

A modest proposal

I propose that those from whom we expect reason, thoughtfulness, maybe even wisdom voluntarily give up Twitter and the other tools of half-baked, shameless, knee-jerk “contribution” to the conversation. (For the record, whatever it is going on in social media, it is hardly conversation. But such is its marketing.)

If these people find themselves incapable of abstaining, I say we bar them from social media.

I am, of course, referring to *important* people. Leaders in politics, private enterprise, and parts in between. Certainly, some people that fit this broad category are not really important. If so, and their words have no constituency—like most other opinion ranting ignoramuses passing on “news”—carry on. But truly important people—those starter pistols who move masses of people into and out of social, economic, military, and other trouble: For the love of God, stop.

I make this proposal because social media are acid pools the corrosiveness of which vastly outstrips any value they may provide. Today only a social media shill or Mark Zuckerberg—but I repeat myself—could disagree with a straight-face. The wide, second order costs of posting unvarnished “considerations” of whatever comes into our field of vision are terrifying: thoughtlessness, tribalism, xenophobia, and yet worse.

Allegedly, the point of social media is to eliminate barriers (including to good taste and civility, obviously) and allow everyone the opportunity to participate. In theory this might be good. And in some instances, where masses are being oppressed it is good. But not without risk.

The printing press—which had similar effect—was certainly a good thing, which is why social media uses allusion to it as a precedent. But even without the sinister information curation Facebook’s and Google’s algorithms perform, social media promises *and* performs at obviating the Editor. This is vastly different than the printing press provided.

It’s practically impossible for any traditional broadcast medium to be accessible to everyone. A printing press or radio/television station costs a lot of money, has its content regulated directly and through libel laws, and has effectively limited distribution potential. These barriers contributed to general limits and a specific need for editors. Even Fox News remains locked into an editorial control structure. That is not to say Fox News is not a force of darkness and contributing to social decay. Rather,

its burden to accomplish that is lots of lawyers and money. Neither of these is within the reach of common social media contributors.

It is a rare circumstance when forethought or critical assessment is put to a social media offering. (In the case of Fox News, this statement may apply to broadcast as well.) Because social media is neither mediated nor regulated, there is no obvious need or pressure to check facts or give consideration to a statement—they are always statements, usually of the most doubtless variety—for immediate, let alone longer-term impact. One could argue that because it's free expression, this is not a problem. If that's true, why so? Probably because common social media contributors are, for the most part, unimportant—as are we all. The locus of our individual, personal influence is infinitely small even among those of us who consider ourselves a centre of some attention.

When politicians—especially the holder of the office once regarded as “Leader of the Free World”—regurgitate delusions and personal prejudices, when they threaten and exact tribal retribution or create digital Fatwahs via social media, when they moralize immorally, when they issue policy in 280 characters, when they *react* to events thoughtlessly—even cluelessly, they are *destructive* not *constructive*. When Fox News or journalists contribute without consideration, they are no better.

Take Rep. Matt Gaetz (R). Via Twitter, his puny Trump apologist threatened Michael Cohen in the days leading to the latter's Senate testimony on 27 February to the point of crossing the hurdle for witness tampering. (This was not Gaetz's first time either.) When called on it by the media and Congressional colleagues, he apologized and withdrew the post, saying it was not his intent to threaten.

First off, we sadly have no choice but to classify this tweet as “important” by earlier definition. Second, the tweet can only be interpreted as a ham-handed, thuggish threat:

“Hey @MichaelCohen212 - Do your wife & father-in-law know about your girlfriends? Maybe tonight would be a good time for that chat. I wonder if she'll remain faithful when you're in prison. She's about to learn a lot...”

Third, can a Congressman—or anyone—expect to simply expunge evidence of criminality with an “Oops, my bad?” Fourth, the man has a law degree: he *knows* his action and subsequent apology/excuse is disingenuous.

Who knows what will happen. What Gaetz did was criminal. If the political class won't deal with it, the judicial class ought to. Strip any privilege: it was Twitter. Let him be brought up on charges,

(undoubtedly) found guilty, and sentenced. As it may not have caused harm, and Gaetz is rich and white, the penalty may be relatively small. But it will be a penalty, and that may deter others from doing the same.

If other, *actually* important, people become even a little judicious about what they disgorge into the community's food basket, we may find social media becoming what it really is and should be relegated to: an illegitimate place for nobodies to pretend that they are somebody by "publishing" nonsense for like-minded half-wits to pass on to their own shallow pool audiences.

Starve a fire of the oxygen it needs, and the damage will stop.

I've used only an egregious example here, but the same applies to any number of politicians who communicate with Tweets and cause (international) mayhem. Or to business executives that insist on treading on (SEC) rules with Twitter. Or various people who are merely famous and cast a long Twitter shadow.

If you're important, Twitter may not be "on brand." So stop Tweeting.

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