

Twitter penalizes Donald Trump Jr. for posting hydroxychloroquine misinformation amid coronavirus pandemic

The social media giant said it ordered the president's son to delete the misleading tweet.

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Twitter on Tuesday penalized Donald Trump Jr. for posting misinformation about hydroxychloroquine, the social media giant said, underlining the tough stance it has taken in policing misleading posts from high-profile users, including President Trump, in recent months.

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Twitter said that it ordered the president's son to delete the misleading tweet and that it would "limit some account functionality for 12 hours." Trump Jr. can still direct-message followers using his account, but he cannot tweet, retweet or like other tweets during the 12-hour restriction.

Trump Jr.'s deleted tweet now shows a notice that says, "This Tweet is no longer available because it violated the Twitter Rules."

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The tweet, which featured a viral video showing a group of doctors making misleading and false claims about the coronavirus pandemic, was directly tweeted by Trump Jr.'s account. That contrasts with his father, who retweeted multiple tweets from others showing clips of the same video to his 84.2 million followers Monday night.

Twitter removed the videos, deleting several of the tweets that President Trump shared, and added a note to its trending topics warning about the potential risks of hydroxychloroquine use.

“Tweets with the video are in violation of our covid-19 misinformation policy,” Liz Kelley, a spokeswoman for Twitter, told The Washington Post.

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Donald Trump Jr. spokesman Andy Surabian said the restriction was “further proof that Big Tech is intent on killing free expression online and is another instance of them committing election interference to stifle Republican voices.” The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

It’s the first time Trump Jr. has had his tweeting privileges removed by the company, although Rudolph W. Giuliani, a fellow surrogate for the president, had his account temporarily locked in March for tweeting misinformation about hydroxychloroquine. Trump Jr. retweeted a tweet from his father’s reelection campaign earlier this year that Twitter labeled as violating its policy on manipulated media.

President Trump has not faced the same tweeting lockdown, but Twitter has attached warning labels to five of his tweets in the past two months for running up against the site's rules.

Trump shared clips from the video — which claims that masks and shutdowns are not needed to stop the spread of the virus — as he shared 14 tweets over half an hour defending the use of hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug that the president has repeatedly promoted, and attacking Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top infectious-diseases expert.

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On Monday evening, Facebook scrubbed from its site the same viral video after more than 14 million people watched it. Facebook was still removing posts of the video Tuesday morning. YouTube said it also removed the video.

Social media companies have been cracking down on Trump and other politicians as the election nears, drawing attacks from the president and his supporters. After Twitter added fact-check labels to two of Trump's misleading tweets about mail-in ballots in May, the president signed an executive order directing federal resources to consider rethinking a law that shields Internet companies from liability. That law, Section 230, protects social media companies from being liable for nearly anything users post on their sites.

But Twitter didn't back down and labeled three more of Trump's tweets in the following weeks for violating its policies on manipulated media, inciting violence and abusive behavior.

Facebook left the same Trump posts untouched, prompting a massive backlash from civil rights advocates and others. Prominent advertisers began boycotting the company and calling for it to better police hate speech. Eventually, Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said the company would start labeling posts from anyone, including politicians, that violated its policies but that it deemed newsworthy enough to leave online. The newsworthiness label has not yet been applied to any of Trump's posts.

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Republican politicians and conservative supporters of Trump have accused the companies, without convincing evidence, of censoring conservative voices and showing bias against Republicans. The social media companies have consistently denied the allegations. Some prominent Republicans and conservative pundits called on supporters this summer to follow them to a newer social media site, Parler, which claims to be a haven for free speech online, although it still has rules.

The issue of alleged bias is almost certain to come up Wednesday when the chief executives of Facebook, Google, Apple and Amazon are scheduled to testify before a congressional committee about antitrust concerns.

Trump's decision to share Monday's misleading video about hydroxychloroquine comes amid mounting criticism, from opponents and allies alike, over his handling of a pandemic that has now killed at least 145,000 people in the United States. The president spent months obstinately denying the severity of the crisis, refusing to wear a mask in public, blaming the rise of case numbers on testing and campaigning against governors' shutdown orders. In recent weeks, however, Trump has occasionally changed tack, donning a mask in public for the first time earlier this month and deciding to cancel the Republican National Convention events set to take place in Jacksonville, Fla.

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But Monday, the president again turned to promoting a drug that the Food and Drug Administration warns carries significant health risks, and portraying the widely accepted scientific consensus on its use as an attack on his reelection campaign.

The video Trump shared Monday night showed a collection of doctors speaking in favor of treating covid-19 patients with the antimalarial drug. The clip focused on the testimony of a woman named Stella Immanuel, who received a medical license in Texas in November, according to state records. Immanuel did not return a request for comment.

Immanuel says she previously worked as a doctor in Nigeria and calls herself a “deliverance minister” who is “God’s battle ax and weapon of war.” She has given sermons attacking liberal values and promoting conspiracy theories including, in her words, “the gay agenda, secular humanism, Illuminati and the demonic new world order.” Another doctor shown in the video, a noted Trump supporter, called Immanuel a “warrior.”

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“You don’t need a mask,” Immanuel claimed in the video, contradicting the widely accepted medical advice that has been promoted even by the White House coronavirus task force and Trump himself. She repeatedly called studies questioning the safety and effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine “fake science.”

“We don’t need to be locked down,” she continued, despite evidence that stay-at-home orders have helped curb the spread of the virus. “America, there is a cure for covid.”

There is no known cure for the novel coronavirus or the disease it causes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. Multiple studies have disputed claims that antimalarial and antiviral drugs such as hydroxychloroquine, azithromycin and chloroquine can help treat or even prevent the coronavirus. Last month, the FDA revoked an emergency approval that allowed doctors to prescribe hydroxychloroquine to covid-19 patients even though the treatment was untested.

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Still, Trump has repeatedly promoted the drugs. White House trade adviser Peter Navarro and Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer, took to Fox News this month to urge the FDA to issue a new emergency approval for the drug after a study, widely panned by scientists as flawed, showed some effectiveness from early use of the medication. The White House did not return a request for comment late Monday.

The controversial video was promoted across social media platforms earlier Monday by the conservative site Breitbart News, a political group called the Tea Party Patriots, and a recently formed coalition of advocates calling themselves America's Frontline Doctors. Neither Breitbart nor the organizers behind the event responded to The Post's requests for comment.

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America's Frontline Doctors has a website that appears to be just 12 days old. That site links to the Twitter account of the group's founder, Simone Gold, a Trump-supporting doctor based in Los Angeles. The group claims to consist of several doctors who appear to be licensed in California, Georgia and Texas.

Different versions of the clip were shared Monday by Breitbart, which covered the group's news conference, and the Tea Party Patriots, which had reportedly organized the summit.

Monday's viral video prompted thousands of posts spreading false information about the pandemic. The first tweet the president shared, which included the clip, suggested that hydroxychloroquine was being maligned in a ploy to discredit Trump and harm his reelection bid.

"WOW!! Doctor calls out what should be the biggest scandal in modern American history," said the now-deleted tweet shared by Trump. "The suppression of #Hydroxychloroquine by Fauci & the Democrats to perpetuate Covid deaths to hurt Trump."