Twitter's "Trust and Safety Council": Orwellian, or just a really bad idea?

Ed Morrissey

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Does that distinction matter? After watching Twitter's new "Trust and Safety Council" push Robert Stacy McCain off the platform, suppress the hashtag #FreeStacy used to protest the decision, and offer no accounting of its decision, Pascal-Emanuel Gobry makes the case that it does. This isn't just a bad idea, Gobry writes at The Week, it's an effort calculated to grant privilege to a particular point of view and intimidate those who do not share it:

> Twitter recently announced a new "Trust and Safety Council" to help in this task. As Twitter works to "develop products, policies, and programs," the council will "help us tap into the expertise and input of organizations at the intersection of these issues more efficiently and quickly." The council is made up of dozens of organizations. Alongside unimpeachable organizations like the National Domestic Violence Hotline, there are organizations that explicitly support efforts to limit troublesome discussion. The council includes organizations like the Internet Watch Foundation, the Safer Internet Centre, and Feminist Frequency. Here's where the "Orwellian" part comes in: "speech that doesn't offend anybody" is the *opposite* of free expression.

> After all, as Biz Stone pointed out, some tweets "downright anger a vast majority of users," and that's life. "[W]e keep the information flowing irrespective of any view we may have about the content." It's also worth noting that while many organizations on Twitter's list have a progressive bent, I couldn't find one with a conservative or libertarian bent. (I can recommend, off the top of my head, the Cato Institute, FIRE, and the Becket Fund.)

This is more than just an idle fear. Last month Twitter stripped right-wing pundit Milo Yiannopoulos of his "verified" user status. Now the company has banned Robert Stacy McCain, an inflammatory right-wing writer. And apparently, not only did Twitter ban him, it also censored the hashtag that welled up in his support.

What's striking isn't just that there may be a political bias in those decisions. The more serious problems are a lack of due process and explanation, and a striking imbalance between what happens to semi-prominent Twitter personalities and the countless run-of-the-mill Twitter trolls who are still at large. And how else could it be? As Biz Stone wrote in 2011, "On a practical level, we simply cannot review all one hundred million-plus Tweets created and subsequently delivered every day." And since then, the number of tweets produced every day has quintupled. The Trust and Safety Council can't actually protect users from abuse; its only power is stop controversial users from issuing controversial opinions on Twitter.

The moves, plus growing suspicions of "shadowbanning" on the platform, prompted my friend Adam Baldwin to say *adios* to Twitter — but not before removing all his previous content, calling for the firing of CEO Jack Dorsey, and the disbanding of the Trust and Safety Council:

Rather than repeat all of Adam's argument, I'd encourage readers to click on his name and check out his entire argument.

Jeff Dunetz posts an open letter to Dorsey from National Bloggers Club president Ali Akbar, asking for a meeting and opening up the TSC to advocates for free speech:

Twitter is not the place it once was. It is not a safe space for political conservatives. I'm concerned about the lack of diversity in general. Last year, as you know, Twitter lost a black engineer due to this very problem. I don't want Twitter to become more conservative, or more liberal, or more black, or more this or that—but instead, more **free**. This is the culture I want to encourage you to create at Twitter.

British journalist Milo Yiannopoulos, a.k.a. @Nero, lost his verification badge. One of your engineers had previously reported Yiannopoulos for tweeting and teasing debate opponents on Twitter. Robert McCain, a conservative author and journalist, has been on a critique of feminism beat for the past two years. He was banned in August 2015 for writing about an alleged pedophile who happened to be transgendered. Late last week, without notice and without a specific cause, Twitter banned his personal @rsmccain account and his @SexBookTrouble book promotion account. Actor Adam Baldwin took notice and now the prolific Hollywood tweeter has left the platform for good. Baldwin had been punished previously too. …

A listing of Twitter's Trust and Safety Council members reads like a buffet of New York interest and lobbying groups. There's no trust in the Council, nor is there a transparent outline of how

they're working or governing over all of us—the users. Today it was dubbed an "Orwellian nightmare" in *The Week*.

Notably, there are no black groups. There isn't a single conservative group.

Jack, diversity and freedom are not antithetical to one another. Embrace the liberty that has made publishing on the web great and encourage all voices so that they themselves may, in a democratic fashion, champion their individual interests.

Akbar links to a petition to improve the ideological diversity of the panel, which can be found here. That prompts a more basic question, however. Should we accept a "Trust and Safety Council" that includes conservative groups among progressives? Or should we as consumers on Twitter demand a more free and open environment?

I've been on Twitter for several years now, and have had my share of trolls and angry tweetstorms. Those can be miserable experiences, to be sure, but hardly the end of the world. Furthermore, I'd much rather use the Mute and Block options to limit those kinds of unpleasantness than demand that Twitter push people off of their platform, especially those who are only advocating for their ideology — however extreme, fringe, or nonsensical it might be. If Twitter wanted to do something that would offer more practical help, they could develop an account-based timed Mute function that applies across all platforms – such as a 24-hour mute function, 7-day, and/or 30-day along with a permanent mute. (Actual physical threats are another matter — but can be handled through law enforcement, as with any other platform.)

As I told Adam this morning, I have enjoyed Twitter in the past, but enjoy it less and less these days. That's not because of the trolls; it's because of the very real sense that Twitter doesn't value free speech or the participation of my friends and colleagues, and that we're only tolerated for as long as we don't cross their orthodoxy in any significant manner. What makes this so absurd is that Twitter is about the *least* substantial communication platform in popular use, thanks to its 140-character limit. Dorsey and the TSC treat it as a medium of such importance that competing views outside their comfort zone *must* be somehow suppressed, while ignoring the fact that Twitter only really matters as a fun and quick way to engage people without the very barriers they are erecting.

The best solution for bad speech is more speech, not the Speech Police or a "Trust and Safety Council." Free speech isn't *supposed* to be "safe" — it's supposed to be *free*, a marketplace of ideas in which consumers can judge the speech and the speakers for themselves. Twitter is a private enterprise that can set its own rules, but that doesn't make them good ideas. Time to toss the "Trust and Safety Council" and its Orwellian undertones for a level playing field.