

Remarks Announcing an Executive Order on Preventing Online Censorship and an Exchange With Reporters

May 28, 2020

The President. Thank you very much. We're here today to defend free speech from one of the gravest dangers it has faced in American history, frankly. And you know what's going as well as anybody; it's not good.

A small handful of powerful social media monopolies controls a vast portion of all public and private communications in the United States. And we know what they are; we don't have to name them. We're going to give you a complete listing. We're going to give you a signed copy of what I'm going to be signing in a couple of minutes, and you'll see exactly what we're doing.

They've had unchecked power to censor, restrict, edit, shape, hide, alter virtually any form of communication between private citizens and large public audiences. There's no precedent in American history for so small a number of corporations to control so large a sphere of human interaction. And that includes individual people controlling vast amounts of territory.

And we can't allow that to happen, especially when they go about doing what they're doing, because they're doing things incorrectly. They have points of view. And if we go by that, it's actually amazing that there was a success in 2016. But we can't let this continue to happen. It's very, very unfair.

And you look at the statistics and you look at what is going on, and I think everybody would very much agree with that, including Democrats, by the way. I saw quite a few Democrats are saying this is about time something is done. So let's see if they keep that decision after they hear that we agree with them.

The choices that Twitter makes when it chooses to suppress, edit, blacklist, shadow ban are editorial decisions, pure and simple. They're editorial decisions. In those moments, Twitter ceases to be a neutral public platform, and they become an editor with a viewpoint. And I think we can say that about others also, whether you're looking at Google, whether you're looking at Facebook and perhaps others.

One egregious example is when they try to silence views that they disagree with by selectively applying a "fact check"—a fact check—F-A-C-T. Fact check. What they choose to fact check and what they choose to ignore or even promote is nothing more than a political activism group or political activism. And it's inappropriate. If you look at what's happened, you look at where they're going, where they're coming from, I think you all see it yourselves.

This censorship and bias is a threat to freedom itself. Imagine if your phone company silenced or edited your conversation. Social media companies have vastly more power and more reach than any phone company in the United States. More reach, actually, than your newspapers, by far. More reach than a lot of your traditional forms of communication.

Therefore, today I'm signing an Executive order to protect and uphold the free speech and rights of the American people. Currently, social media giants, like Twitter, receive an unprecedented liability shield based on the theory that they're a neutral platform—which they are not—not an editor with a viewpoint.

My Executive order calls for new regulations, under section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, to make it that social media companies that engage in censoring or any political

conduct will not be able to keep their liability shield. That's a big deal. They have a shield; they can do what they want. They have a shield. They're not going to have that shield.

My Executive order further instructs the Federal Trade Commission, FTC, to prohibit social media companies from engaging in any deceptive acts or practices affecting commerce. This authority resides in section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act. I think you know it pretty well. Most of you know it very well. I would think you know it quite well, right?

Additionally, I'm directing the Attorney General to work cooperatively with the States. He's going to be working very much and very closely in cooperation with the States to enforce their own laws against such deceptive business practices. The States have brought in powerful authority to regulate in this arena, and they'll be doing it also—and we encourage them to do it—if they see exactly as we've been seeing.

It's—what they're doing is tantamount to monopoly, you can say. It's tantamount to taking over the airwaves. Can't let it happen. Otherwise, we're not going to have a democracy. We're not going to have anything to do with a republic.

Finally, I'm directing my administration to develop policies and procedures to ensure taxpayer dollars are not going into any social media company that repress free speech. The Government spends billions of dollars on giving them money. They're rich enough, so we're going to be doing none of it or a very little of it.

As President, I'll not allow the American people to be bullied by these giant corporations. Many people have wanted this to be done by Presidents for a long time. And now we're doing it. And I'm sure they'll be doing a lawsuit, and I'm also sure that we're going to be going for legislation, in addition to this. And the legislation will start immediately.

And I'll tell you, I've been called by Democrats that want to do this, and so I think you could possibly have a bipartisan situation. But we're fed up with it, and it's unfair, and it's been very unfair. And we'll see what happens.

Any questions?

Q. Mr. President——

News Media/Twitter, Inc./The President's Use of Social Media

Q. Mr. President, given your concern with Twitter, have you given any consideration to deleting your account, to just walking away from this platform you've been so critical of?

The President. Well, you know, if you weren't fake, I would not even think about it. I would do that in a heartbeat.

Q. I'm real, sir.

The President. But the news is fake. We—if you look at what gets printed in newspapers, if only the public could understand where, you know, they're reading a story, and they think it's real, and it's not real in so many cases. And I'm not saying in every case. You have some great journalists. You have some journalists that I have great respect for. But largely, I find, at least in a political sense, there is so much fake news, it's disgraceful.

I would do that in a heartbeat if I had fair—if we had a fair press in this country, I would do that in a heartbeat. There's nothing I'd rather do than get rid of my whole Twitter account. But I'm able to get to, I guess, 186 million people, when you add up all the different accounts and add Facebook and Instagram—that's a lot of people. And that's more than the media companies have, frankly, by a lot. And so, if I get a story that's wrong, I can put a social media—I don't usually use the word "Twitter"; I use—I say "social media."

But I put something out, and the next day or the next hour or the next minute, everybody is reading about it. So I'm able to refute fake news, and that's very important.

I'd like to ask the Attorney General, please, to say a couple of words. And he's very strongly behind it, backing it very powerfully. And again, we're going to be doing this, but we're also going through Congress.

Please.

Attorney General William P. Barr. Well, as you've mentioned, Mr. President, one of the things that I found has the broadest bipartisan support these days is the feeling that this provision, section 230, has been stretched way beyond its original intention. And people feel that on both sides of the aisle.

This was adopted 25 years ago to protect a fledgling industry, and its purpose was to allow websites that were serving as, essentially, bulletin boards for diverse third-party content coming on, to say that you're not responsible for the content of that third-party information. And it also tried to encourage these companies to take down things like child pornography or human trafficking advertising and things by saying, if you act to remove this kind of objectionable material, you won't be liable for taking it down.

Now it's been completely stretched to allow what have become really behemoths who control a lot of the flow of information in our society to engage in censorship of that information and to act as editors and publishers of the material.

So when they put on their own content like "fact check" content onto other people's content and when they curate their collection and when they start censoring particular content including, in many cases, at the direction of foreign governments like communist China, they become publishers, and they shouldn't be entitled to the same kind of shield that was set up earlier.

Now, this Executive order is a very strong step toward addressing this problem. It sets up a rulemaking procedure that will eventually be under the FCC to try to get back to the original interpretation and understanding of section 230. It also empowers the Attorney General to work with State attorneys general to come up with model legislation that addresses this at the State level. And we're preparing Federal legislation, which we will be sending over shortly for review at the Office of Management and Budget.

So this is an important step to get back to the original understanding. You know, there's a bit of a bait-and-switch that's occurred in our society. These companies grew because they held themselves out as public forums, as free public forums where a variety of voices and diverse voices could come on and be heard. That's how they grew. And that's how they attracted the eyeballs. That's why people joined them.

But now that they have become these very powerful networks of eyeballs, now that they've grown by holding themselves out as free public forums, they've now switched. And they are using that market power to force particular viewpoints, and that's wrong. And it has to be addressed not only through this Executive order, but I think litigation going forward and by further action on Capitol Hill.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Q. Mr. President, not only——

The President. Do you have any questions for the Attorney General?

Q. Yes, actually, I do. Mr. Attorney General, not only have you been against section 230, and the President has been against section 230, the Vice President has said he's against section

230. Do you believe that the Executive order that the President is about to sign in any way repeals or amends section 230?

Attorney General Barr. No, it doesn't repeal section 230. And I'm not against section 230 if it was properly interpreted and properly applied. But it's been stretched, and I don't know of anyone on Capitol Hill who doesn't agree that it's been stretched beyond its original intention.

I think this will help it get back to the right balance.

Communications Decency Act of 1996/Twitter, Inc./Absentee Voting Policies

Q. Mr. Attorney General, can you give us more details on the legislation both you and the President referred to? What do you want to do in that legislation?

Attorney General Barr. Well, we're still reviewing a number of possibilities. And it'd be premature for me to discuss the specifics.

The President. Well, one of the things we may do, Bill, is just remove or totally change 230. What I think we can say is, we're going to regulate it. It's a provision, and we're going to regulate it.

You take a look at this as an example; this was just out: "Twitter Moments" on the Mueller witch hunt. So we won. We were in the right. You see what's happened. It's a total fraud. It was a total fraud. Seventy-six to one, okay? Seventy-six to one. You look at it. You think that's fair? Twitter classifies the term "illegal alien" as hate speech. "Illegal alien." But—and viciously.

You look at what China—I mean, just article after article. Here's one: this is our—this is the arbiter.

[*At this point, the President held up an edition of the New York Post featuring the headline "Ministry of Tweet."*]

This guy is the arbiter of what's supposed to go on Twitter. He's the one. He thought that—and he used CNN as a guide—CNN, which is fake news. He uses CNN as a guide. His name is Yoel Roth. And he's the one that said that mail-in balloting—you look, mail-in—no fraud. "No fraud." Really? Why didn't you take a look all over the country? There's cases all over the country.

If we went to mail-in balloting, our election all over the world would look as a total joke. It would be a total joke. There's such fraud and abuse. And you know about harvesting, where they harvest the ballots, and they go and grab them, and they go to people's houses, and then they say, "sign here." No. Doesn't work.

Now, an absentee ballot—you can't be there, or you're sick, and you go and you register and you do all sorts of things to get that ballot, and there's good security measures. But when they send out—like in California—millions and millions of ballots to anybody that's breathing—anybody in California that's breathing, gets a ballot.

Q. But, Mr. President, that's not true. California—

The President. So here—here—excuse me. Wait a minute. I'm not finished. So here's your man, and that's on Twitter.

And the amazing thing is he's wrong. And even no matter who it is, they will admit that he's wrong, because there's tremendous controversy on mail-in voting.

And I can say this: The Republican Party cannot let that let it happen.

Go ahead.

Absentee Voting Policies in California

Q. But you know Gavin Newsom—Governor Newsom has——

The President. I do. I do.

Q. ——has not sent ballots out to everybody in California. They're only going to registered voters.

The President. Oh, really? How many are there?

Q. So—so——

The President. How many are there?

Q. So what your tweet——

The President. Yes.

Q. ——said was——was not wrong——

The President. Okay, so——

Q. ——or was not correct. It was wrong.

The President. Okay. Oh, really? So when he sends out 28 million ballots, and they're in all the mailboxes, and kids go, and they raid the mailboxes, and they hand them to people that are signing the ballots down the end of the street, which is happening—they grab the ballots—you don't think that happens? There's ballot harvesting where all of us—you know, we had seven elections for Congress, and they were, like, tied. And they lost every one of them, because they came, and they dropped the whole pile of ballots on the table.

But you don't think they rip them out of mailboxes? It's all the time you read about it. You could read about it. Take a look.

Q. I mean, there are——

The President. They do worse than that. In some cases, they won't sell [send]* them, like, to a Republican community, a conservative community. They don't happen to send the ballots to those communities. And there's no way of checking.

No, you have to go, and you have to vote. Voting is a great thing. Voting—we would be the laughingstock of the world. And if you just used common sense, you know that's going to happen.

But they raid the mailboxes. They can even print ballots. They get the same paper, the same machine—nothing special—they get the same paper, the same machine. They print ballots. And Bill would have to do a great job to catch them doing it, or you State authorities would have to.

But you have tremendous potential and you have tremendous fraud and abuse, but you have tremendous potential for fraud and abuse.

Go ahead.

Twitter, Inc./The President's Executive Authority/Social Media

Q. Mr. President, you had said in one of your Twitter—in one of your tweets that you would consider shutting down Twitter and social media companies. Did you actually mean you would want to shut down an American company?

* White House correction.

The President. Well, I think it's going to be—you know, I'll tell you what: I have so much, it seems, influence over Twitter in the sense of people wanting to see—go Twitter because of what I have. I have a vast number of—we have a number of platforms, as you know. We have millions and millions of people.

I think this: If Twitter were not honorable—if you're going to have a guy like this be your judge and jury, I think just shut it down, as far as I'm concerned, but I'd have to go through a legal process to do that.

Q. And how would you shut down an American company?

The President. I don't know. I'd have to ask the lawyers. I'd have to go through a legal process. If it were legal, if it were able to be legally shut down, I would do it. I think I'd be hurting it very badly if we didn't use it anymore. I mean, we have other sites we could use, I guess, or we'd have to develop other sites.

But—and I'm not just talking about Twitter. Look at Facebook. Look at the tribunal they set up on Facebook. This woman, who you remember testifying recently in Congress, her hatred was so incredible toward the Republican Party and me that there is no way you can get a fair trial.

So this is not like it's supposed to be. This is not like it's supposed to be. So we're going to see what happens. And you know what? I guess it's going to be challenged in court. What isn't? But I think we'll do very well.

Yes. Go ahead.

Q. Mr. President——

Q. Mr. President——

The President. Yes. Go ahead.

Q. ——as to potential litigation, can you discuss the timing of that? And what is the remedy that you're going to be seeking?

Attorney General Barr. No, what I was referring to, there is litigation going on all the time on section 230 and its scope. And we would look for appropriate vehicles to weigh in and file statement of interest.

Q. So you wouldn't be filing an individual——

Attorney General Barr. Not necessarily.

Q. Okay. Thank you.

Q. Mr. President——

The President. Go ahead. Please.

India-U.S. Relations/India-China Relations

Q. Are you worried about the situation on the border between India and China?

The President. Ah, India. He loves India so much. He's never asked a question other than an India question, and that's okay. I just got back from India, right?

Q. And I am Indian, sir.

The President. I just beat COVID.

Q. You are very popular in India.

The President. I got back—I know. And they like me in India. I think they like me in India certainly more than the media likes me in this country.

Q. You're a rock star there because of Ahmedabad and——

The President. And I like Modi. I like your Prime Minister a lot. He's a great gentleman. A great gentleman.

Yes, they have a big conflict going with India and China. Is that what you're talking about? Yes?

Q. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

The President. They have a big conflict going with India and China. Two countries with 1.4 billion people. Two countries with very powerful militaries. And India is not happy, and probably, China is not happy. But I can tell you, I did speak to Prime Minister Modi. He's not—he's not in a good mood about what's going on with China.

Q. Mr. President, have you spoken to——

The President. Wait. Are you finished?

Q. No, sir. So what—yesterday you tweeted about do you want to mediate between India and China on this issue.

The President. I would do that. You know, I would do that. If they thought it would help if I were the mediator or the arbiter, I would do that. So we'll see.

Go ahead.

Death of George Floyd During an Arrest by Police Officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25

Q. Have you spoken to the family of George Floyd yet?

The President. No, I haven't. But I feel very, very badly. That's a very shocking sight.

Bill and I were talking about it before. It's one of the reasons Bill is here right now because, as you know, we're very much involved. And I've asked the Attorney General—FBI and the Attorney General—to take a very strong look and to see what went on, because that was a very bad thing that I saw. I saw it last night, and I didn't like it.

Q. Do you think those police officers should be prosecuted?

The President. I'm not going to make any comment right now. I can tell you I think what I saw was not good—was not good. Very bad.

Q. Mr. President——

The President. Anybody else?

China-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, are you definitively staying in the U.S.-China trade deal?

The President. We'll be announcing what we're doing tomorrow with respect to China. And we are not happy with China. We are not happy with what's happened.

All over the world, people are suffering. A hundred and eighty-six countries—all over the world they're suffering. We're not happy.

Okay. Thank you very much, everybody.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

Q. Thank you, sir.

Q. Thank you.

The President. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:47 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Yoel Roth, head of site integrity, Twitter, Inc.; Gov. Gavin C. Newsom of California; and Sheryl K. Sandberg, chief operating officer, Facebook. A reporter referred to Minneapolis Police Department officers Derek Chauvin, Thomas Lane, J. Alexander Kueng, and Tou Thao, who were involved in subduing Mr. Floyd during an arrest.

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