



Google needs the First Amendment, too

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John Samples for the Cato Institute: At the Halifax International Security Forum, Eric Schmidt announced that Google will alter its search algorithm to “de-rank” results from Russia Today. Why did Google do this? Perhaps they were concerned about Russia meddling in American elections or they thought their customers wished to see less of Russia Today. It matters not. Generally, Google has broad power to police its platform. We might not like the decision, but it is not ours to make.

There is a second possibility. Government officials may have threatened Google to bring about this “de-ranking” of Russia Today. If so, the First Amendment poses questions for us. We need to answer such questions, however, only if government officials did in fact threaten Google. ...

RT America, despite being recently required to register itself as a foreign agent, enjoys First Amendment speech rights in the same way that other foreign, state-funded television channels such as Al Jazeera and BBC America do. Congress does not have the power to prevent them from running advertisements or publishing news stories on their websites. ...

Courts have ruled that the First Amendment protects a search engine’s ordering of results. A search algorithm may be “meta” editorial control, but it nonetheless is and should be protected from government threats. By analogy, consider the Wall Street Journal. Should we allow public officials to “persuade” editors to move a story from the front page to page 11?

GOP doubles down on vouchers

Richard Kahlenberg for the Century Foundation: For years, conservatives have been promoting publicly financed private school vouchers for low-income students. There doesn’t seem to be much to recommend them: Not only do the vouchers divert public funds away from public schools, but also the evidence is very mixed about whether such programs improve the academic achievement of the vouchers’ recipients.

Despite these concerns, Republicans in Congress are proposing to spend billions of dollars of federal funds to subsidize private-school education for the children of higher-earning families. The provision, included in the Tax Cut and Jobs Act, expands Section 529, which currently provides tax incentives that encourage parents of all income levels to save for college, to allow such tax-deferred savings to be used for private K-12 education.

Unlike existing programs, which allow families to put aside \$2,000 a year for K-12 education, the new plan would allow for \$10,000 per year to be set aside and grown tax-free. Furthermore, the income limits of the existing K-12 savings plans (\$220,000 for joint filers) would be lifted entirely.

There are major problems with this proposal. First, in practice, the bill likely will simply subsidize private K-12 education for many families who were already planning, and can already afford, to send their children to private schools.

Second, if the provision does induce a significant number of additional families to leave public schools, that would undermine support for public schools generally and potentially exacerbate the racial and class-based segregation that many public schools face.

Third, given that there is little evidence that vouchers do any good for education quality, it is flat-out fiscally irresponsible to spend potentially billions of federal dollars on a new education subsidy that is likely to have negative, not positive, effects on overall student achievement.

Tom Friedman is getting spun by tyrants

Clay Fuller for AEIdeas: Authoritarians and aspiring dictators around the world are increasingly able to make their case to the American people through witting and unwitting agents of influence.

In a matter of days, the scion of dispassionate chin-stroking on the New York Times editorial page — yes, Tom Friedman — has turned from questioning the spending patterns of Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Arabian proto-king better known as MBS, to extolling the supposed top-down Arab Spring in the kingdom.

Never mind the fact that the real Arab Spring was a disaster for all but Tunisia or the fact that such an idea typically denotes the development of democratic standards. Just note that in November, Friedman wrote, “Hearing that Saudi princes were arrested for ‘corruption’ is like reading that Donald Trump fired seven Cabinet secretaries ‘for lying.’” Sixteen days later, he wrote: “Not a single Saudi I spoke to here over three days expressed anything other than effusive support for this anti-corruption drive” before delivering MBS’ royal pitch for Western investment.

The problem of authoritarian influence is not just Twitter trolls, fake Facebook accounts, propaganda outlets such as RT and Sputnik, or even quiet donations to universities, think tanks, and political campaigns. It’s more than Beyoncé, Mariah Carey, and Usher singing for the now dead Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. It’s worse than Lionel Messi being paid \$4.2 million to merely visit the current dictator of Gabon. It’s even worse than the fact our current president, that apotheosis of money worship, Donald Trump, seems to be so easily persuaded into almost anything by Arabian royal extravagances, serenades from self-proclaimed murderers, and compliments on his intelligence from kleptocrats.

The problem is that the opinions of unelected media influencers are apparently up for grabs to high bidders, and they are rarely called on it.

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