

Twitter Inc

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Are Facebook, Google and Twitter damaging US freedoms and discourse? - Congress meets to find out

The chief executives of Facebook (NASDAQ:FB), Google and Twitter Inc (NYSE:TWTR) will all appear, remotely, before the US Senate Commerce Committee today, as debate rages in America about the future of the controversial Section 230 law, passed back in 1996 when the internet was still in its infancy.

Under Section 230, companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google were legally designated as platforms rather than publishers, meaning that they were not liable for any of the content that was published on their pages.

The thinking behind the law was to ensure that the exchange of ideas could operate without hindrance on the newly emerging "information superhighway" and that the American ideal of free speech be upheld online as well as in the real world.

Since then though, the wider implications of Section 230 have become clearer, and increasingly controversial.

One of the earliest battlegrounds involved content relating to sex trafficking. This was eventually outlawed, and resulted in a significant shift in the behaviour of certain sites like Craigslist and Tumblr.

More recently, though, the controversy has shifted into the arena of left-right politics.

We know what President Trump thinks.

"Repeal Section 230!" he thundered in a recent tweet, after twitter shadowbanned one of his own tweets in early October.

And the storm erupted again a week or two later when both Twitter and Facebook prevented any access to a story in the New York Post that referred to allegations of corruption against the son of Presidential candidate Joe Biden.

The issue wasn't so much the story itself, which quickly gets bogged down in details about the nature of bribery, and the relevance of home-made pornography, but that numerous members of the Republican Party and their affiliates were effectively prevented from sharing the information itself.

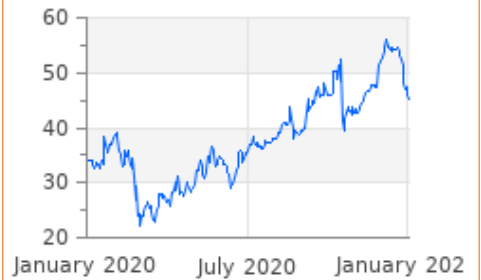
That action by Facebook and Twitter, so the argument goes, means that the tech giants are now effectively taking editorial decisions and turning themselves into publishers.

The liberal media and the left in America has largely been blind to this abuse, because they are the unconscious beneficiaries.

Price: 45.18

Market Cap: \$35.93 billion

1 Year Share Price Graph



Share Information

Code: TWTR

Listing: NYSE

52 week High Low
56.1 20

Sector: Online business & e-commerce

Website: twitter.com

Company Synopsis:

Twitter is a real-time information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting. Simply find the accounts you find most compelling and follow the conversations.

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But on the other side of the political divide, conservatives have for their part become so inured to the denial of access to content they would like to see, that they regard it as a normal feature of a politically-biased technological landscape. It's this morass that the Senate Committee will be addressing today.

Whether it will make any headway is open to question.

The tech giants are extremely powerful in and of themselves, and the fact that on the whole they favour the Democratic party over the Republican means that the ability of Congress to act in a bi-partisan way is likely to be limited, even if the current feverish atmosphere were to abate.

Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook has stated that he regards keeping Section 230 in place as essential to the way Americans, and by extension the free world, conduct their dialogue.

But it's a nuanced argument. Historically, it's generally been the left that have been more in favour of censorship, while the right have favoured free speech. But in in this case it's the right that is reluctantly being drawn to conclude that in the internet age there are different types of free speech.

After all, to have platforms that allow free speech, except where they themselves deem that speech to be harmful is a standard that is open to all sorts of abuse.

Thus, left-wing biologist Bret Weinstein has had his attempt to start an online campaign for a third party in American politics stymied by Twitter. For similar reasons, Facebook shut his account and re-opened it. Two American doctors have been banned from Youtube for dissenting from the coronavirus consensus. Certain recent episodes of Joe Rogan's podcast have been hidden behind Facebook warning signs and made more difficult to access.

One of the world's most popular Youtubers, Pewdiepie, was apparently shadowbanned last week. Or was he? No one really seems to know.

And herein lies the real issue. The tech companies are allowed huge power over what information is or isn't available, with no real manner or method for accountability. Who's to say whether a San Francisco tech grad's idea of what is hateful is any more viable than anyone else's?

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