

# The New York Times Says “Social Media Silences Debate” - What Do Corporate Mainstream Media Do?

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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The New York Times' Upshot section ([8/26/14](#)) put the headline “How Social Media Silences Debate” over a story about a new study that shows that the Internet “has diminished rather than enhanced political participation.”

Reporter Claire Caine Miller writes:

“Social media, like Twitter and Facebook, has the effect of tamping down diversity of opinion and stifling debate about public affairs.”

The study-or the Times recap, more to the point-is likely to get a lot of *I-told-you-so* attention from people who take a dim view of Twitter and the like. So it's worth making two points.

For one, the study (Pew Research Internet Project, [8/26/14](#)) is remarkably narrow, looking at whether people are hesitant about sharing differing political views with their family and friends. The survey asked about one topic-NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden-and apparently found that people said they were more likely to talk about government surveillance offline than online.

That's right: There are people out there who might not want to talk *on the Internet* about the NSA's surveillance powers-which include the ability to monitor what people are saying on the Internet.

The study's authors [note](#) that at the time of the survey, the Snowden revelations were only about phone/email metadata-not specifically about monitoring the content of online communications, which came out in subsequent Snowden documents-so they don't think it had a serious impact on the findings. They acknowledge, though, that “future research may provide insight into whether Americans have become more or less willing to discuss specific issues on- and offline as a result of government surveillance programs.”

In any event, I think it's reasonable to say that it's hard to draw very many conclusions from questions about this single topic.

But let's ask the same question about a different kind of media-corporate media, such as the New York Times. What can we say about how it might be “tamping down diversity of

opinion and stifling debate about public affairs”?

There’s plenty of evidence. In the run-up to the Iraq War, opponents of the war [barely registered](#) on nightly newscasts. One cable channel [fired its most popular host](#) for his dissenting views.

FAIR’s [recent study](#) of cable news shows a stunning lack of diversity. Our 2012 [study](#) of Sunday morning chat shows a strong tilt towards conservatives, white men and Republicans. The major op-ed pages [strongly favor](#) elite viewpoints. Unquestionably, radio talkshows are [overwhelmingly dominated](#) by conservative voices.

Discussions about major issues like [immigration](#) and the [minimum wage](#) almost never include the people who are most affected by the policy debates. And that’s when they cover such issues at all; FAIR has [found](#) the major networks give scant time to covering issues like poverty.

We could go on like this for a while.



Using Twitter to get the message out from Ferguson

A more reasonable way to think about the political dialogue that happens in social media is that it expands the discussion to include voices and perspectives that are marginalized from corporate media. The events in Ferguson became national news after Twitter-[black Twitter](#), more specifically-drew attention to the case. For a more [firsthand and unfiltered look](#) at the Israeli attacks on Gaza, one had to go to Twitter.

It’s not hard to think of many similar examples of stories that bubbled up from social media to so-called “old” media.

The ability to share and produce journalism on the Internet is what draws so many people to it, and it is what has made [Net Neutrality](#) a galvanizing issue. Many of the millions of people who want to protect Internet freedom are so motivated because they don’t want the Internet to [become like corporate media](#). And I suspect many of them would find it downright strange to argue that these new tools of communication are stifling debate.

Though perhaps not too surprising-coming from corporate media.

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