Deplatforming and Freedom:
A Summary for Policy

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Conservatives in Florida are at a dilemma when it comes to the power of large online platforms. On the one hand, conservative principles generally call for limited government intervention in the economy. Social media platforms are private companies which conservatives have traditionally maintained have the right to run their businesses the way they see fit. Competition will produce options tailored to the varied tastes of a wide consumer base, the theory goes.

On the other hand, many users are unhappy with the way that these platforms are run. They cannot connect with the users or access the content that they desire and may be instead directed to unrelated or even undesired content and users. They can be banned without warning or recourse. And competition does not seem to have produced much meaningful choice for these users: if they seek an alternative platform, those too may be shut down by upstream providers.

Political leaders in Florida want to address the needs of their constituents who feel underserved
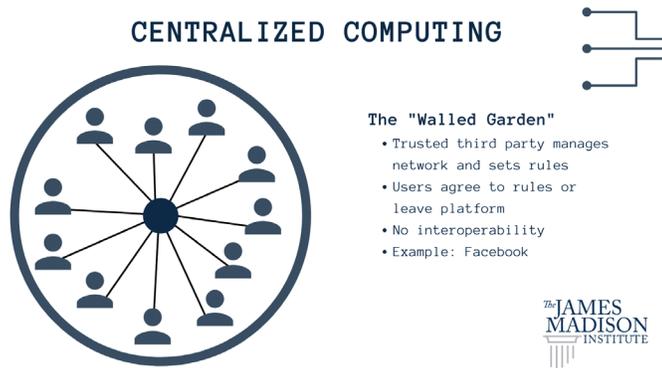
or even embattled by large online platforms. Recent proposals have included measures to protect certain user classes from de-platforming, create causes of action and legal recourse for users who believe they have been targeted, and enact fines on platforms that remove the content or accounts of political candidates. On the national level, proposals include limiting Section 230 liability protections for user-submitted content and antitrust measures. The problem surrounding platform moderation appears so significant that many conservatives feel that such government interventions are justified.

A recent James Madison Institute policy brief, "Deplatforming and Freedom," explains why political solutions to platform moderation will be inadequate. Specifically, these measures do not meaningfully address the technological arrangements that give platforms the ability to control content.
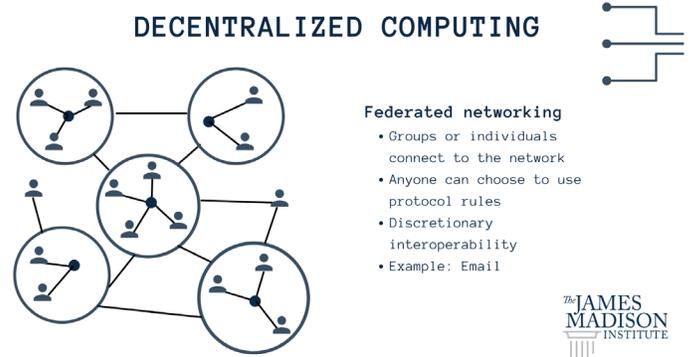
Deplatforming is a technological problem

Groups concerned about control controls on social media platforms will be frustrated by political efforts to protect user freedoms for a fundamental reason. Deplatforming, censorship, and content controls are *technological* problems. Fortunately, there already exist technological solutions in the form of decentralized technologies.

The way that a platform is designed will affect what kinds of freedoms that a user will have on that platform. A platform can either be *centralized*, which means that the administrator will have total control over what users can or cannot do, or *decentralized*, which means that administrators will either have limited control over users (federated) or no control over users (distributed).
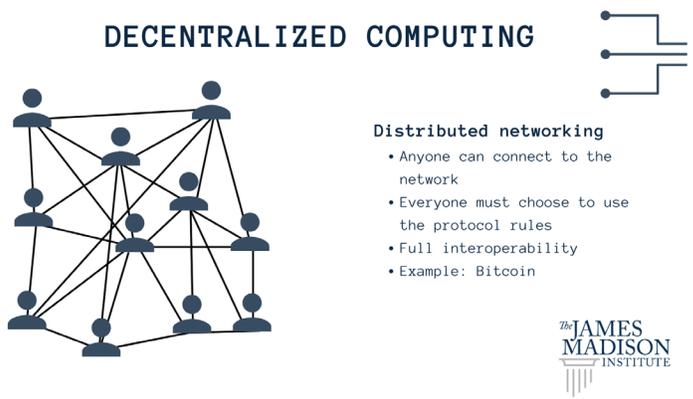

CENTRALIZED COMPUTING

The "Walled Garden"
• Trusted third party manages network and sets rules
• Users agree to rules or leave platform
• No interoperability
• Example: Facebook

Most of the platforms commonly referred to as "big tech" are run as centralized networks. You either have an account with that

platform or you don't. You can't build your own application or run your own server to connect with other users on that platform. Centralized computing is often referred to as the "walled garden" method. Users only have as much freedom in a walled garden as administrators will allow.

DECENTRALIZED COMPUTING

Federated networking
• Groups or individuals connect to the network
• Anyone can choose to use protocol rules
• Discretionary interoperability
• Example: Email

Decentralized networks offer users more freedom by design. The first option is a federated system, which is how email works. There is no one "email.com" provider that sets the rules controlling everyone who wants to send asynchronous messages online. You can use many different services or even run your own client or server. This means that there is no one body that can control what people see on the email system, although central providers do operate within it. Alternative platforms that run on the principles of federation include Mastodon and the Matrix protocol.

DECENTRALIZED COMPUTING

Distributed networking
• Anyone can connect to the network
• Everyone must choose to use the protocol rules
• Full interoperability
• Example: Bitcoin

The second type of decentralized network is a distributed network. Bitcoin is a good example of a distributed network: anyone can choose to agree to the same network rules to run the system and allow direct peer-to-peer data transfer. Alternative platforms that run on the principles of distributed computing include LBRY, Lokinet, and Urbit.

Political solutions are insufficient to fully address deplatforming

Content controls will be a threat for as long as centralized computing is the dominant model. The biggest problem for people who are worried about user freedom on platforms and seek government solutions is that the most popular proposals do not address the underlying technological issue. Rather, government content control proposals would only be as good as the legality and political half-life of the policies.

Conservatives are not alone in proposing moderation standards for platforms. Efforts from the left seek to impose speech codes limiting discussion around such topics as race, gender, sexuality, and religion. Notably, these polar content goals contradict: a platform cannot simultaneously prevent political content from being limited (as the right wants) while limiting that same political content (as the left wants). One side needs to lose. Given the relative strength of the left in the federal legislative and administrative offices, as well within the companies that are being targeted, it is possible that the right's efforts at content control will be outweighed.

Effective policies will foster the development of decentralized alternatives

As discussed above, there are already many working federated and distributed alternatives to centralized platforms. More are being developed all the time. One problem is that decentralized alternatives struggle to find users. They are less well-known and may be trickier to set up. Because they have smaller user bases, they lack the network effects that larger platforms enjoy. This means that more people may stick around on centralized platforms not because they are superior, but because that is where all the users are.

Florida leaders concerned about deplatforming should consider policies that give decentralized alternatives the greatest chance of taking off. Examples include:

1. *Encouraging open source and decentralized technology projects to build in Florida*: Florida's reasonable tax and regulatory structure makes the state a natural choice for technology companies fleeing the policies of other large states. Measures like Florida's new fintech sandbox give builders more assurance that Florida welcomes innovation. Florida could consider creating a general-purpose regulatory sandbox to entice more developers to move to the Sunshine State. Additionally, state leaders could continue their successful courting of the tech communities like the cryptocurrency space to move to the state to build decentralized technology.
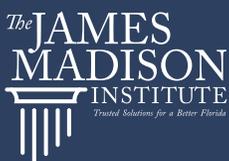
2. *Encouraging government offices to educate the public about or adopt open source and decentralized technology projects and standards*: Government officials are not just policymakers; they are influencers. If they start releasing communications and content on a decentralized alternative, their constituents may be more likely to follow. (Conversely, they could cease to release content on the platforms with which they take issue.) Furthermore, public consumer protection agencies could begin educating citizens about how the technological design of platforms affects their freedoms on those networks. By presenting alternatives that provide more user choice, Floridians may be more likely to try out those technologies.

3. *Funding and supporting open source and decentralized technology products and standards in higher education*: The story of Silicon Valley is also the story of Stanford University and the US military. Public funding and support can be the difference between an unrealized dream and the rise of the personal computer. Florida should consider dedicating educational resources and perhaps public funding to supporting innovative decentralizing technologies—the governments of France and Germany have dedicated public funds to decentralized technologies such as the Matrix project in part because of their concerns with the way that centralized incumbents are managed. Such support could have the positive spillover effect of attracting more talent and industry to the state.

The bottom line: Florida should continue to welcome technologists that are building decentralized alternatives

Florida has developed a national and international reputation for embracing new technologies, particularly in the realm of fintech and cryptocurrency. The state opened a regulatory sandbox for fintech companies in 2021. State and local leaders are courting the cryptocurrency community by exploring ways to integrate Bitcoin payments into government functions and amend money transmission regulations to create a more hospitable environment for next generation payment technologies. The Florida government is updating its digital infrastructure and is considering how to adopt strong privacy and identity techniques for government

processes.

The state should continue to welcome and support the technologists that are building the decentralized platforms that provide alternatives to centralized networks. Not only is this path consistent with conservative principles, it is the only effective means to address the technological problem at the root.