against the whims of politicians, but also the public. Being free from worrying about elections allows the Federal Reserve to execute policies that may be unpopular politically or economically but serve the greater public interest in the long run (Blystone). The fact that the Governors and Bank Presidents are economists and other experts further insulates them, enabling them to make educated decisions and not be influenced by the desires of the public, Congress, the president, and corporations.

Ultimately, it is entirely feasible for there to be a quasi-public entity responsible for internet moderation that is structured similarly to the Federal Reserve, rewarding it with political insulation and the ability to juggle multiple interests. For instance, a qualified Board of Governors could be gradually appointed over the course of long terms in order to prevent a single president from "loading" the Board with appointees sympathetic to their cause. This political insulation would be particularly important, especially given ongoing reform of significant internet regulation legislation like

Section 230. For instance, a recent proposal from the Trump Administration to reform Section 230 would drastically limit the immunity of internet platforms for third-party content by pushing against selective labeling, basically forcing internet sites to curate information (and misinformation) in ways that the administration favors and exposing them to a huge range of legal liability (Bambauer). Meanwhile, President Biden seems to closely favor a complete repeal of Section 230, which would leave a void in internet regulation, possibly exposing internet platforms to all litigation with no immunity (Feld). Each of these options could potentially skew the curation of internet content towards one political persuasion or another, which would inject bias into the information landscape. If control of regulations like this were placed in the hands of an independent regulatory agency with a Board of Directors not beholden to the present administration, these decisions would remain firmly out of the control of Congress and the president. This would stop Congress from altering internet regulation in their favor, further strengthening protection against the demands of politicians.

Additionally, while an internet regulation body would have no physical regions to manage, like the 12 Federal Reserve Districts, an analogous feature could be managers in charge of various portions of the internet. Similar to how the Reserve Bank Presidents are selected to represent different and often conflicting interests, this proposed regulatory body could have a Board of Governors that is chosen in the same manner. The different interests could include representatives from Congress, internet providers, social media networks, news networks, academia, and the public in order to have a qualified and educated Board

that could consider a wide range of perspectives when making decisions. Having these Governors from various backgrounds would ultimately balance these competing interests, allowing them to produce guidelines that are most relevant to the public interest and will not favor one group over another. This is significant because Congress is often stuck between supporting the tech giants that fund their election campaigns and the people they swear to protect (Cao and Zakarin). Having internet regulation be in the hands of an independent government agency would remove the threat of losing elections and would represent both of these interests, producing more balanced and unbiased regulation that would not harm the prospects of any one group.

Unfortunately, there's likely no way that this quasi-public entity would be able to secure independent funding, as it would not be a financial institution like the Federal Reserve. Therefore, it would need to compete for a portion of the annual federal budget with other agencies. However, with misinformation, Big Tech, and internet regulation increasingly being eyed as hot button issues, it's very possible that a regulatory body would be given priority when deciding budgets. In fact, a GQR Research poll found that approximately 82% of Americans want social media platform policy changes, including bans on microtargeting and political ads with misinformation, as well as warning labels on accounts that frequently post false information (Lehrich). Another 67% of Americans want social media networks to remove hate speech and misinformation groups from their sites, fact-check all posts from elected officials, and generally stop amplifying false content (Lehrich). With this being a major concern amongst both the people and politicians, it is likely that the

issue will not go away soon and that any regulatory body would not struggle for funds. Ultimately, a quasi-public entity modeled after the Federal Reserve would be an excellent choice to monitor internet content, ensuring insulation from political pressures and the ability to manage multiple interest groups.

The idea of a regulatory entity that is largely independent from the goals of Congress and the president might be concerning to some. Would it be a subversion of government powers or unconstitutional to have an agency that is unelectable and largely unaccountable dictating what people and platforms are allowed to post? The essence of this argument is analogous to the case against the Federal Reserve; many have expressed discomfort with the amount of independence the Fed has in the face of direct authority, even deeming its level of power unconstitutional (Blystone). However, these claims are unfounded. The Federal Reserve is quasi-governmental and thus is still required to report back to Congress (Federal Reserve). In fact, the Chairman of the Board of Directors and other staff are often called upon to testify about their actions and future plans, and the Federal Reserve submits an extensive report called the *Monetary Policy Report* biannually, detailing economic developments and their plans for monetary policy (Federal Reserve). Finally, the Board of Directors publicizes the Federal Reserve's financial statements and transcripts from meetings where voting occurs (Federal Reserve). Essentially, the Federal Reserve cannot run amuck and ignore the higher powers of government as some would like to believe.

Therefore, since this regulatory body would be modeled the same way, similar checks and balances to its powers would exist. With internet regulation and misinformation being

such a prevalent issue, staff of this regulatory entity will no doubt be called to testify in front of Congress, either to justify actions, answer questions, or map out future plans. Furthermore, like the Fed, this quasi-public agency could release a similar report on its actions, plans, and recent online developments to both the public and to Congress. Since the information landscape transforms quickly given the ever-changing nature of technology, this report can be issued more frequently than biannually if necessary. Similar to the Federal Reserve, transcripts of meetings as well as voting outcomes can be released to the general public in order to maintain transparency with those who will be seeing these changes emerge firsthand. Therefore, there is no real threat of a regulatory body shirking the demands of Congress just because it has some degree of independence, so long as the actions of it are transparent and well-reasoned.

In summary, the proposed framework for an internet regulatory body would be extremely beneficial to society as a whole. During the thirty years that the internet has been available to the public, it has enjoyed relatively little regulation. Though we reap the benefits of it, like global connectivity and information at the click of a button, we also have to confront the consequences of it, like increased misinformation, hatred, violence, and divisions between different groups. With conversation surrounding the two most recent presidential elections being focused heavily on the impact of conspiracy theories and misinformation, it is obvious

that the state of the internet is not going to resolve itself with time. Regulatory control being placed under some degree of government power would be the most logical option, based on the Constitution and the fact that social media networks and individuals have proven to be unable to monitor their own content. Furthermore, this control being under a quasi-public entity would provide it with insulation from political pressures, satiating those who are afraid of government censorship, and would also allow it to balance the interests of social media companies, the general public, and Congress. Additionally, the regulatory body would also be educated and qualified enough to make informed decisions, with representatives from various facets of society, like academia, the press, and social media companies. Whether this proposal would actually mitigate the impact of misinformation on the present information landscape would obviously require further exploration to know, but it would certainly be more effective than letting the internet continue this downward spiral into a falsely constructed reality. This quasi-governmental entity would be more well-rounded than the current reforms proposed by Congress and social media networks and would appease many different interests without having to compromise a strong stance against misinformation. Ultimately, some firm position must be taken up in the near future regarding the internet's regulation — or lack thereof — lest misinformation and hatred are allowed to fester and worsen the divisions present in society.

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