

The Gremlins of Silicon Valley

Social media is heavily manipulated and exhaustively patrolled.

By Marjorie Haun

RANGE magazine is old school. We use traditional avenues to reach our readers and loyal fans, but we're also new school with a reasonably visible social media (SM) presence. Our Facebook and Instagram pages in particular provide critical platforms for publicizing the magazine, our books, and other products, sharing third-party content that we find interesting, and engaging with our followers and subscribers in meaningful ways. But because RANGE is a megaphone for the voice of rural America, the SM tech giants don't seem to care for us all that much.

Like thousands of other publications, online news sites, broadcasters, elected leaders, and ordinary folks with a pro-America, pro-rural, patriotic leaning, RANGE seems to be suffering the wrath of behind-the-scenes SM minions whose deceit has intensified in the pre-election months of 2020. Differing SM platforms manifest the suppression of speech in different ways, and despite our best efforts, RANGE magazine's SM accounts have experienced unexplained drops in page hits and post views, dramatically diminished reach, and a followership struggling against an invisible ceiling, as if the powers that be have allotted us a quota that we are not allowed to exceed. Although the why of SM speech suppression seems obvious—they don't like our patriotic, rural heartland message—the how is a mystery to ordinary folks who can only conjecture. Maybe gremlins have taken over Silicon Valley.

Gremlins, a cryptic species with supernatural powers, were the World War II Allied flying forces' go-to scapegoats. Unexplained accidents, mysterious breakdowns, disappearing tools, and all manner of bizarre happenings were blamed on these obnoxious phantasms. The seeming ability of gremlins to hide between dimensions of space and time, out of the reach of mortals, made them an unknowable and unconquerable enemy. Though unseen, gremlins were always lurking.



You couldn't reach them, you didn't understand them, and you couldn't stop them.

Unlike the gremlins that vexed WWII's flyboys, social media's gremlins are real. They design digital formulas, aka "algorithms," that use keywords to track and suppress certain content, then target and deboost* those whose opinions they find disagreeable. They are authoritarian, and malicious, and out to silence us. And there's plenty of evidence of all the above.

In February 2019, investigative journalist James O'Keefe, the founder of Project Veritas, released a series of interviews and undercover videos which blew the lid off social media's secretive efforts to suppress conservative opinions. Most compelling were the testimonies of currently employed and recovering gremlins.

A whistleblower from inside Facebook explained: "When things are taken down and,

like, actually permanently deleted from Facebook, the user will typically get a notification.... However, with these 'deboost livestream' things, there was no warning sent to the user. These are actions being taken without the user's knowing." The whistleblower went on to describe how, unlike actions in which users receive a notification, "deboosting livestream" actions were not documented. The whistleblower also said she saw "deboost" language on numerous conservative pages, but found none on the progressive pages she investigated.

In a Project Veritas undercover video, Pranay Singh, a direct messaging engineer for Twitter, blithely deprecated the demographic against whom deboosting is used: "Just go to a random tweet and look at the followers. They'll all be like, guns, God, 'Merica, like, and with the American flag and, like, the cross."

Make no mistake, RANGE welcomes controversy. There is nothing we can say or do that someone somewhere won't find

controversial, even offensive. Social media should be a provocative arena to test ideas and debate current events, but instead it's heavily manipulated, exhaustively patrolled, and its hostile gremlin traffic cops are getting their marching orders from Silicon Valley.

Whether we like it or not, everyone who has an opinion is engaged in a war where digital media is the weapon and words, images, memes and narratives are the ammunition. Gremlins are sabotaging our war efforts, and they seem to always be one step ahead of us. ■

*Marjorie Haun is RANGE's social media editor. *Deboosting, also known as "shadowbanning," is a method of reducing or removing the live distribution of content posted by a given SM user. In other words, although the SM users can still see their posts, deboosting makes users and their content invisible to others on the SM platform.*