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2021

Michelotti, A. (2021). Big Tech vs Trump : implications of deplatforming. RSIS Commentaries, 078-21.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/152595>

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Big Tech vs Trump: Implications of Deplatforming

By Andressa Michelotti

SYNOPSIS

Deplatforming Donald Trump from the mainstream social media platforms might have contained his inflammatory discourse in the short term. However, this may well cause ripple effects that might have long-term implications for the future of social media and online speech.

COMMENTARY

IN JANUARY 2021, the major tech companies (Twitter, Facebook and Alphabet) 'deplatformed' Donald Trump from their products, a decision supported by [89 per cent of the Democrats](#). In late March, Trump's senior adviser announced on [Fox News](#) that Trump should be returning to a social network of his own. Now that Trump is banned from the mainstream platforms, there is general scepticism about Trump's abilities to scale and maintain his social media presence. Still, can Trump's plan take off?

In the current landscape, Trump is heavily dependent on the gatekeeping of Big Tech. Although his constituents might be looking forward to his next social media move, there are concerns that Trump's team can effectively develop an environment that can attract his followers.

The Gatekeepers & the 'Alt-Tech'

In an era of 'Trump-like' social media, Parler is the best example. Parler was considered a [free-speech haven](#); [millions migrated](#) to the platform as Big Tech cracked down on misinformation. However, on 6 January 2021, Alphabet, Apple and Amazon blocked the Parler app from their operating systems on the grounds of [incitement of violence](#).

Parler is not the first 'Alt-Tech' ban. In 2017, [Gab was removed](#) from the Google Play Store on similar grounds, while the app has never been approved for placement on Apple's App Store. Additionally, the Google Play Store also removed Trump's 2020 Campaign app [for non-functionality](#).

Indeed, Trump's new platform would have to consider the best user experience for his constituents. Smartphones play a crucial role in social media's success by offering relevant user data and allowing users always to be connected.

However, most smartphones are controlled by Big Tech, in particular Apple and Alphabet. These gatekeepers not only decide when and how to comply with their comprehensive policies, but they are also accountable for the content that might violate US laws. In the presence of any illicit material, these companies may be required to remove the app in question.

Consequently, Trump's platform would have to focus on product and policy development and implement a robust content moderation system that complies with product policies and intermediary liability regulations. To circumvent this, Trump's team may launch an app outside the Apple App Store or Google Play, which would meet its challenges around distribution and user-friendliness.

No matter the technological model or the users that make part of this social network, this new endeavour requires developing new policies that also keep the platform functioning at the minimum levels.

The Constituents: Is User Migration Feasible?

Jason Miller, Trump's senior advisor, noted that Trump's social media platform would draw [tens of millions of people](#). He might be right. [85 per cent of Republicans](#) believe social media intentionally censors political viewpoints they find objectionable. A [survey from January 2021](#) identified that roughly eight-in-ten Republicans disagree with the deplatforming actions taken after the 6 January events. Conservatives believe they are [under attack](#).

Last year, Parler saw its user base grow [from 1 million to 1.5 million users in a week](#) with the 'Alt-Right' migration. With [88 million followers on Twitter](#), [35 million followers on Facebook](#), and [2.7 million subscribers on YouTube](#), the magnitude of Trump's supporters is evident. The outcomes of the 2020 US presidential election results can prove that.

Indeed, Trump has a large fanbase; however, is a user migration feasible? As posed by Singh and Singh, *'network effects are like gravity. The greater the number of people on a network, the greater its "mass"'*. Creating a network is not simple. It takes time to build a new profile that will result in extended social connections. No matter the constituents, the success of a social network highly depends on a robust online community.

Moreover, regardless of its constituents, any social media platform requires a strong product policy foundation that ensures the basic level of content quality and product

functionality for its users. Without this basic formula, social media platforms might not take off.

Ripple Effects: Maximised Polarisation and Censorship?

In January, the [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#) and the [Electronic Frontier Foundation \(EFF\)](#) raised concerns about deplatforming. Deplatforming may have a ripple effect. It may create a precedent to be used to censor alternative voices in the future. While one may create its social media or go to Fox News to express their views, the risk lies in censorship of dissident voices around the globe that are solely dependent on the power of the US Big Tech for expression.

Additionally, Trump's social media announcement is an early sign of the consequences of the ban. Furthermore, [polarisation and homogeneity](#) might result from a joint effect of confirmation bias and social influence. As new conservative platforms are developed, [confirmation bias](#) and polarisation may become more prominent.

The concept of conservative and 'Alt-Right' may become even more extreme. Users will no longer focus on supposedly diverse platforms; instead, they might be focusing solely on social media platforms that fully reinforce their views, increasing the formation of [homogeneous clusters](#).

This effect can create an unpredictable political environment of extremism. Political platforms with the single purpose of centralising conservative or 'Alt-Right' views looking for like-minded people may intensify polarisation even further in the real world.

What's Next?

Whether Trump succeeds in launching his own social media platform, he will undoubtedly face challenges in the current landscape. There is a strong pressure to crack down on extremist conservative views. However, Trump's power is his pool of fans waiting for his next move online and are ready to follow his lead. Experts have [argued](#) that 'Alt-Tech' platforms could serve as recruitment for the far right. Consequently, Trump's new social media plans might result in the 'Alt-Tech' amplification.

Donald Trump's suspension from Facebook [was reviewed by The Facebook Oversight Board](#) in early May, and the board has upheld the suspension for now. However, Facebook has six months to consider replatforming Trump. In light of the latest developments, it would be wise for Facebook to assess the repercussions of their actions and the implications on dissident and civic speech in future cases.

Instead of only acting reactively in response of a crisis, social media platforms and regulators should push for more regulatory changes. Additionally, companies like Facebook should reassess their policies by making them more transparent and consistent to avoid '[spirit of the policy](#)' decisions that are useful only when it suits their own interests.

Certainly, Donald Trump has [criticised](#) the suspension. Banning Trump from the

mainstream platforms does not mean that his voice will not be heard by his supporters. Banning actions may instead boost the polarisation effects in the offline world and create a negative precedent for dissident voices.

Deplatforming can be the beginning of a new and unpredictable polarised online world with real-life socio-political ramifications, and social media platforms should be accountable for the ripple effects caused by their actions.

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