

The 26 Words That Create Hate and Violence on the Internet

How Section 230 of the
Communications Decency Act
Enables Hate, Incitement, and
Antisemitism on Social Media



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Introduction:

The Dark Side of Section 230

The Communications Decency Act (CDA) of 1996 was created with the goal of fostering a free and open internet. Its most infamous provision, Section 230, is often credited with enabling the explosion of innovation and communication online. The key 26 words within Section 230 state:

“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.”

While this provision granted internet platforms immunity from liability for user-generated content, it has also allowed the worst corners of humanity to fester online. Hate speech, incitement to violence, and rampant antisemitism now thrive on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, shielded from accountability by the broad protections of Section 230. This booklet explores how these 26 words have become the cornerstone of an internet rife with hate, why the tech giants must be held liable for the harm caused, and how reforming Section 230 is not only possible but essential for a safer, more just society.



How Section 230 Protects Platforms Over People

Section 230's original intent was to encourage the growth of fledgling internet companies by shielding them from lawsuits based on user-posted content. At the time, this provision was seen as critical for the survival of startups in a nascent industry. However, as companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter have grown into multibillion-dollar empires, this protection has created a massive imbalance.

These platforms wield immense power over global communication, yet they bear no responsibility for the harm caused by the content they amplify. Antisemitic conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial, and outright calls for violence against Jewish communities are allowed to circulate, often going viral due to algorithmic amplification. Under Section 230, platforms are not legally obligated to intervene. They are free to profit from hate-filled content through engagement-driven ad revenue, without fear of liability.

Antisemitism Amplified: A Case Study

Antisemitism has found a particularly fertile breeding ground on social media. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook have been repeatedly exposed as incubators of hate speech. For instance:

- **The Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting (2018):** The shooter behind the deadliest attack on Jews in American history posted antisemitic rants on Gab, a platform that promoted his posts without regulation.
- **Twitter and Holocaust Denial:** Despite repeated promises to crack down, Twitter has hosted thousands of tweets denying the Holocaust or spreading antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jewish control over global institutions.
- **YouTube's Algorithmic Problem:** Studies show that YouTube's recommendation algorithm frequently steers users toward extremist and antisemitic content, even when they start with neutral queries.

In each of these cases, Section 230 protects these platforms from being held accountable for their role in enabling and amplifying antisemitic hatred.

Incitement and Violence: The Real-World Consequences

The immunity provided by Section 230 does not merely protect offensive speech—it enables incitement to violence. Online hate speech does not exist in a vacuum; it spills over into real-world harm. Social media platforms have been used to organize violent events, radicalize individuals, and target Jewish communities.

One glaring example is the January 6th Capitol Riot, which was fueled by conspiracy theories and hate speech spread widely across social media. These platforms not only hosted but actively promoted the rhetoric that inspired violence. Similarly, white nationalist groups have used platforms like Telegram and Facebook to recruit members, organize rallies, and spread propaganda.

The devastating consequences of Section 230's unchecked protections are best illustrated through specific, real-world examples. In the case of the 2018 Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, the shooter, Robert Bowers, used Gab, a social media platform known for its lack of content moderation, to post antisemitic rants and announce his intentions to attack Jews. Despite these explicit threats, Gab faced no legal consequences under Section 230. The platform had actively facilitated the spread of hateful propaganda but was shielded from liability, even as it became clear that its negligence had played a role in inciting violence.

Another example is YouTube's role in promoting extremist content through its algorithm. Research by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found that YouTube repeatedly recommended Holocaust denial videos to users who searched for Jewish-related content. In one instance, the platform directed viewers from benign historical videos to overtly antisemitic conspiracy theories, such as the claim that Jews orchestrated 9/11. By allowing its algorithm to serve such content, YouTube effectively normalized antisemitism and helped radicalize individuals, yet Section 230 absolves the company of any accountability. These examples demonstrate that the law not only protects platforms from liability but also incentivizes them to ignore the dangers of their own business practices.

When hate speech and calls for violence go unchecked, the consequences are deadly. Section 230 protects platforms from lawsuits even when their negligence directly facilitates harm. This lack of accountability incentivizes platforms to prioritize profit over safety.

The Role of Algorithms: Amplifying Hate for Profit

Social media platforms are not passive conduits of information; they actively shape and amplify content through their algorithms. These algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, prioritizing sensational, divisive, and often harmful content. Antisemitism, like other forms of hate speech, thrives in this environment.

Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) revealed that Facebook failed to act on 89% of reported antisemitic content. Instead, its algorithms often promoted this content to larger audiences. Similar findings have been reported for YouTube and Twitter.

This is not a matter of free speech but of deliberate business practices. Platforms profit from the increased user engagement generated by controversial and hateful content. Yet under Section 230, they face no legal repercussions for this reckless behavior.



Counterarguments and Misconceptions

Critics of Section 230 reform argue that holding platforms liable for user-generated content would stifle free speech and innovation. However, this argument falls apart under scrutiny.

1. Free Speech vs. Accountability: Section 230 reform does not mean eliminating free speech online. Instead, it ensures that platforms are held accountable when they amplify or profit from harmful content.
2. Innovation Can Thrive with Responsibility: Many industries, from pharmaceuticals to automobiles, are required to follow regulations without stifling innovation. The tech industry should not be an exception.
3. Existing Precedents: Countries like Germany and France have enacted laws requiring platforms to remove hate speech and incitement within strict timeframes. These laws demonstrate that accountability and free expression can coexist.

Proposed Reforms to Section 230

Reforming Section 230 is not about silencing speech but about creating a framework for accountability. Several proposals have been put forward:

1. Limit Immunity for Algorithmic Amplification: Platforms should be held liable when their algorithms amplify harmful content, such as hate speech or incitement to violence.
2. Mandatory Transparency: Require platforms to disclose how their algorithms operate and what steps they take to combat hate speech.
3. Enforceable Standards for Hate Speech: Platforms must be required to take action against hate speech and incitement, with clear penalties for noncompliance.
4. Narrow the Definition of Neutral Platforms: Immunity should only apply to platforms that remain neutral and do not curate or amplify content.

These reforms would ensure that platforms take their responsibilities seriously while preserving the core values of free expression.

Holding Internet Giants Accountable

The tech giants that dominate the internet—Facebook (Meta), Twitter (X), YouTube (Google), and others—must no longer hide behind Section 230. These companies have built empires by monetizing human interaction, but they must also bear the costs of the harm they enable.

1. Legal Precedents: In 2021, victims of terrorist attacks sued social media companies, alleging that their platforms were used to recruit and incite violence. While many cases were dismissed due to Section 230, they highlight the need for a legal framework that allows victims to seek justice.

2. Moral Responsibility: By profiting from hate-filled content, tech companies are complicit in the harm caused. It is morally indefensible to prioritize profits over the safety and dignity of users.

3. Government Oversight: The federal government has a responsibility to regulate these companies, just as it regulates other industries that impact public safety.



Conclusion:

The Time for Change is Now

The 26 words of Section 230 have unleashed a wave of hate, incitement, and antisemitism on the internet, with devastating consequences for individuals and communities. While these words were once seen as a cornerstone of internet freedom, they have become a shield for irresponsibility and greed.

It is time to reform Section 230 and hold internet giants accountable for the harm they enable. This is not just a legal or regulatory issue—it is a moral imperative. As society grapples with the real-world consequences of online hate, we must demand that those who profit from the internet’s darkest corners take responsibility for their role.

The internet has the power to connect and inform, but it also has the power to divide and harm. Reforming Section 230 is the first step toward creating a safer, more just online world.

Sources

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The “social media platforms and other online content hosts have largely operated without outside regulation as a result of Section 230’s broad immunity. This lack of external oversight has led to a predominantly self-policing industry.”

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