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Social Media's Limitations Across Borders

Social media's presence on the global stage depends on who and where, exactly, one is looking at. On one hand, Facebook is the most used social media site when considering global numbers, with over one billion users worldwide (Vincos, *World Map of Social Networks*). However, invisible boundaries, firewalls, prevent genuine connection to all countries, specifically China. Social media's limitations across borders are harmful due to the lack of information allowed to different citizens as well as the spreading of misinformation it causes.

The purpose of social media is to connect its users no matter where they are. This leads to many benefits, such as the equal opportunity to spread of opinions and ideas. These benefits are tainted and mistreated when governments censor what their citizens can see. A prime example of this is China's "Great Firewall". In 2009, Facebook, Twitter, and some Google services were banned across China after the infamous Xin Jiang riots (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Bearing Witness 10 Years On: The July 2009 Riots in Xinjiang*). The events started as peaceful protests led by a few of the Uyghurs, an ethnic group, following the deaths of two Uyghur factory workers in a fight between them and Hans (Mansa, Munichiello, Zucchi, *Why Facebook Is Banned in China & How to Access It*). During these protests, fights broke out and an uncontrollable mob began to riot. This led to the confirmed deaths of 197 people, the majority claimed to be of the Han ethnic group, and later the execution of 9 Uyghurs by the Chinese government (Mansa, Munichiello, Zucchi, *Why Facebook Is Banned in China & How to Access It*). After these events, the government labeled these riots "a plot against communist rule"

(Revenge, not Reconciliation, Vowed in XinJiang), and consequentially, blocked global social media sites from its citizens in an effort to censor the spread of information that they claimed led to the violence.

It can be argued that the fundamental flaw in China's strategic banning of global social media sites is that banning this form of free speech can lead to fewer opinions and activism allowed to Chinese citizens. Without the ability to share different opinions and consequentially gain knowledge and empathy, the problem in China was likely to escalate following the banning of these platforms. In recent years, there continues to be inequalities and prejudices against the Uyghur group throughout China, a genocide *(Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?)*. Without widespread global knowledge on the issue, without anybody to stand up for those oppressed and silenced, these horrifying crimes will continue.

Furthermore, global media sites can be manipulated and abused. In the case of the Chinese "re-education" of various Muslim ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs, the Chinese government has used both Chinese and global social media sites in order to convey a false and harmful narrative (Kao, Jeff, Al, *How China Spreads Its Propaganda Version of Life in Xinjiang*). This has been achieved through the posting of thousands of videos featuring Uyghurs living in Xin Jiang, claiming to be living free and fulfilled lives. What's striking about these videos is their stark similarities with phrasing and word choices. For example, many videos include the expression "you're speaking total nonsense", a statement aimed at Mike Pompeo for speaking out about the genocide (Kao, Zhong, Mozur, Krolik, *How China Spreads Its Propaganda Version of Life for Uyghurs*). Overlaps like this suggest a larger plot, one where the Chinese government

has been forcing its ethnic minority leaders to upload scripted videos in order to sway global opinion. These videos were first released to Chinese audiences, through media sites like Pomogranate Cloud and Douyin (Kao, Jeff, Al, *How China Spreads Its Propaganda Version of Life in Xinjiang*). Afterwards, they flooded global social media sites including Youtube and Twitter. This is the first, and probably not the last, large scale example of the mass spread of misinformation through social media.

The power of social media can never be underestimated. In an increasingly connected world, acknowledging the power of social media as well as holding users accountable is vital. We must appreciate the freedom of speech social media allows us and use it for good. Whether it be through shedding light on an important issue or simply educating oneself with reliable sources, the world as a whole will take the necessary steps it needs in order to reach a peaceful reality.

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