

The Rising Cost of Being Human

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There was a time when power revealed itself through spectacle. Be it the trial of Socrates, poor man sentenced to drink the hemlock for ‘corrupting the youth’ and impiety; or centuries later the Nazi regime which razed books by fire, the violence was unmistakable. But one thing we can notice, is that the idea was first expressed, and then destroyed in full view of the society. Wrong and tyrannical, but visible, and more importantly, resistible. But what happens when this system changes and power no longer needs to destroy ideas in public, because it’ll be able to just bury them before they even take shape. As scary as it sounds, that is the era we live in now. The shift is subtle but profound; it has gone from prohibition to preconfiguring the set of actions that are possible for a person to make. The system that we everyday live and interact with is being altered in ways so imperceptible that us fellow humans fail to even recognize it, much less oppose it. When the very perimeter of what we can think, say or do, is engineered in advance, we don’t experience it as constraint but as a choice; unaware that anything has been taken from us.

From the perspective of Austrian economics, human action is always a response to the environment, and when this environment itself is being preconfigured, the state no longer needs to burn books or give death sentences. It can just make opposition more costly. In more clearer words, it can simply make the “wrong” words more expensive to utter. We are transitioning from a world of external prohibition to a world of internal praxeology where a person has to weigh their authentic behaviour or expression with the risk of being filtered out of social and economic systems.

When cost of dissent becomes too high, the human mind seeks safety; and that leads to a voluntary retreat from originality, the phenomenon we simply term as self-censorship. This is not merely theoretical, and we can strongly witness it in the “extreme vetting”

immigration policies implemented during the Donald Trump administration. It all began in 2017 with an executive order and solidified in a 2019 mandate. The State Department began requiring nearly all visa applicants to surrender five years of social media handles for government scrutiny. This created a massive opportunity cost for free expression, because when a person's stray political thought could result in a denied visa, or a lost future, they are incentivized to shape their online presence to something "safer" and that is ultimately less authentic. The result is decay of society itself. Society advances through trial/error, and open discovery; but today we witness that people are too afraid to think, question and express themselves, which is the very beginning of knowledge creation. Systems like this are choking progress in real time, and more importantly, and personally, stealing from us what makes us human.

But don't you dare mistake this for a single institution's problem. It has followed you, at your desk. The office you return to every morning, the company that signs your paycheck, and the screen you stare at for eight hours, they all are converging slowly towards the same logic of control. A jeweller's ability to know the quality of a diamond by touch, or the shopkeeper who can read his customer's mood before they even speak; is the very thing that makes human labor valuable and irreducible. Nothing can capture the knowledge that lives in the hands, in the eyes and in the years of accumulated experience. But a new class of software has decided to try anyway. Bossware, or in layman terms, employee monitoring software. It's built on the belief that human work can be fully known and optimized from the outside. And while AI is a technological breakthrough, it's already being used in ways that should terrify you and me. To be specific, there are tools like Optifye AI designed to track your keystrokes and monitor idle time at work. Moreover, a

shocking incident was shared by career coach Simon Ingari, where a company used cameras to measure how frequently employees blinked to 'measure their productivity'; a pathetic attempt to reduce the most involuntary human gestures into a data point. This is control that is automatic, invisible and infinitely scalable. Similar to our visa example, this too leads to self-censorship; but here, self censorship transitions to 'performing productivity'. The spontaneous breaks and the wandering thoughts are the things that can actually lead to innovation, but this new system is crushing tacit knowledge. The tragedy is not that employees want productive workers. The tragedy is that in an attempt to guarantee productivity, they are destroying the very conditions where genuine productivity, the one that creates value, is possible.

But none of this emerged from nowhere. It all began from the same teacher, the one with a flag. Unlike the employer and their desperate attempts to force productivity, or the software company stealing your data, the state has to play on a whole new level. They need something permanent, something more total, and more importantly invisible, so it can lead to unquestioning compliance. Consider India. The Indian Government has repeatedly ordered social media platforms, especially Twitter to block accounts, posts and journalists critical of its policies, citing Section 69A of the IT Act. The law is built on broad terms like 'national security' and 'public order' which can be stretched to cover almost anything the government finds inconvenient. Worse, the law operates through confidential orders which means that the person whose content is removed is often not told why. And silently, the platform complies, the post is removed without the mass getting a hint. But this was not enough. Recently, the government proposed bringing Community Notes (crowdsourced fact checking system) on Twitter under government

oversight. The government has clearly warned social media platforms to follow guidelines if they want to keep “safe harbor” i.e. legal immunity from liability for content posted by users. But India is not alone, and in fact it is not even the most sophisticated practitioner of this art. The NetzDG law in Germany requires online platforms to remove “obviously illegal” content within 24 hours, or face heavy fines upto 50 million Euros. The categories of illegal content come from criminal law but are applied broadly in practice, plus the timeline is short and the consequences are enormous. So platforms over remove. They take down content that might be illegal, content that might not be illegal, content they simply don’t have the time to evaluate. The case of Germany is certainly more advanced than India as you can notice that the law never demands over censorship. It just makes under censorship catastrophically expensive. The state just has to sit back and watch these platforms do the rest. Similar mechanisms can be found in other countries like Turkey and Russia. But all of these, as blunt and brutal as they are, still leave traces. There is still a law you can point to, or a politician you can hold responsible. Which is precisely why the most dangerous form of this today is the one that has shed all of that entirely.

Here comes the European Union’s Code of Practice on Disinformation. On paper it is completely voluntary. No law forces companies to sign it, no court enforces it; but still Google, Meta, Twitter, Tiktok and dozen others have signed it and follow its rules. The reason is that The Digital Services Act hangs over this “voluntary” code and any defiance is the quickest way to trigger a formal investigation. The soft law is optional in the same way that a shopkeeper’s “donation” to a local protection racket is optional; technically yes, but practically - not at all. As expected, this code starts with something unimpeachable but the problem arises at its laws on “disinformation”. Disinformation is not a legally

defined term and has no stable boundary, and predictably, it has expanded from foreign interference to domestic political narratives; from clear lies to opinions that the powerful institutions find destabilizing. But this goes one step further than this. This code doesn't ask platforms to remove the posts, or block accounts, it does something far more sinister. It requires them to reduce their visibility; algorithmic downranking in other words. The content stays up, but barely anyone sees it. This is the most philosophically insidious innovation of the modern censorship regime. Not the removal of speech but its deamplification. Removal can be screenshotted and protested but when your post simply reaches fewer people, you have no enemy to name. You conclude rationally that your ideas are just not very interesting and you adjust accordingly.

The self censorship is complete, and it was never once demanded.

Hayek warned against the arrogant belief that one can know the unknowable (fatal conceit), and this EU code is exactly this delusion personified. These cases should lead to an epiphany about today's system of control. We view self censorship as something that happens inside a person, like a journalist swallowing a story or citizen deleting a post. But you must notice the rise of 'Institutional Self Censorship'. A platform is unambiguously better off doing what the state wants, and slowly, the state hands the role of the tyrant to it.

Yet this crown of digital interventionism is not the state's alone. It can be purchased, perhaps for \$44 billion. When Elon Musk acquired Twitter, he positioned himself as the man who would restore free speech. And maybe he even believed it. But credible evidence soon emerged that certain Republican leaning accounts, including him were receiving algorithmic boosts (some by 1000x temporarily). The problem is not who holds the

power, the problem is that such power exists. Moreover, we should be terrified that all this power is now being transferred to machines. Be it Open AI, Gemini or any other major AI, it is being trained with content moderation built into its foundations. These systems will decide what they will discuss, what they will refuse, what framing they will adopt, what they will quietly avoid. It is concerning that millions today are forming their understanding of the world by having a conversation with these AI apps. This is worse than algorithmic downranking/boosting. Far worse. When a platform buries your content, you at least know it exists. There is a gap between what you said and what the world heard. But in the case of AI, there is no gap to notice. You do not know what you were never told. You do not miss the idea that was never surfaced.

But there is something that every system of control forgets. Humans don't, and can't stop wanting what they want. This raw human instinct to go around and find another way is perhaps the most powerful vindication of the Austrian School of Economics that order does not need to be designed. After 2008 financial crisis, when govt. and central banks said that the money in your bank account could be diluted and manipulated by institutions that were too large to fail and too connected to be punished, we witnessed one of the best manifestations of spontaneous order in modern history. In 2009, from no office, no government mandate, Bitcoin was born. It was a decentralized currency no bank could freeze, and no authority could confiscate without your private key. Absolutely genius. It emerged out of frustration of millions of people who had watched the traditional financial system betray them. For a moment it worked, but then came the authorities to intervene; again, with a desire to establish control. China watched capital flow freely across its borders through crypto exchanges, and banned them entirely in 2017. Then

again in 2019; then again in 2021. Because each ban inspired some other workaround. India imposed 30% flat tax on crypto gains, with no allowance for losses. It pretty much made legitimate trading so punishing that trades on domestic exchanges fell and people began to shift to foreign platforms. Then this very thing became the justification for proposing even stricter regulations. Similar thing happened in the US when the SEC began classifying tokens as securities, but it had a more legal form. Seeing increasing regulations, people moved to privacy coins, for ex= Monero, Zcash. These currencies were designed to be untracable and was born because the state had attempted to regulate crypto transactions. The state again responded, not by banning them directly, because that will lead to pushback, but by increasing regulatory and compliance pressure on exchanges. Faced with that risk, exchanges chose to delist privacy coins completely, and began to avoid listing new ones. Similar to what we saw in the example of EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, the state implemented institutional self censorship. It must be noticed that this is a growing pattern that states all over the world are using. Be it platforms censoring speech or corporations censoring financial coins, the hand that pulls the trigger is always someone else's. But obviously this wasn't going to stop people and the privacy coin communities just moved further underground, and one can be sure by now, that this might become the justification for the next intervention, which will just push them further, and perhaps another Bitcoin will be born.

The true consequence of digital interventionism is the atrophy of human discovery process. We have discussed three main ideas that are self censorship in individuals, the new idea of institutional self censorship and finally intervention spiral. These concepts can cause the most lasting impact, and not in a good way. Let's be completely honest,

great thinkers, innovators, will continue to exist as we move on and as blunt as this can be put, the rebel will still rebel. The problem was never for them. The problem is for everyone else - the vast majority, who are not stupid, but who rely, as all humans must, on the information around them to form their thoughts. Increasing Digital interventionism won't make the exceptional mind less exceptional, but will surely make the common mind more captive. The herd, (that is most of us, and if you are reading and thinking you're not part of it, the system as perhaps accounted for that feeling too), will graze on the filtered information provided to them . This is not an insult. We are approaching something genuinely new, where the herd no longer has the diversity of thought required to even generate disagreement. It will be a world where everyone arrives at the same opinions independently. In these times, a quote by Anthony the Great feels uncomfortably modern- "A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying 'You are mad; you are not like us.'" Well, here is something to keep you up at night- we will never realize it happening; won't have a single clue of what we have turned into. The collision of ideas, the disagreements, all this friction is important. The friction is what leads to progress. But digital interventionism is removing this friction, and the AI, that most are already highly dependent on, will be the mass executor. And so we arrive at the only honest place this essay can end. All these 'techniques' of Digital Interventionism depend on only one thing, and that is You Not Noticing. The resistance to this system is your decision to notice. To question yourself, question what you see.

Thinking is your MOAT.

The problem is, it's not that easy. There were moments in this essay where I softened some words and framed an argument in a way that was more acceptable. Because the cost of it being too loud felt very real even here, on a page that nobody has read yet. But that is only the half of it. The scarier half is the void in my own consciousness. Somewhere in writing this, a harder argument may have never even occurred to me, or perhaps a better conclusion, because the information I was given by the tools was theirs to decide. This is the most complete form of control. It leaves no trace; not even in the mind of the person who just wrote more than two thousand words about it, and they'll never know what they did not say.