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Banning TikTok gives Trump cheap anti-China points but undermines his free speech chops in war with Twitter and Google

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President Donald Trump's TikTok takedown might seem like an easy win for his anti-China campaign strategy. But he's losing ground in a bigger fight as the world's most powerful companies go unchecked in silencing conservatives.

Banning the video-sharing platform — owned by Beijing-based ByteDance — from the US might seem easier than taking on the likes of Google, Twitter and Facebook. After all, Trump can probably score some cheap political points by stoking the anti-China sentiments of his base. But if he doesn't tackle the bigger job of fighting censorship by Big Tech, the content gatekeepers may make it impossible for him to win a second term.

And the TikTok side-skirmish will make it harder to win the war over Silicon Valley. What credibility will the president have in demanding a free marketplace of ideas on the internet after he bans TikTok for the crimes of being Chinese-owned and perhaps little else?

The Trump administration argues that TikTok is a national security threat because data collected on the application can be accessed by China's government. As in previous moves against Huawei and ZTE, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the aim is to identify and shut down conduits that give Beijing easy access to the data of US citizens.

The seriousness of the threat in TikTok's case is open to debate. TikTok says the data of its US users is stored in the US and has strict access controls. Whether that is true or not, there are options other than a shutdown that would address any vulnerabilities. For one, ByteDance is reportedly willing to divest its US operations and has held talks with Microsoft on a sale.

Trump told reporters on Air Force One Friday that he would reject such a deal. But if the goal is really to address a national security vulnerability, selling the business to a US company would make sense. US regulators could demand security protections before approving the sale. Those protections might not be foolproof, but neither is a TikTok shutdown. Unlike China and India, the US doesn't have a firewall to block certain internet content nationally. The steps Trump could take against TikTok, such as banning Google and Apple from offering the platform in their application stores, would be worked around by some users.

More important is the principle of defending free speech. As much as punching China appeals to some Trump supporters – mostly those who will vote for him regardless – there's a far bigger constituency of people who would get behind a leader who champions their right to speak freely.

Instead, even staunch Trump supporters are left to wonder at what point he will stand up for them on social media with something more than words. Through more than three and a half years of Trump's presidency, including two years with his party controlling both Houses of Congress, conservatives have watched Republicans stand idly by while Big Tech censors more and more voices and clamps down on what information is allowed to flow freely.

The bans on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter started with some of the most incendiary voices, such as Alex Jones, then expanded more recently to include less controversial individuals and media outlets like Zero Hedge. Even the president's son, Donald Trump Jr., saw his Twitter account locked down this week because he retweeted a video of doctors promoting hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) as part of a cure for coronavirus.

More insidious – and perhaps more impactful – are the manipulations of speech that go on behind the scenes. Project Veritas has anecdotally exposed some of these tactics, such as "*shadow banning*" on Twitter and squelching of pro-Trump posts by content moderators at Facebook — in hidden-camera videos. Conservatives don't even know why their comments aren't gaining traction and are left to presume that they are in a shrinking minority.

Then there's Google's manipulation of search results. Breitbart News, which originally posted the HCQ video and was locked out of its Twitter account, says a visibility index of how often its content shows up on Google searches has dropped 99.7 percent since the 2016 election. Other conservative outlets, including the Daily Caller, have been hit similarly hard since May, Breitbart editor-in-chief Alex Marlow says.

Leftists suddenly get religion on free markets when Big Tech's censorship is brought up, saying private companies are free to pick and choose what's allowed on their platforms. But decades ago, Congress gave technology companies protections from liability for their content under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act.

The notion was that as a public square for free and open speech, social media companies shouldn't be liable for what someone says on their platforms. But when these companies curate their content, allowing what they like and blocking what they dislike, no such protection is defensible.

Big Tech has helped create an environment where Americans do most of the censoring themselves. A Cato Institute poll shows that 62 percent of Americans, including 77 percent of conservatives, say they must censor themselves from openly expressing their political views out of fear for losing their jobs or facing other repercussions.

Living in that kind of fear isn't a happy place. A leader who turns the tide the other way by busting up the censorship would be a hero to most Americans. Even 52pc of moderate liberals say they must censor themselves. But being the guy who shut down TikTok allows Trump's opponents to paint him as just another censor.