

As Brazil bans Elon Musk's X, who will speak up for free speech?

Free expression has become a culture war, and those who should defend it are staying quiet

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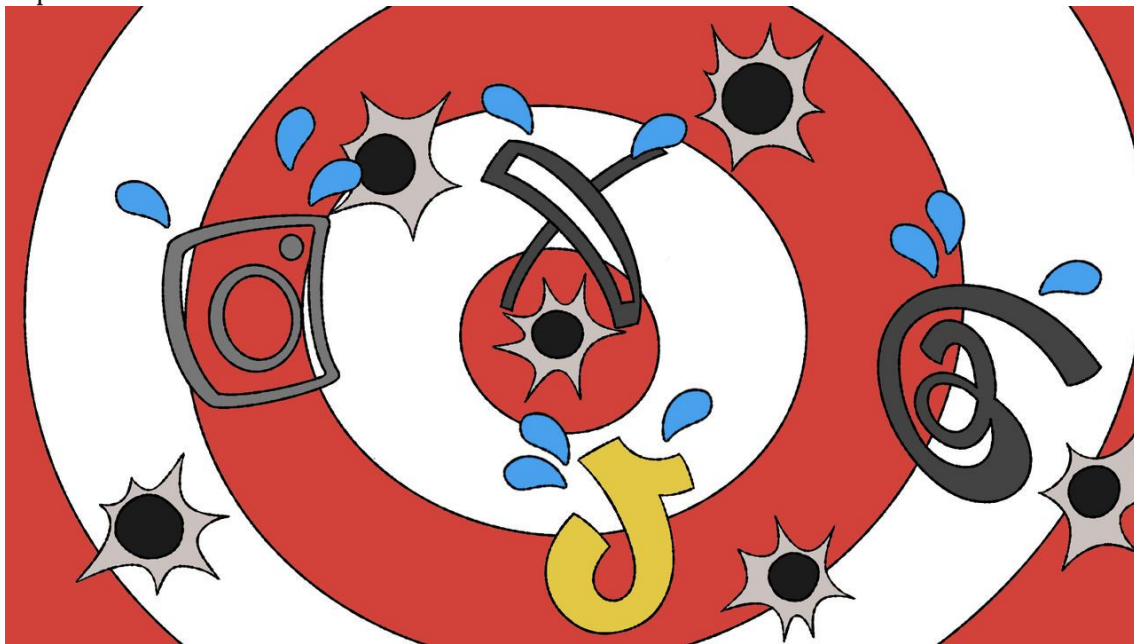


Illustration: Brian Scagnelli

In Brazil JUDGES have [blocked access to X](#), one of the country's most popular social networks. In France prosecutors have banned the head of Telegram from leaving the country while they investigate the messaging platform. In Britain judges are sentencing social-media users to prison for messages posted online during recent riots. In America there are plans to ban TikTok, a wildly popular Chinese-owned app. Arguments about free expression are beginning to boil over, as governments clamp down on speech online.

In some instances the crackdown is justified. France's case against Telegram, a Russian-founded app which has 50% more users worldwide than X, focuses on its policing of illegal content. The app, which has only about 50 employees, has long been seen as an easy place to share material involving child abuse and advertise drugs and other contraband. Telegram calls the French charges "absurd" and says it conforms with European digital norms. Whatever the investigation concludes, it is at least targeting something that is illegal.

America's draconian strike against TikTok is also defensible. The app is enjoyed by more than 1bn people worldwide and has shaken up an uncompetitive market. But with a parent company based in Beijing, it is vulnerable to manipulation by the Chinese Communist Party—which matters, given how many users treat TikTok as

their source of news. Individuals have a right to freedom of speech, but foreign governments do not. Banning TikTok is a reasonable last resort if the firm cannot sever its ties with Beijing.

Yet other recent cases seek to censor and punish speech that should be within the law. Brazil has banned X over its refusal to comply with opaque court orders to remove dozens of accounts, including those belonging to members of its Congress; users trying to access the platform face ruinous fines (see Americas section). India, the United Arab Emirates and others are seeking to weaken encryption (see International section); Malaysia has said that posts about religion must be cleared by the Department of Islamic Development.

Rich democracies are also reaching more often for the censor's scissors. The European Union is investigating X for fostering misinformation and racism—both bad, but not appropriate targets for the law. Britain is right to jail those who clearly incite violence and to expect platforms to observe the law, but when it convicted a man for posting a tweet deemed simply “grossly offensive”, it strayed into unjustified censorship. Even in America, which has the world's strongest free-speech tradition, Facebook has accused the White House of leaning on it to remove satire about covid-19.

Arguments about speech and the law have been raging since the invention of the book, never mind Facebook. Our long-standing position is clear: **only with the freedom to be wrong can societies advance slowly towards what is right.** What has changed is that today the loudest objections to the crackdown on free speech come from right-wingers such as Elon Musk, X's boss, while many self-described liberals applaud what they see as a blow against Trump-supporting billionaires. **As speech becomes a culture-war battleground, those who disagree with the politics of Mr Musk and his allies have become relaxed about the onslaught.**

They should wake up. The tightening curbs on what is said affect everyone who uses online platforms, not just the billionaires who own them. What's more, freedom of expression is hardly safe in the hands of fair-weather libertarians like Mr Musk, who sues those he disagrees with, bans words he dislikes from his platform and is cordial with Vladimir Putin, whose favoured content-moderation tool is Novichok. The ability to speak freely is perhaps the essential liberal value. It is time for true liberals to speak up and defend it. ■