

SOCIAL MEDIA ETHICS AND THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION

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A COMMENTARY IN THE **BUSINESS ETHICS IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC VIRTUAL SYMPOSIUM** ON Brett Gregory Johnson (2017), “Speech, Harm, and the Duties of Digital Intermediaries: Conceptualizing Platform Ethics,” *J Media Ethics* 32(1): 16–27,

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ABSTRACT

Johnson (2017) conceptualizes the social responsibilities of digital media platforms by describing two ethical approaches: one emphasizing the discursive freedom of platform-users, the other emphasizing protecting users from harmful posts. These competing concerns are on full display in the current debate over platforms’ obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Johnson argues both approaches are grounded in democracy, we argue that democratic commitments transcend the freedom/harm dichotomy. Instead, a commitment to democracy points toward social media companies’ responsibilities to structure their platforms in ways that facilitate perspectival diversity and collective deliberation.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY of information is crucial to developing an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as consumers and citizens seek guidance on how to behave in an unprecedented social and political moment. For businesses and organizations that figure prominently in this information economy, the pandemic thus creates an interesting ethical landscape. This is particularly true for social media companies like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In contrast to traditional “legacy” media organizations that explicitly exert editorial

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