Twitter Thread by Sam Greene

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It is possible to believe that Twitter and Facebook did the right thing to block Trump, and that, having done so, it lays bear a real problem for American democracy. The Biden Administration and the incoming Congress need urgently to address the power of online social media.

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First, Twitter's cancellation of Trump is NOT a First Amendment violation. Twitter has a right to moderate the speech distributed on its network, and a responsibility to take the public interest into account.

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Moreover, Trump has not been deprived of the ability to speak. He has merely been deprived of the ability to speak on Twitter and Facebook. I am not overly troubled by the ability of private corporations to decide how consumers use those corporations' resources.

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I am, however, troubled by the fact that depriving someone of access to Facebook and Twitter has an effect roughly equal to government censorship. It has that effect because we have allowed these two networks to become public goods, rather than merely private interests.

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In other words, the impact of Facebook and Twitter is not limited to the private benefit enjoyed by their users, employees and shareholders. As we have seen, these and other networks can unintentionally become a powerful force for liberation - or for fascism.

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Lots of corporations produce these kinds of unintended consequences (aka externalities). Some of these externalities are negative - like pollution. Others are positive - like connectivity. But we use gov't to regulate them, so that they don't produce

undue power or suffering.

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We need to have a conversation about regulating the social networks as public goods. It is no longer possible for these companies to deny that they have a broader social impact. In the past 2 days, they have finally admitted it themselves and finally acted accordingly.

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But we also need to be exceedingly careful. Once we do have this conversation, we will move from private corporations moderating speech, to the government itself mandating - at least in the abstract - the ways in which we can and cannot communicate. And that IS a 1A issue.

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We also need to be aware that, even as we have this conversation in the US, it will have global consequences. Europe is also nearing a tipping point on these issues.

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And my friends battling for freedom in authoritarian countries are - right now - agonizing on these very networks about the impact this decision will have on them.

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Democratic leaders in Russia, Belarus, Hong Kong, Egypt, Turkey and many other places are also accused of sedition and inciting insurrection. And, unlike Trump, they have no recourse to impartial courts to protect their rights.

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In fact, they and many others have no rights other than those given them by companies like Facebook and Twitter. And that is a precious thing.

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The advent of online social media has, in democracies and autocracies alike, created de facto rights that didn't exist before. Even as we protect our communities from harm, we need to make sure that those rights are safeguarded.

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