

Twitter and Facebook censor New York Post report on Hunter Biden

Kevin Reed
16 October 2020

Social media censorship prior to the 2020 US presidential elections reached new heights on Wednesday, when both Twitter and Facebook blocked the distribution of links to a *New York Post* story about Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden.

In an unprecedented move around 2:00 p.m. Eastern time, Twitter blocked all users from posting links to the *Post* story or photos from the Biden news report. Users attempting to Tweet the link were served a notice that said, “We can’t complete this request because this link has been identified by Twitter or our partners as being potentially harmful.”

Anyone who attempted to view or retweet already existing shares of the link were given a warning that said, “link may be unsafe.”

Additionally, Twitter locked the accounts of both the *Post* and White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, labeling their tweets with a warning to others that the two users had violated Twitter’s rules against publishing “hacked materials.”

In the case of Facebook, the social media company “reduced” the distribution of the *Post* story pending an investigation by independent fact checkers. At 11:10 a.m., Facebook Policy Communications Director Andy Stone tweeted, “While I will intentionally not link to the New York Post, I want to be clear that this story is eligible to be fact checked by Facebook’s third-party fact checking partners. In the meantime, we are reducing its distribution on our platform.”

Two hours later Stone tweeted a link to Facebook’s micro website called, “Helping protect the 2020 US elections,” and wrote, “This is part of our standard process to reduce the spread of misinformation. We temporarily reduce distribution pending fact-checker review.”

The *New York Post* article contained information from a trove of email communications—reportedly provided by Rudy Giuliani, former New York City mayor and Trump’s personal attorney, and Steve Bannon, Trump’s former top advisor—that had been obtained from a laptop computer that was dropped off for repairs at a shop in Delaware, Biden’s

home state, and never retrieved.

The *Post* report said that the computer store owner made a copy of the email correspondence that was on the computer’s hard drive and gave the copy to Robert Costello, a lawyer connected with Giuliani.

The central claim made in the article, based on the alleged evidence including screen shots of email messages, is that Joseph Biden had arranged to meet with an adviser to a Ukrainian energy company on whose board his son Hunter Biden served.

In response to the censorship moves by Twitter and Facebook, the *Post* wrote that the social media companies were blocking the story for political reasons and “deliberately trying to keep its users from reading and deciding for themselves what it means.”

The *Post* pointed out that Facebook’s Andy Stone, who has been the Policy Communications Director since 2014, has a long history as a spokesman for the Democrats, including serving as the party’s Western Regional Press Secretary of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee from 2009–11, as press secretary for Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer from 2011–12 and as Communications Director for the House Majority Political Action Committee from 2012–14.

The social media censorship was denounced widely by users on both platforms. Tom Dreisbach, investigative reporter for National Public Radio, expressed the views of many when he posted on Twitter, “It’s fairly clear that Twitter is making this up as they go along. ‘Illegally obtained materials’ could include records that are widely considered in the public interest—the WikiLeaks release of Iraq War and State Department cables, Snowden’s leaks, the Pentagon Papers. ...”

Dreisbach was responding to an effort by Twitter to justify its censorship in the face of widespread denunciations of it as an attack on freedom of speech. A series of posts at 7:44 p.m. from the company’s Twitter Safety account said, “We want to provide much needed clarity around the actions we’ve taken with respect to two NY Post articles that were

first Tweeted this morning,” and “Commentary on or discussion about hacked materials, such as articles that cover them but do not include or link to the materials themselves, aren’t a violation of this policy. Our policy only covers links to or images of hacked material themselves.”

Digging themselves further and further into a censorship hole, Twitter posted “We know we have more work to do to provide clarity in our product when we enforce our rules in this manner. We should provide additional clarity and context when preventing the Tweeting or DMing of URLs that violate our policies.”

Responding to another Twitter post about the company policy since 2018 prohibiting “the use of our service to distribute content obtained without authorization,” Glenn Greenwald of *The Intercept* tweeted, “Please don’t be deceived. The authoritarian mindset expressed below—celebrating mass censorship of journalism they dislike—is absolutely a significant strain in current US liberalism, which is why so many of them cheered the stunning censorship yesterday.”

Ten minutes later, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey tweeted, “Our communication around our actions on the @nypost article was not great. And blocking URL sharing via tweet or DM with zero context as to why we’re blocking: unacceptable.”

The crisis at Twitter over the censorship of the *Post* article continued into Thursday and Friday. Vijaya Gadde, Legal, Policy and Trust & Safety Lead, posted a string of tweets on Thursday evening explaining that the company “had received significant feedback” about how it “enforced our Hack Materials Policy yesterday. After reflection on this feedback, we have decided to make changes to the policy and how we enforce it.”

Gadde went on to explain that Twitter wanted to address the concerns that there can be “unintended consequences to journalists, whistleblowers and others” that are “contrary to Twitter’s purpose of serving the public conversation.”

However, the changes to Twitter’s Hacked Materials Policy still facilitate censorship. According to Gadde, they will only remove content that is “directly shared by hackers or those acting in concert with them,” something that is virtually impossible to prove, and “we will label Tweets to provide context instead of blocking them.”

On Friday morning, CEO Dorsey issued a mea culpa, “Straight blocking of URLs was wrong, and we updated our policy and enforcement to fix. Our goal is to attempt to add context, and now we have capabilities to do that.” Twitter then removed its restrictions on sharing links to the *New York Post* article.

It is significant that the *New York Times*, up to the moment that Twitter reversed itself, refused to refer to the actions of

the social media companies as censorship and justified it as “pushback” from the platforms about an “unsubstantiated” report.

In its initial story on Wednesday, the *Times* began with the response of the Biden campaign to the *Post* story, writing that the Democratic Party campaign rejected the report, “that the nation’s leading social media companies deemed so dubious that they limited access to the article on their platforms.”

Meanwhile, the actions of Twitter and Facebook have further emboldened the Trump administration and its drive to modify or abolish the Section 230 provisions giving online service providers immunity from prosecution for content published on their platforms by users. Ajit Pai, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, posted on Twitter Thursday that he intended to move forward, in response to social media censorship, with revisions to the Section 230 language.

That the swift and coordinated censorship action by Twitter and Facebook was coordinated with the Democratic Party is clear. For more than a year, and throughout the 2020 presidential election campaign, the Democrats have been demanding that the social media platforms unilaterally “take down” posts by the Republicans and the Trump campaign which they claim are “disinformation” or “false.”

As we have explained consistently on the *World Socialist Web Site*, it is not up to the government or the giant social media monopolies to determine what is truth and what is lies. When the Democrats, along with its faction of military-intelligence, work with Twitter and Facebook to “fact check” information being published online, they are attacking free speech.

By using censorship to attack the Trump campaign, the Democrats are also enabling the fascistic leader to falsely posture—as he is plotting a coup d’état and the overthrow of the US Constitution and democratic government from the White House—as a defender of free speech rights.

Furthermore, the Democrats are sharpening the weapon of censorship on behalf of the entire capitalist ruling elite to be used against the independent organization of the working class and the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)