

Trump intensifies conflict with big tech over Section 230 protections following censorship moves by Facebook and Twitter

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Facebook and Twitter on Tuesday censored posts by President Donald Trump that the social media platforms said violated their rules against misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic. In his posts, Trump compared COVID-19 to the seasonal flu, downplayed the deadly nature of the pandemic and said, “we are learning to live with COVID.”

The morning after he returned to the White House from Walter Reed Hospital—still infectious and heavily medicated—and posed in Hitlerian fashion for a photo op on the Truman Balcony, Trump took to social media to bolster his homicidal “herd immunity” policy and dangerously demonstrate by example how the “great leader” is facing down the virus.

Facebook removed his post entirely but not before it was shared approximately 26,000 times, according to data published by the social media metrics company CrowdTangle. A Facebook spokesperson told CNBC, “We remove incorrect information about the severity of Covid-19, and have now removed this post.”

The action by Facebook is unusual in that the world’s largest social media platform has been reluctant to remove posts by the president in the past. In August, Facebook deleted a video of Donald Trump falsely asserting that children were “almost immune from COVID-19” during an interview with Fox News, the first time the platform ever removed one of his social media posts.

In the case of Twitter, the tweet remains up but is covered by a warning that says, “This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules about spreading misleading and potentially harmful information related to COVID-19. However, Twitter has determined that it may be in the public’s interest for the Tweet to remain accessible,” along with a link to learn more about the company’s coronavirus information policy. Trump’s post cannot be retweeted or

shared.

The full Tweet reads, “Flu season is coming up! Many people every year, sometimes over 100,000, and despite the Vaccine, die from the Flu. Are we going to close down our Country? No, we have learned to live with it, just like we are learning to live with Covid, in most populations far less lethal!!!”

That Trump’s comparison of the seasonal flu to the coronavirus is completely false is easily confirmed by information readily accessible on the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The site contains data for every year of the seasonal flu going back to 2010-2011 and shows that the death rate among those who get sick from the flu ranges between 0.1 percent and 0.3 percent. The death rate, through July, of those who have contracted COVID-19 is 2 percent, showing that coronavirus is between 6.7 and 20 times more deadly than the flu.

Additionally, as pointed out by the *Washington Post*, many people who have been infected with the virus have lingering symptoms for months, including “difficulty breathing, inability to exert themselves physically, recurring pain.” The virus can cause long-term damage to organs other than the lungs, damage that is not common to the seasonal flu.

In response to the censorship measures by Facebook and Twitter, the President tweeted “REPEAL SECTION 230!!!” Section 230 contains the provisions within the Communications Decency Act of 1996 that shield online services such as social media platforms from being legally responsible for the content posted by users of their systems.

When Twitter began labeling the president’s tweets in late May, he issued an executive order making the US government the arbiter of political speech online. The

order called upon the Federal Communications Commission to revise the scope of Section 230 and also empowered the Federal Trade Commission to evaluate the content moderation policies of the tech giants and determine whether or not their actions violate free speech rights.

With Attorney General William Barr standing next to him, President Trump said on that day, “We’re here today to defend free speech from one of the greatest dangers,” before he signed the order. By empowering the federal regulatory agencies in his executive order, Trump was sending a message to big tech that attempts to censor his social media posts—along with those of his far-right and fascist allies and supporters—would result in the removal of Section 230 protections and open up the online service providers to fines and lawsuits.

Since then, the Department of Justice (DoJ) and AG Barr late last month drafted proposed legislation modifying the language of Section 230 to address “concerns about online censorship by requiring greater transparency and accountability when platforms remove lawful speech.” In a letter dated September 23, Barr jumbled together claims that big tech is “hiding behind the shield of Section 230 to censor lawful speech” with the allegation that online service providers are invoking the law’s protections “to escape liability even when they knew their services were being used for criminal activity.”

Simultaneous with the DoJ-drafted legislation, Republican Senators Roger Wicker of Mississippi, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee introduced a bill in the Senate that calls for nearly identical modifications to Section 230 rules for online services. At the top of their list is the unsubstantiated charge that right-wing political views are being singled out by the tech monopolies for persistent online censorship.

In moving the bill, Senator Wicker said, “For too long, social media platforms have hidden behind Section 230 protections to censor content that deviates from their beliefs. These practices should not receive special protections in our society where freedom of speech is at the core of our nation’s values. Our legislation would restore power to consumers by promoting full and fair discourse online.”

On October 1, the Senate Commerce Committee, which includes 14 Republicans and 12 Democrats, voted unanimously to subpoena the top executives of Facebook, Twitter and Google to appear at a hearing on Section 230

on October 28. After initial opposition to the subpoenas from Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell, the Republicans agreed to add the topics of “privacy” and “misinformation” to be discussed along with censorship issues.

Meanwhile, the House Judiciary Committee released a 449-page report on Tuesday on the results of its antitrust investigation into Apple, Amazon, Google and Facebook which condemns big tech’s monopoly power and calls for the companies to be broken up and restructured.

The coming together of the White House and Democrats and Republicans in Congress over a raft of regulations and attempt to assert government control over the Silicon Valley tech giants raises to a new level contradictions embedded within the capitalist system, not least of which is that these firms are the most valued properties on Wall Street worth trillions of dollars and a primary source of the massive fortunes being made by the financial oligarchy that controls both parties and the entire US political establishment.

Behind the frenzied efforts to rein in the powerful technologies of these firms is a growing awareness that the utilization of these systems by billions of people amid expanding class struggle internationally presents the ruling elite with a problem of revolutionary proportions.

While the ruling establishment is roiled by intense conflicts in the run-up to the November 3 elections—with Trump asserting that he intends to stay in office regardless of the outcome—the Democrats and Republicans are unified in their drive to clamp down on information technologies. Their central aim is to prevent the working class from using these technologies to organize their struggles, including across national boundaries, and above all to stop the program of revolutionary socialism represented by the *World Socialist Web Site* from reaching the working class and youth.



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