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International Affairs

# Scrolling Towards Intellectual Stagnation: A Millian Analysis of Social Media

March 5, 2024

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## Introduction

In the present day, social media is the prime mechanism for the exchange of information and opinions. Social media's design allows for international communication, twenty-four hour a day accessibility and provides a platform for everyone, no matter their income, race, religion, or gender, to present their opinion in a public manner. At first glance, these platforms seem to be founded on John Stuart Mill's ideas of freedom of speech which he presents in *On Liberty*. Yet, this view of social media has been idealized and is not the materialization of Mill's hope for a free and intellectual society. In fact, this article will argue that social media is incompatible with Mill's freedom of speech concept due to two distinct characteristics. First, content on social media is controlled by personalized algorithms. Second, social media allows for the limitation of dialogue.

This essay will focus primarily on social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and Reddit, as these networks lend themselves to the exchange of opinions and ideas versus visual content. Mill's arguments for free speech focus mainly on intellectual discussions that are had with the

aim of discovering truths, and platforms such as X and Reddit are the closest to replicating the reality that Mill's arguments were founded on. The essay will begin by explaining Mill's support for the freedom of speech, followed by the two challenges that social media presents to Mill's ideas. Each challenge will be accompanied by a potential objection and counterargument to thoroughly demonstrate social media's incompatibility with Mill's account. Although social media provides an accessible platform for people to express their opinions and interact with others, a process valued deeply by Mill, the design of these platforms hinders users' ability to seek truthful knowledge and develop their own understanding. Social media's design fundamentally contradicts Mill's purpose for the freedom of speech.

## John Stuart Mill's Freedom of Speech

John Stuart Mill's account of free speech or free expression of opinions, both used interchangeably in this essay, is based on the idea that the free expression of opinions is how truths are found; a necessary process to allow the flourishing of individuals and society. The discovery of "the clearer

perception and livelier impression of truth” is made possible through the open exchange of opinions between members of society, especially through the exchange of conflicting opinions (Mill, 2015, p. 19). Mill’s argument for freedom of speech is concerned with the silencing of opinions. Mill declares that a person can never be sure that the opinion they are striving to silence is a false opinion. Even if the person were sure it was false, “stifling it would be an evil still” (2015, p. 19). Presuming an opinion to be true without “permitting its refutation” does not allow the truth to be discovered and is an “assumption of infallibility” (Mill, 2015, pp. 19-21). Mill believes that the truth can only be discovered when the whole of a subject is discussed by people holding every variety of opinion. The only stable foundation for relying on an opinion and viewing it as truthful is through actively “correcting and completing” the opinion by “collating” it with all possible objections and difficulties (Mill, 2015, p. 22). To silence all other opinions is to believe that “[people themselves] and those who agree with [them] are the judges of certainty and judges without hearing the other side” (Mill, 2015, p. 23). Mill wholeheartedly objects to this assumption of infallibility as every age has held opinions which have been deemed false and, at times, absurd by subsequent ages. All opinions must be given every opportunity for refutation as to not rob humanity of the discovery of truth and knowledge (Mill, 2015, p. 19). In the other case that Mill presented, where an opinion is seen as undoubtedly true, Mill believes that “however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently and fearlessly discussed it will be

held as a dead dogma, not a living truth” (Mill, 2015, p. 35). By only knowing one side of the case, a person is unable to argue against an opposing view, furthermore if they do not know the opposing opinion, they have no ground for preferring either side (Mill, 2015, p. 37). Mill sees the “deep slumber of a decided opinion” as a “fatal tendency of mankind” (2015, p. 43). If an opinion ceases to be “vigorously and earnestly contested,” people will cease to understand their own opinion (Mill, 2015, p. 52). They will hold the opinion with little knowledge of its rational grounds. Without strong comprehension of its origins, the opinion is at risk of being lost (Mill, 2015, p. 52). Mill presents a final and more common case, that conflicting opinions “share the truth between them; and the non-conforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder of the truth” (2015, p. 45). Mill states that “popular opinions” are often true, yet rarely hold the “whole truth” (2015, p. 45). Therefore, if opposing opinions are silenced or not actively listened to, the whole truth will never be discovered (Mill, 2015, p. 45).

### **The First Challenge - Algorithmic Hostility**

Following Mill's strong defence for freedom of speech, it can be stated that Mill insists on the truth being valuable and that the open expression of opinion allows people to arrive at true beliefs. Freedom of speech on social media platforms does not share this primary aim of striving for truthful knowledge. Social media platform designs are not independent areas for open discussion and exchange of opinion. They are majorly funded through the exchange of user’s personal data to

advertisers (Rusev, 2022). This results in a platform where algorithms promote the content that generates the most revenue. Social media networks are also controlled by algorithms that “analyze user behaviour, interactions and interests to understand their content preferences and deliver personalized content” (Adisa, 2023, para. 1). For example, X’s “For you” page is a section of the app where users can explore new accounts they do not follow; yet this content correlates with what the user views the most on the app. With these algorithms and external influences, Mill’s idea of open discussion directed by the people who are participating is no longer the case.

Due to social media’s algorithmic design, it is rare that a social media user will regularly be confronted with content that is in opposition with their viewpoint. Therefore, users are not given the opportunity to “throw themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them” (Mill, 2015, p. 37). Users are then only presented with one side of the truth (Mill, 2015, p. 45). The nature of algorithms leads social media users to become unfamiliar with confronting opinions that differ from their perception of truth. This causes a “social intolerance” for opposing ideas and has led to a lack of “mental freedom” (Mill, 2015, pp. 32-33). Mill believes that the opinions which people hold “respecting those who disown the beliefs they deem important” can limit the diffusion of the unconventional (2015, p. 32). It must be recognized that the controlled environment of social media has heightened the hostility between users of differing opinions as they have been acclimated to an online world specifically built to appease

them, one which cannot be replicated in the real world, which Mill observed. In addition to appeasing an individual’s beliefs, the social media actions of “liking” and “sharing” content actually encourage outrage and hostility amongst users (Brady, 2021). The externally managed digital environment, which reaffirms users’ ideas rather than challenging them, vehemently opposes Mill’s ideal of free discussion between people holding opposing ideas. In Mill’s view, social media does not allow for the discovery of truth by dissuading opposition, and consequentially, increasing tensions between members of society.

### **Potential Objection and Counter Argument**

A potential objection to the above argument is that social media does, in fact, bolster freedom of the expression of opinions. Social media is a constantly accessible platform allowing users to present their ideas and engage with each other at all hours and across the world. Even with personalized algorithms, social media platforms do not block users from accessing opposing opinions. Users always can seek out ideas that conflict with their own, yet many choose not to. It is understandable that users feel comfortable conversing with those who share similar opinions. Intellectual discussions can still be had between users and ideas can be frequently discussed. Social media, with its personalized algorithms, actually holds a “convenient plan for having peace in the intellectual world,” yet, as Mill notes, “the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification, is the sacrifice of the entire

moral courage of the human mind” (2015, p. 33). Even with social media’s almost universal accessibility, if opposition is not promoted, ideas may be “frequently” discussed but not “fully and fearlessly” (Mill, 2015, p. 35). While social media does not silence all opposing views of a user, it does not promote intellectual confrontation. Users must rely on themselves to discover the whole truth by seeking out its refutation, yet how can this be expected from a society made increasingly socially intolerant by the design of social media? Social media seemingly promotes freedom of the expression of opinion, however, by design it has limited users from arriving at true beliefs. Therefore, following Mill’s argument, true freedom of expression cannot be found on social media.

### **The Second Challenge: A Declaration of Infallibility**

The design of social media platforms opposes Mill’s ideas of open communication by allowing the limitation of dialogue. Platforms like X and Reddit allow users to block comments, reducing one’s discourse with other users. Disabling other users from commenting is the “silencing of discussion” and, therefore, an “assumption of infallibility” (Mill, 2015, p. 19). As Mill explains, the “complete liberty of contradicting and disproving” a person’s opinion is the only condition that justifies them in assuming its truth. (2015, p. 21). Social media’s design allows for the limitation of contradictions and disapproval, thus restricting the discovery of truth. Mill praises the Socratic dialects that led the pupil to truly understand their own opinion

by making them question and defend the doctrines they follow (2015, p. 44). Mill declares that in his time, negative logic that reveals weaknesses in theory was disparaged. This can also be said of the present day, with social media platforms giving users the ability to block opposition. Mill highly disapproves of this as “until people are again systematically trained” to negative criticism, society will have “few great thinkers and a low general average of intellect” (2015, p. 45).

Mill also discusses the use of “vituperative,” or abusive, language against those who hold opposing opinions. He believes that people who hold unpopular opinions are often exposed to “intemperate discussion,” and this “unmeasured vituperation” deters people from expressing opposing opinions (Mill, 2015, p. 54). Mill believes that for the interest of “truth and justice,” these attacks must be restrained by giving “merited honour to everyone whatever opinion” they may hold (2015, pp. 53-54). The act of blocking other users from commenting and sharing their opinion is not honouring their perspective and assuming their comments will have “pernicious effects” on the user (Mill, 2015, p. 75). The limitation of dialogue on social media eliminates users’ “calmness to see and honesty to state” what their opponents’ views truly are, hindering the discovery of the full truth (Mill, 2015, p. 54).

### **Potential Objection and Counter Argument**

An objection to the preceding argument is that the limitation of dialogue on social media can strengthen users’ ability to have

freedom of the expression of opinion. With users being able to block comments, they limit the amount of opposition they receive when they post their perception of the truth. Users can be intimidated into not expressing their perspective due to the possibility of other users refuting their stance and potentially using abusive language. Blocking comments allows users to limit the harmful effects of negative comments. This is an understandable action; users have the right to act on their “unfavourable opinion” of a disagreeable person (Mill, 2015, p. 75). Users are justified in their avoidance of them as they should seek the society most agreeable to them. Social media users desire a non-threatening space where they can widely share their opinions, and blocking comments eliminates all possibility of disapproval. Yet, this action is allowing users to block meaningful opposition as well. If a user makes a comment where they have “infringed the rules necessary for the protection of [their] fellow creatures, individually or collectively,” the social media platform can censure this user and the comment can justly be removed (Mill, 2015, p. 77). However, the pre-emptive blocking of all comments restricts fair discussion and assumes infallibility, which both oppose Mill’s freedom of the expression of opinion. Social media’s ability to restrict all opposition has blurred the lines between essential opposition that permits the discovery of truth, and meaningless vituperative language that has pernicious effects on society. A distinction between

these two must be made for society to flourish; without contestation society will forever remain stagnant.

### **Conclusion**

The freedom of speech, as John Stuart Mill argues, is an essential process that has allowed society to discover truths and flourish due to this knowledge. The ways in which people communicate with each other have changed dramatically since the advent of social media platforms. These platforms do not replicate the former methods of the exchange of opinion that Mill observed. Platforms are controlled by algorithms that expose users to personalized content, which inherently limits their interactions with people whose opinions oppose their own. Social media also allows for the limitation of discourse between users with settings that can block comments. These two specific design elements do not support the interchanging of ideas between users, therefore limiting the discovery of truths. Social media has widely been regarded as an accessible platform where people can publicly discuss their opinions; however, its design hinders Mill’s very purpose of freedom of speech. Through this article’s analysis, it is clear that John Stuart Mill’s account of freedom of speech is not being upheld by social media platforms; its quintessential purpose is eroding. In the age of social media, readers of Mill are left to wonder, is this supposed freedom of expression accomplishing anything?

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