

Trump ban sparks fears over power of Big Tech

Has Big Tech gone too far?
As social media sites slap bans on Donald Trump, some are applauding their firm stance – while others worry it sets a dangerous precedent for free speech.



Last straw: Twitter says it had to act because Trump's account incited violence.

"I think that the ban of Donald Trump on

Twitter is an unacceptable act of censorship", the thread began. "A decision", it continued,

“based on emotions and personal political preferences”.

Who was writing? Not **Rudy Giuliani** or Ivanka Trump, nor the President himself. No, it was his sworn enemy, the Russian opposition leader and pro-democracy activist, **Alexei Navalny**.

Twitter announced that it would permanently ban Trump’s account on Friday. Soon afterwards other social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, followed suit. Many are relieved. But some think this has chilling implications for freedom of speech.

Navalny is no fan of Trump. But he is worried that a precedent has been set, that “will be exploited by the enemies of freedom of speech around the world”.

Trump is not the only one finding himself deplatformed. Millions of users were affected when **Parler**, a conservative alternative social media platform, was taken off **Amazon**’s servers, which previously hosted the site.

Many have pointed out that social media companies today have extraordinary power over what we publish, read and ultimately what we think. By **harvesting data** on our interests, hobbies and views, they can influence what information we receive – and, most importantly, they can block us from accessing ideas that they do not want us to see.

While Parler was a hotbed of conspiracy theories, it was also the main competitor to

mainstream social media sites, with 15 million users. Some think it is wrong that Amazon, a private company, was able to shut it down.

They claim that Big Tech now wields a power similar to that of the medieval Catholic Church, which strictly controlled what people could write and censored those whose ideas it disapproved of, like **Galileo**.

Twitter has defended its decision by arguing that it had to ban Trump’s account to prevent him from encouraging violence. And supporters of the ban point out that **incitement to violence** is not protected under free speech laws.

They argue that social media companies have only done what was necessary to prevent further violence before Joe Biden’s **inauguration** on 20 January.

But some argue that social media companies have profited from Trump’s controversial behaviour for years, and have only dropped him now because they were afraid of negative publicity.

They point out that Twitter has not deleted the accounts of leaders like Xi Jinping, who could also be accused of using the site to spread misinformation and incite violence.

And they worry that this decision has set a precedent that could lead to social media platforms censoring voices they do not like.

But some think that it could turn out to be the dawn of a new era in the history of the

internet. They suggest that this case proves that Big Tech needs to be regulated democratically to protect free speech. Navalny proposes that Twitter should create a public committee to make independent, transparent decisions on banning accounts.

Some think that we could go further, removing these platforms from private ownership entirely and letting their users decide how they should be run.

Has Big Tech gone too far?

Antisocial media

Yes, say some. Twitter has **crossed the Rubicon** by banning Trump’s account. Along with Amazon’s decision to no longer host Parler, this means that two unaccountable private companies have decided that millions of people should not be able to exchange ideas and information on large social media platforms. Big Tech is now a threat to everyone’s free speech.

Not at all, say others. Whether we like it or not social media platforms are here to stay, and that means their owners must have a responsibility to protect us from misinformation and incitement of violence. Trump was only banned after repeatedly violating Twitter’s rules: there is no evidence that social media sites want to start censoring opinions regularly.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should politicians have social media accounts at all?
2. Is social media responsible for all misinformation and conspiracy theories? Would they still be spreading without it?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design a logo for your own social media platform and write down some of the rules you would establish for your users.
2. You have been tasked with writing three simple laws to regulate social media platforms. Write down your three laws and explain why you have chosen them.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“We assumed that we use social media to connect, but we learned that connection is how social media uses us.”

Shoshana Zuboff (1951 -), American sociologist

What do you think?

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: Most people agree that governments all over the world are still struggling to respond to the challenges posed by the internet. Sociologist Shoshana Zuboff argues that the internet is totally unprecedented in human history, meaning that we have not yet devised the right language to describe and understand it. As the internet has come to play an important role in the democratic process, it has become more urgent for governments to take action on it.

Q: What do we not know?

A: There is some debate over whether “free speech” laws apply to private companies. In the USA, constitutional lawyers argue that the First Amendment only prevents Congress from imposing limits on free speech, not private companies. However, before the 1970s it was common for private organisations to be prosecuted for violating

WORD WATCH

Rudy Giuliani – The former New York City mayor who has become one of Donald Trump’s staunchest supporters and his personal lawyer. He has been in charge of Trump’s failed efforts to dispute the 2020 election result.

Alexei Navalny – A Russian politician who has been a strong critic of President Vladimir Putin. He tried to run for president himself in 2018 but was stopped by the Supreme Court. Last year he almost died after being poisoned by the Russian secret service.

Parler – A social media platform set up by conservatives who believed that Twitter and Facebook were censoring them. Its founding principle was total free speech and it imposed no restrictions on content, but it was accused of providing a safe space for bigotry and conspiracy theories.

Amazon –

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free speech rights. Since last year in the UK, social media companies have had a “duty of care” requiring them to regulate the content on their platforms.

Amazon Web Services, a subsidiary of Amazon, is the world’s largest cloud storage system. It hosts a number of other websites, giving it the effective power to shut them down by withdrawing its services.

Harvesting data – Social media companies make their revenue largely from extracting data from their users’ daily habits and selling it to advertisers.

Galileo – A physicist of the 17th Century who was persecuted by the Catholic Church for arguing in favour of heliocentrism, the belief that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

Incitement to violence – One of the oldest exceptions to the principle of free speech, articulated by the English philosopher who is seen as the father of freedom of expression, John Stuart Mill. Mill argued that the state may ban speech that is clearly intended to cause harm to others.

Inauguration – The official handover of power, staged at the Capitol building. Traditionally, the outgoing president attends the ceremony; however, Trump has indicated that he will not attend Biden’s inauguration. Some fear that the event will be beset with more violence.

Crossed the Rubicon – To make an irreversible decision, with dramatic future consequence. The phrase comes from Julius Caesar’s decision to cross the river Rubicon with his army, in defiance of the Senate, and march on Rome to seize power.