

CASES

CASE 9-A

TWITTER'S TRUMP PROBLEM

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Twitter permanently suspended Donald Trump's personal account on Jan. 8, 2021, "due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Twitter, 2021). The decision followed the Jan. 6 attack on the US Capitol, which was fostered—at least in part—by Trump's rhetoric online and offline. On Jan. 6, Twitter took down a video of Trump praising the rioters and falsely claiming election fraud, and the social media company suspended him from tweeting for 12 hours.

Twitter, however, isn't alone. Other social media and online companies—including Amazon, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Shopify, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitch, and YouTube—have permanently or temporarily suspended Trump.

Twitter's ban is not without financial consequences for the company. For example, its stock, which is publicly traded, dropped 6 percent on the first day of trading since it banned Trump. Its stock price continued to drop from \$52 a share on Jan. 8, 2021, to \$44 on Jan. 19. As of this writing, the price has not recovered. Facebook, Pinterest, and Snapchat also lost value, but not to the extent of Twitter (Bursztynsky, 2021).

One reason for the price drop is that Donald Trump's personal Twitter account had 88.5 million followers—just more than 25 percent of Twitter's 330 million total users. His official presidential account had 33.3 million followers in January 2020. The White House account had 26.1 million followers during his last month in office. (The @POTUS and @WhiteHouse accounts were not suspended, but both did transfer to Biden's communication team following his Jan. 20 inauguration.)

Those numbers are problematic for Twitter, which makes money through selling users' behavioral patterns to advertisers. The more engagement—the depth of involvement with the site measured by retweets, replies, likes, and time spent on the platform, among other things—a person has with the platform, the better for Twitter. Trump

drove engagement in his political base, as well as opponents who often “hate tweeted” responses to his posts.

Twitter also has a financial stake in the debate about Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which protects internet companies from legal liability for user-generated content. Trump and his allies—falsely claiming that social media companies censor them—want to repeal Section 230. Others—including Twitter’s Jack Dorsey and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg—think the law should be revisited and possibly amended or replaced, but not repealed. Many on the left also favor this reform, which, as of this writing, has yet to be codified in legislation. The bottom line for Twitter and other social media platforms is that keeping Trump happy—or at least not angry—is good for business.

In June 2020, Twitter announced that tweets by world leaders would stay online if they have a “clear public interest value”—even if those tweets violate the platform’s policies. When, for example, a political leader violates the platform’s rules of spreading misinformation, Twitter might add a disclaimer providing context, hide the offending tweet behind a warning label, or limit its spread by preventing people from liking, replying, or retweeting it. “Direct interactions with fellow public figures, comments on political issues of the day, or foreign policy saber-rattling on economic or military issues are generally not in violation” of the rules, according to Twitter.

Donald Trump consistently broke Twitter’s rules while he was president. For example, in the week after the Nov. 3 presidential election, Twitter flagged 39 Trump tweets for spreading baseless accusations of voter fraud, falsely claiming victory, and casting doubt on the validity of mail-in ballots. Trump’s Twitter misbehavior, however, started long before the election. During unrest and violence following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Trump tweeted that “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” on May 29, 2020. Twitter flagged the tweet, stating that it violated rules about “glorifying violence.” Trump’s team escalated the dispute by tweeting the same message on the official White House account, but it again was flagged by Twitter (see [figure 9.2](#)).

Perhaps the most egregious example came when Trump accused MSNBC host Joe Scarborough of potentially murdering Lori Klausutis, who died from a fall when she hit her head on a desk while she was an aide for then-US Representative Scarborough in 2001. The fall was the result of an undiagnosed heart condition. Trump began attacking Scarborough in 2020 when the host criticized Trump’s COVID-19



Figure 9.2.



Figure 9.3.

response and anti-immigration policies. The continued attacks and innuendos by Trump prompted Klaustutis's widow to write a personal letter to Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey asking him to intervene (see figure 9.3).

Twitter responded on May 26, stating that it would not take action on Trump's tweets.

Twitter's fairly hands-off approach to tweets by world leaders does not apply to ex-public officials.

Micro Issues

1. Donald Trump had 88.5 million Twitter followers. What role, if any, should a person's number of followers play in deciding actions for tweets that violate Twitter's terms of use?
2. Are disclaimers, warning labels, and preventing actions such as retweets effective? Why or why not? Provide evidence to support your answer.
3. Should Twitter have permanently suspended Donald Trump's account? Did it wait too long? How would your answer change if Twitter waited until after Joe Biden's inauguration?
4. What standard of truth do you think tweets should be held to?

Midrange Issues

1. Is it ethically fair for Twitter to have one set of rules for political leaders and another for everyone else? How might Michael Sandel answer that question?
2. How would you define "clear public interest value"? How is your definition similar to or different from Twitter's?
3. Is there an ethical difference between tweeting misinformation (i.e., voter fraud), threats (i.e., "when the looting starts, the shooting starts"), and conspiracy theories (i.e., accusing Scarborough of murder)?

Macro Issues

1. Do social media platforms have a social responsibility to provide truthful information? How is that responsibility similar to or different from the obligations of news media?
2. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, while testifying before Congress, said that eliminating Section 230 would likely result in "increased removal of speech, the proliferation of frivolous lawsuits, and severe limitations on our collective ability to address harmful content and protect people online." Evaluate this statement.
3. Is there an ethical distinction between Donald Trump and administration officials tweeting from @realDonaldTrump (his personal account) or @POTUS or @WhiteHouse? Should there be a distinction?
4. Should the income from social media platforms be taxed to support fact-based journalism, similar to the support for the BBC or media organizations in Sweden and Finland?