Twitter Thread by Venkatesh Rao



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There are only 3 real challenges to free speech at the tech level a) the need for CDNs at scale b) distortions of net neutrality c) nation-state firewalls.

All other claims are about social governance on private sites, where applying free speech doctrine is a stretch at best

Baseline free speech has expanded modestly since 1776 or whatever your reference point is.

About 20% beyond core case of government-critical speech in formally public spaces and media I'd say.

You can (for example) have more kinds of conversations in a bar without getting punched or kicked out by other patrons or management. You can teach more things in colleges than 100 years ago.

That's a genuine de facto increase in practical, informal free speech/expression.

But online free "speech" is, as @reneed has pointed out, not an expansion of free speech at all, but an expansion of reach. It is like the secondary freedom of the press to print as many copies as they can afford, not primary freedom to say what they want https://t.co/Ud5kKDQRV7

@ReneeD If a newspaper wants to print more copies it has buy more printing equipment and front more upfront costs. Reach for a paper publication is not "free", but a function of desired circulation, which in turn is a function of demand prediction etc. But that logic is obscured online.

@ReneeD Online, the most expensive kind of "reach" is to run your own server at home (or redundant set of mirroring servers) where your only reliance on contracts with others is with ISPs. You can run your own installs of open-source sw like Wordpress or write your own.

@ReneeD EVERY single thing you do to lower the cost of this setup -- using a cloud vendor, a third-party hosted application layer, a privately owned social network for distribution... these are expansions of reach achieved by trading off control for cost.

@ReneeD Your reach is not YOUR reach. It's a set of agreements binding you to the speech politics of a bunch of other private parties. What you say is what they endorse by renting you servers, pipes or software installs or whatever. You want minimal constraints, run your own server

@ReneeD Beyond a certain scale, you'll need things like CDNs to serve your audience. This means you either have to get into the Internet infrastructure business yourself to keep your reach insured, or agree with their policies to stay in business.

Level up yet again and you basically need your own country to insure your reach.

This is reasonable. You should not expect no-strings-attached access to the attention of potentially billions of people under the same terms as ranting from a soapbox in a 19th century town square.

Here's the thing free speech fundamentalists don't get about "free" reach technology capable of reaching billions: given what is possible, what it costs, and how many thousands of people have to be voluntarily involved to keep the system running, it is nothing like "public air"

When you ask for conditions of use of this infrastructure to be the same as the conditions governing Q&A time at a physical townhall in a village in a room with 100 people, you're basically asking "give me a free dictatorship to rule over".

You're a wannabe tinpot dictator who wants the privileges of being ruler of a country-scale entity without all that fussy trouble of actually running a country and maintaining an army who can make internet infrastructure people do what you want at gunpoint.