

Defense of Social Media Platforms
Berlin, March 2025
Closing Argument by Pantelis Michalopoulos

Democracy *is at* risk. It is at risk from the prosecution's effort to kill the messenger because it does not like some of the messages and would like only its favored messages to be transmitted. It is at risk from the truth police who would like platforms to adjudicate who is a traitor and who isn't. It is at risk from the prosecution's attempt to save it by suppressing what the people want to say. And it is at risk from the traditional media oligarchs, the press barons, the Beaverbrooks and the Hearsts of our age, because they would like to keep their channels in the bedrooms of the poor, and they don't like the poor to get out of their bedrooms and talk back. Better the devil you know, they seem to argue. Better the paternalism of the past where only one speaks.

Come with me to 480 B.C. The army of Xerxes, the Persian king, is so large that it blackens the horizon. His chariots are armed with lethal sickles. But he had to cross the Hellespont to get to Greece. He has his army build a defective bridge. A storm destroys it, and what does he do? He punishes the Mediterranean Sea. He lost of course in the end. The Mediterranean Sea was not to blame.

Come with me to 399 B.C. Socrates is put to death. He corrupted the youth. But did the Athenians close down the Agora? Did they beat it up? No. The Agora was the forum for the sophists, for Anytus, Melytus, Polycrates -- those who accused Socrates.

Come with me to Paris in the 18th century. The cafés are the media platform of the day where lawyers' briefs are distributed and debated. Louis XVI cared about clocks and about sending his secret police to terrorize coffee houses. The result was La Terreur, the guillotine, and a man who would crown himself emperor by placing the crown on his own head.

Social media are the most democratic medium there has ever been. The only truly interactive one. The only one that allows the disenfranchised to talk back. But some elites do not like what some of the poor have to say. Some of what they have to say is illiberal. Some of what they have to say would trample upon minorities' rights.

How do we avoid this? How do we cure social media imperfections? Not by punishing the Mediterranean Sea. Not by suppressing social media. Not by closing our ears. Not by trying to change people's minds – minds are hard to change. By engaging. By coming up with creative ways to resonate with the insecurities, resentments, alienations and anger.

Social media can be, not a devil, but the benefactor who will save democracy. It is a flawed benefactor, yes; but then, after all, someone said democracy is the worst regime but for all the others.