

The 'citizens' have power. They can help.

[cross-post from medium]

This is a confusing time in a confusing place. I've struggled with concepts like allyship from within, of whether I sit in a country on the verge of collapse or renewal, on how I might make some small positive difference in a place that could take the world down with it. And, y'know, also getting on with life, because even in the midst of chaos, we still eat and sleep and continue to do all the human things. But I'm starting to understand things again.

I often say that the units of this country are companies, not people: that democratic power here rests a lot in the hands of organizations (and probably will until Citizens United is overturned, people find their collective strength and politics comes back from the pay-to-play that it's become in the last decade or two). But since we're here, I've started thinking about how that might itself become an advantage. We've already seen a hint of it with StormFront being turned away by the big hosts. What else could be done here? Where else are the levers?

One thing is that a relatively small number of people are in a position to define what's socially acceptable: either by removing the unacceptable (e.g StormFront) or making it harder to find or easier to counter. And for me, this is not about ensuring a small group of nazis don't coordinate and share stores: that's going to happen anyway, whether we like it or not. It's more about reducing their access and effect on our grandmothers, on people who might see a well-produced article or presidential statement and not realize that it doesn't reflect reality (we can talk all we want about 'truth', and I have been known to do that, but some subjective assessments are just way past the bounds of uncertainty).

Removing the unacceptable is a pretty nuclear option, and one that is hard to do cleanly (although chapeau to the folks who say 'no'). Making things harder to find and easier to counter — that should be doable. Like, tell me again how search and ranking works? Or rather, don't (yes, I get [eigenvector centrality](#) and [support](#), and enjoy [Query Understanding](#)) — it's more important that people who are working on search and ranks are connected to the people working on things like algorithm ethics and classifying misinformation; people who are already wrestling with how algorithm design and page content adversely affect human populations, and the ethics of countering those effects. There's already a lot of good work starting on countering the unacceptable (e.g. lots of interesting emergent work like counter-memes, annotation, credibility standards, removing advertising money and open source information warfare tools).

Defining and countering "unacceptable" is a subject for another note. IMHO, there's a rot spreading in our second (online) world: it's a system built originally on trust and a belief in its ability to connect, inform, entertain, and these good features are increasingly being used to bully, target, coerce and reflect the worst of our humanities. One solution would be to let it collapse on itself, to be an un-counteracted carrier for the machine and belief hacks that I wrote about earlier. Another is to

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draw our lines, to work out what we as technologists can and should do now. Some of those things (like adapt search) are thematically simple but potentially technically complex, but that's never scared us before (and techies like a good chewy challenge). And personally, if things do start going Himmler, I'd rather be with Bletchley than [IBM](#).