



## Let's Not Forfeit Our Own Freedoms In The Rush To Silence Terrorists

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American founding father Benjamin Franklin once wrote: “Any society that would give up essential liberty to obtain a little security will deserve neither and lose both.” Since September 11, 2001, it’s a trade-off with which we are increasingly familiar.

The Christchurch attacks were senseless acts of terror that reverberated around the world, but we need to be wary of knee-jerk proposals to limit our freedoms – in this case, restrictions on free speech via tighter regulation of the internet.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison is leading the charge among world leaders, warning G20 nations last week that it is “unacceptable to treat the internet as an ungoverned space”. However, the exact content that Morrison proposes to govern against is frustratingly unclear.

Morrison and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten are reported to be on a “rare unity ticket” on this issue. We should be concerned when politicians on both sides come together to rush dramatic changes to our laws without time for proper consultation or policy development.

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It could be that Morrison is simply referring to incitement of violence, which is already a crime, and for good reason. But criminal incitement requires the direct encouragement of acts of violence, with the intent that such acts be committed. If the Prime Minister is proposing to legislate to prevent the specific crime of incitement online, then it may well be a sensible reform.

To what extent do we want to trust the government to define the difference between the terrible events of Christchurch, and say, and the video footage of September 11, which still remains online.

Moves to regulate the internet are unlikely to end there. Since the tragic events of Christchurch, the conversation around the “crackdown” on social media platforms seems to focus more on the prevention of so-called “hate speech”. Morrison belled the cat on this overreach, saying he is “quite confident” that tech companies “can write an algorithm to screen out hate content on social media platforms”.

But government regulation of social media is wrong in principle and ineffective in practice. The problem is that laws against “hate speech” are, at best, a blunt instrument that almost always incur unintended consequences. We’ve seen anti-discrimination laws recently weaponised against Queensland University of Technology students who actually argued against racial segregation.

Facebook yesterday announced it would extend its ban on white supremacy to cover content that references white nationalism. But how will it define white nationalism? It is a concept so broad that it could very well include banning supporters of the elected President of the United States, Donald Trump.

According to Facebook “white nationalism and separatism cannot be meaningfully separated from white supremacy and organised hate groups.”

This latest move by Facebook would, on face value, sound agreeable if it were not for the terrible track record of social media companies making similarly hamfisted efforts to scrub hate speech off their platforms.

At one stage, American conservative education organisation PragerU had about 80 of its educational videos on YouTube’s list of “restricted content”. None of these videos could be considered remotely “alt-right” or “extremist”, but they were nonetheless blocked by Silicon Valley.

In Australia, outspoken indigenous conservative Jacinta Price had her Facebook account suspended twice just last month. Her crime? Exposing the racial abuse that internet trolls had directed at her.

If this is the record of big tech companies policing “hate speech”, we should be sceptical of any government that proposes to do better.

Existing laws regulating internet content have proven to be ineffective. Court orders against accessing piracy sites such as Pirate Bay are easily circumvented, and a suite of otherwise illegal content is easily accessible via the dark web. In all likelihood, genuine terrorist groups will simply



move underground, while relatively innocuous content is taken down.

Internet censorship will do little to prevent the genuinely dangerous. And in the process, our precious freedoms will take yet another hit for the false promise of safety.

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