

It's Time To Stop Pretending Twitter Is Neutral

If Twitter wants to editorialize and 'factcheck' President Trump's tweets with disclaimers, then it should be treated like any other publisher.

Twitter's decision this week to **append a disclaimer** to President Trump's tweets about the risks of mail-in ballot fraud should be enough, at long last, for us to dispense with the fiction that Twitter is nothing more than a neutral platform.

It's not, it never has been, and it's time to stop pretending otherwise.

Set aside the relative merits of **Trump's comments** and the entire debate about whether mass voting by mail is a good idea, because that's not what's important here. By stepping in to flag Trump's tweet with a warning label and a link so users can "get the facts" about mail-in ballots (which ironically links to a CNN article by Chris Cillizza), Twitter abandoned any claim it had to being a neutral facilitator. It crossed over, in other words, from being a supposedly unbiased social media platform to being a traditional publisher—in this case, a publisher with a very clear editorial position.

This has been true for some time now. Everyone knows that Silicon Valley is politically progressive and, as **Vox reported Wednesday**, its top executives are working hard to elect presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden.

The only difference now is that Twitter decided to make it bone-crushingly obvious. Social media companies like Twitter, Facebook, and Google have been **censoring** and **editorializing** for years under the absurd pretext that they were just enforcing their own "community guidelines," not weighing in on the merits of what their users were saying or embedding their own biases into the site's rules. Who writes and enforces these community guidelines? People like Yoel Roth, Twitter's Head of Site Integrity, whose anti-Trump tweets from 2016 and 2017 resurfaced recently. Roth called Trump and his officials "ACTUAL NAZIS," compared Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to a "bag of farts," and implied that Trump supporters are racists.

What changed this week is that Twitter essentially came out and admitted these biases, discarding the façade of a neutral platform. The company itself, it turns out, has a point of view—in this case, about absentee voting—and it is willing to push that point of view on its users, not just by employing people like Roth to write and enforce its rules, but by explicitly fact-checking the President of the United States.

By doing this, Twitter hasn't just waded into politics in an overt way, it has exposed the fiction at the heart of what social media companies are: they're not neutral platforms, they're biased, and like their peer organizations in the mainstream media, they're overwhelmingly biased against conservatives and in favor of progressives.

Twitter Needs To Be Held To The Same Standards As Traditional Publishers

Here's why that's a big deal. For decades, social media companies have wanted to have it both ways. They wanted to be able to enjoy liability protections that traditional publishers don't have while censoring opinions they don't like and promoting those they do.

They've been able to do this in part thanks to federal law. Back in the late 1990s when the internet was young, Congress exempted Internet companies from liability for publishing things that were inaccurate or potentially libelous, so long as they were uploaded by a third party.

Specifically, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, passed in 1996, protects companies like Twitter from being sued for allowing users to post crazy conspiracy theories, malicious lies, and outright falsehoods.

That's why, for example, you'll occasionally see completely false news stories on Twitter like this one from December 2017, in which CNN claimed Donald Trump Jr. had been tipped off about hacked Wikileaks documents before they were made public:

(Contra CNN, there was no story here at all. Trump Jr. had simply gotten an email from someone telling him about Wikileaks documents that had already been released. CNN chalked it up to an honest mistake.)

All of this to say, Twitter, Facebook, Google, and other tech giants with massive social media platforms obviously have an editorial slant, much like the New York Times or the Washington Post or CNN. Unlike those outlets, however, these tech firms have been able to hide behind the canard that they're just providing a space for third parties to exchange ideas, so they can't be held liable for what their users post.

No more. If Twitter wants to start fact-checking everything that gets posted by influential people, fine. But there's no way it can do so in an even-handed or fair manner, and no way it can continue to insist on Section 230 protections.

As Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley **said** Wednesday, "It's pretty simple: if Twitter and Google and the rest are going to editorialize and censor and act like traditional publishers, they should be

treated like traditional publishers and stop receiving the special carve out from the federal government in Section 230.”

Hawley has the right instincts here. At the very least, he and his Republican colleagues in the Senate should call on Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to explain why his company should continue to enjoy Section 230 protections when it has clearly decided to act like a traditional publisher. While he’s at it, maybe Dorsey can explain what he meant when he [told Sam Harris last year](#), “I don’t believe that we can afford to take a neutral stance anymore.”

Then again, maybe he doesn’t need to. We all know what he meant.

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