



The “Anti-Extremist” Content Pact is a Versailles Treaty in the Making

The [recent alliance](#) between the “Big Four” social media enterprises (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft — [post-LinkedIn acquisition](#)) to combat the proliferation of extremist content online is one that tragically mirrors the [Treaty of Versailles](#) — a well-intentioned, ambitious and incredibly fraught endeavour.

As history uncovers, the Treaty of Versailles was a heavily negotiated peace agreement signed on the 28th day of June 1919 at the Palace of Versailles. This settlement was between the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, and Russia), the Associated Powers (The United States and [23 other countries](#)) and Germany following the disastrous repercussions of World War I.

Unlike the “[Fourteen Points](#)” (an “[idealistic](#)” list of tenets outlined by U.S. President, Woodrow Wilson, in a 1918 speech addressed to the American Congress) the intent of the Versailles settlement can be considered a “[Russian doll](#)” of sorts: prevent another seminal war by teaching Germany a painful economic, political, territorial, and militaristic lesson. This, of course, was counterproductive as it gallantly ushered in the horror that is World War II.

Although historians have made several arguments for the failure of the Versailles Treaty, there are two pertinent causes worth exploring. They serve as a framework and dutifully predict the potential ineffectiveness, and possible failure, of the anti-terrorist pledge, that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft have made, which is: to pinpoint and remove extremist content on their respective platforms through a joint database of *unique digital fingerprints* — known as “*hashes*.”

Let’s examine these reasons in detail:

1. A difference in opinion

While the ultimate goal (of preventing another war) was shared by the Allied and Associated Powers, there was, however, a [rudimental difference](#) in the means to achieving this objective — specifically in regards to the disarmament of Germany by the three dominant powers: France, Great Britain, and the United States.

France wanted blood. She saw Germany as a threat to her borders and a sworn enemy of the guaranteed future of stability within Europe. To allay these concerns, she wanted severe penalties that would inherently cripple Germany on all counts. Georges Clemenceau, the then French Prime Minister, thought the terms of the Versailles Treaty were not harsh enough and did nothing to address the fears of a recurring German attack on France.

Great Britain, on the other hand, had self-serving intentions. She, under the leadership of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, wanted to enlarge her kingdom by fortifying her control of the seas and increasing British commerce. As such, she saw Germany as a financially muscular country to do business with and thought that the treaty terms were *too* severe.

President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, a distinguished scholar, and University Professor, [who some in history have considered rather utopian](#), wanted little involvement in European affairs and worldwide safety. Following the description of his “Fourteen Points” plan to promote “[just peace](#),” Wilson felt that the terms of the Versailles Treaty were a fair and decent agreement befitting of any advanced civilization.

While all three parties wanted Germany to be disarmed — and she was — the [eventual terms of the treaty](#) did not specify the duration of this disarmament.

Ultimately, the devil arose from the lack of details, and the rest is history.

The present-day anti-terrorist content truce by the “Big Four” could share the same failed fate because all four companies have not arrived at a precise definition, or explicitly outlined what constitutes as “terrorist content.”

Here is an excerpt from Facebook’s official statement:

“Each company will continue to apply its own policies and definitions of terrorist content when deciding whether to remove content when a match to a shared hash is found. And each company will continue to apply its practice of transparency and review for any government requests, as well as retain its own appeal process for removal decisions and grievances. As part of this collaboration, we will all focus on how to involve additional companies in the future.”

Again, a statement that is “well-intentioned, ambitious and also incredibly fraught.” Why should the definition of “terrorist content” be subjective? Shouldn’t there be a benchmark

explanation of some kind to inform this venture?

If the Treaty of Versailles has taught us anything, it is the need for exactitude: a meticulous and laser-beam alignment by all parties involved.

Disharmony, if not addressed explicitly and thoughtfully, can be the spark that ignites an unforgiving flame that consumes the grand monument of intent, no matter how noble.

2. A successful governing body

The League of Nations (an intergovernmental organization created to be an avenue where countries could potentially hash out their grievances without resulting to battle) [distinguishingly failed](#) at its chief task to prevent another war.

One of the noteworthy reasons for the collapse of this “third party peace enforcer” — and there were many — was the difference in opinion France and Great Britain had about the goal of the League of Nations.

Here’s how the author, Paul Kennedy, explains the rift in his book [“*The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*”](#):

“There were obvious disagreements in the goals valued by the British and the French. The British, like the Americans, were less and less interested in the goal that France valued the most: keeping Germany in check. Additionally, Great Britain was more preoccupied by extra-European problems, namely keeping the vast Empire from disintegrating. At the beginning of the 1930s France seemed to be the leading nation in the European scene. Its economic performance in the 1930s, however, proved to be poor in comparison with the other European Great Powers.”

This is another clear example of discord resulting in failure.

While all four technology companies, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Google) and Microsoft, are coming together for an admirable cause (after long consumer and governmental castigation) they are, at the end of the day, different companies with divergent operational, fiduciary and philosophical ambitions.

For this glaring reason, there needs to be an external umpire whose chief responsibility is to keep a close eye on the database of hashes; its collection and use for example. Most importantly, this governing body must ensure that participating organisations are simpatico and held accountable for any malfeasance.

So far, no external arbiter has been identified.

Hindsight they say is perfect vision — so is history!

History offers an excellent illumination on the human condition; a kind of storytelling as a social utility where we use tales of the past to better understand a person, place, product or thing. This only works if we care enough to pay close attention and glean from it. The unfortunate reality is that most of us do not capitalise on this gift.

The proposed sanitisation of social media platforms from odious content, used as a tool for unspeakable terror, is such a worthy socio-political cause. Its potential success could signal a significant shift towards a saner and more humane world — both online and offline.

While the “Big Four” haven’t outlined concrete next steps, I genuinely hope they (the respective CEOs of Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Microsoft) take stock and revisit history. This way, the master initiative formulated to negate this online menace is comprehensive enough to succeed.

Fingers crossed.