



Trump Signs Order to Try to Tighten Social Media Controls

Steve Herman

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WHITE HOUSE - U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order Thursday he said was aimed at reining in social media platforms, although analysts doubt it will survive legal scrutiny.

The president said his action is meant to "protect and uphold the free speech rights of the American people."

Social media companies currently "have a shield. They're not going to have that shield" as a result of his executive order, Trump explained to reporters in the Oval Office.

Twitter released a statement late Thursday, saying, "This EO is a reactionary and politicized approach to a landmark law. ... Attempts to unilaterally erode it threaten the future of online speech and Internet freedoms.

The order requires the Federal Communication Commission to clarify a section of the Communications Decency Act that largely exempts online companies from any legal liability concerning users' content. It also directs the White House Office of Digital Strategy to redouble its efforts to collect complaints of online censorship and submit them to the Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department.

The president, in the Oval Office, decried social media companies as monopolies that have become more influential than newspapers and broadcasters.

"We can't let this continue to happen. It's very, very unfair," Trump said.

The president's ire is aimed in particular at Twitter, which earlier this week placed a fact-check warning on two of his tweets.

"If it were able to be legally shut down, I would do it," Trump said of Twitter.

President Donald Trump speaks before signing an executive order aimed at curbing protections for social media giants, in the Oval Office of the White House, May 28, 2020.

When Twitter, Google, Facebook and other platforms choose to fact check or choose to ignore certain posts that is "political activism," according to the president.

"I'm sure they'll be doing a lawsuit," he said.

Early Friday Twitter again singled out a Trump tweet, flagging one of his comments on the protests in Minneapolis as “glorifying violence.” In the tweet the president called the demonstrators “THUGS” and said there would be shooting if looting continued.

"If you weren't fake," Trump said in reply to a reporter's question about why he just does not delete his personal Twitter account. "If we had a fair press in this country, I'd do that in a heartbeat."

The order's interpretation of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act "is not expected to hold up in court, but it has the effect of giving political permission to attack social media companies if they apply content moderation or fact-checking rules to Trump's statements or those of his supporters and allies," Rebecca MacKinnon, director of Ranking Digital Rights, told VOA.

What is Section 230 of Communications Decency Act?

A look at one of the tools used in the fight to protect freedom of expression on the internet

"Trump is trying to pervert the law into an instrument that enables him to be able to say and do what he wants without being challenged or contradicted, including suppressing the vote in the upcoming presidential election," she said.

The director of the Cato Institute's Project on Emerging Technologies, Matthew Feeney, commented that "as misleading and legally flawed as the order is, it is nonetheless concerning."

Feeney told VOA that "in the long term, the ongoing conservative attacks on so-called 'Big Tech' could result in legislation that harms Americans' free speech."

Section 230 of the act "incentivizes platforms to host all sorts of content without fear of being held liable for it. It enables speech, not censorship," said Kate Ruane, senior legislative counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union, adding that Trump is a beneficiary of it.

"If platforms were not immune under the law, then they would not risk the legal liability that could come with hosting Donald Trump's lies, defamation and threats," she added.

President Donald Trump listens as Attorney General William Barr speaks before Trump signs an executive order in the Oval Office of the White House, May 28, 2020.

Trump said he was directing U.S. Attorney General William Barr to cooperate with the states to enforce their own laws against deceptive practices by social media companies, who now have what the president characterized as power "tantamount to monopoly. Tantamount to taking over the airwaves."

The president added: "We're fed up with it. It's unfair."

Barr, in the Oval Office with Trump for the signing of the executive order, said the administration is preparing legislative proposals regarding social media companies and also will pursue litigation.

Senator Ron Wyden, the highest-ranking Democrat on the finance committee, said he had long been warning the Trump administration might make such a move "in order to chill speech and bully companies like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter into giving him favorable treatment.

Today, Trump proved me right. I expect those companies, and every American who participates in online speech, to resist this illegal act by all possible means. Giving in to bullying by this president may be the single most unpatriotic act an American could undertake."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called the order "outrageous" and meant as a distraction from the coronavirus crisis.

On Tuesday, an unprecedented alert on the @realDonaldTrump tweets about mail-in balloting prompted the president to accuse Twitter of interference in this year's election and of "completely stifling" free speech.

When those viewing Trump's flagged tweets on Tuesday clicked on the warning placed by Twitter, they were taken to a notification titled: Trump makes unsubstantiated claim that mail-in ballots will lead to voter fraud.

The alert, linked to stories from CNN and The Washington Post, also included a fact box citing what Twitter called false claims by the president about mail-in ballots.

Twitter Chief Executive Jack Dorsey said Trump's tweets "may mislead people into thinking they don't need to register to get a ballot. Our intention is to connect the dots of conflicting statements and show the information in dispute so people can judge for themselves."

Before Thursday's executive order was issued, Facebook Chief Executive Office Mark Zuckerberg, appearing on the CNBC business channel, said he did not think "Facebook or internet platforms in general should be arbiters of truth."

The White House press secretary was asked by a reporter during Thursday's briefing whether Trump's focus on alleged widespread fraud involving mail-in balloting is laying the groundwork to cast doubt on the outcome of November's presidential election.

"No, he's certainly not doing that," Kayleigh McEnany said.