

Executive Summary

1 Attitudes About the Digital Public Square: Americans' Views on Free Expression and Potentially Harmful Online Content

Americans' attitudes weighing free expression and harmful online content provide invaluable context for policymakers and social media companies to consider in brokering solutions that the public will support.

- 1) Americans prefer social media apps and sites to be places of open expression.
 - Nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) favor allowing people to express their views on social media, including views that are offensive, over restricting what people can say on social media based on societal norms or standards of what is fair or appropriate (35%).
- 2) Even as Americans voice a preference for open expression, there are several forms of online content that many say should be restricted or never allowed.
 - Nearly all Americans (98%) say child pornography should never be allowed on social media, and particularly relevant today, 85% say misleading health information also should be prohibited.
- 3) Many Americans have personally been targeted by harmful online behavior.
 - Of the types of harms people experience online, Americans most frequently cite being called offensive names (44%). More than 1 in 3 (35%) say someone has tried to purposefully embarrass them online, 18% have been physically threatened, and 15% have been sexually harassed.
 - Fully 3 in 10 Americans (31%) have requested a social media or internet company remove a post made by someone else they considered harmful, and 21% have had a post they made removed by a social media or internet company.

2 Americans' Appetite for Regulation: Views on Intermediary Liability and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act

Among the potential solutions discussed to address harmful online content is the potential for social media companies to bear greater liability for such content, which could pave the way for greater moderation on their part.

- 4) Americans are somewhat divided on Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which largely shields major internet companies from liability for content posted on their websites and apps by third parties.
 - Fifty-four percent say the law has done more harm than good because it has not made the companies accountable for illegal content on their sites and apps, while 44% say it has done more good than harm because it has allowed the internet to grow as a place people can communicate and say what they think.
 - That said, almost two-thirds (66%) of Americans say they support keeping the existing law that shields major internet companies from liability, while 3 in 10 (31%) say they favor changing the law so people can sue the companies for content posted by individuals that causes them harm.
 - Attitudes toward keeping or changing the law are weakly held and subject to how the question is framed. When Gallup and Knight asked a similar question in December 2019, findings showed more Americans in favor (54%) than opposed to (45%) allowing people to sue major internet companies for harmful content that appears on their platforms.

- 5) A majority of Americans do not trust social media companies to make the right decisions about what content appears on their sites or apps.
 - Levels of trust in social media companies to make the right decisions about what people can say or post on their websites and apps are low, with more than 8 in 10 Americans saying they trust the companies “not much” (44%) or “not at all” (40%).
 - A slim majority of Americans (54%) say that social media companies are “not tough enough” in policing content on their sites, and 25% say they get it right. Men, whites and less educated Americans are all more likely to say content oversight is “too tough.”
- 6) Despite misgivings about major internet companies making the right decisions related to harmful online content, Americans are more likely to favor the companies, rather than government, setting policies to regulate such content.
 - Americans marginally favor major internet companies setting policies about what people can post on their websites and apps without government involvement (55%) rather than government setting limits or guidelines about such content (44%).

3

Americans' Views on Private Sector Self-Regulation: Content Oversight Boards

In an effort to address concerns of harmful content, Facebook recently announced its appointment of a content oversight board, an independent group of experts who will determine the boundaries of free expression that Facebook says it will be obliged to enforce.

- 7) Americans' opinions of content oversight boards are largely favorable, tending to prefer them to social media companies or the government to make decisions about what can and cannot appear on social media websites and apps.
 - More than 8 in 10 Americans say they think a content oversight board is a “good idea” (54%) or “very good idea” (27%), while 12% say it is a “bad idea,” and 7% say it's a “very bad idea.”
 - Americans' favorability toward content oversight boards increases when they know more about them. Sixty-five percent prefer such entities to decide what can and cannot appear on social media websites and apps after learning more about them, compared with 46% when respondents were asked the same question before considering some of the issues content oversight boards face.

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Content Oversight Boards: Americans' Views on What Matters Most

- The most important content oversight board attributes for Americans are transparency and diversity, followed closely by independence — i.e., who appoints board members. Less valuable is the board's ability to compel social media companies to enact its decisions or guidelines.
- Americans' trust in a social media company will not automatically increase solely because the company adopts a content oversight board. Rather, trust can be gained based on the board's features relating to its independence, transparency, diversity and ability to enforce decisions.