

Causes and Repercussions of Trump's Twitter Ban

Hemi Bell

Surprisingly, the turn of the calendar a few weeks ago did not immediately remove all of the woes of 2020. In fact, 2021 seemed to exaggerate the beloved character of its predecessor right out of the gates, with a rush of the US Capitol that felt more like the beginning of a "fall of society" thriller than an actual political rally. While the true causes of this fiasco are far-reaching, consequences for then-president Donald Trump were almost immediate.

President Trump's feud with Twitter is well documented, as the site has had a tendency to openly tag and even censor his content when they deem it fallacious or potentially dangerous. Facebook and Instagram were no strangers to Trump either, with his claims and theories about "fake news" in the 2016 election contributing to the implementation of "fact-checking" software on both sites in response to the issue.

A series of tweets surrounding the Capitol riots led Twitter to ban Trump, with the company claiming that the "context around them - specifically how they are being perceived on and off Twitter" may lead to "risk of further incitement of violence." As a result, Facebook and Instagram, Youtube, Amazon, Snapchat, Reddit, Twitch and even Shopify banned or suspended Trump and platforms representing his followers, such as Parler. Shortly following, many other accounts representing similar ideas in support of Trump were banned, as well as thousands of "QAnon" accounts.

These decisions have led many of Trump's supporters to claim that these sites are violating what they believe to be their first amendment rights to free speech and press. However, nowhere in the constitution (and certainly not in the first amendment), is it specified that anyone is guaranteed rights to a Twitter account, partially because the founding fathers never could have predicted Twitter and especially because even if they had, they have no control over the Terms of Service on the site. Among other things, Section 230 states that the U.S. government has little to no control over what private businesses can or can not allow on their sites in terms of speech (an article that Trump and the Republican party have fought and are currently fighting to change).

Constitutionally, it was within the rights of each of these companies to ban Trump just like they would ban anyone who they feel violates their Terms of Service. Despite this, many Americans from every scope of the political spectrum are still wondering if they should.

For better or for worse, many Americans engage with social media as a means of spreading and gathering information and beliefs about what's happening in the country. Perhaps due to age differences between the two primary parties, many forms of online media today have grown to be particularly left-leaning. This fact may make it seem easy to contribute the mass ban of primarily right-wing users to a media bias, yet there



is still no shortage of right-wing accounts on these sites, even as millions of users move to other platforms that they deem more friendly to their beliefs. The accounts targeted so far were not targeted strictly for their worldviews, but for spreading proven misinformation, particularly about COVID-19 and the 2020 Presidential Election and for threats to public safety from QAnon groups and even Trump himself.

Twitter and Facebook are creating a safety net for themselves by completely blocking the flow of potentially harmful false ideas from these repeating offenders, simultaneously keeping these ideas from spreading and distancing themselves from the harm that groups like QAnon pose. However, this choice did not come lightly, as it has set a precedent that seems to some to suggest that certain voices and views may not be welcome on these major platforms. Even Twitter's own Jack Dorsey seems troubled by this decision that he himself deemed necessary.

Despite the clear motives Zuckerberg, Dorsey and other media executives have, it's still easy for users to wonder if it's really for the best to push these groups and their ideas away from the most major hubs for

discussion in the world. At least when these groups were drawn to Facebook and Twitter there was an opportunity for others to discuss these ideas and attempt to find common ground based in fact. Removing these ideas completely and forcing Trump, his supporters and associated groups onto their own, separate platforms creates more room for polarization. Without open forums for multisided discussions and the presentation of a variety of knowledge and takes, these opposing sides may only grow further apart, failing to understand the motivations and ideas that fuel the other.

Educating oneself involves working with radically differing viewpoints and wrestling fact, fiction and opinion. Sites like Parler that are meant to host primarily one school of thought do not allow for this complexity. Despite removing some of these more radical thinkers, Twitter and Facebook still serve as relatively open spaces for discussion of a variety of views. Realistically, most casual Twitter users won't even realize they're gone.

The most outstanding takeaway from Twitter's decision may just be that they aren't afraid to clean up their site, even if it means virtually shushing the President of the United States.