BITS OF FREEDOM

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Healthy public debate online

A healthy public debate reflects the diversity of our society. However, right now, tech companies like Google and Facebook are the gatekeepers of our public debate. They have this role because of their dominance and the toxic business model they employ.[1] A multiform communication landscape is essential for a healthy public debate, in which companies compete fairly for the users' favor. Bits of Freedom therefore advocates the following measures:

1. **Dominant platforms must be interoperable. The services of these platforms must be publicly accessible through an open and free protocol. In this way, competing services can let their users communicate with the users on the dominant platform.** As a user you currently have no freedom to switch to an alternative. If you, as a WhatsApp user, no longer wish to use WhatsApp, that means losing contact with your social network. You can use an alternative network, but if you are the only one there it is not of much use to you. It should therefore be possible to communicate on one platform with users of another platform. This isn't not a new idea: email works the same way. As long as your app uses the email protocol, you can communicate with others - regardless of which app or provider the other uses.

2. **Dominant platforms must allow third parties to access certain parts of their services. Such platforms must be forced (if necessary) to unbundle the hosting and the management of information, and make a publicly accessible API[2] available for this management. Competitors can then develop independent services that supplement, change or replace the functionality of the platform.** Users currently have very little control over the curation of the information. The platform determines, based on its commercial interests, what information the users will be served. The interests of the provider rarely coincide with the interests of the individual user or society as a whole. A publicly accessible API ensures that curation of the content not only lies with the user, but that this user can also make effective use of it by outsourcing this curation to a third party specialized in this.

3. **Basing advertisements on user behavior should be prohibited. Advertisements can still be personalized, but can for example be based on the content the user is**

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1 We previously wrote the concise analysis 'Fix the system, not the symptoms' on the impact of the dominant position of a handful of platforms. We described exactly what their power consists of, how they maintain it, and what the consequences are thus has for our freedom of expression. The measures mentioned make a direct or indirect contribution to the solution of the problems under paragraphs 3.1, 3.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 5.
2 An API is a the combination of a piece of software and some agreements that allows two separate applications to communicate. API stands for Application Programming Interface.

viewing. Ads that are based on user behavior can only exist if the behavior of those users is tracked and users are profiled. The result is a tracking industry in which users are not only followed within the platform itself, but also secretly on the wider web. To stop this that user surveillance, ads based on user tracking should be prohibited. Advertisements can still be personalized, for example by placing advertisements for from a hardware store next to a video on about do-it-yourself DIY houses.

4. **The use of so-called dark patterns should be prohibited.** All kinds of user manipulation are hidden in the design of the dominant platforms.[3] Once a video ends, YouTube automatically starts the next one - one that is selected based on Google's interests, not the user's. It often also takes a lot more effort to refuse than to accept the use of cookies. The button for accepting cookies is often much more prominent than the one for refusing. These are all conscious choices of the platform, intended to keep the user on the platform for a longer time and have them share more data. These designs secretly take away the user's autonomy. Such dark patterns should be prohibited, so that the user can again choose themselves what to do on a platform.

3 The report 'Performing the platform' scrutinizes how the design of these platforms seeks to mold user behaviors and engagement with the platform. This molding is a form of manipulation. Through design analysis, reporting and academic research, this report identifies and labels six unique forms of manipulation carried out by Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The report was drafted by Dr. Holly Robbins of Eindhoven University of Technology for Bits of Freedom.