Against Censorship and Its Academic Supporters

No one should prize the free exchange of ideas more than academics, whose entire purpose is to develop, challenge, and improve ideas. Endorsing state control of public discourse through the censorship of political opponents should be anathema to any defender of democracy. We are thus dismayed by the public letter "Against Big Tech's Attack on Digital Sovereignties," signed by many notable academics, including Daron Acemoglu and Thomas Piketty.

Although the letter mentions "Big Techs" in general, it singles out Elon Musk's X as an "instance in a wider effort to restrict" Brazil's (and other nations') "digital developmental agenda". We attempt to understand what this means, but first it is worth reviewing the facts.

Brazil's law establishes that any judicial order to remove content from a social platform must specify what content is to be removed (Law 12.965, Art. 19, §1). The law also affirms the constitutional protection of free speech (Art. 5, IV, IX, and Art. 220 §2). Nevertheless, Justice Alexandre de Moraes ordered the suspension of the accounts of influencers, journalists and even members of Congress, all of whom were critics of the current president. X complied with these orders until April 2024, when Elon Musk stated this would violate laws in Brazil. Moraes's threats of fines and the jailing of X's legal representative lead X to close its office in Brazil. Moraes ordered the suspension of X for all Brazilians along with the seizure of Starlink's assets to cover the fines he imposed. Note that Starlink is a separate company, with no connection to X besides the fact that Elon Musk is a shareholder in both. A report by the U.S. Congress found that "Moraes ordered the censorship of a Brazilian citizen for criticizing Moraes for censoring Brazilians" (p. 5).

However, instead of siding with X, the law, and Brazilians' freedom of expression, the academics' letter condemns Elon Musk for providing the only digital platform in Brazil that refused to censor speech deemed undesirable by some public officials. It seems the signatories believe that governments should be able to decide what their citizens can and cannot hear, and use all their might to silence criticism — essentially endorsing authoritarianism.

The letter portrays X as if it somehow controls the flow of information in Brazil, rather than being just one of many platforms through which Brazilians access information. It also links X to the incitement of the acts of January 8, 2023, and suggests that its suspension is motivated by its refusal to block accounts involved in this instigation. However, as previously mentioned, X did not refuse to comply with any orders prior to April 2024.

Introducing the unfamiliar concept of "digital sovereignty", the letter demands that "Big Tech companies cease their attempts to sabotage" Brazil's "digital agenda", which they urge the government to implement. It is unclear what this agenda is, but it appears to be a rehash of old industrial policy ideas, which usually create inefficiencies and losses for companies and consumers, while generating significant profits for well-connected businessmen. Even if this outcome does not materalize, there is a greater danger today: the possibility that the government is able to silence opposition, paving the way for an authoritarian regime.

On one point, however, we must admit some agreement with the signatories of the letter: there is indeed a danger that Big Tech companies could cooperate to undermine democracy. In fact, many of them appear to be working with governments to suppress viewpoints they find unfavorable. Brazil serves as a notable example, but similar dynamics have been observed in the U.S. as well, with many public figures expressing support for speech control. The only platform that attempted to resist this pressure and defend freedom of expression was X. The world owes Elon Musk gratitude for safeguarding this fundamental right and maintaining X as a space where all voices can be heard. In doing so, he is arguably protecting democracy — even from those academics who seem undisturbed by authoritarianism, as long as it aligns with their preferred political ideology.

In summary, we uphold free speech and are committed to maintaining a free marketplace of ideas where the exchange of thoughts is not suppressed, regardless of whether they are deemed offensive, unwise, immoral, or disagreeable by some. Only the vigorous debate on all ideas can lead to informed judgments and, consequently, true progress.

The affiliations of the signatories below are listed for identification only and do not imply endorsement by the institution. The names appear in the approximate order in which they signed.

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